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(Magic) Making: The Invisible Visible

There is a certain form of magic at work in the aesthetic experience of art, regardless of whether that experience is one of making or receiving art. However art's magic is tricky, and aura best names it: 'Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth.'[1] If this is the case, then, modern and contemporary works of art really ought to retrieve something of their auratic character, which turns the physical toward the metaphysical, the material toward the immaterial, the visible toward the invisible – making artworks, which are 'things among things, something other than [a] thing' (*AT* 86). Such art may even become a 'placeholder of a radical otherness,' which is, as Russell Berman argues, 'therefore utopian.'[2]

It is my firm belief that to make such an argument we could do a lot worse than developing new ways of thinking old questions or reconfiguring the terms of previous debates for the contemporary. Hence my interest in the historical debate concerning aura, art, photography, and film that Theodor W. Adorno had with his close friend Walter Benjamin. For if, as both men believed, film represented the 'newest form' of the arts,[3] then, perhaps, this *magical aura* still accounts for one of the distinctly artlike qualities of film? If like art, film thinks, then, perhaps it does so through auratic images?

Let's begin, then, by asking a simple question: What is Benjamin's understanding of aura? Well, aura appears as an important motif or category in a number of texts by Benjamin, and may be considered of paramount significance to his philosophy. Benjamin's fullest conceptual development of aura may be found in his essays on photography, film, and art – i.e. in the 'Little History of Photography,'

written and first published in 1931,[4] and in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' written between 1935-9, and first published, in an abridged form, in 1936.[5] In both essays Benjamin defines aura accordingly:

> A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadows 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 (*LHP* 518-19 / *WA* 104-05).

Now, our simple question requires a more complex answer. For instance, Gershom Scholem, on reading Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay, noted to his friend that he 'had employed' aura 'in an entirely different sense for many years.' Scholem accused Benjamin of misappropriating the concept of aura, which 'permitted him to sneak metaphysical insights' into a 'pseudo-Marxist' 'framework unsuited to them.'[6] Another friend, Bertolt Brecht, had this to say of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay: 'All mysticism, from an attitude against mysticism. This is how the materialist view of history is adapted! It is quite dreadful.'[7] And, yet another friend, Adorno, expressed his concern in the *Aesthetic Theory* thus:

> It is of interest that initially, in his "Little History of Photography," Benjamin in no way pronounced this antithesis [between the auratic and the mass reproduced work] as undialectically as he did five years later in his essay on reproduction. Whereas the later work adopted the definition of aura word for word from the earlier one, the early study praises the aura of early photographs, which they lost only with the critique of their commercial exploitation by Atget. This may come closer to the actual

> situation than does the simplification that made the essay on reproduction so popular (*AT* 56).

As Adorno observes, the *definition* of aura remains consistent across Benjamin's two essays. However, as Scholem and Adorno both note, the *sense* or the *emphasis* Benjamin gives to aura is inconsistent. These shifts of emphasis and slippages of sense, which exist between Benjamin's various attempts at conceptualising aura, make it impossible to claim that he had a single, definitive, theory of aura. '[T]here is,' as Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings declare, 'no full conceptual development of the term anywhere in Benjamin.'[8] 'The difficulty with Benjamin's writings on the aura,' according to Andrew Benjamin 'is a lack of consistency.'[9] And Miriam Bratu Hansen, too, identifies 'the elusiveness and ambivalence' of the category of aura in Benjamin's work:

> Anything but a clearly delimited, stable concept, aura describes a cluster of meanings and relations that appear in Benjamin's writings in various configurations and not always under its own name; it is this conceptual fluidity that allows aura to become such a productive nodal point in Benjamin's thinking.[10]

Aura, then, as Esther Leslie remarks, remains something of a 'nebulous' or 'curious category' in Benjamin's philosophy.[11] There is clearly a degree of ambivalent argumentation or *conceptual fluidity* between Benjamin's two essays, which adversely affects his *theory* or conceptual development of aura. Whereas in the 'Little History of Photography' essay the value of aura for art (and photography, and film) is viewed positively, and made synonymous with 'something new and strange,' 'a magical value,' 'the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now,' 'the inconspicuous spot' (*LHP* 510), the 'optical unconscious' (*LHP* 512), and *the unique*

appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be, in the more famous (and unfinished) 'Work of Art' essay the value of aura for art (and photography, and film) is viewed negatively, and made synonymous with an imperialist bourgeois privileging of uniqueness, authenticity, and originality. Benjamin's sense of aura, and its emphasis vis-à-vis the work of art (and photography, and film), shifted considerably between these two essays, bearing witness to something of a sea change in the fortunes of aura.

