

AURA, FACE, PHOTOGRAPHY

RE-READING BENJAMIN TODAY

DIARMUID COSTELLO

INTRODUCTION

Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' has been familiar to Anglophone art theory since the early 1980s, when it was used by a generation of critics, many of them associated with the journal October, for one of two purposes: either to underwrite various photographic and lens-based art practices that had emerged in the late 1970s, or to retrieve the work of avant-garde movements such as Surrealism and Dada from their marginalization by modernist theory – or both. This fact alone tells us one thing; that in the context of art theory, Benjamin's work on photography, like his work more generally, was first received as a resource for theorizing postmodernism in art, and read accordingly.¹ The present paper takes this reception history seriously enough to suggest that it has distorted the way in which Benjamin's work – notably the category of 'aura' – is generally understood within art theory. Typically, this has led to its reductive application to localized debates about the respective values of photography and painting, debates in which Benjamin's work is routinely invoked to valorize the radicality of the former over the conservatism of the latter. Not surprisingly, this narrow focus is accompanied by a tendency to miss the breadth of what was at stake for Benjamin himself – namely, the waning of a general category of experience – and the ethical repercussions of this transformation. By now, postmodern theory has congealed into just the sort of critical orthodoxy that originally motivated its own critique of modernism, and its claims are ripe for critical scrutiny in turn. Against the dominant reception of Benjamin within postmodern art theory, then, I want to do four things in this paper.

First, I want to retrieve the richness of Benjamin's early paper, 'Little History of Photography' (1931) from the programmatic uses to which its claims are put in the

later, but better known, essay on technical reproducibility (1936). The idea of ‘aura’ originates in the earlier paper, in the context of a discussion of the qualities of early portrait photography – a fact I take to be significant. The later paper takes over his original definition of it verbatim, but employs it to critique the ‘cult value’ of pre-industrial art more generally. Against this more polemical use to which Benjamin puts the idea of aura in the later paper, a use to which art theorists have deferred, I shall argue that ‘Little History of Photography’ is both more sensitive to the detail of specific photographic images, and more cognizant of the importance of artistic agency in actualizing the conflicting possibilities afforded by new technologies. Second, I intend to bring out the complexity of Benjamin’s attitude to the social and cultural changes he characterizes in terms of the ‘withering’ of aura, by relating the claims of the artwork essay to his later use of the term, notably in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (1939). Re-situating the idea of aura in this broader context brings out two kinds of tension in Benjamin’s conception of aura – a tension in his attitude towards it, and a conflict in his characterizations of it. It reveals, for example, that Benjamin both celebrates and mourns the liquidation of the aura, rather than just affirming it, and that he equivocates between what I will call a ‘specific’ (photographic) and a ‘general’ (experiential) conception of what aura is.² Given the degree of complexity of Benjamin’s own conception of aura, my third aim is to contest the reductive use to which Benjamin’s artwork essay has been put within art theory, where the notion of aura tends to be detached from this wider context, disguising the magnitude of what is at stake for Benjamin himself. For Benjamin, the fundamental issue is not that an ‘aura’ may be predicated of some objects (paintings) but not others (photographs), but that a fundamental category of experience, memory and perception permeating human possibilities of encountering the world, other persons and works of art more generally is in the process of fading away.³ That something so basic as the structure of experience might be changing, under the pressure of new technologies, represents for Benjamin both an opportunity and a threat. My fourth aim, in making this case, is to bring out the ethical undertow of Benjamin’s remarks on aura. This is especially apparent in the Baudelaire essay, where Benjamin characterizes auratic experience as what we undergo when we feel an object of perception return our gaze; that is, what we feel once we credit an object of perception – be it a person, a photograph or a work of art – with the ability to look back at us. This more ethical dimension of aura, and the consequent repercussions of its demise, serves to recast Benjamin’s earlier remarks about the ‘magical quality’ of early portrait photography – the sitters of which conveyed the uncanny impression of

seeing their viewers in turn – in a new light, and puts pressure on his apparent celebration of its destruction.

The paper is structured as follows. I begin by taking Douglas Crimp's use of Benjamin's texts as indicative of art world appropriations of Benjamin in the early eighties. Despite being one of the more philosophically cogent uses of the artwork essay to underwrite contemporaneous photographic art, I will show that Crimp's reading distorts Benjamin in several key respects. With that in place I turn back to trace the genealogy of Benjamin's notion of aura across three key texts in the 1930s, beginning with his earliest remarks about it in 'Little History of Photography'. Here I focus on the close connection between Benjamin's early remarks about aura and portraiture, and I draw attention to a problem in Benjamin's argument when he attributes aura directly to reality as opposed to its representation in early portrait photography. When I turn to Benjamin's subsequent generalization of aura in the paper on technical reproducibility, I suggest that it makes clear that aura pertains to the subject rather than the object of perception, namely, to a particular modality of experience on the part of a perceiving subject. I call this the experience of 'aesthetic transcendence', and I take it to represent Benjamin's mature conception of aura. The rest of the paper is given over to my own re-interpretation of such transcendence, as flagging up a more general ethical dimension of experience. To bring this out I focus on two clues in Benjamin's account of film, and I suggest that these ethical overtones of aura inevitably impact on Benjamin's attitude towards its 'withering', making it far more conflicted than its presentation in art theory tends to acknowledge. Here I turn to Benjamin's later essay on Baudelaire; in particular, I use it to reconsider his earlier remarks about the human face serving as the 'ultimate retrenchment' of aura. It is at this point that the specific (photographic or technological) and the general (ethical or experiential) dimensions of Benjamin's concept begin to pull in conflicting directions. In conclusion, I turn to the portraits of Thomas Ruff and Rineke Dijkstra. Although Ruff and Dijkstra clearly present two very different ways of dealing with the face in contemporary photographic art, I argue, in light of my ethical reconstruction of aura, that in spite of those differences, indeed precisely because of them, their work points to the ethical significance of works of art per se.

