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## Finding the Ephemeral: Aura, Apperception, and Digitally-Mediated Music

Rodger Eugene Bishop  
*Clemson University*, [therodgerb@gmail.com](mailto:therodgerb@gmail.com)

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FINDING THE EPHEMERAL: AURA, APPERCEPTION,  
AND DIGITALLY-MEDIATED MUSIC

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English Literature

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by  
Rodger Bishop  
May 2020

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Michelle Ty, Committee Chair  
Dr. Angela Naimou, Committee Member  
Dr. Maria Bose, Committee Member  
Dr. William Stockton, Committee Member

## ABSTRACT

This paper attends the live music performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reconsider German philosopher Walter Benjamin's theses on the authenticity of art in his 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin focuses on the emergent technology of photography in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a method of technical reproduction of the art object, and, as he indicates, as having "captured a place of its own among the artistic processes" (219-20). Benjamin proposes several theories on the mechanical reproducibility and distribution of art within the culture industry, and his attention to the aura of the art object—"its unique existence at the place where it happens to be"—is, in my argument, reimagined in an age of digitally-mediated art practice. The ephemeral experience of live musical performance, I maintain, presents the requisite space-time to reevaluate the integrity of the art object's aura. At the core of this analysis is the connection between the digital reproduction's aura and its influence on human apperception, much like how the "Work of Art" essay is structured. Thus, the shift in the *mode* of reproducibility—from the mechanical to the digital—reflects a larger change in the *mode* of human apperception. Specifically, I am considering the use of digital devices by individual—and, more-specifically, non-professional—audience members to capture and reproduce a live music performance. This analysis repositions Benjamin's theses on the authenticity of art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to contextualize how capturing something as authentic yet as fleeting as music—especially through a digital device that is rarely out of arm's reach—can answer the larger questions of who we are as authentic, individual beings and how the human experience is contextualized.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family, for showing what hard work, tenacity, and compassion look like. Specifically, my mother and father: Mom, for your academic support, guidance, and expert wisdom throughout my education; Dad, for showing me not only how to love music, but to play, appreciate, and grow through every instrument and inquiry.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The mentorship, confidence, and critical devotion of my committee members has inspired me throughout this exploration. Michelle Ty has advised me since beginning this work and has been invaluable as I searched for answers to questions that, in the beginning, I didn't know to ask. Had it not been for Dr. Ty's patience and encouragement during what now seems like a period of academic adolescence, I would have never been introduced to Benjamin in the first place. Working with Angela Naimou has taught me how to think critically with a compassion and sincerity that I hope will be reflected in this essay. Dr. Naimou helped me most of all to approach any uncertainty with grace and candor. To consider art in the age of digital media, Dr. Maria Bose has been a vital companion in constructing this essay's critical framework. Her enthusiasm and support were constant reminders that the work was always moving forward. Finally, Dr. William Stockton was a close and dependable advisor. Without his guidance, completing this research amidst full-time employment and the recent outbreak of the Coronavirus would have been a much more grueling task.

A separate acknowledgement is sincerely due to all those whom have lent their eyes and ears to this project—far too many to name all. Specifically: Nic Brown, Michael LeMahieu, Camille Cooper, Jonathan Beecher Field, Alison Mero, Ellory Schmucker, Logan Moody, Victoria Houser, Kimberly Rector, Diane Quaglia-Beltran, Clemson Libraries and Clemson's Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION: IPHONES AT THE CONCERT

The ephemeral nature of music<sup>1</sup> precipitates a reflection on the authenticity and authority of art. What is considered original and authentic when each iteration—each sound encountered in a unique spacetime—comes and goes in a more transitory manner than would, for example, the observation of a painting? Authenticity of art is the central theme of German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s 1935 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” What is at stake for Benjamin in an age of reproducibility is the integrity of the *aura* of the art object and, subsequently, the influence of the *mode* of reproduction on human apperception—or, how we contextualize the world around us.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin defines aura as the element of the original that anchors its presence to a specific time and space: “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). Reproduction is furthermore identified as the act that threatens the auratic integrity of the original. “In principle a work of art has always been reproducible” (218), emphasizes Benjamin. But replicas—the product of *manual* reproduction—are the precursors to *technical* reproduction. These replicas were produced by artists and masters for the purposes of improving their craft but were also carried out by those seeking financial gain—branded by Benjamin as *forgery*. “Mechanical reproduction,” Benjamin makes plain, “represents something new” (218), a grand “shattering of tradition” that had yet to be fully critiqued in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> See "ephemeral, adj. and n."

<sup>2</sup> See "apperception, n."

Benjamin's approach to this upset of tradition in art practice positioned him to make a larger observation on society's desire to eliminate distance. Essentially, he is using his theses on art as an anchor by which to solidify more of a societal critique as opposed to a simply artistic one. He describes the auratic component of distance through the example of encountering a mountain range or the shadow cast from a tree branch—phenomena of nature. As you “follow with your eyes” these distant vistas (far or near), “you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (222-23). Benjamin's critique gives voice to the inability to physically reach into the distance and capture those mountains or that tree branch. Technical reproducibility, he concludes, is a way for the viewer to eliminate that distance, a way to bring home whatever view one chooses to frame through the lens of a camera. Photography thus created a rift in the standard<sup>3</sup> of representation in that, before, only the artist—the painter, the sculptor—could represent some semblance of reality through art “in its traditional form” (220).

Criticism in the wake of the “Work of Art” essay follows Benjamin in focusing on auratic decline in the plastic arts. However, the digital reproducibility of art, I am urging, requires a critique of music as a more ephemeral sphere of art practice. The ephemerality of music and the comparatively more sophisticated nature of digital reproduction allows my argument to explore a deeper change within human apperception. This “deeper change,” I intend to show, will surpass the desire to eliminate distance in its importance to the human experience. To be clear, this discussion is not an affront to Benjamin's theses on art and its reflection of society; instead, it will launch the “Work of Art” essay

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<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” p. 219.

into the present moment as an introduction for a contemporary discussion on the methods of digital reproducibility.

Music, of course, takes center-stage, but why shift the focus away from photography? After all, photography has by now adapted itself well within the realm of the digital. But photography today—even in its highly advanced digital form—still embodies many of the limitations of the plastic. For instance, the digital photograph can be modified using the DSLR camera that first captured it or by using computer software like Adobe’s Photoshop, but the final product (again, like a finished painting) is a static, fixed image. The digitally reproduced live music performance, however, is comprehended by the audible *and* visual sensorium, which will later be considered as it relates to passivity versus concentration and the mode of reproduction’s influence on aura and apperception. At its core, this analysis takes Benjamin’s theses on the authenticity of art into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to help contextualize how capturing something as authentic yet as fleeting as music—especially through a digital device that is rarely out of arm’s reach—can help answer the larger questions of *who we are* as authentic, individual beings and how the human experience is contextualized.