Indeed the change was so emphatic and the atmosphere so altered that Benjamin may still be counted as one of the most prominent modern critics of aura (and autonomy) vis-à-vis the work of art, photography, film, and their aesthetic experience. The prevalence of this view is due, in part, to the relatively late translation of Benjamin's work into English, and subsequent interpretation thereof. As Esther Leslie notes, the English translation of Benjamin's 'Little History of Photography' essay, which appeared in *Artforum,* in 1977:

> gave theoretical backing, in the 1970s and '80s, to the use of reproductive media in art making. Benjamin's thoughts on aura were taken to mean that this (…) nebulous quality adhered to painting and sculpture and traditional arts and was a kind of bourgeois stain that needed elimination through a wholehearted embrace of new media, specifically photography and film. These were deemed to be non-auratic, mass-reproducible art forms that were on par with modern life and experience. Douglas Crimp's essay 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,' published in *October* in 1980, was headed by a citation (…) from Benjamin's ['Little History of Photography'], and the body of the essay explored the notion of aura and its (possible but not necessary) liquidation in the photographic –

> or its haunting presence as a critical ghost admonishing and revealing the hanging on of art and the existence of art as a commodity. To use photography, especially with the anchoring of the caption, or slogan, was to forward a critique of the values on which painting relied – creativity, authenticity, spontaneity, inspiration. These were qualities that amounted to traditional art's aestheticized 'cult value' or 'exhibition value,' as Benjamin phrased it in [the 'Work of Art' essay]. For those who took guidance along these lines, favoured was the appropriationist, the non-original, the replicated, copies, and copies of copies, though what was made, for the most part, continued in actuality to be underwritten by the authentic signature – virtual or actual – of the artist (a Sherrie Levine, a Cindy Sherman, a Barbara Kruger, a Richard Prince).[12]

Perhaps, however, by revisiting one or two of the objections raised by his contemporaries in more detail, we may be able to uncouple aura from the wretched fate Benjamin bequeathed to it? As we have noted, in the *Aesthetic Theory,* Adorno takes issue with Benjamin's 'simple antithesis between the auratic and the mass-reproduced work' of art (*AT* 56). '[F]or the sake of simplicity,' Adorno argues, Benjamin 'neglected the dialectic of the two types' of art (Ibid). Ultimately, Benjamin's one-sided theory of art in the age of its technological reproducibility becomes, for Adorno at least, 'the booty of a view of art that takes photography as its model and is no less barbaric than the view of the artist as creator' (Ibid). Yet, Adorno differs from Benjamin (and, perhaps, Crimp's Benjamin) in not placing as much value on the transformative potential of technological reproducibility (photography and film) for art:

> There is an obvious qualitative leap between the hand that draws an animal on the wall of a cave and the camera that makes it possible for the same image to appear simultaneously at innumerable places. But the objectivation of the cave drawing vis-à-vis what is unmediatedly seen already contains the potential of the technical procedure that effects the separation of what is seen from the subjective act of seeing. Each work, insofar as it is intended for many, is already its own reproduction. That in his dichotomization of the auratic and the technological artwork, Benjamin suppressed this element common to both in favor of their difference, would be the dialectical critique of his theory (*AT* 33).

For Adorno, Benjamin 'underestimate[d] the technical character of autonomous art and overestimate[d] that of dependent art.'[13] And it is certainly true that Benjamin, at times, privileges a certain 'technological utopianism.'[14] Yet, 'despite his desperate advocacy of mechanical reproduction,' Adorno remarks that 'in conversation Benjamin refused to reject contemporary painting: Its tradition, he argued, must be preserved for times less somber than our own' (*AT* 320). Adorno, then, found Benjamin's transferal of 'the concept of the magical value to the 'autonomous work of art,'' rather casual, and his dismissal of autonomous art as 'counter-revolutionary,' 'somewhat disturbing' – 'a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian themes' (*CC* 128). Adorno simply wanted '*more* dialectics' from Benjamin's treatment of autonomous art (and by extension autonomous art's magical value or aura) in his 'Work of Art' essay (*CC* 131). For Adorno, in and against Benjamin, the autonomous work of art 'is inherently dialectical, that is, compounds within itself the magical element with the sign of freedom' (*CC* 128). This is the case because,

> Art is motivated by a conflict: Its enchantment, a vestige of its magical phase, is constantly repudiated as unmediated sensual immediacy by the progressive disenchantment of the world, yet without its ever being possible finally to obliterate this magical element (*AT* 58)