THE RECEPTION OF BENJAMIN'S TEXT IN RECENT ART THEORY

The reception of Benjamin's work on photography and reproductive technology in

first generation postmodern art theory during the late seventies and early eighties was over-determined in (at least) two respects. The key art world determinant was the simultaneous emergence of two antithetical artistic sensibilities: the ‘neo-expressionist’ painting promoted in blockbuster shows such as Zeitgeist on the one hand, and the appropriation-based ‘pictures’ photography brought together in the show of the same name on the other. That these movements were perceived as being antithetical is nicely captured in Hal Foster’s contemporaneous theorization of a ‘postmodernism of reaction’ (read painting) versus a ‘postmodernism of resistance’ (read photography).⁴ From the vantage point of this way of parsing postmodernism, technologically mediated lens-based art was perceived as a critique of the values on which the resurgence of painting relied (namely: creativity, spontaneity, originality, authenticity, self-expression, subjectivity and craft skill). That is, values regarded as politically reactionary by a generation of theorists simultaneously working through the post-structuralist critique of authorship then being canonized by the American academy.⁵ As a result, Benjamin’s critique of the ‘cult value’ of traditional art forms – art forms that photography was taken to have dispatched – was read through both the resurgence of figurative painting and post-structuralist critiques of the author-function, now transposed into the domain of art.⁶

Among the original participants in this debate Douglas Crimp stands out as having made the most philosophically cogent use of Benjamin to underwrite a distinctively postmodern, appropriationist, photographic practice. This is the body of work and accompanying theory that has come to be known simply as Pictures after the show of the same name curated by Crimp himself at New York’s Artist’s Space in 1977.⁷ What makes Crimp’s recourse to Benjamin more sophisticated than most art world appeals to Benjamin of the time is the fact that Crimp recognizes that, for Benjamin, aura is not a predicate attaching to one category of artwork (i.e. paintings) at the expense of another (i.e. photographs), but rather picks out a quality held in common – or not at all – by art in general at any given moment in history:

the aura is not an ontological category as employed by Benjamin but rather a historical one. It is not something a handmade work has that a mechanically made work does not have. In Benjamin’s view, certain photographs have an aura, whereas even a painting by Rembrandt loses its aura in the age of mechanical reproduction. The withering away of the aura, the dissociation of the work from the fabric of tradition, is an inevitable outcome of mechanical

reproduction.⁸

But despite recognizing that aura is a property of art in general – or not at all – at any given historical moment, Crimp fails to pursue this thought to its conclusion; namely, that aura is not a predicate pertaining in the last analysis to objects of perception – be they works of art, things or other persons – at all, even though the grammar of propositions in which the term appears may lead us to believe this. Rather, it pertains to the structure of perception itself, i.e., to a particular way of perceiving the world that the slow optics of early photographic equipment both embodied and objectified. Aura is best understood as a predicate pertaining to the subject rather than the object of perception; it describes how that subject is capable of encountering its objects, whatever they may be – namely, auratically or otherwise. Once the capacity to perceive ‘auratically’ wanes then, evidently, nothing will exhibit an aura any longer; this is to say that aura is a quality that not only requires a subject for its perception, but a specific, historically circumscribed, mode of perception on the part of that subject. But what finally makes Crimp’s use of Benjamin typical of early postmodern art theory is not only that he fails to draw this conclusion, but that he perceives Benjamin, rather undialectically, as an unqualified champion of this transformation of perception:

Although it may at first seem that Benjamin lamented the loss of the aura, the contrary is in fact true. Reproduction’s ‘social significance, particularly in its positive form, is inconceivable’, he wrote, ‘without its destructive, cathartic aspect, its liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage’.⁹

I am not suggesting that Benjamin does not say what Crimp has him say, but rather that what Benjamin means when he says what he says cannot be understood if read through the essays on photography and art alone. Crimp arrives at the conclusion he does because he takes Benjamin to be talking about artworks in general rather than, more broadly, the nature of perception – or even experience – in general. As such, his interpretation suffers from the general tendency in art theory to read Benjamin’s writing on art and photography in isolation. Thus, while Crimp may be right, in a qualified sense, to say that aura is an historical category, he is wrong to claim both that its atrophy is an inevitable consequence of technological advance, and that this is simply cause for celebration (at least for Benjamin). On the first of these points Crimp is, it has to be said, being faithful to a tendency in Benjamin himself (even if, in Benjamin’s less determinist moments, he is willing to grant that how a technology is

used is crucial to its implications).¹⁰ But on the second he is simplifying to the point of misrepresentation, by abstracting from Benjamin's more ambivalent remarks on the decline of aura. While on the question of whether aura is an 'historical' category, it would be more accurate, I think, to say that it is a 'structural' category pertaining to a form of perceptual experience that is itself subject to transformation over time.

Nonetheless, Crimp's Benjamin is as good as first generation appropriations of his work in Anglophone art theory get. Despite this it remains one-dimensional. And given that this is the kind of reading from which I want to retrieve the original texts, I now turn to Benjamin's own writing. In doing so, my interpretation will be driven by the following inter-related questions: how does the notion of aura first arise for Benjamin? What does he mean by it?; what does he say about its destruction? What is at stake in this destruction? And what is Benjamin's attitude to what he describes? With this in place, I will focus on the significance of the face in Benjamin's argument.

THE FATE OF AURA

BENJAMIN ON EARLY PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY, ATGET AND SANDER

Benjamin invokes 'aura' for the first time in 'Little History of Photography', while trying to account for the exceptional quality of portrait photography in the decades prior to its industrialization. He singles out the portraits of David Octavius Hill, among others, claiming that in his work 'the most precise technology [could] give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us' (SW 2:510). Benjamin attributes this quality to what, half a century later, Barthes would call the photograph's 'punctum': 'the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject' (SW 2:510).¹¹ More generally, he attributes the high aesthetic achievement of early portrait photography in the 1840s and 1850s to the fact that many of its first practitioners, like Hill, originally trained as painters, and as a result brought an artisanal commitment to the craft of their subsequent practice as photographers. But it was not only the practitioners of photography who stood out in its pre-industrial phase: of their sitters Benjamin says, '[t]here was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that medium' (SW 2:515-6). As Crimp notes, Benjamin attributes this emphatic quality to a fleeting confluence of social and technical factors;

on the one hand the technical ascendancy of the photographer, and on the other the social and political ascendancy of his subjects:

every client was confronted, in the person of the photographer, with a technician of the latest school; whereas the photographer was confronted, in the person of every client, with a member of a rising class equipped with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's frock coat or floppy cravat. For that aura was by no means a mere product of a primitive camera. Rather, in that early period subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they became incongruent in the period of decline that immediately followed. (SW 2:517)

The decline Benjamin has in mind occurred during the period in which technical advances in photography, notably faster optics, dispelled this aura from the print at the same time as it was banished from reality by the 'deepening degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie' (SW 2:517). The poor light-sensitivity of early photographic plates had made long exposure times necessary, requiring 'the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it'. 'During the considerable period of the exposure', Benjamin observes, 'the subject (as it were) grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot' (SW 2:514).¹² But once faster optics became available this was no longer necessary, to the detriment of the 'magical' quality exhibited by early photography. Despite this, Benjamin is at pains to forestall the conclusion that the aura of early photography was 'the mere product of a primitive camera' (SW 2:517). Nonetheless, as regards the claim that is supposed to establish this fact – namely, that the bourgeois sitters of early photography 'came equipped with an aura' that was 'banished from reality' by the increasing degeneracy of their class at the very moment faster optics eliminated it from the print – Benjamin fails to provide an argument to support it. It remains at the level of assertion: to constitute an argument, Benjamin would need to marshal independent evidence for predicating an aura to the subjects of early portraiture in the first place. Given that his only basis for doing so is the changing appearance of the photographs themselves, he cannot claim to know anything about the way a world unmediated by its photographic depiction may have appeared without begging the question. In the absence of further argument, or corroboration independent of the photographs themselves, Benjamin's claims about the aura of what is depicted, as opposed to the aura of its depiction, raise the worry that he is simply projecting the characteristics of early photographs back onto

what they depict. When, evidently, one cannot infer that a person possesses an aura from the fact that their depiction does.