Benjamin employed photography as the anchor by which to observe mass culture’s commodification of art. Photographic technology was, at that time, the perfect platform to discuss aura in tandem with, as he maintains, “[society’s] bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (223). Live music as an art object, however, is complicated not only by reproduction of the visual element of the performance but also by the added dimension of audio’s digital

transformation. Carl Dahlhaus' *Esthetics of Music* sheds light on the sophistication of music's objectivity—music as “a focus of esthetic contemplation.” He begins by aligning music's foundation with a more plastic artform like painting.<sup>4</sup> Both occur—are produced and consumed—in space. Music, on the other hand and simultaneously, works in time unlike the painting: not in the sense that it requires time for the artist to create a still life with oil on canvas, but time as a mode by which to exchange the musical tones from musician to audience.<sup>5</sup> And Dahlhaus counters his generosity of music's relation to the plastic arts further by writing, “[music's] objectivity is displayed not so much immediately as indirectly: not in the moment when it is sounding, but only if a listener...reverts to what has passed and recalls it into his present experience as a closed whole” (11). The objectivity of music, therefore, requires a specificity of time and space, much like how Benjamin frames aura.

In this essay, I apply Benjamin's theses on art to the digital reproducibility of live music. My argument is then solidified by reimagining auratic integrity—from *original* to digitally reproduced *copy*—within mass culture's access to portable digital reproduction devices like Apple's iPhone. As a millennial growing up in what I would refer to as the electronic and digital cultural revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s, I find that the most recognizable device is the iPhone. Other smartphone devices are available on the market, but, for the sake of simplicity, I will reference the iPhone in lieu of other platforms by Android, Samsung, and Google. Unlike other companies, though, Apple has

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<sup>4</sup> See Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

worked with audio and video engineers to allow performers to disable the recording of their live performance.<sup>6</sup> This patented technology (US Patent 9,380,225), according to an NPR report, “would use infrared emitters to temporarily deactivate the photo and video capabilities on devices like mobile phones, laptops, stand-alone video or still cameras or any other ‘electronic device with an image sensor’” (Tsioulcas). A closer look into the breakdown of the technology can arguably conclude that the “infrared data” received by the system would also make capable the capturing of all data being fed into the system. Essentially, this digital reproduction technology created to bar the use of mobile phones and other devices at a live performance could simultaneously be used to crowd-source “data” (or *information*) that could, in turn, be able to produce something like the Beastie Boys’ 2006 production, *Awesome; I Fuckin’ Shot That!* According to London-based media critic Patrick Tarrant,<sup>7</sup> the film was produced from raw footage taken by 50 fans who were given cameras to film the show from their own vantage point. Tarrant describes *Awesome* as “a collage-like concert documentary” inspired by a fan’s previous phone recording uploaded to the band’s website.<sup>8</sup> The 2004 concert, held at Madison Square Garden, presented a novel opportunity for the music industry to capitalize on audience participation. Apple’s 2016 patent, as well as the Beastie Boys’ *Awesome*, are exceptional cases in digital recording capabilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After a close reading of Benjamin’s theses on aura and mass culture’s yielding to reproducibility, it is not surprising to encounter such cases in an age defined by increasing access to digital

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<sup>6</sup> See Tiscareno, et al.

<sup>7</sup> See Tarrant, “Camera Movies.”

<sup>8</sup> Tarrant, “Camera Movies,” p. 156.

technology. But are we now concentrating on the work of art or are we concentrating on the work of art as it appears through the screen? Or is it now the device that is the focal point of our attention?

The “increasing significance of the masses” in 20<sup>th</sup> century industrialized society provided Benjamin with the opportunity to single out, as he observes, “the desire...to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” (223). No longer limited to the expert or professional, the act of eradicating distance between the work of art is conducted by the growing numbers of people equipped with multi-modal smartphones. Typically framed by the polarity of distraction and concentration before art, Benjamin later remarks, “A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it... In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art” (239). Arresting art not by machine but through a more intimate relationship with the device thus allows a renewed cultural standpoint by which to observe a shift in the mode of human apperception that Benjamin considers only briefly in his theses on art. And live music performance, a more ephemeral artform than photography, is employed in this discussion on art in the digital age in order to illustrate a renewed shift in the mode of apperception in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This critique, like the “Work of Art” essay, considers both the integrity of aura and human apperception—not as separate, but as codependent. While Benjamin bridges the gap between aura’s integrity and human apperception by commenting on the desire to collapse distance in the age of mechanical reproduction, this argument emphasizes the authenticity of self within the individual human experience as it relates to art practice and the reproduction of the art object in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The ephemeral nature of music in its

most basic form—that which, like Benjamin’s aura, is only encountered in a singular space and time—is predicated by the fleeting original that is, today, reproduced by the digital devices found in the hands of millions. Here I argue that the device—its functionality and multimodality—has evolved from a tool to a kind of sacred tether to the modern world. This multi-dimensional approach to artistic experience is another avenue where Benjamin’s theses on art breaks down when applied to 21<sup>st</sup> century digital reproduction. For the mechanically reproduced copy, while still capable of modifications, will be shown as comparatively static next to the digital reproduction and the affordances the device allows its remixability. Thus, the digital age, I will present here, has the potential—much like what is at stake in the “Work of Art” essay’s critique on the technical reproducibility of art—to influence human sense perception on an objectively deeper level than a desire to bring objects closer. While the elimination of distance is still an integral component of reproducibility in the digital age, I argue that it is being conducted in the present moment to bring closer an authentic sense of self to the individual behind the device.

In sum, a shift in the *mode* of reproducibility reflects a larger change in the *mode* of human apperception. For Benjamin, the shift and its technocratic byproducts were successfully exemplified in the reproduction of the plastic arts. I, however, am observing digital reproduction in a more fleeting medium of art, one beyond the static nature of photography that embodies an ever-changing and increasingly global society. Music is transitory and fluid in a way that can help to illustrate the speed at which events occur, statuses change, and perception fluctuates in the modern age. Questioning the

authenticity of an ephemeral artform allows a subsequent questioning of the authenticity of the *self*—individual identity in an age of information and digital communication—which exemplifies the shift in the mode of human apperception in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While it is difficult to predict what will render digital reproducibility obsolete (or, at least, be considered in the past tense), the ephemeral nature of music and its digital reproducibility distinguishes the artform from all others. This essay examines—as did Benjamin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the current mode of human apperception at a time when the ephemeral is endangered by an even more prolific mode of reproducibility, one that is not necessarily produced by but is, rather, a reflection of 21<sup>st</sup> century mass culture. This historical moment is not novel in the endangerment of aura or the ephemerality of music. Their integrity is in the hands not of those who were once—as Adorno notes—in charge of the culture industry; however, the individual has the opportunity to engage with integrity through the do-it-yourself reproduction platforms given agency by the digital device.

## AURA & APPERCEPTION IN THE AGE OF BENJAMIN

Benjamin's account of aura is ultimately a phenomenon perceived by the individual lover of art. Yet, for much of art history's absence of reproduction's distributive potential, art was exclusive to an elite class with privileged access. To view art in its original form required travel and access to galleries that were, for much of society, economically out of reach. Following a proliferation of art by way of technical reproduction, it makes sense that the "Work of Art" essay comments on changes in "the medium of contemporary perception" (222), but Benjamin's distribution of attention on aura and apperception is significantly skewed. On only two occasions in his essay does he mention the symptoms of "profound changes in apperception" (240); the focus is on the mechanical reproducibility of art by means of photography and its consequences for aura. Reproduction technology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was in the beginning stages of cultural integration, and photography was easily-made the focal point of Benjamin's critique. For the first time in history, Benjamin observes, the technical reproducibility of art had been employed on a mass scale. A significant passage at the beginning of Benjamin's critique stipulates:

Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. (219-220)

Reproduction as an artistic practice was arguably an affront to art for Benjamin and his contemporaries. Benjamin critiques the birth of photography as having liberated the hand

of “the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens” (219). For Benjamin, this “shattering of tradition” occurred when the machine replaced what the artist had before accomplished by hand and with simple tools. Digital reproducibility, however—introduced in the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and flourishing in the 21<sup>st</sup>—represents something novel all over again, for both the integrity of aura and how the mode of human apperception is interpreted today. One significant departure from the age of mechanical reproducibility is the widespread public access to digital devices, which are produced in such quantities as to be affordable to a greater number of people. Furthermore, the present moment is witnessing an age of travel and mobility that helps to dissolve the privileged access to art that before was only afforded to an elite class of patrons.