For Adorno, then, the magical element or the magical value of (art's) aura is not entirely destroyed or liquidated by technological reproducibility. Indeed, photography, film, and/or cinema, understood as *mass* forms of art, which Benjamin favoured for political reasons, 'possesses an auratic character (…) to an extremely and highly suspect degree' (*CC* 130). Adorno disagreed with Benjamin's one-dimensional understanding of semblance (and by extension aura), yet agreed with the trajectory of the magical element or value of aura vis-à-vis the autonomous work of art:

> I do not wish to be misunderstood. I would not wish to secure the autonomy of the work of art as a special prerogative, and I agree with you that the auratic element of the work of art is in decline, and that not merely on account of its technical reproducibility, incidentally, but also through the fulfillment of its own 'autonomous' formal laws (…). But the autonomy of the work of art, and therefore its material form, is not identical with the magical element in it (*CC* 129).

Certainly the magical element or value of aura *is in decline,* yet for Adorno at least, it must not be 'left to decay' (*CC* 130). As Adorno puts it:

> Compared with authentic art, degraded, dishonored, and administered art is by no means without aura: The opposition between these antagonistic spheres must always be conceived as the mediation of one through the other. In the contemporary situation, those works honor the auratic element that abstain from it; its destructive conservation – its mobilization

> for the production of effects in the interest of creating mood – has its locus in amusement. Entertainment art adulterates on the one hand the real layer of the aesthetic, which is divested of its mediation and reduced to mere facticity, to information and reportage; on the other hand, it rips the auratic element out of the nexus of the work, cultivates it as such, and makes it consumable. Every close-up in commercial film mocks aura by contriving to exploit the contrived nearness of the distant, cut off from the work as a whole. Aura is gulped down along with the sensual stimuli; it is the uniform sauce that the culture industry pours over the whole of its manufacture (*AT* 311).

Taking her lead from Adorno, Hansen questions 'the liquidationist tenor' of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay and 'the facile reproduction of this tenor in the essay's standard reception,' courtesy of Crimp et al 'along with the politically progressive purchase derived from it' (*CE* 83). 'With the undialectical surrender of the auratic image in favor of reproduction,' Hansen argues:

> Benjamin denies the masses the possibility of aesthetic experience, in whatever form or medium (and thus, like the communist cultural politics he opposed, risks leaving sensory-affective needs to be exploited by the right). At the same time, the liquidationist gesture disavows a crucial impulse of his own thinking – his lifelong concern with the fate of experience in the age of its declining transmissibility, a concern in which the concept of the aura plays a central if precarious part (*CE* 103).

In his 'Work of Art' essay Benjamin certainly betrays 'aura (in the narrow sense of beautiful semblance and aesthetic autonomy) to the mass-cultural forms and forces of liquidation' (*CE* 118). Hansen backs up Adorno's ruthless criticism of

Benjamin's dialectical lack and technological utopianism - aura may well be in decline, but it must not be liquidated or left to decay.

According to Diarmuid Costello, 'Benjamin both celebrates *and* mourns the liquidation of the aura, rather than just affirming it.'[15] Both Andrew Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss are sensitive to Benjamin's equivocation on this important point: 'There is no doubt that there is a continuity regards the question of whether or not the aura has been lost; however there is an oscillation (…) between a negative and positive response to the loss' (*DABA* 146).[16] The Benjamin of the 'Work of Art' essay positively celebrates the liquidation of aura (much to Scholem's and Adorno's chagrin), whereas the Benjamin of the 'Little History of Photography' and 'Baudelaire' essays mourns the loss of aura.[17] Costello convincingly argues that this is the case because 'the fundamental issue' for Benjamin 'is *not* that an 'aura' may be predicated of some objects (paintings) but not others (photographs)' contra Crimp et al. Rather, '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' (*AFP* 165). 'Aura is best understood,' Costello argues, 'as a predicate pertaining to the subject rather than the object of perception' (*AFP* 167). An entire way of seeing, aesthetic experience, and magical mode of encountering images and objects – *a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of distance, no matter how close it may be* - is in danger of being liquidated, and:

> Once the *capacity* to perceive 'auratically' wanes then, evidently, nothing will exhibit an aura any longer; that 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' (*AFP* 167-8).

