

Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography

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Abstract This article explores Walter Benjamin's famous concept of the aura in relation to his writings on photography. Although Benjamin's "Artwork" essay charges photography with the decline of the aura of the traditional artwork, his essay on photography complicates this historical narrative, associating aura with early portrait photography but also with its successor, the commercial studio portrait. The childhood photograph of Franz Kafka, whose melancholy air serves Benjamin as an example of a paradoxical, post-auratic aura, recurs in his childhood memoirs, where the narrator projects himself into this picture. Benjamin's writings on photography thus develop an alternative concept of aura, one which transcends fixed historical or technological categories through the model of an imaginary encounter between viewer and image. This conception has far-reaching consequences not only for the theory of photography but also for its role within literature, as is suggested by Benjamin's empathetic engagement with the Kafka photograph and its incorporation into his own life story.

Reassessing Aura

Walter Benjamin's notion of the "aura" has emerged as one of his most recognizable and widely used theoretical concepts. Defined in historical, aesthetic, and psychological opposition to the techniques of mechanical reproduction, aura has become a common theoretical currency across the arts and humanities. Indeed, among the dialectical twists and turns

of Benjamin's thought, which, in its constant redefinition of terms and positions, resist easy application,¹ the notion of the aura appears to offer a welcome sense of stability to the disoriented reader. However, as the considerable amount of critical attention attracted by this Benjaminian concept indicates, this is only part of the story. In literary, visual, and cultural studies, aura has become synonymous with the traditional work of art, whose contemplative experience is progressively eroded with the advent of modern media technology. Even in Benjamin's time, then, aura described a state which had already become obsolete. Aura is thus a concept coined with hindsight, describing an elusive phenomenon from the perspective of its disappearance. It alludes to a groundbreaking cultural shift from authenticity to replication, from uniqueness to seriality, and from the original artwork to its "soulless" mechanical copy. At the same time, however, its inherent liminality both historically speaking and within the corpus of Benjamin's writings escapes any stable, clear-cut categorization. Rather than providing a neat shorthand for the transition from traditional to modern culture, Benjamin's aura provokes, in its very ambiguity and multivalence, supplementary elaboration and analysis.²

In discussions about aura, photography is commonly associated with its decline; like few other technological innovations, it has challenged notions such as originality and uniqueness—a fact stressed by Benjamin himself in his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Yet while this text theorizes photography and aura as opponents in the historical process, this opposition is in turn challenged in other parts of his writings. The aim of this article, therefore, is to reexamine the commonly drawn link between the advent of photography and the decline of aura. Within Benjamin's writings, I will argue, aura and photography are not simply cast as mutually exclusive opposites but are in fact engaged in a complex process of interaction. My essay will explore Benjamin's engagement with photography across different texts, where aura resurfaces at decisive and at times surprising points in the argument. By looking at aura

1. For a detailed account of Benjamin's critical terms, their complexity and development over the course of his writings, see Opitz and Wizisla 2000.

2. Critical uses of the term across the humanities are too widespread to be constructively summarized within the space available. However, for a general introductory account of the concept in Benjamin's writings, see Ferris 1996 and Fürnkäs 2000. In my article, I will limit myself to such studies that make the term and its role within Benjamin's writings the focus of a more detailed, sustained exploration. In particular, various critics have emphasized Benjamin's deeply rooted ambivalence toward the aura as a concept which he rejects as aesthetically as well as politically regressive, while simultaneously bemoaning its decline in modernity (see, for instance, Stoessel 1983 and Hansen 1987); what is widely overlooked, however, is photography's crucial role as both showcase and driving force of this ambivalence.

“through the photographic lens,” I aim to uncover a more intricate relationship between aura and photography in Benjamin’s writings, which in turn has profound implications for the role of photography in fiction. As I shall argue, the seemingly paradoxical notion of a photographic aura not only complicates received assumptions about the historical, aesthetic, and political parameters of Benjamin’s thought; it also challenges more fundamental methodological oppositions between criticism and autobiography, theory and fiction both in his writings and beyond. In particular, the conjunction between aura and photography sheds a revealing light on the interpersonal dynamics of (photographic) reception, a process which in Benjamin’s case is founded on a precarious interplay of identification and alienation.