But setting these reservations about Benjamin's claims concerning the subjects – as opposed to their portraits – to one side, what made a period of technical advance at the same time one of artistic decline, for Benjamin, was the fact that photographers themselves responded regressively to technological progress; they sought to simulate the atmospheric qualities of early photographic portraiture by aping the effects of painting. If the first generation of photographers' initial training as painters was painting's gift to photography, the artfully posed studio portrait and the retouched negative, Benjamin quips, were 'the bad painter's revenge on photography' (SW 2:515). From this Benjamin concludes that 'what is again and again decisive for photography is the photographer's attitude to his techniques' (SW 2:517). The insight of this remark, which can be generalized across the arts, is sadly lacking from his own treatment of the intrinsic social and political significance of film as a medium in the later essay on technical reproducibility.¹³ Nonetheless, it is because he recognizes, at least here, that the practitioner's attitude to their medium is a decisive determinant on what they are able to accomplish within it, that Benjamin champions Eugène Atget. Atget, according to Benjamin, was the first photographer to break the pretence that afflicted photography once it sought to imitate painting: 'He was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere of conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere – indeed, he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography' (SW 2:518). Atget, Benjamin claims, 'looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift'; his pictures 'suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship' (SW 2:518). Benjamin attributes this achievement to the emptiness of his images or, more accurately, to their absence of people: 'almost all these pictures are empty ... They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant' (SW 2:519). Atget's images of empty courtyards and terraces, architectural details and shop-windows, are pictures of a city bereft of its inhabitants – akin, one might say, to a body bereft of consciousness – a vacant city, the very antithesis of the depiction of subjective interiority that is the preserve of portraiture, traditionally construed. Benjamin's remarks tie the rout of aura to the emptiness of Atget's street scenes, to their absence of people and, hence, to their distance from portraiture, and thereby imply that the presence of aura has a special relation to the depiction of

persons.

In fact, Benjamin ties aura, more specifically still, to a particular way of depicting persons, as becomes clear when he turns to the work of August Sander, the other broadly contemporary photographer singled out in 'Little History'. In Sander's case, the meaning of Benjamin's alignment of anti-portraiture with the rout of aura and, by implication, of aura with portraiture, is thrown into even sharper relief, as Sander's project to document the social strata of German society consists of nothing but images of people. Despite this, Benjamin aligns his work with that of Atget, so far as aura is concerned. Benjamin was responding to The Face of our Time, a book of sixty images published in 1929, and suppressed by the Nazis in 1933, that previewed a project that was intended to run to forty-five folios of twelve prints. Not surprisingly, given the terms in which he champions Atget, Benjamin claims that Sander's images of people are anything but portraits, conventionally construed: 'August Sander has compiled a series of faces that is in no way inferior to the tremendous physiognomic gallery mounted by an Eisenstein or a Pudovkin, and he has done it from a scientific viewpoint' (SW 2:520). For Benjamin, the salient artistic and political feature of this gallery of faces is precisely that they are not portraits. This is what these images share with the way people appear in the Russian films Benjamin admires – people who Benjamin claims had 'no use for their photographs', allowing 'the human face [to appear] on film with new and immeasurable significance' (SW 2:519-20). Opposing Sander's photographs to the conventions of commercial portraiture, Benjamin emphasizes its scientific and ethnographic ambition, its intention to impartially commit to record the entire range of social types, an encyclopedia of social roles or functions rather than an album of persons. The aim of such work, for Benjamin, is to objectively document its historical moment. Benjamin cites Döblin approvingly: 'Just as there is comparative anatomy, which helps us to understand the nature and history of organs, so this photographer is doing comparative photography, adopting a scientific standpoint superior to the photographer of detail' (SW 2:520). What Atget and Sander share, then, is a documentary ambition to record the physiognomy of their historical moment, by training their cameras on a city and a people respectively. For Benjamin, it is this intention, and the attitude towards the photographic medium that this intention expresses, rather than that medium per se, that makes the work of both anti-auratic. This suffices to point up the fallacy of attributing intrinsic progressive value to any medium in virtue of its constitution, mechanical or otherwise, in abstraction from how it is used by a given artistic agent – as was typically the case

when Benjamin's work was harnessed to the cause of photography versus painting in early postmodern theory, and was also the case in Benjamin's own account of film. What remains unclear is what Benjamin actually means by 'aura'.

'A STRANGE WEAVE OF SPACE AND TIME' BENJAMIN'S DEFINITION OF 'AURA'

The closest Benjamin comes to defining 'aura' is a curious analogy he offers mid-way through his discussion of Atget's empty street scenes. Here he pauses to reflect explicitly on its meaning for the first time. Benjamin uses the same analogy again, five years later, in the 'Work of Art' essay (SW 4:255). The terms in which it is framed are instructive:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. (SW 2:518-9)¹⁴

What is immediately striking about this analogy is, as Benjamin acknowledges when he uses it again in the later essay, that it seeks to illuminate the aura of an historical, cultural artifact – the photographic print – by reference to that of a natural object. Indeed the image Benjamin conjures is nothing if not a traditional, even Romantic, one of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. And given that this kind of experience is what Benjamin will go on, famously, to proclaim is 'withering' in a mass society, the Romantic provenance seems highly appropriate; for what could be more alien to modern urban existence than the leisure to pause on a summer afternoon to immerse oneself in a distant vista? Nonetheless, the terms in which this analogy between natural and artistic aura is cast repay close attention. The notion of a 'strange weave of space and time' is clearly framed in such a way as to invoke the Kantian forms of intuition, the structuring, or formal, constraints on our sensory intuition of the world for Kant.¹⁵ This is significant because it demonstrates that the real object of Benjamin's interest is the structure of experience, i.e. the underlying form to which all experience must conform in order to be experience at all – as opposed to the content of any particular experience. And the fact that Benjamin calls the kind of

experience he is interested in a ‘strange weave’, a ‘unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be’ suggests that the structure of this particular species of spatio-temporal experience is of a different order altogether to that of our everyday intuition of the world. On the temporal axis it suggests a kind of reverie in which time expands, in which one is contemplatively immersed in – or absorbed by – the object of one’s perception; and on the spatial axis it suggests a distance distinct from that of mere measure, that is, a distance – or rather ‘appearance of a distance’ – preserved in the face of proximity. This is a ‘strange weave’ indeed: an immersion in the experience of an object that retains its distance despite that immersion, and in so doing transcends it. Without wishing to sound obscure, this can be best described as the experience that there is something about an object that transcends our experience of it, an opacity internal to our experience_of the object itself. What distinguishes this order of experience from more transparent, everyday, experience is that its structure – the ‘strange weave of time and space’ – makes this opacity palpable, and thereby affords a moment of transcendence within the immanent horizon of our experience itself. This is not as obscure as it may at first appear; for on this reading of Benjamin, ‘aura’ turns out to be his term for what is more generally called aesthetic experience, that is, a mode of experience that is typically described as transcending our everyday ways of engaging with the world. In the ‘Work of Art’ essay, Benjamin ties ‘aura’, the name he gives this unique kind of experience, back to art’s origins in magic and ritual, and appends the following footnote:

The definition of the aura as the ‘unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be’, represents nothing more than a formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of nearness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Inapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image; true to its nature, the cult image remains ‘distant, however close it may be’. (SW 4:272, n.11, emphasis in the original)

This is the equation of ‘aura’ – or aesthetic immersion in a transcendent object – with the atavistic remnants of magic and cultic experience still buried in our relation to art in a disenchanted world for which the ‘Work of Art’ essay is famous. It is this aspect of the essay that has tended to be taken at face value by art theorists looking to enlist Benjamin’s work as a theoretical underpinning for lens-based art, or as a way to

critique work in more traditional media.¹⁶ But detaching Benjamin's remarks on the cultic origins of art from his more general claims about the changing structure of experience is what leads to the more superficial and reductive interpretations of Benjamin in the art world. And this despite the fact that both here, and in his earlier 'Small History', Benjamin conceives the atrophy of this supposedly 'cultic' way of relating to the world in more general terms, terms he ties to the characteristic spatio-temporal horizons of mass experience. For it is the typical forms of mass experience, Benjamin argues, that are intrinsically hostile to the preservation of aura:

the social basis of the aura's present decay ... rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction. ... The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness in the world' has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique. (SW 4:255-6)¹⁷

The process of mutual adaptation between the new urban masses and the texture of life in the modern city that the dominance of this form of perception engenders is the context for Benjamin's discussion of 'aura' in the later essay. What is significant about the masses in this regard is the way in which their forms of interaction with the city foreclose earlier – more auratic – modalities of experience. That is, modes of experience that prized particularity and difference over sameness, and distance over closeness. Modern cities as experienced by the masses are hostile to such experience, both spatially and temporally. On the temporal axis, the typical experiences of life in the industrial city – being jostled by the crowd, traversing busy streets, repetitive work on automated production lines, clock-time – amount, for Benjamin, to a series of miniature shocks that fracture temporal duration into a series of discrete moments lacking narrative coherence.¹⁸ While, on the spatial axis, the need to take hold of all manner of goods quickly and easily, and to make the one available to the many, Benjamin implies, breeds an intolerance of distance and uniqueness, exacerbated by the culture of cheap copies that the new reproductive technologies make possible. Taken as a whole, the transformation of experience this entails rules out in advance the possibility of that 'strange weave of space and time' and, with it, contemplative

immersion in a transcendent object required for the maintenance of auratic experience:

One might encompass the eliminated element within the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. The process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. (SW 4:254)

In the 'Work of Art' essay, as Crimp argues, Benjamin celebrates such destruction, seeing it as the final emancipation of the work of art from its 'parasitical dependence on ritual', the 'location of its original use-value'; hence its liberation for other ends.¹⁹ This is what Howard Caygill refers to as Benjamin's 'active nihilism', his affirmation of technology's cathartic destruction of the cultural heritage as a way of opening up new possibilities for art, possibilities free of the atavistic commitments still buried in more auratic modes of relating to art.²⁰ For Benjamin this is no small matter, since this destruction of the cultural heritage entails a 'tremendous shattering of tradition' that undermines a culture's ability to transmit its collective store of historical experience. Just as the accumulation of experience at an individual level requires the capacity to embed present experience in a broader seam of past experience, thereby giving it density and weight, so the accumulation of experience at a collective level requires that a culture preserve some means of transmitting its store of experience through its artifacts. Once these artifacts are detached – reproductively – from their original spatio-temporal contexts and the historical testimony sedimented therein, whatever cannot be easily reproduced is no longer transmitted. Benjamin himself is far more circumspect about these consequences of the destruction of aura – not least since they fly in the face of his own idea of substantive experience in 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' – than many of his commentators.²¹ Benjamin's account of experience in the strong sense requires that present experience be embedded in past experience at both an individual and a collective level; that is, it requires just what is lost when an artwork, person or event is stripped of its presence through reproduction. This more elegiac aspect of Benjamin's thought is the flipside of the 'liquidationist' dimension routinely singled out by art theorists. For this Benjamin, once experience is reduced to a sequence of punctual moments bereft of underlying narrative coherence, the subject loses the ability to engage with its objects auratically; similarly, once culture

is consumed by means of its reproductions, the historical testimony once lodged in the unique spatio-temporal presence of the artifacts reproduced falls away.

THE ETHICS OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

TWO CLUES TO WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE WITHERING OF AURA

In the 'Work of Art' essay film serves as the fulcrum for the mutual adjustment between the masses and urban life to which Benjamin attributes the 'withering' of aura. Film, for Benjamin, is a ballistic art that assails its spectators with a series of shocks they then have to parry. The jump-cuts and montage of avant-garde Russian film, Benjamin argues, constitute a ballistic 'training' in urban living, a schooling for the 'human sensorium' in shock, the pervasive experience of modern urban life:

Film is the art form corresponding to the increased threat to life that faces people today. Humanity's need to expose itself to shock effects represents an adaptation to the dangers threatening it. Film corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception – changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in the big-city traffic, and on a historical scale by every present-day citizen. (SW 4:281, n.42)

The political significance of film as a medium is that it teaches the masses to master such experience and thereby bring their life in the city, which otherwise threatens to overwhelm them, under control. This is the use-value of film, and it is political. The nature of film, as Benjamin construes it, is clearly inimical to auratic experience. The tactility of its shock effects brooks no distance; it forecloses the possibility of auratic immersion by refusing to let its audience be: whereas 'painting invites the viewer to contemplation [in such a way that] before it he can give himself up to his associations', Benjamin observes, '[b]efore a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on. ... This constitutes the shock effect of the film which, like all shocks, seeks to induce heightened attention' (SW 4:267). Of course, one can take issue with Benjamin's claims about film, as many have done since Adorno, on the basis of the absorptive spectacle of Hollywood film.²² But this is less easily said of the Russian avant-garde films (e.g. Sergei Eisenstein and Diego Vertov) that Benjamin has in mind. Yet this in itself shows the fallacy of attributing, intrinsic political significance to an artistic medium or technology in abstraction from how it is used by an artistic agent. In this respect

Benjamin's account of film lacks the subtlety of his earlier account of photography as an artistic medium, despite being derived from it.