Scholars from Theodor Adorno to Miriam Hansen consider the integrity of Benjamin’s aura as *degraded* following the original work of art’s technical reproduction and mass distribution. Adorno’s *The Culture Industry* provides a critical foundation to both Benjamin and his theses on art as well as my work to further aura and apperception in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century live music. Adorno contextualizes the work of art within the schema of mass culture by describing the art object as forming “the technique of reproduction and presentation, actually a technique for the distribution of a real object” (64). Monopolization, though, is Adorno’s focus in his critique of auratic integrity. He considers the habit of the culture industry to mass-produce and monopolize art to be impeding its singular value or, more clearly stated: “decisive aspects of reality today elude representation through the aesthetic image” (65). While mechanical reproducibility

introduced art to the general public on a mass scale, its omnipresence eventually led to the dismemberment of aura as Adorno and Benjamin feared. Much later, Miriam Hansen—in “Aura: The Appropriation of a Concept”—would claim that aura according to Benjamin is “unstable, metamorphic, and relational,” imbued with a “dependence on particular constellations and acts of reading and interpretation” (119). Here, Hansen steps away from the public arena to consider the potential of the individual and the singular approach to the art object’s aura. The onus of appreciation rests not with everyone, but with *you*. Both Adorno and Hansen, while writing at different points in critical history and each with a specific critical agenda, are acknowledging a rift in the artistic tradition that preceded their present. Any degradation of aura—whether observed by Benjamin, Adorno, or a more contemporary critic like Hansen—is arguably regarded as an offense to tradition, and the relatively stable history of art practice lends itself to this kind of sensitivity. Each of these scholars approach the critical table with a unique agenda, and I would argue that changes in the tradition of art practice give them pause to consider what these changes (including their benefits and negative consequences) may bring to the public art audience.

Much like the historical moment during which Benjamin encountered aura, its significance and meaning have been shown by contemporary scholars to be changing in the age of digital reproduction. Miriam Hansen continues to reimagine aura’s integrity in her Benjamin-defying essay.<sup>9</sup> Her stance classifies the “withering” of aura as “symptomatic” of “a fundamental shift in the conditions of human sense perception that

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<sup>9</sup> See Hansen, “Aura: The Appropriation of a Concept”

Benjamin in turn attributes to both the new technologies of reproduction and the increasing importance of the masses in modern life” (113-14). Thus, technology and society eventually reach a point of homeostasis following any new incorporation of the former into quotidian life. And once some other technology is introduced, the cycle begins anew. Hansen furthers her approach to Benjamin’s reconsideration of experience as entailing an exploration of “new modes of apperception and adaptation equal to a technologically changed and changing environment” (105). In a way, she has summarized the impetus of the present study, which is being conducted in response to changes in the way art is reproduced. Hansen also points to traces of optimism in Benjamin’s account, as his efforts “revolved around the possibility that the new technological media could reactivate older potentials of perception and imagination that would enable human beings to engage productively, at a sensorial and collective level, with modern forms of self-alienation” (105). This perceptive and imaginative potential I am here observing within the realm of live music performance and, thus, reimagined within the sphere of digital reproducibility to illustrate an indeed productive approach to digitally mediated apperception. For digital reproducibility is not an *ideology* of apperception—it is an act used to illustrate digital communication & reproduction technologies as an *aid* in understanding human apperception and more contemporary forms of self-alienation—forms which will be explored below.

The novelty in copying the work of art by means of technical reproducibility “represents something new,” just as much today as it did during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Benjamin begins his critical theory focused on how the *mode* of reproducibility affects

aura. “In principle a work of art has always been reproducible” (218), he claims. Here, Benjamin is differentiating between replicas and reproductions. Replicas of art objects were historically created either for practice (by pupils), dissemination (by artists), or profit (“by third parties in the pursuit of gain”) from the work of art (218). These copies were considered to be replicated by the mode of manual reproduction—no machine or device was involved at all, save for the more traditional tools the artist may use. A replica—“confronted with its manual reproduction”—was regarded as a *forgery*. Reproductions, argues Benjamin, employed a more technical mode than before. By foregoing the human hand for the components of machinery, the reproduced art object is, thus, labeled a *copy*. And while the divide between what is to be considered a copy and a forgery is dependent upon the purpose of the reproduction, this divide—although not central to this argument—I would predict becomes increasingly troubled in the digital reproduction.

Rather late in the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin mentions the concept of *apperception* in tandem with his attention to aura. His analysis is on a decrescendo, and he affords noticeably little time to explore the consequences of a shift in the mode of reproducibility on the psyche of the individual or mass culture at large. Again, this analysis is not attempting to discredit Benjamin—by *Section XV* of the “Work of Art” essay, the amount of critical ground already covered is immense, and this final section’s discussion (which precedes his *Epilogue*) is compounding on the work accomplished earlier in the essay. The genesis of my critical exploration into Benjamin’s theses was not where he ends with *apperception*, but to bring his novel analytical model into the present

moment and devote more time to explore the potentials of analyzing the human experience through the lens of art. Thus, live music is merely the anchor—the tip of a deeper social iceberg—by which to acknowledge apperception’s metamorphosis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Apperception describes how humans contextualize something newly encountered by incorporating it into the mass of experience already possessed in order to comprehend it within the larger whole of their consciousness. Benjamin stipulates that the desire to reproduce an art object as “symptomatic of profound changes in apperception” (240). He critiques this desire by observing how the reproduction of art eliminates a necessary distance between object and audience. This distance is vital to the integrity of aura, just as the inability to fully capture a mountain range is arguably what adds to their grandeur. Not only does Benjamin pin down the changing integrity of aura through reproduction and the shattering of tradition that its technical reproduction elicits, he essentially is asking *why* this is happening, *why* mass culture is moving in this direction, and *how* reproducibility takes such an influential position over society. Benjamin states, “the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence” (222). I, too, believe that one’s mode of existence has a direct bearing on how their world is perceived. This *mode*, supports Benjamin, “is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well... And if changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura, it is possible to show its social causes” (222). I would argue that this statement is the most succinct in explaining what Benjamin is up to in his theses on art—and what I hope to continue. For the social causes

resulting not only from the introduction of technical reproducibility of art but also from the shift in the mode of its reproducibility—from the mechanical to the digital—is the theoretical basis for understanding questions surrounding a troubled sense of self in the present moment.