Benjamin’s reflections on a photographic aura are condensed in his engagement with one particular image; just as Roland Barthes’s engagement with photography in *Camera Lucida* (1980) is centered on the absent “winter garden” image, Benjamin’s meandering reflections on photographic reception and interpretation repeatedly return to the same picture, a childhood portrait of Franz Kafka. Recurring in no fewer than three of Benjamin’s texts, this picture is located at the interstices between different strands of his thought. Through its repeated textual “exposure,” Kafka’s childhood portrait mediates between literary and photographic criticism as well as between theory and autobiography, thus blurring the boundaries between reflection and recollection, between photography as historical testimony and its appropriation into literature.

The “Artwork” Essay: Photography at the Margins

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935–39), Benjamin’s most programmatic analysis of modern media culture, the relationship between aura and photography is presented as one of clear-cut opposition. As a medium of mechanical reproduction, photography is one of the main forces behind the decline, and indeed destruction, of aura. As Benjamin (2003c: 254; 1974a: 477) asserts, “What withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura. The process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art.”³ The photographic reproduction of original artworks invests them with an unprecedented mobility and accessibility and thereby fun-

3. All quotations from Benjamin’s writings will be referenced to both the English Harvard edition and the German *Gesammelte Schriften*. English translations of Benjamin’s works are on occasion silently amended.

damentally alters their mode of reception. The quasi-religious contemplation characteristic of the traditional spaces of gallery and museum gives way to an eagerness for possession and control: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or better a facsimile, a reproduction” (ibid.: 255; 479).

These changes within the domain of art are symptomatic of a more general shift in human perception and experience. It is no coincidence that Benjamin’s famous definition of the aura as “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (ibid.) refers to natural scenes, such as the shadow of a branch or the sight of a distant mountain range. Conversely, the decline—or indeed the active dismantling and destruction—of the artwork’s aura reflects a wider condition of modernity: the turn toward seriality and uniformity which shapes the experience of reality, in particular in the modern city: “The stripping of the husk [*Hülle*] from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (ibid.: 255–56; 479–80).

In his “Artwork” essay, Benjamin avidly supports this development when he advocates the antibourgeois reconceptualization of art for the sake of political mobilization.⁴ While the medium of film is figured as exemplary of this process, and hence provides the argumentative focus of Benjamin’s essay, photography is given rather short shrift. As a predecessor of film, it initially triggered the shift from manual to technologically (re)produced images, and yet its discussion in the essay is confined to a few passing remarks. The reason for this curious neglect lies in the narrow and rather instrumentalized role assigned to photography within Benjamin’s argument. In contrast to film, which is presented as emblematic of a new, politicized mode of reception, the main purpose of photography, according to this essay, is not the (primary) representation of reality but rather the (secondary) replication of preexisting, traditional artworks which are made widely available through the technique of photographic reproduction.

In the one section of the essay which is devoted to photography as a self-contained medium, rather than as a tool of reproduction, this overall bias is not so much rectified as illuminated from an unexpected angle. Before turning to contemporary uses of photography in modern mass culture, Benjamin (ibid.: 258; 485) makes a brief historical detour to early portrait photography, remarking that “in the fleeting expression of the human face,

4. As Benjamin (2003c: 267–68; 1974a: 502–3) argues, the contemplative mode of reception associated with the auratic artwork perpetuates an isolated, individualist mode of reception which prevents a sense of (political) solidarity across class boundaries—an experience made possible by the anticontemplative spectacle of film.

the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time.” This throw-away remark has wide-reaching consequences: it associates photography with both sides of an apparently irreconcilable divide, thus complicating the historical as well as the aesthetic parameters of Benjamin’s own argument. Photography emerges here not only as the tool of aura’s destruction but also, in the form of the early photographic portrait, as the site of its last appearance.