What, therefore, can we conclude from the historical debate concerning aura? Well, at the time Benjamin put forward his 'Work of Art' thesis aura is *both* negated (liquidated, lost) *and* transformed (exploited, stimulated). As Adorno puts it, '[t]he phenomenon of aura, which Benjamin described at once nostalgically and critically, has become bad wherever it is instituted and simulated' (*AT* 45). Benjamin's *conceptual fluidity* amounts to both celebrating and mourning the loss of aura. And to positively celebrate such loss, as Adorno and Costello both believe, 'is tantamount to celebrating barbarism' (*AFP* 182, *AT* 56). Adorno, as we have seen, accepts both aura's decline, which he mourns, and aura's transformation, which he critiques - but Adorno refuses to accept aura's total decay:

> [C]onceived nondialectically the theory of aura lends itself to misuse. It becomes a slogan of the deaestheticization of art that is under way in the age of the technical reproducibility of the artwork. Aura is not only – as Benjamin claimed – the here and now of the artwork, it is whatever goes beyond its factual givenness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art. Even demystified artworks are more than what is literally the case (*AT* 45).

Aura survives, albeit in a different form. By tarrying with the negative (*in the contemporary situation, those works honor the auratic element that abstain from it*), aura is creatively conserved, transforming into what Shierry Weber Nicholsen terms a *counter* or *para*-aura:

> What is at stake for Adorno in all these characterizations of Benjamin is first of all a kind of vision. It is a vision that is in many senses an outside

> one, radically discontinuous with what it sees and revealing a different – more internal, more inorganic or deathlike – aspect of what it sees. (…) In these terms, the "view of earth from somewhere else" implies an outside location for the photographer that is not so much a place as a perspective that negates and transforms. The unearthly light employed in this process can be conceived as a transformation of the radiance associated with the aura. Thus, although Adorno nowhere speaks explicitly about photography and the aura in this vein, we may speculate that for him photography has the capacity – as do Benjamin and Kafka – to present a version of the world in negative. This negative image may then entail a different kind of aura, a negative aura – or, to follow the language of the miniature in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* entitled "The Moon," a piece that fascinated Adorno – a "para" – or "counter"-aura.[18]

This is how Adorno *positively* or creatively conserves autonomous art's aura, as negation, under erasure, yet neither entirely abandoned nor absolutely killed off – a certain form of magic, 'an afterimage of enchantment' (*AT* 58), a utopian and radical otherness. Adorno's ~~aura~~ is the negative dialectical counterpart to the destructive conservation of aura witnessed in either the industrial stimulation (Hollywood) or the totalitarian exploitation (Nazi) of auratic effects in the interest of creating mood, mobilized for political ends (capitalism, fascism) (cf. *CE* 131). For, '[w]hat slips through the wide mesh of [Benjamin's] theory,' according to Adorno:

> Is the element opposed to cultic contexts that motivated [him] to introduce the concept of aura in the first place, that is, that which moves into the distance and is critical of the ideological superficies of life. The condemnation of aura easily becomes the dismissal of qualitatively

> modern art that distances itself from the logic of familiar things; the critique of aura thereby cloaks the products of mass culture in which profit is hidden and whose trace they bear even in supposedly socialist countries. (…) The failure of Benjamin's grandly conceived theory of reproduction remains that its bipolar categories make it impossible to distinguish between a conception of art that is free of ideology to its core and the misuse of aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation and mass domination, a possibility he hardly touches upon (*AT* 56).

Given Adorno's uncompromising criticism of the one-dimensionality of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay it is curious to note that Adorno himself had recourse to the artistic medium of film – itself a technology of reproduction - to offer a defense and renewed definition of (art's) ~~aura~~. It might come as something of a surprise to argue for 'new possibilities'[19] in film, understood precisely as an 'emancipatory cultural production,'[20] for it appears Adorno was not a fan of film. This sentiment is seemingly borne out in his following provocations: 'people watch movies with their eyes closed and their mouths open' (*MM* 164), and '[e]very visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse' (*MM* 25), and 'I love to go to the movies; the only thing that bothers me is the image on the screen.'[21] But this is not the whole truth, as Martin Seel observes:

> There were certainly films in which Adorno recognized cinema at the height of its possibilities. Several of the Marx Brothers films may be numbered among them, above all *A Night at the Opera* and *A Day at the Races*, which Adorno credited with an admirable sense of comedy, in particular for their comic use of music. The scene in *A Day at the Races* in which Harpo smashes a piano, only to pick up the frame and play the

piano strings like a harp, received the unique compliment of being called by Adorno a "highly admirable piece of sophisticated entertainment."[22]

According to Stefan Müller-Doohm, Adorno considered Chaplin's 1947 film *Monsieur Verdoux* 'a masterpiece.'[23] And he may have been impressed by one or two Hitchcock films, e.g. 'the chance conversation in the train, when, to avoid dispute, one consents to a few statements that one knows ultimately to implicate murder, is already betrayal' (*MM* 25), perhaps refers to *Strangers on a Train,* which appeared in the same year that *Minima Moralia* was published (1951). And again, '[b]ecause everything is business, the latter is unmentionable like rope in a hanged man's home' (*MM* 41-2), which may refer to *Rope* released in 1948.