The “Work of Art” essay, however, is largely devoted to the effects mechanical reproduction has on the art object’s aura. While Benjamin and others like Adorno<sup>10</sup> point to the degradation of society as a reflection on the decay of aura, Benjamin’s analysis provides a mere glimpse into the shape these possibilities could take. And while this analysis is not being conducted to answer the question of *why*, in his essay, so little space is afforded to reproducibility’s effect on how society perceives their individual reality, there are a number of possibilities. Two examples are found when considering the still-developing field of psychology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as Benjamin’s limited access to resources during his research in an age far more analog (i.e. no computers or web-based search engines) than the present one. Nevertheless, what Benjamin has done in his theses on art is provide the critical foundation for understanding the individual’s sense of self in an arguably more sophisticated, complicated age. Without the “Work of Art” essay, I am unsure this type of analysis could be conducted at all.

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<sup>10</sup> See Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*

## FINDING THE EPHEMERAL:

### LIVE MUSIC REPRODUCTION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Music is ephemeral: its most basic existence is only experienced at the moment of encounter, in a singular time and space before disappearing. “You can’t touch music,” announces David Byrne, vocalist and guitarist of The Talking Heads. In his meditation on *How Music Works*, he continues: “and yet [music] can profoundly alter how we view the world and our place in it” (9). Perhaps the ability of music to elude the physical grasp of listeners while still enacting profound changes in their lives has led to a mix of attraction and frustration in the human conscience since music was first practiced. While Byrne was a touring musician in the 1980s, Carl Dahlhaus was describing music as *transitory* in his *Aesthetics of Music*: “It goes by, instead of holding still for inspection” (11). Notes from a piano, vibrations from a cello—the sounds of music cannot be framed and exhibited in a gallery. Although music is arguably the most fleeting artform, perhaps it is the ephemerality of music that makes it so ubiquitously received by the human sensorium. Perhaps it is music—and not a more plastic artform like photography or painting—that encapsulates what it means to *be*, only existing in the moment without any connection to past or future. Reproducing something with such an interpretive potential is troubled the more it is copied, the more it engages with the non-human element of the machine or the device.

But reproducing a static art object—an original that can be encountered in multiple space-times—is only a shallow approach to the potentials of the concept of aura in the age of digital reproducibility. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, static reproductions of

art—in the form of photographs—were an enormous feat. Riding on the shoulders of lithography, photography marked a paradigmatic shift in the way images could be captured: the world slowed to a halt for passers-by to observe, but in stunning detail that the human hand before could not capture with canvas and paint. Benjamin points out that “photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens. Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech” (219). Reproducing art at this speed allowed a quick incorporation of aesthetic value into the culture industry that had never before been able to circulate. This incorporation included images of such quality—and consistency—into the more traditional (i.e. textual) content that was being disseminated in advertisements, newspaper magazines, and eventually in motion pictures.

Yet copies in the digital age take a new form and are subsequently charged with different affordances. One difference between music recordings of the age of mechanical reproducibility and the music industry today is that the line between producer and consumer is becoming increasingly blurred with the convenience and portability of the iPhone’s digital recording capabilities—making an audience member at a live performance able to arrest the art object and immortalize it through the lens of their digital device. Because one cannot “take home” the original—like Benjamin could not arrest for his own safekeeping the mountain range or the tree branch’s shadow—its reproduction retains some semblance of what was beheld. Unlike the final product in the machine age, however, the “final destination” of the digital reproduction inhabits a

similarly ephemeral realm in that the act of reproduction—the conversion of *art* to *information*—is rarely the last step. The digital copy can be further remixed and modified, therefore introducing the affordance of auratic change either during or long after reproduction. In the case of live music performance, the reproduction can be captured and modified while the individual behind the device is still experiencing the singularity of the original. Compared to the technical reproducibility of Benjamin’s observations, the 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to the work of art happens on a temporal scale that is far narrower than the time it took to complete the reproduction process in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The result of such speed in reproduction—within this discussion on 21<sup>st</sup> century music—affects not only how art is approached and appreciated by the individual “lover of art,” but also how the individual approaches and appreciates their reality before, during, and after the performance.

The plastic arts that preceded the age of Benjamin led to the birth of photography and the potential for machinic reproduction to influence the way humans perceive their everyday reality. But the machine not only copied the image, it helped to transport it on a scale far wider than imagery had ever before been distributed. Although concentrating on the image in the digital world, Boris Groys<sup>11</sup> helps to contextualize the parallel that anything digital does not need the exhibition space. Because of their reproducibility, they travel “spontaneously and anonymously throughout the open fields of contemporary means of communication, such as the Internet or cell-phone networks, without any centralized curatorial control” (23). The key work here is *control*, and without the

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<sup>11</sup> See Groys, “From the Image to the Image File—and Back.”

traditional limits placed on the exhibition of art, the elite class is no longer the only audience with the privilege of consumption.

Of course, when the digitized object is encountered, it is arguably found with the understanding that the original exists beyond the screen. For we still visit the museum—we still attend the live performance. Theorist Douglas Davis, in a 1995 critique on Benjamin's theory applied to digital media, asserts, "[Benjamin] erred in assuming that the world would bow to logic, that the endless reproduction of a painting or a photograph would diminish what he called the 'aura' of the original... We still bid wildly at auctions and employ armies of scholars to find the 'original,' the 'authentic' masterpiece" (384). While aura may be endangered by reproduction, authenticity gains more authority with the increasing amount of copies that proliferate. Benjamin's examination of original and copy is furthered by Groys, a comparison that he defines as topological. Groys clarifies, "the original has a specific historical site, and it is through this site that the original is inscribed into history as a unique object. The copy, by contrast, is virtual, placeless, ahistorical; from the very beginning, it manifests itself as potential multiplicity" (26). This is not the culture industry's sleight of hand, tricking us into thinking that what glows from our screen could possibly be an original. Adorno makes an observation in *The Culture Industry* that remains relevant to the new conditions of the digital age. He concludes, "Imagination is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism which determines whether the latest imago to be distributed really represents an exact, accurate and reliable reflection of the relevant item of reality" (64). To contextualize his thinking in the present moment, I would argue that those at all familiar with digital

reproduction technology recognize, on some level, that what is encountered on their Instagram feed should not be considered an original—or at least should be done so with caution. But why, in an age of convenience, full of easy-to-access reproductions, are we still seeking the site of their creation? What is it about the authentic auratic experience that is still attracting the attention of mass culture?

Considerations of music on a critical level have much to do, argues Christoph Cox<sup>12</sup>, with how humans have approached the concept and experience of music over the course of recorded history: it is either a thing of beauty or something purely mathematical (149). Cox points out that sounds—described as “invisible, intangible, and ephemeral entities”—have been regarded in the history of philosophy as secondary attributes of physical objects yet have little in common with the actual objects themselves (156). The human experience has maintained a rhythm throughout time, manifest in something far more fleeting than a brushstroke on canvas or the snap of a shutter. And while the more static history of art has been well-documented by critics and musicologists, this project explores the digital reproducibility of music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the backdrop for a larger conversation on the profundity of an artform’s mode of reproduction to alter the listener’s perception of self in a highly-connected yet fleetingly-authentic world.

Sound as a secondary attribute to a primary object is worth considering in this multidimensional approach to aura and apperception. Adorno considers the ear and eye—the audiovisual elements that typify the digital recording—as together but not equal:<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Cox, “Beyond Representation and signification: Toward a sonic materialism.”