Within the “Artwork” essay, this suggestion is left unexplored, thus appearing curiously out of place in Benjamin’s otherwise stringent theoretical narrative. In fact, however, the notion of a photographic aura does not come out of the blue. Benjamin’s passing remark about the aura of early portrait photography echoes his more extensive exploration of this issue in the earlier “Little History of Photography” (1931), which first defines aura as a theoretical concept, with specific reference to photography. In my account, I follow Miriam Hansen’s (1987: 186) suggestion that, while repudiated as obsolete and regressive, the notion of aura nevertheless “plays a precarious yet indispensable part” in Benjamin’s texts throughout the 1930s. In her article, Hansen exemplifies this structure with reference to film, arguing that, through his one-sided advocacy of reproduction over the auratic image, Benjamin “denies the masses the possibility of aesthetic experience”—an experience which, however, finds an outlet in other domains of modern culture.⁵ While film in Benjamin’s thought is thus one-sidedly associated with the decline of aura, photography, in contrast, plays a more versatile and ambivalent role. In Benjamin’s initial reflections on the photographic medium, aura appears in an intriguingly complex capacity, even though this is subsequently undercut by the political agenda of his later writings. In my following exploration of aura in the light of Benjamin’s engagement with photography, I shall focus in particular on the interrelations between Benjamin’s theoretical and literary writings, both of which illustrate the central role of a photographic aura for processes of interpretation, imagination, and recollection.

The “Photography” Essay: Auratic Portraits

“A load of mysticism, although his attitude is against mysticism . . . it is rather horrid.” Bertolt Brecht’s (1993: 10) dismissive remark about Benjamin’s concept of the aura reflects the ambiguities which beset this

5. According to Hansen (1987: 193), Benjamin identified in the work of the surrealists a possible alternative appropriation of such auratic modes of experience through the model of “profane illumination,” which lent “the auratic promise of happiness a public and secular meaning.”

term. By casting aura as an essentially ephemeral, elusive phenomenon, Benjamin faces the paradoxical task of defining the indefinable (Fürnkäs 2000: 97). This becomes particularly apparent in his “Little History of Photography”: compared with the “Artwork” essay, where aura occupies a clearly defined historical-theoretical position, aura here takes on a more ambivalent role, blurring the contrast between early photography and its subsequent commercialization. Revealingly, almost all of the photographs which Benjamin explores in more detail are portraits, a fact which has far-reaching implications for his conception of photography in the essay and beyond. What underpins Benjamin’s reflections on the photographic medium is a particular form of interpretative engagement, an imaginary encounter between viewer and image which bears a crucial significance not only for his theoretical argument but also for the role of photography within his literary writings.

Although Benjamin does not use the term “aura” until later in the argument, the first images he discusses in greater detail—a couple of early photographic portraits—prefigure this term by giving rise to a particular interpretative dynamic. Looking at a portrait of the photographer Karl Dauthendey and his wife, Benjamin (1999c: 510; 1977b: 371) is struck by the woman’s gaze: “Here she can be seen with him. He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance [*saugend in eine unheilvolle Ferne gerichtet*].” The distance into which the sitter’s gaze is directed is reminiscent of Benjamin’s famous definition of aura as “apparition of a distance”—a phrase first used in the “Photography” essay (*ibid.*: 518; 378). As if to illustrate this notion, Benjamin stresses the air of distance surrounding the depicted woman, which appears to make her immune even to her husband’s grasp. The uncanny atmosphere surrounding this image is amplified by the viewer’s knowledge that the depicted woman would later commit suicide.⁶ The picture’s particular appeal thus emerges from an underlying sense of displacement that contrasts with its tangible presence and immediacy (Stoessel 1983: 45).

A similar tension between presence and absence also informs another image, whose attraction is in turn founded on a complete lack of supplementary information. In a portrait recorded by David Octavius Hill, it is the anonymous sitter, rather than the famous photographer, who attracts the viewer’s attention:

6. Ironically, this part of Benjamin’s interpretation is based on a misreading. The photograph actually depicts Dauthendey’s second wife rather than his first, who took her own life, as is clearly evident in the book from which Benjamin drew this image (Krauss 1998: 22). In effect, then, Benjamin’s theorization of photography as a harbinger of death is the result of what might be a deliberate misattribution.

in Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to being wholly absorbed in "art." (Benjamin 1999c: 510; 1977b: 370)

Coyne and seduction become fused in the sitter's gaze which, as in the image of Dauthendey's wife, evades that of the viewer, thereby further heightening the picture's captivating power. Whereas in painted portraits the interest in the sitter is soon superseded by the fame of the painter (*ibid.*), the allure of Hill's model has not been eroded by the passing of time.