Adorno is mentioned in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1961 film *La Notte* when Marcello Mastroianni and Jeanne Moreau comfort their dying friend by saying his essay on Adorno will do well. Adorno wrote about *La Notte* in his 1966 essay 'Transparencies on Film,' claiming it pictures stasis, which is somewhat paradoxical for a *moving picture*: 'The most plausible theory of film technique, that which focuses on the movement of objects [i.e. Kracauer's], is both provocatively denied and yet preserved, in negative form, in the static character of films like Antonioni's *La Notte*. Whatever is 'uncinematic' in this film gives it the power to express, as if with hollow eyes, the emptiness of time.'[24] The *radically discontinuous vision* of such *hollow eyes* presents *a version of the world in negative. La Notte's uncinematic* or anti-cinematic images, perhaps, radiate *a different kind of aura, a negative ~~aura~~.*

Adorno is also mentioned in Michael Haneke's 2001 film *The Piano Teacher.* Erika Kohut, played by Isabelle Hupert, asks her potential student Walter Klemmer, played by Benoît Magimel: "Have you read Adorno on Schumann's *Fantasia in C Major?*" To which Klemmer replies "No." The piano teacher continues, "He talks of

his twilight. It's not Schumann bereft of reason, but just before. A fraction before. He knows he's losing his mind. It torments him but he clings on, one last time. It's being aware of what it means to lose oneself before being completely abandoned." In his 1967 essay 'Art and the Arts' Adorno refers to Schumann's 'aesthetic quality' as 'an expression of disaster' (*AA* 376), and in the *Aesthetic Theory* it is 'the tendency toward disintegration,' with which Schumann's 'work shapes an unreconciled antagonism [that] gives it its power' (*AT* 184). Again, we encounter *the power to express*, as if at twilight (an *unearthly light*), disaster (*a version of the world in negative)*, which, perhaps, entails *a different kind of aura, a negative* ~~*aura*~~.

There are, then, a number of mainstream films and experimental film techniques that provide *new possibilities* for an *emancipatory cultural production*. Adorno's own examples were the use of 'hand-held camera[s],'[25] intentional 'improvisation' (*TF* 179) and 'montage' (*TF* 182), and films' intermediality. As Adorno put it in his essay, 'Transparencies on Film:'

> Film is faced with the dilemma of finding a procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into a mere documentary mode. (…) For the time being, evidently, film's most promising potential lies in its interaction with other media, themselves merging into films, such as certain kinds of music. One of the most powerful examples of such interaction is the television film *Antithese* by composer Mauricio Kagel (*TF* 182-3).

In this essay Adorno redeems film for art and aesthetic experience, and seemingly comes close to Benjamin's own definition of aura in the following: 'A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colorful images of landscapes

consolingly coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams' (*TF* 180). What is immediately striking about Adorno's variation on Benjamin's theme is that one of the most new and technologically advanced artistic mediums of reproduction (film), should be so intimately tied to the aesthetic experience of natural beauty recollected and reproduced through spontaneous 'interior images' (*TF* 180).

As we have already noted, Adorno speculates that film represents the 'newest form' of the arts, and '[a]lthough film would like to discard its artlike qualities (…) film remains art in its rebellion and even enlarges art.' The distinctly *artlike qualities* of film include 'subjective intention' and 'aura' or 'that illusion of transcendence guaranteed by its context' (*AA* 386). '[T]he aesthetics of film,' according to Adorno, really ought to 'base itself on a subjective mode of experience' (*TF* 180), technologically reproducing, expressing, and/or externalising interior images. Film, for Adorno, actually 'resembles' subjective modes of experience, which also 'constitute its artistic character' (Ibid).