<sup>13</sup> See Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*

“The ear is passive. The eye is covered by a lid and must be opened; the ear is open and must not so much turn its attention toward stimuli as seek protection from them” (51). If you have ever spent time editing the audio quality of a recording after its reproduction, his point instantly rings true: for while the individual in the crowd can pan the camera back and forth, their control over what the speakers capture is significantly limited by the entirety of the soundscape that surrounds them (i.e. screaming fans belting lyrics). The differential voluntarism involved in *hearing* with the human ear compared to *seeing* with the human eye is thus identical on a digital scale when capturing the live music performance. In typical Adornian style, the critic expands on passivity by stating, “Deterioration of the faculty of musical synthesis, of the apperception of music as an esthetic context of meaning, goes with relapsing into such passivity” (51). But consider for a moment what may be happening when the eye—the more active of the two—is handicapped by the optical lens of the camera: is one then focused on the performance or merely on the *reproduction* of the performance through the screen of the device?

For there is the opportunity for passive listening in the age of digital reproduction: listening to music through headphones plugged into an iPhone is easy, much like many other (and arguably more important) aspects of the human experience that can be satisfied through the use of mobile phones. If you’re hungry, you make a call to order take-out; if you’re sick, you send a text message to cancel your date. Again, the level of convenience that digital devices bring to the 21<sup>st</sup> century table outnumbers those of the machine in the previous century. Convenience can be wonderful—we’ve all benefitted from being able to look up a word or to snap a quick photo on our mobile phones, what

today have evolved into hand-held computers capable of accessing the Internet nearly anywhere. But convenience often comes with a price.

And these digital devices are still tools—just like the machine—and how we interpret them is determined by their use. The presence of mobile phones in public spaces, for example, is met with some trepidation, and, while they offer a higher degree of connectivity that is proven to aid in times of crisis, they also present an element of distraction that can be interpreted as a challenge to face-to-face communication. For instance, Adorno takes a desolate stance on technology's social integration:<sup>14</sup> “The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death” (96). Is the digital device opening the door for new mediums of artistic creativity and communication, or is it pointing to their end? Nancy Baym, in her 2015 text, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, echoes these Adornian concerns by critically addressing society's relationship with technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “On the one hand, people express concern that our communication has become increasingly shallow,” she acknowledges. “On the other, new media offer the promise of more opportunity for connection with more people, leading to stronger and more diverse relationships” (1). Baym's discussion of connection and digital communication technologies is yin and yang, a fair yet admittedly optimistic work in the field of media studies. The trend in critical theory since Benjamin (and before him, for that matter) has been to *critique*, and the overwhelming

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<sup>14</sup> See Adorno, *The Culture Industry*

adoption of digital technology into the lives of everyday people leads theorists to question these changes as their effects ripple outward.

I would argue that anything new—unless it be some obvious and overwhelming improvement over what came before—is met with a certain degree of skepticism. Critic Brian House provides a sense of this critical reaction to culture and technology in his essay, “Against Listening.” Although not a total luddite, House is, as Baym would understand, cautious of the power of digital technology to influence culture. He declares, “Entangled in speakers, headphones, or VR headsets, the subject who is continually interpellated in acoustic ecology is the listener—eyes closed, head bowed, immobile, contemplative, concentrating, bored, or dreaming” (165). Making a comment similar to what Paul Valéry predicted in a 1928 essay<sup>15</sup> also referenced in the “Work of Art” essay’s first section, House continues to suggest that, nearly a century later, “our social relationships are captured and capitalized by technological platforms.” Contrary, though, to what Valéry was only then beginning to uncover, House reveals that the acoustic economy of listening today is “more than just a matter of sound” (160). To give our full attention to sound—to this single axiom of experience—is a now artificial act in Western art practice (160). To some, it would seem that Adorno’s worst fears are not at all being assuaged in the digital age but are, in fact, being confirmed.

Yet any technology is arguably invented and released into the world in the hope of bettering some process, making an aspect of daily life more convenient or easier. Baym gives a voice to the positive aspects of technology as she stresses, “there are still

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<sup>15</sup> See Valéry, “Conquest of Ubiquity.”

competing narratives between phones as ostentatious, expensive, stressful, and prone to creating bad manners and phones as assuring safety, autonomy, access to others, and control over the flow of daily life” (53). Many critics—and average technology users—are unsure about the increasing reliance on technology in the present. But Baym leads us back to the optimistic, stating that digital devices, while capable of completely subsuming human experience, “offer the promise that we need never be out of touch with our loved ones, no matter how long the traffic jam in which we find ourselves. When stuck with our families, we may import our friends through our mobile devices” (11). When technologies are new, she implores, they often produce “social and cultural reorganization and reflection” (2). Baym concludes that these phenomena—digital media use, device portability, and constant connection—prompt us to question, as she states, “the very authenticity of our identities, relationships, and practices” (5). Thus, in my argument, the act of digitally reproducing the live song must not go unquestioned, both on the level of auratic integrity as well as human apperception and the individual’s sense of self. To understand the possibilities of digital reproduction and its current mass-participation is not limited to, for example, a seasoned musician like David Byrne or a technology critic like Nancy Baym. Instead, I’m suggesting that anyone that has attended a live music performance of any nature can begin to think about how a desire to reproduce something as ephemeral as music with a device so closely integrated into their own life can answer unique questions surrounding the power of music, the authenticity of art, and individuality in an age of digital reproducibility—whether or not they knew to ask in the first place.

And while the experience of music in its basic form has always been ephemeral, music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is rarely so. Digital reproducibility captures its existence and *digitizes* it into binary—turned into *information*. Archivist Nora Alter cautions the increased access to digital information in “Transformations of the Archive.” From an *informational* perspective, she considers the conversion of original works to digital information as “democratized in their dissemination,” which, in line with Benjamin’s aura, significantly deteriorates their singularity. More plainly, Alter illustrates, “The process of digitization transforms the heterogeneity of disparate and materially distinct media such as text, photographs, sound recordings, films, and the like, into a homogeneous mass of computer data” (156). The reproduction of the art object by means of digitization and the information imperative of the digital is another important avenue where Benjamin’s theory of aura and reproducibility breaks down. Instead of the “plurality of copies” that are produced by mechanical reproduction,<sup>16</sup> it can be deduced that there is only *one* copy of the work of art—turned into binary—when digitally reproduced. Not only is the original work of art—in this case, the live music performance—being reproduced by means of technical reproducibility, the end result is constructed not by language or imagery but by numbers. Like Boris Groys, critical theorist Sabine Eckmann also focuses on digital images in her 2009 essay, “Aura, Virtuality, and the Simulacrum.” Yet she would appear to be on the side of a hypothetical Benjamin considering digitization’s shattering of artistic tradition. Eckmann articulates:

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<sup>16</sup> See Benjamin, “Work of Art,” p. 221.

While we may, for example, claim that abstract paintings are indexical of artistic subjectivity and figurative ones a mediation or reflection of the world in which we live, digitally conceived images, whether representative or abstract, if we take them literally, refer to not much more than a mathematical code that transcends linear time and actual space. Hence, according to the argument against digital art, the human gesture is ultimately broken and destroyed by the computer. (69)

Eckmann's claims are reminiscent of Benjamin's remark: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (221). Technical reproduction, as first posited by Benjamin, depletes the auratic integrity of an artwork; however, it could also—based on Eckmann's statement above—involve an even higher level of degradation in today's age of digital reproducibility. Not only is the work of art being reproduced by its metamorphosis through the binary matrix of the digital device, the device itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become increasingly more omnipresent in the everyday lives of everyday people. No longer must one be a professional photographer to capture a beautiful image—one now need only reach into their pocket and frame it within their screen.