Benjamin's account of film as an art form both responds to, and shapes in turn, the transformation of experience brought about by urban existence has been discussed at length in the literature, and I do not wish to dwell on it here. Rather, I want to bring out what it suggests is at stake in Benjamin's view of auratic experience more generally. I shall broach this by way of two clues that operate just below the surface of Benjamin's own claims in his discussions of the cinematographer and the film actor. The first is his analysis of the different relations a cinematographer and a painter have to what they depict. To bring this out Benjamin draws an analogy to the different relations a surgeon and a magician have to their clients: 'Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue' (SW 4:263). The terms in which Benjamin discusses what is at stake in the degree of 'distance' that the two activities tolerate suggests an ethical dimension to auratic experience for the first time. Where the magician heals the sick by laying on hands, thereby respecting their patients' bodily integrity, the surgeon – like the cinematographer – cuts into it:

The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person. (SW 4:263, my italics)²³

What this image flags up is the ethical significance of aura, its relation to respect – here figured as respect for bodily integrity or, more generally, as an ability to relate to others as others. The surgeon has to cross this boundary in order to operate. At that moment he ceases to relate to the patient as a person (an end), and begins to relate to him as a body, i.e. as a medical problem to be solved. By this, I do not mean to suggest that advances in modern medicine are unethical; I simply mean to draw out what I take to be at stake in this analogy for Benjamin, given the context of his

surrounding remarks on aura. Looked at in this light, these remarks suggest that an auratic relation to a work of art carries an implicit ethical charge or, more strongly, that this relation might serve as a model for thinking about the ethical dimension of experience more generally. Artworks, as Adorno remarks, ‘open their eyes’.²⁴ At their most compelling, works of art look back at us, appearing to exhibit a subjectivity of their own, a subjectivity capable of putting us in question. Now, if this is what is disappearing as a result of the transformations in the structure of experience that Benjamin is tracking in terms of the withering of aura, then what is disappearing is not only our ability to appreciate the aura of a Rembrandt painting in the age of technical reproducibility, as Crimp suggests, but our capacity to perceive or respect the uniqueness, difference or distance of any object of experience whatsoever – including that of other persons. If aura names a general category of experience that is fading as a consequence of the transformations of our experience of space and time brought about by technological modernity, then it must be the very possibility of experiencing – let alone respecting – difference or particularity that is ultimately at stake.

The second clue to what is at issue in the demise of aura – one that functions as a companion image to that of the surgeon/cinematographer versus the magician/painter – is provided by Benjamin’s comparison of the screen and stage actors’ relations to their respective audiences. Film substitutes an image for the real presence of the actor in the space and time of the theatre. Unlike the actor on stage who, Benjamin claims, can adjust their performance in response to its reception by their audience, the film actor’s image is dead; unlike the embodied actor it cannot be said to ‘look back’. Moreover, unlike that of the stage actor, the film actor’s role unfolds through a series ‘takes’ only brought together subsequently in the edit suite; as a result it lacks the narrative coherence, on the plain of the actor’s own experience, of an equivalent role on stage. Moreover, this replacement of a living unified presence by a dead fragmented one, is mirrored in the reception of the actors’ respective performances. Rather than taking place before a living audience, the film actor’s performance takes place before the dead eye of the camera – with which, Benjamin claims, its audience is encouraged to identify – an eye that is dead because it sees, but without returning the gaze.²⁵ Like the surgeon, the film audience no longer encounters the object of its perception ‘man to man’, that is, as a person. ‘For the first time’, Benjamin observes, ‘the human being [in this case the actor] must operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence in the here and the now. There is

no facsimile of the aura' (SW 4:260). What fades in the transition from auratic living presence in the theatre to reproductive presence in film, then, is the last trace of an intersubjective relation between actor and audience. That is, the last trace of this as a relation between persons.

ERLEBNIS VERSUS ERFAHRUNG

BENJAMIN'S ATTITUDE TO THE 'WITHERING' OF AURATIC EXPERIENCE

Not surprisingly, the magnitude of what is at stake, ethically, in the decay of auratic experience, has consequences for Benjamin's attitude towards what he describes. It makes his attitude far more conflicted than it is frequently represented as being. This applies to his philosophical commentators as much as it does to his reception by art theorists. Rather than simply welcoming the rout of the aura, as Howard Caygill and Rodolphe Gasché maintain, I shall argue, in concert with Susan Buck-Morss and John McCole, that Benjamin's attitude is marked not so much by ambivalence as by a double-edged response. He welcomes and mourns its passing simultaneously; his remarks about aura manifest both a 'liquidationist' and an 'elegiac' undertow, and which is prominent depends on what dimension of aura, as a general category of experience is under discussion.²⁶ This is particularly noticeable in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), when Benjamin discusses memory and experience in more general terms than in the earlier essays on art. What he says here – both about the antithetical relation between shock and authentic experience, and about the significance of feeling one's gaze returned by an object of perception – retrospectively recasts his earlier positive remarks about film as a ballistic training in shock, and his pejorative remarks about the cultic uses of photography, in a far more ambivalent light.

'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' is a complex essay, and I shall not attempt to summarize it here; rather, I shall focus on how it takes up the themes of shock and the gaze from his earlier writings and, in so doing, reformats some of his earlier claims. Central to this essay is the distinction Benjamin makes, while discussing Baudelaire, between two varieties of experience, marked by the words Erlebnis and Erfahrung. The former is experience conceived in the minimal sense of merely living through, or enduring, the present moment; the latter is a more substantive, thicker conception of

experience. Only the latter has density to distinguish us as individuals, while embedding us – as individuals – in a wider field of shared understanding: ‘Where there is experience [Erfahrung] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory with material of the collective past’ (SW 4:316). Despite this, Benjamin maintains that the weaker, more impoverished form of experience, in which events remain confined to the hour in which they occurred, has become the dominant schema for modern experience. This is a product of the pervasive experience of shock in modernity; it is the form of experience that results when existence is reduced to a series of shocks to be parried by a consciousness functioning essentially as a defensive shield. A shock that is ‘parried by consciousness’, Benjamin claims, drawing on Freud, gives the ‘incident that occasions it the character of an isolated experience [Erlebnis], in the strict sense’ (SW 4:318). It drains it of affect, thereby consigning it to the moment of its occurrence:

The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter experience [Erfahrung], and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [Erlebnis]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of the incident’s contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into an isolated experience [Erlebnis]. (SW 4:319)

When this becomes the dominant form of experience, the present is increasingly cut adrift from the past, because it is no longer assimilated to past experiences. As a result, the collective store of past experience is no longer transmitted, along with present experience, to the future. For Benjamin, then, the ongoing transmission of tradition is only possible where there is experience in the full sense; that is, the accumulation of a largely unconscious repository of shared understanding. But by fixing events in consciousness, shock prevents their assimilation to this unconscious repository. Benjamin is following Freud in claiming that consciously registering an event and that event leaving a memory trace are antithetical in the same system; that only what bypasses our conscious defenses and thereby leaves a memory trace amounts to experience in the full sense, experience that has been embedded in a store of unreflective past experience: ‘[O]nly what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an isolated experience

[Erlebnis], can become a component of mémoire involontaire' (SW 4: 317).²⁷ What has been lived through, by contrast, leaves no trace: what we are conscious of (Erlebnis) and what we experience (Erfahrung) are antithetical, because what has been registered in consciousness has been parried, drained of affect, leaving no trace.²⁸ On this view, once shock experience just is experience in general, substantive experience becomes a thing of the past. But what is most striking about Benjamin's analysis of shock as the schema for impoverished experience in the present context is the way in which it retrospectively recasts his earlier celebration of film – with which it is entirely consistent – in a much less positive light. For on this account, the ballistic training film provides in mastering shock must contribute directly to the atrophy of substantive experience. This, then, is the underside of the 'shattering of tradition' that takes place when objects, events, memories and experiences lose their aura. It is the cost of the 'present crisis and renewal of humanity', and it makes Benjamin's attitude to the withering of aura more conflicted than is generally acknowledged (SW 4:254).