Benjamin explores these two early portraits in great detail, as attractions in their own right rather than as examples of more general schools, styles, or historical configurations. Indeed, it is the highly specific and immediate fascination of these pictures which leads him to formulate a more general theory of photographic reception:

Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion [*Zwang*] 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 [*den Bildcharakter*]. (*Ibid.*: 510; 371)

In an argument which is the exact inverse of that in the "Artwork" essay, Benjamin here attributes to photography a particular appeal which, as he stresses, is absent from painting. Although the term "aura" is not actually used, the above quotation prefigures Benjamin's later conception of the auratic work of art; in this case, however, these auratic characteristics are attributed to the very medium which is later blamed for the aura's disappearance. While in the "Artwork" essay the aura of painting is said to stem from its origin in rituals "first magical, then religious" (2003c: 256; 1974a: 480), here the "magical value" of photography is said to be the result of the technological recording process, which preserves a sense of immediacy even across a temporal distance. Another, even more striking example which underlines Benjamin's later theoretical U-turn is the suggestion, developed in the above passage, that photography is rooted in the "here and now" of reality; in the "Artwork" essay, by comparison, this exact phrase recurs in relation to painting, denoting its self-contained material existence, the aura of its singularity (*ibid.*: 253; 475). This passage anticipates Barthes's (2000 [1980]: 26) theory of the *punctum*, which is like-

wise presented as that detail which “punctuate[s]” both the homogeneity of the photographic arrangement and the detached stance of the viewer. Within the “Photography” essay, this dynamic, and the associated image of the “spark of contingency” which sears the picture, marks one of its key insights. While emphasizing photography’s representational realism, Benjamin simultaneously stresses its indexical nature—the fact that every photograph bears the physical trace of its referent.⁷ For Benjamin, it is this trace of the real inherent in every photograph that accounts for its particular, enduring appeal beyond individual styles, schools, or movements, for the fascination it holds for the viewer, who is drawn to explore the image in an almost compulsive fashion.

Having thus stressed the particular, auratic appeal of early photography with reference to two specific examples, Benjamin then articulates his conception of a photographic aura in more abstract, general terms. This argument, however, turns out to be highly precarious; not only does it in effect challenge his later opposition between aura and photography, but it also undermines his more specific claims about the decline of aura in this very essay. As Benjamin writes about the sitters of the earliest daguerreotypes: “There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze [*Blick*] as it [their gaze] penetrated that medium” (1999c: 515–16; 1977b: 376). As in the case of the two female portraits, the sitter’s gaze is here constructed as the focus of the image, as that element which is surrounded by aura while simultaneously penetrating it. In this respect, the photographic aura draws on an idea first developed during Benjamin’s (1999b: 328; 1985: 588) drug experiments, in whose protocols aura is described as an “ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case.” The description of aura as a “medium” implies a sense of distance but also of mediation and encounter. Indeed, the *Blick* (gaze) encapsulated by the photographic aura might not be solely that of the sitter, but this dynamic might, as Marleen Stoessel (1983: 28) has argued, extend beyond the picture into the space of its reception, whereby the picture’s sight, or *An-Blick*, is experienced by the observer. In this earliest definition, then, Benjamin’s concept of a photographic aura is not simply based on static historical or technological categories but implies a process of encounter between viewer and image.

Within Benjamin’s history of photography, however, this conception of aura is only introduced late in the argument, following a discussion of the various social and technological factors which led to its disappearance in

7. For a more systematic theorization of the indexical nature of photography, which develops Benjamin’s and Barthes’s thoughts on this issue, see Dubois 1983.

modern culture. Here as elsewhere in his writings, then, Benjamin's discussion of aura is informed by a curious sense of belatedness, or *Nachträglichkeit*, whereby the phenomenon of aura is never discussed in its heyday but can only be theorized in the process of disappearance (Fürnkäs 2000: 109). As industrial mass production becomes the defining feature of modernity, Benjamin argues, this process also invades photography, where the reproducible collodium negative replaced the costly daguerreotype, paving the way for the large-scale commercial expansion of portrait photography, which now became more widely affordable (Rosenblum 1997: 56, 62–63). In his essay, Benjamin discusses a childhood photograph of Kafka to illustrate this development. Within his argument, however, this image takes on a precarious, even paradoxical character in that it both supports and contradicts Benjamin's theoretical narrative about the disappearance of the aura of photography. The nineteenth century is described as

the period of those studios—with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels—which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room, and of which an early portrait of Kafka brings us a deeply moving [*erschütternd*] testimony. There the boy stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight children's suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of greenhouse landscape. The background is thick with palm fronds. And as if to make these upholstered tropics even stuffier and more oppressive, the subject holds in his left hand an inordinately large broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear. He would surely disappear in this setting were it not for his immeasurably sad eyes, which reign over this landscape predestined for them.