This technological reproduction of a subjective mode of experience is precisely what occurs in John Constable's obsessively painted cloud studies,[26] which bear witness to a behaviour and an atmosphere that is rediscovered and reproduced in the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz.[27] Each study (in obsession) technologically reproduces the *interior image,* or the aesthetic experience, or the subjective mode of experiencing, the natural beauty of clouds. Now, Adorno's own conceptualization of art's ~~aura~~, art's magical element or value, was tied to an aesthetic experience of natural beauty for, 'art is not the imitation of nature but the imitation of natural beauty. (…) While art does not reproduce those clouds, dramas [paintings, photographs, and films] nonetheless attempt to enact the dramas staged by clouds' (*AT* 71). 'Here what is called aura is known to artistic experience as the atmosphere of

the artwork' (*AT* 274). No matter how carefully observed from nature they may have been, Constable's and Stieglitz's ~~*aura*~~*tic images* do not imitate clouds, but, rather, these paintings and photographs set about giving duration to the cloud's fleeting atmosphere, or ~~aura~~ – *one brief moment caught from fleeting time / a strange weave of space and time*. By pointing beyond itself, via its ~~aura~~tic element, 'the artwork escapes its factual reality,' objectivating that which is 'fleeting and elusive' 'in the form of artistic technique' (*AT* 274). Adorno continues:

> That aspect of an artwork that points beyond itself is not just a part of its concept but can be recognized in the specific configuration of every artwork. Even when artworks divest themselves of every atmospheric element – a development inaugurated by Baudelaire – it is conserved in them as a negated and shunned element. Precisely this auratic element has its model in nature, and the artwork is more deeply related to nature in this element than in any other factual similarity to nature (*AT* 274).

Conditions have to be right for that which 'flashes up in nature only to disappear in the instant one tries to grasp it' (*AT* 72), for '[i]f one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears' (*AT* 122). Tacita Dean's *The Green Ray,* 2001, works in this tradition (i.e. the distancing from the subject and/or 'the separation from empirical reality' of autonomous art's ~~aura~~ (*TF* 185)). *The Green Ray* takes the form of a short 16mm colour film and a signed, stamped, and sent edition of colour postcards. Green rays are refracted by the sun as it sets over the horizon. The sky has to be clear, and the magical appearance of the green ray is best seen from distance, particularly at sea. Dean has spoken of the aesthetic or sensory-affective experience she underwent attempting to discover and technologically reproduce the elusive and evanescent green ray:

> The green ray is something I have been obsessed with for a long time. It is very difficult to see. I saw it by chance when I went to Morombe, on the western coast of Madagascar, in order to film the eclipse. I had this terrible accident with the camera, which fell during totality, so I failed to get the eclipse. But what I came back with was *The Green Ray*. I was determined to get it. Every night I set the camera up and filmed the sunset and eventually I got it, although it is almost not there. In the end this is better because it becomes more about perception than phenomena. (…) It's a very strange thing because you need to time it well with your eyes – if you keep them open you get too much dazzle. You have to blink and open them just at the point when the sun slips beneath the horizon. (…) the best green ray I ever saw was on an airplane at dawn. (…) It was sublime. A ripple of brilliant green. I felt sick – it was such a shock.[28]

Peter Bürger notes that Dean's 'films attempt to capture an atmosphere that she herself has experienced.'[29] This dizzying obsession to technologically reproduce the aesthetic experience or atmosphere of natural beauty and not simply to imitate nature, reproducing a facsimile of natural phenomena, is the ~~aura~~ specific to art. Yet, it (~~aura~~) is also what connects art to film – as Adorno argues:

> Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music. As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience, film may become art. The technological medium par excellence is thus intimately related to the beauty of nature (*TF* 180).

Dean refers to her passion for the green ray as 'a quest to try to see, if not film, something that I could not imagine.'[30] The 'fleeting movement of film frames,' which

both rediscover and reproduce, and thereby give duration to Dean's evanescent green ray, 'became about the act of looking itself, about faith and belief in what you see' (Ibid). *It becomes more about* ~~aura~~tic *perception than phenomena.* Art's mere existence, if I may extend Dean's discussion of a particular work, 'traps something that really is disappearing.'[31] Painting and photography, film and video, 'make another world' (Ibid. 17), and much like Constable's and Stieglitz's cloud studies the visual event of art '*presents* itself as that, which withdraws.'[32] Wolfram Pichler describes something of this (invisible) spirit operating in Dean's (visible) artwork:

> [T]o hold on to that which is evanescent or is in the act of vanishing (for example, a cloud, a shadow or someone who is going away), by making a permanent record of it – Then, on a second level, subtle shifts occur. Now, what is to be held onto is no longer the fleeting object itself, but something that appears or becomes visible in the moment of its evanescence or its vanishing: as it were, the last glance that it casts at us, or the last glimpse of it that we can catch, which often takes the form of a back view. (…) [T]he desire for representation is directed at that which can be glimpsed in the moment of its disappearance.[33]

This representation of a withdrawal-from-representation is precisely what occurs in Hito Steyerl's, *How Not To Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File,* 2013. Steyerl's instructional video is, to quote Michael Connor, 'partly inspired by the [disused] photo calibration targets in the California desert, which look like giant pixels [on] the ground. (…) [T]hese targets were used in the age of analog aerial photography to test the resolution of airborne cameras, like a kind of optometrist's chart for the ancestors of drones.'[34] *How Not To Be Seen*, in part, evidences how the

lo-fi analogue materiality of this visual technology has been rendered obsolete in a high-res digital world.