ENCOUNTERING OTHERS AS OTHERS

AURA, FACE, PHOTOGRAPHY

These tensions in Benjamin's account of aura, and his attitude towards its passing, become most acute when he turns to its implications for our capacity to encounter one another as others. This is where the specific and the general dimensions of the category cross. By the 'specific', I mean those aspects that derive from, and pertain specifically to, the history of portrait photography in which the idea first arises; by the 'general', I mean the more global remarks about the structure of experience that Benjamin raises off the back of that account over the following decade, culminating in the essay on Baudelaire. I want to suggest that, in the last analysis, these pull in conflicting directions; that what might be thought salutary at the specific level (the erosion of a cultic relation to early photography, if that is what it is, as an instance of the ongoing disenchantment of the world) is impossible to regard in the same light when looked at from the more general perspective (as the capacity to perceive, and hence respect, difference and particularity per se, as the ability to respond to others as others). These two axes of the concept intersect most clearly in the experience of portraits in which the sitter's gaze anticipates and returns that of its viewer. That photographic images of the face have a privileged relation to the experience of aura

was apparent in the earlier essays: in the implied link between aura and a particular way of representing persons suggested by Benjamin's anti-auratic verdict on work of both Atget and Sander in 'Little History'; and in the 'Work of Art's' equation of a particular use of portraiture with the residue of an earlier, more cultic, relation to art:

cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to a last retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty. (SW 4:258)

But the Baudelaire essay provides, for the first time, a transparent rationale for this connection of aura and face by attributing it to the unique ability of the face to look back, returning the gaze. This was implicit in the earlier texts – for example, in the claim that what gave early photography its 'magical quality' was the impression that its subjects could see their viewers in turn²⁹ – but the Baudelaire essay makes this explicit. And, as with the examples of the cinematographer and actor, what is at stake here is the relation between aura and intersubjectivity; specifically, a formal rather than substantive notion of intersubjectivity that turns, minimally, on the ability of another subject, in other regards just another phenomenal object within my world, to return my gaze as a subject, that is, as an agency or intelligence or point of view onto that world, and hence from outside it. For the subject to feel itself held in the gaze of another in this way functions structurally as another instance of that 'strange weave of space and time' discussed earlier with reference to works of art; it opens a moment of transcendence within the immanent horizon of consciousness.³⁰ Like the experience (Erfahrung) that bypasses consciousness despite leaving a memory trace, the gaze of the other comes to me from within my world (consciousness), despite being a point of view onto that world from outside it, and hence transcending it. In this respect the face of the other functions as the limit of my world; it puts the sovereignty of my own subjectivity in question. The face is a prophylactic against solipsism. This is apparent, in the Baudelaire essay, when Benjamin ties the 'fullest experience' of aura back to the experience of another returning one's gaze. As the opportunities for encountering others in this way decrease, through the increasing use of reproductive technologies, so too do our opportunities to encounter one another as persons:

What was inevitably felt to be inhuman – one might even say deadly – in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze. Inherent in the gaze however is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met ... there is an experience [Erfahrung] of the aura in all its fullness ... Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and the inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. (SW 4:338, my italics)

That photography records but does not see, and hence does not return the gaze, is for Benjamin photography's constitutive contribution to the demise of aura, in virtue of its mechanical nature. Given this, Benjamin implies, responding to photography auratically is a category mistake of sorts, the animistic transposition of a relation between humans to a relation between persons and inanimate objects. For this reason its rout is to be welcomed as part and parcel of the disenchantment of the world. But this is where the tension between the general and the specific in Benjamin's various characterizations of aura becomes acute: for what might seem salutary, viewed in terms of disenchanting our relation to photography taken in isolation, seems much more problematic, if viewed in terms of Benjamin's more general characterizations of aura as a place-holder for emphatic experience per se, that is, a category of experience applicable not only to our relation to the depiction of persons in photography, but to our ability to experience personhood as such. In so far as aura picks out an experiential possibility – the ability to appreciate distance and uniqueness, hence the capacity to respond to the particularity of others as others – that is waning, what may appear from the more restricted viewpoint as a salutary purge of atavistic residues in secular practices, appears from the more general perspective as the reduction of everything in the world – other persons included – to the status of mere objects. And celebrating such a reduction, particularly at the historical moment in which Benjamin was writing, is tantamount to celebrating barbarism.

THE FACE IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
RINEKE DIJKSTRA AND THOMAS RUFF

In conclusion, I want to say something about how the reading of aura proposed in this paper might impact on our perception of more recent photographic portraiture. I shall do so by way of some brief remarks about the work of Rineke Dijkstra and Thomas Ruff, two contemporary European photographers who persistently record the face in their work, albeit in very different ways. And I want to suggest that, initial appearances notwithstanding, their work partakes of a deeper continuity that serves to bring out the underlying connection between our experience of other persons, the depiction of other persons, and works of art more generally. To give some idea of the generality of what I take to be at stake: if my claim, which I shall do no more than set out speculatively here, is granted in principle, then it should apply to any serious body of art in any medium, visual or otherwise.