This amateur/professional divide is the cornerstone of the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital revolution. In their introduction to *After the Digital Divide? German Aesthetic Theory in the Age of New Media*, Koepnick and McGlothlin observe, "the advent of modern mass media redefined what it might mean to engage in aesthetic activity in the first place" (7). Their introduction points out that the media of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial culture allowed "the transport [of] culture to the masses rather than inviting select audiences to

stand in silent admiration in the face of the original” (9). Again, we are still in search of the aura produced by the plastic arts and the ephemerality of a more dynamic artform like music, but access to their unique reproductions is today far more widespread than ever before. And the capability of the individual to reproduce art, unlike in the age of Benjamin, no longer remains in the hands of the professional. *After the Digital Divide* later gives way to a conversation on the remix—the ability of the digital copy to be further manipulated following the act of reproduction. Of course, this was possible with analog forms of reproduction, such as photography. Benjamin foregoes an in-depth discussion on the modification of the photograph in order to highlight film. The cinematic process specifically is predicated on the ability to remix and modify after the moment of encounter, what is referred to as *cutting*—a vital aspect of the “equipment-free aspect of reality.” This, Benjamin indicates, is “the height of artifice” (233). Thus, by affording more opportunities to alter the work of art after the moment of its reproduction, one argument would conclude that there is an even greater deterioration of aura in the digital age. The basis for such an argument is furthered in the contemporary moment by Lev Manovich in his essay, “Remixability.” “Since the introduction of the first Kodak camera, users have had tools to create massive amounts of vernacular media,” he states. Before the advent of digital technology that was widely designed for and distributed to the public, Manovich points out that “the media pools of the amateur and those of the professional did not mix” (47-48). Thus, reproduction technology is sinking deeper into mass culture in the present moment because of its distribution as well as its user-friendly design. Given the logic that has thus far been shown, the present moment beholds a larger

audience with more opportunities to shatter the tradition of art practice. Thanks at least in part to Apple's widespread marketing of their iPhone line, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I argue, is witnessing not an equipment-free reality but an introduction to equipment that allows the user to engage in a potentially reality-free experience. As has already been framed by House and "Against Listening," the digital device as a tool lends its user the ability to either escape their sonic surroundings with headphones or to capture an aspect of their reality to then remix it into something entirely different. Yet the promise of altered realities is not, unsurprisingly, left solely to the individual with the device.

In an age of digital reproducibility, music is encountered everywhere: in advertisements, on car stereos, pumped through headphones emanating from digital devices—muting the physical space with a sonic topography that can transform the listener within and without. This transformation of space today can be as easy as reaching into your pocket. Baym observes in *Personal Connections*, "We may be physically present in one space, yet mentally and emotionally engaged elsewhere" (3). Would Benjamin consider this ability to transcend space an authentic experience? For many, as Adorno predicted long before the first iPhone came to life, first encounters with music are today often experienced "from mechanical means of mass reproduction" in a digitally mediated manner. The act of listening is crucial for Adorno, but a deeper concern is the *means* by which listening occurs. Adorno postulates whether "these means have thus raised the listening level" (1). If one has only experienced music through a mechanical or digital apparatus, has he or she truly *experienced* all that music has to offer? If the ephemeral nature of music is sacrificed (as Adorno is hinting at here), how will the aura

of the original ever be understood? Brian House has already suggested the rarity of completely sequestering the individual experience to a single mode of sense perception. Increased access to digital devices is not as simple as an increase in the listening level.

Listening itself can constitute the abandoning of the body during the experience, but the introduction of a technological apparatus during said experience will always require use of the body. House is zeroing in on the “acoustic ecology” of listening—as an experience exclusively typified by the sense of hearing and nothing else. He argues that this acoustic economy tends to “sacralize listening,” transforming one of the five senses into an esoteric practice (159-160). House finds the tendency to seek out a technological middle-man—i.e. whipping out your iPhone to video the performance—to be a product of acoustemological conditioning (166), and he later refers to this conditioning as a technologically mediated act, bolstered by the attention economy ruled by social media. But this idea also falls in line with the digitally mediated musical experience.

More to the point: to listen to the digital reproduction— entangled in speakers and headphones, as House would typify it—involves the use of the ear but is, as an action, facilitated by the body; hands plug in the earbuds, fingers tap the screen to curate the song, and *then* can one finally enjoy the sonic experience pumped directly into the ear. Studies focused on listening and the soundscape have benefitted from critic Salomé Voegelin and her 2014 work *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*. In a critical vein similar to the work produced by House, Voegelin argues that the socio-political practice of sound, and the spatiotemporal aspect of music, can integrate a soundscape within the visual topography of individual or collective experience. She

solidifies this idea by explaining, “The soundscape makes accessible, audible and thinkable, alternative states of affairs that allow us to rethink and relive the materiality and semantics of the real world” (45). David Byrne<sup>17</sup> complements Voegelin’s idea by writing on the power and possibilities of the individual music experience’s soundscape: “Music can get us through difficult patches in our lives by changing not only how we feel about ourselves, but also how we feel about everything outside ourselves” (9). Of course, the question remains unanswered as to whether or not Benjamin would approve of the possibilities of sonic worlds—as a shattering of tradition or a renaissance of sound art practice and consumption.

The digital reproduction of the art object—like mechanical reproducibility that came before—necessitates the body, but as an act it occurs in space. Yet space in an age of digital reproduction is not strictly public or private. The device provides the affordance of choice to the individual user navigating a public space: does one engage with the world around them or shield them self in the sonic bubble constructed by headphones and a playlist? Baym continues to think about the complications of space in *Personal Connections*, yet she is approaching it from less of an individual standpoint than House. Where House is an individualist, Baym can be found on a more collectivist spectrum. Listening through headphones, “head bowed, immobile, contemplative, concentrating, bored, or dreaming,” per House, can completely remove the individual from whatever situation in which they find themselves. Steve J. Wurtzler<sup>18</sup> compliments these

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<sup>17</sup> See Byrne, *How Music Works*

<sup>18</sup> See Wurtzler, "One Future of Sound Studies Fits into the Palm of your Hand,"

approaches to the personalized soundscape by arguing that the 21<sup>st</sup> century attention economy is largely influenced by the personal soundscape's bubble of sonic protection, thanks in large part to headphones. According to Wurtzler, "tuning out" reverts the individual to their own soundscape. "When experienced through headphones," Wurtzler continues, "handheld devices attest to a structural tension between the broadcast programmed music that increasingly fills public and semi-public spaces, and the private, portable, ubiquitous personal soundscapes" that are constructed through the digital device (171). Thus music, here again, is an exceptional case. Because of the deep societal integration of digital reproduction technology and the devices that make them possible, it is easy to understand Benjamin's enthusiasm when he marvels, "The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room" (221). The reproduction—during the time of Benjamin's theses as well as in the present moment—is still music as had been heard, just in different spacetimes with an attached aura either geared toward a collective encounter (such as in shopping malls or the elevator) or the individual's negation of it (by way of the headphones).