This picture, in its boundless sadness, forms a pendant to the early photographs in which people did not yet look out at the world in so excluded and godforsaken a manner as this boy. There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze as it penetrated that medium. (1999c: 515; 1977b: 375–76)

Kafka's childhood photograph provides a striking example of the commercialization of the studio portrait in the second half of the nineteenth century. With its stuffy decor and theatrical props, this image stands in stark contrast to the simplicity of the early daguerreotypes and the self-contained composure of their subjects. Not only is the young sitter passively inserted into this suffocating interior; through his costume and posture, he is himself forced to comply with a similarly formulaic model of subjectivity.

In contrast to the portraits of the New Haven fishwife and Dauthendey's wife, this image is not actually reproduced within Benjamin's essay, and so its evocative ekphrasis takes the place of a more immediate visual repro-

duction (see figure 1). Benjamin in fact owned a copy of the Kafka photograph,⁸ and its personal, sentimental value might have contributed to the decision not to reproduce it either here or in the “Kafka” essay, where the image is also thematized (1999a: 800; 1977a: 416). Given its conventional decor, stuffy costume, and contrived pose, then, the photograph provides a prime example of the de-individualizing effect of mechanical reproduction, namely, the “homogenization of heterogeneity—the triumph of normative representation . . . over diversity” (Silverman 1996: 99). Yet although the Kafka portrait appears to support Benjamin’s historical narrative about the loss of a photographic aura, this argument is immediately undermined when Benjamin describes Kafka’s image as a “pendant” to its earlier, auratic predecessors—a term of equivalence which suggests correlation as well as difference.⁹ As a result, the Kafka image introduces an unsettling ambivalence into Benjamin’s argument. Rather than illustrating a decisive turning point within the history of photography, it blurs the distinction between authenticity and convention, between the early daguerreotypes and their mass-produced counterparts. Even before it is introduced by name, then, the aura defies clear-cut categorization—a resistance embodied by Kafka’s childhood portrait, which remains associated with a phenomenon whose decline it simultaneously illustrates.

On what basis, then, does the Kafka photograph challenge the opposition it allegedly illustrates? Revealingly, Benjamin’s account of this picture echoes various key elements of his discussion of earlier, auratic portraits. As in his engagement with these earlier images, Benjamin’s focus is again on the sitter’s gaze, the site of the picture’s inherent tensions but also of its particular appeal. Kafka’s “immeasurably sad eyes” reflect the ordeal of being photographed in such stuffy surroundings; they highlight the child’s passive exposure, which contrasts with the self-contained composure that Benjamin discerns in earlier sitters. Despite this loss of auratic security, however, Kafka’s gaze maintains an element of control; it is said to “reign over” the suffocating scene, thus radicalizing a tendency which Benjamin also discerns in its auratic predecessors, such as the portrait of the anonymous fisherwoman. Like this image, whose personal allure transcends the photographer’s style and arrangement, Kafka’s image betrays a tension

8. How Benjamin obtained this picture is not known for certain; one possible explanation is that he received it from Hugo Bergmann, a youth friend of Kafka whom Benjamin might have met via Gershom Scholem in Bern in 1919. Bergmann emigrated to Palestine in 1920 and stayed in touch with Scholem, who recounts that Bergmann had a photograph of Kafka on display on his piano (Schöttker 2004: 21).

9. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., vol. 11 [1989: 467]) defines *pendant* as “a thing, esp. a picture, forming a parallel, match, or companion to another; a match, companion-piece. Also said of a person.”