The orthodox view of Dijkstra and Ruff runs something like this. Dijkstra's work turns on the formation of an empathetic relation with her subjects. This is evidenced by series that document the same individuals over extended periods in their lives, and by her preference for a particular kind of inward, non-exhibitionist, personality (with which she claims to identify), and which tends to be accompanied by a certain awkwardness before the camera.³¹ This is especially apparent in the series that brought her international recognition, recording adolescents of various nationalities on beaches, where their semi-exposed bodies seems to exacerbate their innate adolescent awkwardness and self-consciousness, which Dijkstra then further exacerbates by not instructing her subjects in how to compose themselves, despite the concentration her way of working demands of them. All this, particularly the awkward self-possession, is made apparent in the portraits themselves. Ruff's work, by contrast, has no truck with such time-honoured homilies concerning the expression of subjective interiority in portraiture. Schooled in the Bechers' rigorous tradition of objectively and systematically documenting the appearance of the world, without laying claim to any deeper truth or insight, Ruff's work may be read as a hard-nosed rebuttal of the belief that photographs are capable of communicating anything about their sitters' psyche or soul. This is most evident in the series of large-format straight-to-camera passport photograph style portraits that brought Ruff to international attention. These works, initially of the artist's friends and acquaintances, and consistently of subjects from his own generation, are characterized by a large-format, straight-to-camera, closed-cropped, no-nonsense directness (and it is striking how the few images that depart from this format fail aesthetically). Throughout, the work makes a virtue of a neutral, detached observation, and the serial way of working, in

concert with the similar ages of the subjects, tends to homogenize differences and downplay individuality. On this account, Ruff would be a kind of latter-day Sander, documenting a generation rather than engaging in portraiture as that activity is traditionally understood, and thereby refusing the comforts of engaging with others that Dijkstra's work seems to hold out. Such other, largely presentational, similarities as there are between their work (large format, colour, high production values and so on) serves only to make these more fundamental differences in attitude and intention more apparent.

This is the orthodox view: it sees Dijkstra and Ruff as occupying polarized artistic positions. I do not disagree with this view, so far as it goes, it just does not go very far. Here, then, is what I want to say: what the work of both artists shares above and beyond such differences, indeed precisely in virtue of such differences, is a distinctive – i.e. unwavering, uncompromised, coherent – viewpoint onto the world. The work of both is marked by a particular artistic vision; each is stamped with an immediately recognizable set of priorities and assumptions about what is salient in the world. (Of course, an adequate account of either's work, but particularly Ruff's, who works in a variety of non-portrait series besides, would have to say much more, but what I have said should suffice for my purposes here.) Thus, it is not the sitters who look back at us from the work of either Ruff or Dijkstra in the last analysis but, rather, the artists themselves. What we see when we look at their work, indeed, what we see (what we experience) when we look at, or otherwise engage with, any substantial body of art, photographic or otherwise, representational or abstract, visual, verbal or aural, is the manifestation of such a distinctive point of view onto the world. This, after all, is a large part of why we value the work of one artist over another. That is, because we respond, or find ourselves called to respond, to the point of view onto the world opened by one artist's work rather than that opened by another's. In this respect it has much in common with why we value other persons. Analogously to what we see when we see another person looking back at us, what we encounter in a work of art is a point of view onto the world or, more strongly, the opening of a competing world that potentially challenges that which we take ourselves to inhabit. This is hardly a novel claim: but what it suggests is that we respond to works of art and, a fortiori, artist's oeuvres taken as a whole, in much the same way that we respond to other persons' actions taken as a whole – that is, their lives, and how they live them, taken as a totality – as cohering in particular ways, ways redolent of particular commitments, beliefs, and priorities. Artworks, like other persons in this regard,

express particular viewpoints onto the world. In virtue of the fact that works of art are made by persons, they do not just show things; they also manifest particular attitudes towards or about what they show. Like my earlier account of the face, which was in this respect just a cipher for others per se, works of art are marked by a two-fold ontology: they are at once both inside and outside my world. Like persons, in virtue of possessing a point of view onto what they present, works of art transcend their material substrate: they are at once both things in my world, and subjective viewpoints upon it from outside it. In this respect, artworks, like persons, look back, and thereby make a claim on us. This is trivially true of photographs that depict the human face, but it is true in a far deeper sense of works of art and other persons per se. And it remains true of our relation to art and other persons, for just so as long as we retain the capacity to respond to difference and particularity. In this respect our relation to works of art functions, structurally, as a place-holder for our relation to others persons. Artworks are the face of the other. Aura marks this spot.

I would like to thank David Company, Béatrice Han, and Maggie Iversen for their comments and correspondence on this paper in draft.

¹ For examples of this postmodern reception of Benjamin see: Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism Parts I/II', reprinted in Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1994); Douglas Crimp 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism' and 'This Is Not a Museum of Art', reprinted in On The Museum's Ruins (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993); and Andreas Huyssen, 'The Hidden Dialectic: Avant-Garde–Technology–Mass Culture' in After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986). Peter Wollheim set out to retrieve Benjamin's work from this postmodern appropriation in 'The Politics of Memory: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin', Vanguard (February/March, 1986): 22-6, by resituating the concept of 'aura' in the context of Benjamin's conflicted understanding of memory, perception and experience more generally. More recently, original contributors to the debate, such as Rosalind Krauss, have begun reflecting on the afterlife of Benjamin's concept of aura in art theory; see 'Reinventing the Medium', Critical Inquiry 25 (1999): 289-305, in the special issue of Critical Inquiry titled Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin.

² The latter distinction is my own and, so far as I know, has not previously been presented in this way. The former distinction is a point of contention in the literature. For an exemplary account of this aspect of Benjamin's thought, see John McCole, Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), especially section 1, chapter I 'Benjamin on Tradition', 1-10. Here McCole portrays Benjamin's double-edged response to the destruction of aura as a key to interpreting his work as a whole. See also Rainer Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), chapter II, parts 2-3. Susan Buck-Morss is also attentive to this tension in Benjamin's work; see The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute (New York: Free Press, 1977), chapters 9-10 on 'The Adorno-Benjamin Debate'.

³ On this point, see Howard Caygill's reading of the artwork essay in terms of Kant's understanding of the concept of experience in chapter 3 of Walter Benjamin and the Colour of the Experience (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). For an interpretation that puts more emphasis on where Benjamin departs from Kant, while still reading the artwork essay as a crypto-Kantian text, see Rodolphe Gasché, 'Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"', in eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience (2nd edition, Manchester: Clinamen, 2000). Both Caygill and Gasché would contest the double-edged reading of Benjamin's response to the withering of the aura put forward here. For a fine reconstruction of Benjamin's account of the relation between particular art forms and transformations in the structure of perception, see Joel Snyder 'Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura: A Reading of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility"', in Gary Smith, ed, Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴ See Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface' in Hal Foster, ed, The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). On a more critical note, Foster was already referring to an orthodoxy of the 'purloined image' in postmodern theories of photographic appropriation by 1982 in 'Re: Post', reprinted in Brian Wallis, ed, Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

⁵ Both Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?' appeared in widely read translations in 1977: Barthes' Image, Music, Text (London: Fontana, 1977), and Foucault's Language, Counter-Memory, Practice (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), respectively.

⁶ See, for example, Douglas Crimp's critique of Barbara Rose's explicitly anti-photographic defense of contemporary painting in 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism', pp. 114-5.

⁷ The show itself included the work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Phillip Smith; only Sherrie Levine remains prominent among the group in retrospective accounts of the period. Today it is just as likely that

Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Louise Lawler or Barbara Kruger would be associated with this way of working.

⁸ Crimp, *ibid.*, p. 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰ See, for example, Benjamin's claim in 'Little History of Photography' that 'what is again and again decisive for photography is the photographer's attitude to his techniques' (SW 2:517).