However, it is worth recalling that Steyerl is a self-confessed *defender of poor images* in and against what she refers to as *the spam of the Earth*.[35] In culture industries and societies of the spectacle, where the proliferation of images and imaging technologies has to some extent supplanted reality, where the stars of the silver screen long ago lost their sparkle, we need to (re-)discover new possibilities for an emancipatory cultural production even if that involves a withdrawal from representation – as seems to be the imperative addressed in Steyerl's *How Not To Be Seen.* It is, politically speaking, important to remain invisible, out of sight, under the radar, constantly vanishing (~~aura~~) - especially when one is faced with the new and advanced digital technologies used by the state and private business to surveil us, to discipline and control us, to mine us for money.

Crucially, however, Steyerl's video *shows* how not to be seen. The act of disappearing *appears*, albeit briefly – and as a work it *presents itself as that, which withdraws*. Something *appears or becomes visible in the moment of its evanescence or its vanishing*. *How Not To Be Seen presents* a version of the world in negative, and shows how to withdraw from representation by means of representation (suggested strategies include: merging into a picture, going off-screen, going off-line, hiding in plain sight, wearing a cloak or a veil, applying camouflage, being poor, being undocumented, being a woman over fifty, owning an anti-paparazzi handbag, living in a gated community, living in a military zone or being a dead pixel).

So, what may we conclude from all of this? Art's magic has its truth and its untruth. That which is invisible or *unmediatedly seen* is rendered visible in art or made transparent on film. Therein lies the magic of making ~~*aura*~~*tic images* via

~~aura~~*tic perception*, which is more than a sleight of hand. This, then, is how the economy of the *invisible* and the *visible* operates in art. As a *radically discontinuous vision,* it *presents* (renders visible) itself as that which *withdraws* (invisible), i.e. *a version of the world in negative*. For, in a 'bewitched' reality, artworks comport themselves negatively: 'Their enchantment is disenchantment' (*AT* 227). It *is* possible *to imagine an art that participates in society as the placeholder of a radical otherness which is therefore utopian,* and the ~~aura~~tic image, which *compounds within itself the magical element with the sign of freedom* - despite Benjamin's protestations - still best names it. Blink, and you'll see.

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[1] Adorno, T. W. [1951], *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life,* trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 222. Hereafter cited in the text as *MM*. I am aware of Adorno's dialectical understanding of the relation between magic and art: 'To speak of "the magic of art" is trite because art is allergic to any relapses into magic. (…) Nevertheless, the cliché about the magic of art has something true about it. (…) The aporia of art, pulled between regression to literal magic or surrender of the mimetic impulse to thinglike rationality, dictates its law of motion; the aporia cannot be eliminated.' Adorno, T. W. [1970], *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 54. Hereafter cited in the text as *AT.* It is worth recalling that, for Adorno, '[e]very work of art still bears the imprint of its magical origin.' Adorno, T. W. [1945], 'Theses Upon Art and Religion Today,' *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 296. And, for Horkheimer and Adorno, magic cannot be entirely disentangled from art's autonomy: 'Art has in common with magic the postulation of a special, self-contained sphere removed from the context of profane existence.' Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. W. [1944], *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 13-14.

[2] I find Berman's argument for 'an emancipatory reauraticization of art' convincing. He asks: 'is it possible to imagine an art that participates in society neither as a commodity nor as an ornament nor as an engaged exponent of politics but as the placeholder of a radical otherness which is therefore utopian? A genuine retrieval of aura, (…) might counteract the perpetually heightening aggressive potential and articulate a project of community. Contemporary aesthetic theory faces the task of articulating an account of reauraticization that neither capitulates to the culture industry by designating its schmaltz as utopian nor demands a civilizational regression by linking aura exclusively to rebarbization.' Berman, R. A. *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 97.

[3] For Adorno film represented the 'newest form' of the arts. Adorno, T. W. [1967], 'Art and the Arts,' trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical* Reader, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 386. Hereafter cited in the text as *AA.* For Benjamin film unfolds 'all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today's machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film.' Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 394 (K3, 3).