Consumption and enjoyment of art during the age of mechanical reproduction was and had been a much more public experience. Of course, there could be found vast collections of art in private homes, but the gallery was, to a certain extent, created for the public exhibition of art. In the present moment's reconfiguration of space, Baym asks, "As we lose connection to space, do we also become detached from those nearby whose social support comprised communities of old and on whose interconnections civil society

depends” (102)? When there is lack of a “single shared environment,” reveals Baym, “the metaphor of space quickly unravels” (101). Thus, by the device’s creation of a personalized space as a sort of bubble within a larger, public space, the integrity of the reproduction’s aura takes on an individualized meaning during both the reproduction process and each iteration of its future consumption.

By studying live music, though, space is tantamount to time. While the plastic arts work in space and present an artificial representation of space, Dahlhaus reminds us that music also works in time,<sup>19</sup> “not merely in but also through temporal sequence by means of an artificial temporal exchange of tones” (9). When experiencing the original iteration of a song in all its ephemerality, one no longer has the opportunity to skip, pause, rewind, or fast-forward. There is only the moment of its encounter in time, which I would argue places the onus on the listener to appreciate as much of the experience as possible.

Adorno, perhaps countering himself on an increased capacity to listen, laments<sup>20</sup> that “humanity in the age of omnipresent radios and gramophones has actually forgotten the experience of music” (21). Is this why we continue to visit the museum? Is the constant barrage of musical reproduction herding us to the concert venue? If so, then why begin the process of reproduction anew once the performance begins? Katrina Somdahl-Sands and John C. Finn<sup>21</sup> are not only thinking about the spacetime of the live performance, but also about the possibilities that reproducibility allows in a future time. They write, “the performance itself still fills that space between the performer and audience members,

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<sup>19</sup> See Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*.

<sup>20</sup> See Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*.

<sup>21</sup> See Somdahl-Sands and Finn, “Media, Performance, and Pastpresents: Authenticity in the Digital Age.”

producing a reflexive understanding of the actions taking place” (813). But what happens when the iPhone is interjected, thrust between audience member and performer? Are these ephemeral moments being experienced to their full extent? Somdahl-Sands and Finn continue: “In the case of a mediated performance, the performance is connecting the real world (now-time) of the viewer with the mediated world (pastpresent time) of the performance” (813). The logic of digital reproduction understands that the reproduced copy will be recalled—or, in this case, *replayed*—at some point in the future, for some purpose. This was the case during Benjamin’s mechanical age, but today the possibilities that are allotted the digitally reproduced copy are far more dynamic than the arguably more static mechanical reproduction, transcending both space and time to operate in a multitude of other spacetimes. With so many varying opportunities for the work of art to be reproduced, remixed, encountered, and altered again, I would argue that authenticity and its meaning is challenged and, like aura, diminished.

The static art object is no longer sufficient to represent the mode of human sense perception during an age in which technology enables the user to transcend both space *and* time—yet the adherence to aura’s crucial spacetime is not at all foregone. The ephemerality of music—of *sound*, audio, fleeing space and time—complicates Benjamin’s approach in that the shift in the realm of reproducibility from the mechanical to the digital involves a reevaluation not only of aura’s spacetime, but of the art object’s spacetime as well. What would be considered the “original” work of music in the age of digital reproducibility (or mechanical reproducibility for that matter)? Is it the encounter by the audience during the live performance, or is it the more official and distributed

studio recording? To play with the dialectics of Benjamin's aura in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the unique spacetime of music is the perfect venue to reevaluate the authenticity of art and human experience together. For the authentic is arguably more difficult to encounter—whether due to the affordances of quality in the digital reproduction, the integrity of the object's aura that has arguably changed in the digital age, or the proliferation of copies (perhaps more appropriately, the singular digital *copy* that can be so widely distributed) that can be encountered across space and time and devices and platforms.

For a *mechanically* reproduced copy is an arguably less drastic transformation than its modern counterpart, the *digital* reproduction. The digitally reproduced work of art—considering the information aspect of its reproduction process—can be seen as far more dynamic, albeit troubling, in its transformation from the original work of *art* into the reproduction as *information*: captured, stored, modified, and redistributed within the device. As early as the 1990s, Douglas Davis comments on the dynamism of the digitally reproduced art object: “in the age of digital reproduction [the work of art] is physically and formally *chameleon*” (381, *emphasis added*). Davis is beginning a renewed understanding of aura as “supple and elastic,” far more so than Benjamin could have imagined in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The elasticity of aura in the digital age stretches into the deeper, more personalized realm of the individual's approach to the reproduction, an aura described by Davis to be “unique, personal, quivering with the sense of self” (382). And with the reproduction's potentially-personalized meaning being disseminated through the information highways of the Internet and into mobile phones, the consistency of its aesthetic quality—its semblance to the original object—must also

adapt to its increased distribution. The information imperative of digital reproduction and the elasticity of its aura presented by Davis allow the reproduction today to be not only effortlessly copied as before, but also “endlessly reproduced without degradation, always the same, always perfect” (382). This digital activity occurs outside of the vacuum of Benjamin’s spacetime and, thus, does not precipitate a loss in the *clarity* of the art object. The loss in clarity by means of “analog reproduction”—as Davis typifies it—is compared to a series of waves crashing on the beach: “breaking over and over but never precisely in the same form... just as the copy of the audio or video signal before would always involve a loss in clarity” (382). Thus, not only does the digitally reproduced work of art withstand a loss in *clarity* compared to the original, it is also reproducible by devices that, unlike the photographic technology of Benjamin’s era, are intensely portable, accessible, and in the hands (or pockets) of millions.

While the aura of the mechanically reproduced object was diminished in relation to the loss in quality of the copy, I can argue here that digital reproduction of the art object—due to the lack of a loss in clarity—has different consequences for the aura of the reproduction. Quality becomes a concern, for example, when choosing between a camera loaded with film and one equipped with a digital lens. The tradition of analog photography is still continued today, yet, to comment on the photography of Benjamin’s age, there is a drastic difference in the clarity and focus of those reproductions. Although Benjamin was no technology expert on a scale of equipment, he hints in another essay, his “Little History of Photography,” that “the most precise technology can give its products a magical value” (510). The magic value of the reproduction today can be seen

in both manual photographic reproduction *and* its digital iteration. Choosing traditional film over digital storage produces a reproduction, in this example of photography, with an auratic value noticeably different from the crisp quality of the digital. Furthermore, and to risk this analysis digressing into the specifics of digital reproduction technology, I would argue that the cameras built into an iPhone (of any generation since its launch in 2007) wildly surpass those that Benjamin would have known.

I end this section with a powerful mediation on the magic value still inherent in the reproduction. This is Benjamin writing in his “Little History of Photography” essay, and I find it to be the most succinct and appropriate conclusion to the power of aura and its influence on apperception, still retaining its relevance well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (510)

Therefore, the ephemerality of live music can be readily captured by everyday audience members with their digital devices and then replayed far beyond its encounter. Until recently, the recording of a live music performance was an arduous task of equipment and coordination, a production that involved more time and collective contribution to realize the final product. Today, to reproduce the live music performance is done on such an individual scale as to render each iteration with an aura still arguably diminished

compared to the original, authentic experience, yet one more personalized and significant to the user. The aura of the original is so powerful that even its diminishment through process reproduction is substantial enough to elicit pause in the viewer, one that will continue to permeate the digital confines of its stored location to be remixed, replayed, and rediscovered in a limitless number of spacetimes.

