The Reincarnation of the Aura: Challenging Originality with Authenticity in Plaster Casts of Lost Sculptures

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ABSTRACT

In 1935, Walter Benjamin introduced the aura as the abstract conceptualization of uniqueness, authenticity, and singularity that encompasses an original art object. With the advent of technological reproducibility, Benjamin posits that the aura of an object deteriorates when the original is reproduced through the manufacture of copies. Employing this concept of the aura, I outline the proliferation of plaster casts of sculptures in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, placing contextual emphasis on the cultural and prestige value of originals and copies. Theories of authenticity in both art history and material culture are used to examine the nature of the aura and to consider how the aura transforms when an original object is lost from the material record. Through an object biography of a 15th-century sculpture by Francesco Laurana, I propose that the aura does not disappear upon the loss of the original, but is reincarnated in the authentic reproduction.

KEYWORDS

Art History, Authenticity, Material Culture, Originality, Plaster Casts, Representation, Reproducibility, Sculpture, Walter Benjamin

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935), Walter Benjamin argues that the reproduction of an art object leads to the “decay of the aura” of the original work (p. 15). The aura, as Benjamin defines it, is “the here and now” of the object; it is the quality of a unique existence, “a strange tissue of space and time” that gives the appearance of being slightly distant or removed, “however near it may be” (1935, p. 15). It is the here-and-nowness of the original that “constitutes the concept of its authenticity” (1935, p. 13). The way we seek to perceive history in the present day means that we desire to become closer to objects while “overcoming the uniqueness of every reality through its reproducibility” (1935, p. 16). This concept of the aura that is put forth by Benjamin is seen as an inherent, magical property that is present in every original art object. I endeavour in this paper to apply Benjamin’s conceptualization of the aura to a specific context that persists throughout our material culture histories in a very pertinent way. Can an object have authenticity if it does not have originality? Do copies have a life beyond their prescribed role as mere representation or replication? Can the concept of the aura be maintained in a world of copies and replicas? These key questions guide my analysis of Benjamin’s theoretical approach to reproducibility in the technological age.

With the foundations of my research built upon “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935), I explore the implications of Benjamin’s work through a case study of a
particular example of artistic reproduction. Looking specifically at the casting and replication of sculpture in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, I outline the social, historical, and cultural forces that led to the proliferation of casts and copies in the Western world. Situating the originals in relation to their copies, I consider differences in function, value, meaning, and prestige. To illustrate the prevalence and significance of casting practices in Europe during this era, a historical overview of the Cast Courts at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London contextualizes the focal point of this paper: a plaster cast of a bust by Renaissance sculptor Francesco Laurana, entitled Portrait of a Woman. It is the investigation of this piece in particular that highlights my exploration of the tension between originality and authenticity. Considering Benjamin’s concept of the aura, along with further critical commentaries on authenticity in material culture and on reproducibility, I use Laurana’s Portrait of a Woman as a prime example of the vanishing original. In examining this work, I suggest that the aura may not always decay as Benjamin says. Using object biography to consider the historical relevance and iconic meaning of a reproduction, I posit that the value and prestige of the original are not lost through the process of casting. Instead, Benjamin’s aura may be temporarily concealed or displaced. I argue that in instances of an absent original, the aura is reincarnated within the authentic reproduction. Put simply, the iconic sign becomes the very object to which it refers.

AUTHENTICITY IN MATERIAL CULTURE

I begin by asking a simple question: what makes an object authentic? In light of Benjamin’s contentious essay, a number of critical commentaries and responses have emerged, revealing the complicated resonances that are tied up in the meaning of authenticity. Jaworski (2013) prefaces his argument that skilful reproductions of art objects are “just as good” (p. 392) as the original objects by clarifying that he does not believe they are of the same value. His description of historical originality as a value of the authentic object appears closely aligned with Benjamin’s conceptualization of the aura. “We seem to care about ‘survival value,’” which is “the value objects have in virtue of having survived throughout the years” (Jaworski, 2013, p. 393). In this sense, the way that an object is situated in time gives a good indication of its authenticity. This temporal quality is connected to causal history, which Goodman explains as follows: knowing the history of production of an art object provides a link back “to the hand of the artist,” and because of this history, “the original … will be authentic in virtue of its causal history” (as cited in Jaworski, 2013, p. 397). A reproduction or a forgery, which is bereft of a causal history as intricate as the original, “lacks authenticity” (p. 397). A rich causal history implies that an object also has a strong survival value, and it is the uniqueness of this narrative and its position in time that bring it closer to originality and authenticity. This temporal individuality, with a complex object biography, points to the aura that is imbued in the original object via its unique existence, as Benjamin says.

Others suggest that authenticity is not so complicated, especially when understood directly through Benjamin’s lens. Zeller (2012) posits that the aura, which is “a notion of aesthetic experience,” is “the utopian concept of authenticity” (p. 75). In this sense, the aura and authenticity are inextricably linked, and both are opposed to the inherently dystopian advent of technological advancement. George Kubler (2008) is less direct in his realization of the authentic object, largely symptomatic of his structural approach to the relationships between originals and copies. In his mind, there cannot be one without the other. Originals are referred to as prime objects, and reproductions in the face of technological development become part of the replica-mass (Kubler, 2008, p. 35). He emphasizes that “the number of prime objects is distressingly small” (p. 38), and that copies are vital by way of their “adhesive properties,” as they “[hold] together the present and the past” (p. 66). There is a
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