

Free essay about the destruction of aura with a click of the mouse

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Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" delves into the effects on art by the mechanical reproduction of such implements as the camera as it relates to photography and film. The rise of the digital age furthers the progression began by the advent of photography and film of the destruction of aura in favor of mass production and accessibility. Now, more than ever, people can instantaneously view and critique artwork, becoming experts merely by their ability to access and lay claim to a digitalized piece of art. Just as the camera lens removes an actor from his aura, the advent of the Internet further demolishes this distance between artist and aura. The Internet and social media such as Facebook enables the ultimate mobility of a work of art, causing it to transcend time and space, allowing it to be completely uprooted from context, and potentially interpreted by anyone into a variety of meanings.

The uniqueness or "aura" inherent in a work of art takes into account the historicity of the time around the art. The elements of time and space are crucial to maintaining the integrity and authenticity of art (Benjamin IV). Benjamin argues "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" (II). If aura is attached to the physical presence of a work of art, be it a picture, person, etc, then the mechanical reproduction of art removes the artist and voids the meaning of the artwork. On the other hand, while artwork becomes devalued in the process of mass reproduction, it also becomes more accessible to more people.

Facebook is a prime example of the effects of mass production on works of

art. Facebook allows anyone to post their “ art” be it words, photography, videos, etc. Yet in posting a picture, for instance, one loses their ownership in that picture and its aura immediately vanishes. Now the picture is available to be copied and pasted and transferred completely out of historical context so when a viewer comes across it after multiple transfers, they are removed from the association of the artist. That is, they have no idea of who took the picture or the context and thought behind it. This separation of the picture from its ritual function results in the loss of its aura.

In addition, anyone can take a certain degree of ownership in the picture by commenting on it, thereby imposing their own viewpoint and interpretation of the picture in a very public forum. In turn, other people may comment on a particular person’s statement about the picture. Now there is a conversation beginning with the public and the artist, who has limited ability to protect the original integrity of the picture. The lines between artist and public become blurred. As Benjamin writes, “ At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (X). This ability for the masses to access the artwork and directly engage the artist, further strips the art of its aura and authenticity.

Moreover, the invitation of slow paced, active contemplation by a viewer on a work of art is destroyed in the instant gratification offered by the click of a mouse. The ease in which Facebook allows someone to view a picture in one moment, comment on it in the next, and move on to the next picture or comment without ever pausing, negates the need for evaluation and contemplation. In this sense the need for instant gratification can be seen as

further destroying the aura of art. For, as Benjamin states, “ One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later” (XIV). Even though millions of people spend a large quantity of time Facebook, they are clicking through pictures and pages as fast as the scenes from a movie change from one thing to the next. This voracious appetite of the masses consumes artwork instead of allowing the artwork to absorb them on an individual level (Benjamin XV).

In conclusion, the degradation of aura began by the mechanical reproduction of artwork via film and photography is furthered by the creation of the Internet and particularly by social media platforms such as Facebook. Now, while anyone can view works of art, they can also lay claim to them by participating in conversation with the artist and other members of the public. The ability to copy, paste, and share results in the ultimate separation from context and loss of aura. Gone is the quiet contemplation encouraged by a work of art on a viewer and here to stay is the hunger for instant gratification by the masses as they absorb large quantities of art with the mere click of a mouse.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. “ The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” 1998. Web. 8 December 2014.