## EPHEMERALITY FOUND:

### AUTHENTICITY OF SELF

When music is reproduced and replayed—ripped from its ephemerality yet with new affordances of recreated space, time, and experience—it can be carried anywhere via portable platforms like the iPhone. The agility of the digitally reproduced music performance illustrates the chameleon-like nature of aura that Douglas Davis highlights above. This adaptability is not only indicative of the affordances mobile phones grant the user in capturing and consuming art, but also of their capability as communication tools no longer bound to a fixed location. To contextualize this point, Nancy Baym emphasizes<sup>22</sup> that “media vary in their *mobility*.” She considers media’s mobility by being either portable or stationary. Baym writes that portable media “[enable] people to send and receive messages regardless of location.” Stationary media, on the other hand, “[require] that people be in specific locations in order to interact” (11). The iPhone as a mobile device—albeit not alone—arguably represents the peak of mobility in the digital age, exemplified in the ease by which everyday users can now reproduce the live music experience—one that involves both the audible *and* visual sensorium. Benjamin’s understanding of the mode of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography, in retrospect, limited his observations on human apperception. The “Work of Art” essay comments on the desire to eliminate distance, but this desire today is well-incorporated into 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Furthermore, I would argue that this desire has been satisfied by the proliferation of mobile devices that have become ubiquitous in modern life. This is not to say that the

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<sup>22</sup> See Baym, *Personal Connections*.

elimination of distance has ended—in fact, it has arguably been amplified within the conscience of everyday living.

The ubiquity of digital devices like the iPhone is bolstered by both portability and functionality. These aspects are eventually translated to the reproduction of the art object in that the original can be captured and transported far away from its place of origin—rendering it more portable—and can be furthered modified—thus functioning outside of its original intent—far beyond the moment of encounter. Somdahl-Sands and Finn consider the consumption of the digitally reproduced copy in the past and present as what I would argue to be a metaphor for furthering the concept of portability—transporting the reproduction not only through space, but through time. “The mediated performance is [the audience member’s] now,” they write. However, it is made clear, “Through a mediated performance, a past performance and a present moment are collapsed into a pastpresent” (812-813). The challenge of space was the primary influence on Benjamin’s critique of aura and reproducibility, shown through his critique on distance. Today, however, there is the added dimension of time which complicates an approach to digital reproducibility as an understanding of human apperception and sense of self. Not only does the digital reproduction transcend space—as did its mechanically-captured predecessor—I argue that it has the ability to compress or expand the viewer’s sense of time during its secondary encounter. Not only can the device stage the reproduction of audio using built-in microphones, its screen presents dynamic images captured through the camera function that further contributes to the proliferation and reproduction of the

work of art. In an introductory quip by Wurtzler,<sup>23</sup> he maintains, “[portable devices] instantiate both the live and the recorded. They inhabit the realm not of ‘either/or’ but instead of ‘not only but also’” (170). The *not-only-but-also* element of the live recording parallels with the idea of the pastpresent presented by Somdahl-Sands and Finn above. The ephemerality of music and its digital reproduction, therefore, not only operates in time but, as has been shown, space as well. Both time and space, like the relationship between the integrity of aura and the mode of apperception, are closely linked in the reproduction of the live music performance.

Authenticity, while still sought out by mass culture, continues to be endangered for both aura and apperception: what does it mean for a thing—an object, an experience, a thought—to be authentic? Would an individual’s personal recording of a concert hold more auratic integrity than a production like The Beastie Boys’ *Awesome*? Digital technologies—especially those like the iPhone and its use during the auratic experience of live music performance—ultimately lead to the questioning of not only what it means for the work of art to be authentic but also, as Baym reveals, “what it means to be authentically human” (178). The world can now be contextualized through digital devices, but is this contextualization an authentic representation of individual reality and sense of self? Does a collection of reproductions function as a kind of collage by which to see through the binary of digital reproduction and the authentic art experience behind it?

While the work of art is not the only thing in contemporary society being digitally reproduced, its reproducibility is arguably illustrative of the wide-spread incorporation of

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<sup>23</sup> See Wurtzler, "One Future of Sound Studies Fits into the Palm of your Hand."

communication and information technology into modern society. Baym ends her *Personal Connections* by stating, “Digital media aren’t saving us or ruining us. They aren’t reinventing us. But they are changing the ways we relate to others and ourselves in countless, pervasive ways” (177). From the telegraph to the Internet, technology has quickly opened the door for the dissemination of information on a scale that mirrored what was made possible with machines such as the cotton gin or Henry Ford’s assembly line. Convenience is the siren song of progress, and machines not only helped to make *work* more efficient but have also led to advances in the way humans could communicate in their time of *leisure*. The communication imperatives of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have revolutionized the world of individual experience and have empowered mass culture with tools that would have been inconceivable by Benjamin in the 1930s. But with such an increased ability to reproduce the art object by both professional and nonprofessional individuals, I have argued in this essay that society’s sense of individuality has become sorely limited.

## CONCLUSION; OR, ENCORE

Are we losing a sense of community and connection with the art object by the distracting nature of the screen? Is this simply another form of “commodity listening,” a “reception in a state of distraction” of the art object and a shallow negation of the full capacity of the aura? And, more importantly, what makes the lover of art reach into their pocket for their iPhone in the first place? The key difference in an age of digital reproducibility is that mobile devices are being used as part of the process of apperception, allowing the individual to contextualize the complex and ever-changing world through their device. Douglas Davis understands this as society attempting “to find ways to increase the power of our subjective presence in the other reality, precisely as the painter orders his or her field” (385). Thus, the attempt to arrest the ephemeral experience before it is gone can be read as frustration over a sense of self away from the digital. Nancy Baym<sup>24</sup> puts it this way: “The social concerns that we voice when we discuss technology are concerns that we would have even if there were no technology around” (55). Communication technologies provide devices—tools—that can be used to better understand the complexity of modern life, a way to slow things down while simultaneously keeping pace with the quickening flow of mass culture. Arresting the art object, attempting to bring it closer, transporting its reproduction—these all indicate a perception of contemporary life as constantly changing and, indeed, chameleon.

Is the time right to consider what may come after the age of digital reproducibility? Davis leaves us with the following: “Only the unwary mind would deny

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<sup>24</sup> See Baym, *Personal Connections*.

the further inevitability that a ‘neurasthenic’ computer, programmed by humanoid codes...will shortly create paintings from first stroke to last” (383). Perhaps digital reproducibility will continue to grow in its sphere of influence over human apperception, and it will arguably produce more artforms as the age progresses. Mass culture, of course, will always be receptive—albeit weary at times—of new technology, but it will not give its nod of approval willingly and immediately. How technology is used, how art is reproduced, is largely up to the individual. While it is still difficult to observe the full societal effects of reproducibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the integrity of aura is indeed still intact—flexible yet decidedly altered since the time of Benjamin’s critique. Human apperception will continue to conform to changes within mass culture and will perhaps shift away from being framed by a troubled sense of self. Yet, at the rate of change by which the tradition of the present moment is constantly shattered, what the future holds—for both the lover of art and the wielder of technology—is just as uncertain today as would today have been for Benjamin.

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