¹¹ See Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida (London: Fontana, 1984). For an overview of Barthes' theory of the photographic 'punctum' and 'studium', as well as the parallels between Barthes and Benjamin's views of photography, see Maggie Iversen, 'What is a Photograph?', Art History, 17: 3, September 1994.

¹² Benjamin further notes of the slow optics of early photography that 'the low light-sensitivity of the early plates made prolonged exposure outdoors a necessity. This in turn made it desirable to take the subject to some out-of-the-way spot where there was no obstacle to quiet concentration. ... The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment' (SW 2:514).

¹³ Adorno was the first to point this out, in his correspondence with Benjamin concerning the essay's prospective publication in the Institute's journal. See letter II of 'Presentation III' in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, Aesthetics and Politics, (London: NLB, 1977, pp.121-2).

¹⁴ Cf. SW 4:255. For all the Kantian overtones of this passage, which I bring out below, it also echoes Valéry's account of listening to music: '[it] weaves us an artificial span of time by lightly touching the keys our real life', allowing us 'to live again in a vibrant milieu not very different from that in which it was created'; see 'Conquest of Ubiquity', reprinted in Paul Valéry, Collected Works, ('Aesthetics') ed J. Matthews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964) 13: 226-7, from which Benjamin takes his epigraph for the 'Work of Art' essay. Valéry's paper originally appeared in 1928 in La Musique Avant Tout Chose, prior to its collection in Pieces Sur L'Art, 1934. 'Little History', in which Benjamin invokes this 'strange weave of space and time' for the first time, was written in 1931.

¹⁵ On space and time as the a priori forms of intuition, see the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’, in Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929). Gasché’s ‘Objective Diversions’ focuses explicitly on the way in which Benjamin is recasting Kant’s forms of intuition in his description of aura. On the significance of Kant for Benjamin’s thought more generally, see Caygill, Walter Benjamin and the Colour of Experience.

¹⁶ For a contrasting critique of Benjamin’s periodization of art, see chapter II of Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁷ The same passage appears in Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’ (SW 2:519).

¹⁸ On the experience of city crowds as an experience of shock, see ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (SW 4:324-9).

¹⁹ Benjamin claims these new ends are political, in §IV of ‘The Work of Art’ essay, but does not offer an argument for the claim (SW 4:256-7).

²⁰ Caygill, The Colour of Experience, pp. 93-117.

²¹ I come back to this point below. As to the cogency of Benjamin’s central – and massive – claim in the artwork essay that the very structure of experience is being transformed as a result of the new reproductive technologies, notably film, see Joel Snyder’s ‘Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura’, for a defense; and chapter II of Noël Carroll’s A Philosophy of Mass Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), for a skeptical reply.

²² Adorno appealed to his own experience as a composer, when corresponding with Benjamin about his essay: ‘[d]ialectical though your essay may be, it is not so in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience – that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made’. See Adorno et al, Aesthetics and Politics, 121-2.

²³ See also §IX of Susan Buck-Morss's 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', October 62 (1992), a highly original re-reading of the artwork essay, where she comments: 'The medical practice was professionalized in the mid-nineteenth century, and doctors became prototypical of a new elite of technical experts. Anaesthesia was central to this development. For it was not only the patient who was relieved from pain by anesthesia. The effect was as profound upon the surgeon. A deliberate effort to desensitize oneself from the experience of the pain of another was no longer necessary. Whereas surgeons earlier had to train themselves to repress empathic identification with the suffering patient, now they had only to confront an inert, insensate mass that they could tinker with without emotional involvement' (pp. 27-8).

²⁴ See Adorno: 'What nature strives for in vain, artworks fulfill: They open their eyes' and 'An artwork opens its eyes under the gaze of the spectator when it emphatically articulates something objective', in Aesthetic Theory, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 66, p. 275. In effect, Adorno concurs with Benjamin's characterization of aura in the 'Work of Art', but not with its consignment to cult, hence nor with Benjamin's willingness to dispense with it. This is apparent in the 'Paralipomena' to Aesthetic Theory, pp. 273-5, in which Adorno uses the idea of aura (contra Benjamin) to contest Hegel's idealist conception of the work of art as thoroughly permeated by mind.

²⁵ See, in this regard, Susan Buck-Morss's discussion of eyes that look but no longer see, having been anaesthetized through over stimulation, in 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics', §§VI-VIII, especially p. 18.

²⁶ I take this way of characterizing Benjamin's double-edged response to the withering of aura from John McCole's Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, pp. 1-10 in particular.

²⁷ Benjamin is here invoking Proust's idea of 'involuntary memory', which he regards as a modern phenomenon. For Benjamin, the fact that voluntary and involuntary memory should have come apart, and that retrieving the richness of the latter thereby become a matter of chance, is a product of the fact that once consciousness is forced to function as a shield against excessive stimulation, only what circumvents consciousness can lodge itself within our experience in a deep sense. Thus Benjamin

characterizes ‘the associations which, at home in the mémoire involuntaire, seek to cluster around the object of perception’ as auratic (SW 4:337).

²⁸ This conception of experience is predicated, specifically, on Freud’s work on consciousness as shock-defense and, more generally, on Freud’s view of the mind as a dynamic, self-regulating system that functions by deflecting or discharging excitations and stimuli that threaten its own equilibrium. See, for example, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in Sigmund Freud, On Metapsychology, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 275-338.

²⁹ Thus Benjamin cites in ‘Little History’ Dauthendey, a contemporary of Daguerre, remarking: ‘We didn’t trust ourselves at first to look long at the first pictures he developed. We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little faces in the picture could see us, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and unaccustomed fidelity to nature of the first daguerreotypes’ (SW 2:512). ‘At first’, that is, when photography was still a truly startling invention, looking for too long would have felt akin to staring at another person who was looking back. This impression that the subjects of early photography were looking back gave it an uncanny quality for its contemporaries, not least because it gave rise to the feeling that the inanimate objects of their gaze were alive, imbued with a subjective interiority of their own.

³⁰ For an account of the relation between aura, intersubjectivity and transcendence consonant with that put forward here see Andrew Benjamin, ‘The Decline of Art: Benjamin’s Aura’, Art, Mimesis and the Avant-garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 147-8 and 150-1. Despite our different starting-points, Benjamin’s remarks on the ‘inexhaustibility’ and ‘primordial presence’ of the face, the fact that it remains distant and other despite proximity – what I call its ‘transcendence’ – his stress on its ability to look back, returning the gaze, and his claim that this confers an ethical significance on aura anticipates my argument here. See also Andrew Benjamin’s discussion of the ‘cleavage of experience’ in ‘Tradition and Experience: Walter Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,”’ in Andrew Benjamin, ed, The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 122-40 (pp. 132-3 in particular), for the parallels in our discussions of Benjamin’s concept of ‘experience’ relevant to our respective accounts of aura.

³¹ See 'Interview with Rineke Dijkstra' in Rineke Dijkstra, Exhibition Catalogue (London: The Photographers Gallery, 1997), n.p.