[4] Benjamin, W. [1931], 'Little History of Photography,' *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934,* eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 510. Hereafter cited in the text as *LHP.*

[5] Benjamin, W. [1935-1939], 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility [Second Version],' *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938,* eds. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002). Hereafter cited in the text as *WA.*

[6] Scholem quoted here in: Eiland, H. and Jennings, M. W. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014), 581.

[7] Brecht quoted here in: Rosen, M. *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 235.

[8] Eiland, H. and Jennings, M. W. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014), 644.

[9] Benjamin, A. 'The Decline of Art: Benjamin's Aura,' *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1991), 146. Hereafter cited in the text as *DABA.*

[10] Hansen, M. B. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 106. Hereafter cited in the text as *CE.*

[11] Leslie, E. 'Introduction: Walter Benjamin and the Birth of Photography,' *On Photography: Walter Benjamin*, ed. and trans. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 55, 10.

[12] Leslie, E. 'Introduction to 'Small History of Photography,'' *On Photography: Walter Benjamin*, ed. and trans. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 57.

[13] Adorno, T. W. 'Wiesengrund-Adorno to Benjamin, London, 18.3.1936,' *The Complete Correspondence: 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 131. Hereafter cited in the text as *CC.*

[14] Eiland, H. and Jennings, M. W. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014), 518.

[15] Costello, D. 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-reading Benjamin Today,' *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 165. Hereafter cited in the text as *AFP.*

[16] See also: Buck-Morss, S. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 160-61.

[17] See: Benjamin, W. [1940], 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940,* Eds. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings, Trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[18] Weber Nicholsen, S. *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), 186-7.

[19] Adorno, T. W. [1938], 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,' trans. Maurice Goldbloom, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture,* ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 56.

[20] Huyssen, A. 'Introduction to Adorno,' *New German Critique,* No. 6, 1975 (Durham: Duke University Press), 5.

[21] See: Hansen, M. B. 'Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966), *New German* Critique, Nos. 24/25, 1981/1982 (Durham: Duke University Press), 194.

[22] Seel, M. 'Sitting Unobserved: Adorno's Outline for an Aesthetics of Cinema,' trans. Steven Lindberg, in *Adorno: The Possibility of the Impossible: Volume I,* eds. Nicolaus Schafhausen, Vanessa Joan Müller, and Michael Hirsch (Frankfurt: Frankfurt Kunstverein, Lukas & Sternberg, 2003), 28-29.

[23] Müller-Doohm, S. [2003], *Adorno: A Biography,* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 312.

[24] Adorno, T. W. [1966], 'Transparencies on Film' trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture,* ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 180. Hereafter cited in the text as *TF.*

[25] Adorno, T. W. [1965], 'The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience,' trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Notes to Literature: Volume Two,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 216.

[26] 'As Constable wrote, 'an attempt has been made to arrest the more abrupt and transient appearances of the CHIAR'OSCURO IN NATURE; to show its effect in the most striking manner, to give to "one brief moment caught from fleeting time" a lasting and sober appearance, and to render permanent many of these splendid but evanescent exhibitions.' See: Wilcox, T. 'Keeping Time' in *Constable's Clouds: Paintings and Cloud Studies by John Constable,* Ed. Edward Morris (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2000), 166.

[27] Stieglitz 'called the earliest of these [sky and cloud studies] *Music* and *Songs of the Sky*, but soon came to prefer the term *Equivalents.'* Cornell, D. *Alfred Stieglitz and the Equivalent: Reinventing the Nature of Photography* (Yale: Yale University Art Gallery, 1999), 1.

[28] Dean, T. 'Interview,' *Interviews: Volume II,* Ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2010), 747-8.
[29] Bürger, P. 'Beauty as a Provocation of Aesthetic Modernism,' *Essays on the Work of Tacita Dean: Wolfram Pichler, Peter Bürger, Douglas Crimp and Achim Hochdörfer*, in *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 23.
[30] Dean, T. 'The Green Ray,' *Tacita Dean, Selected Writings, 1992-2011*, in *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 52.
[31] Dean, T. 'Marina Warner in Conversation with Tacita Dean,' *Tacita Dean,* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 15.
[32] Hammermeister, K. *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 182.
[33] Pichler, W. 'Horizon and Line of Fate (with Tacita Dean and Leo Steinberg),' *Essays on the Work of Tacita Dean,* in *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 10.
[34] http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/31/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen/ (accessed: 29/05/2018)
[35] Steyerl, H. 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' and, 'The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation,' in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 31-45, 160-175.