Figure 1 Franz Kafka, ca. 1887. Courtesy of Klaus Wagenbach, Berlin

between the general and the particular—in this case, between the formulaic setting and the melancholy expressiveness of the sitter’s gaze. Against the suffocating conventionality of the photographic backdrop, the boy’s eyes stand out through their excessive, uncontainable emotion. It is this detail, rather than the surrounding scene, which attracts the viewer’s attention, triggering an empathetic response in Benjamin—who describes the picture as “deeply moving” [*erschütternd*]¹—a response that matches or even exceeds the one triggered by the pre-commercial portraits. Indeed, just like early photographs, which compel the viewer to search for the underlying “tiny spark of contingency” among the photographic arrangement, Kafka’s eyes likewise resist the picture’s restrictive conventions. Their melancholy gaze invests the image with an element of individuality and immediacy which punctures its formulaic arrangement. In an argument which anticipates Barthes’s opposition between *studium* and *punctum*, between a photograph’s fixed cultural semiotics and its unpredictable, personal appeal, it is no longer the entire picture which captures the viewer’s imagination but rather a detail—Kafka’s eyes—whose unfathomable, auratic appeal is highlighted by the formulaic sameness of the surrounding context.

Despite, or indeed because of, the reifying conventionality of bourgeois portraiture which Benjamin sees embodied in Kafka’s portrait, this same photograph provokes in the viewer an emotional response comparable to that triggered by the early female portraits. Indeed, it is Benjamin’s evocative description of the childhood portrait which most radically challenges his own explicit claims about the decline of aura. As a result, his engagement with all of the three portraits, but with the Kafka photograph in particular, gestures toward a second, alternative conception of aura, one which is not bound up with a picture’s photographic style, conventions, and sociohistorical context but which emerges from the encounter between viewer and image. As Kaja Silverman (1996: 94) puts it, “It would be more correct to characterize the aura in terms of social ‘attitude’ toward the work of art, than a property inherent in it.”

While Silverman mobilizes this argument in relation to film, this conception of aura as rooted in the act of beholding is most strikingly put into practice in Benjamin’s writings on photography, where the aura of particular pictures emerges as the result of a (textual) strategy of empathetic exploration. Benjamin’s general theoretical claims are thus inseparable from a particular interpretative practice which lends his writings on the concept of aura depth and complexity. In this respect, Benjamin’s “Photography” essay forms the centerpiece of his theory of aura, not simply because it contains the earliest definition of the term but because it gestures beyond

a narrowly historical definition of the term toward a more flexible and universally applicable model of aura as a phenomenon bound up with the act of viewing and reception. It is no coincidence that the full implications of this concept of aura are revealed only in Benjamin's autobiographical writings, which complement and expand his theory of photography from a literary perspective, suggesting new avenues for photographic interpretation and narrative exploration.

A Berlin Childhood: The Photographic Double

On the face of it, Benjamin's childhood memoirs, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932–38), merely develop one aspect of the "Photography" essay, namely, its critique of the conventional, de-individualizing effect of late-nineteenth-century photography. In this text, mostly written in the year after the "Photography" essay, Benjamin returns to the genre of the bourgeois studio portrait, this time illustrating the effects of its formulaic conventionality from a personal perspective. In an episode entitled "The Mummerehlen," the narrator recounts the traumatic experience of being photographed as a child. Standing in the middle of the studio, the boy feels that the surrounding screens and pedestals "craved my image much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal" (2002: 391; 1972: 261).

In the late nineteenth century, photographic portraiture emerged as a primary arena for the (self-)fashioning of bourgeois identity (Hamilton and Hargreaves 2001: 30–33). For the young Benjamin, however, this photographic practice has precisely the opposite effect. Faced with the mechanical eye of the camera, he finds himself unable to identify with the photographic self he is forced to embody: "In the end, I was offered up to a crudely painted prospect of the Alps, and my right hand, which had to brandish a kidskin hat, cast its shadow on the clouds and snowfields of the backdrop" (2002: 392; 1972: 261).¹⁰ The photographic recording—supposedly a process of self-presentation and self-assertion—amounts here to the metaphorical annihilation of the sitter's identity, a process which is diametrically opposed to the auratic security which Benjamin elsewhere

10. This description is based on an actual photograph which depicts Benjamin with his younger brother Georg (reproduced in the English edition of *Berlin Childhood* [2002]: 391). In fact, this image already makes a covert appearance in the "Photography" essay, where Benjamin (1999c: 515; 1977b: 375) alludes to his photographic masquerade as a "parlor Tyrolean, yodeling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape" in the first person plural, thus investing his personal memory with a transindividual, collective significance.

discerns in the earliest daguerreotypes (1999c: 515–16; 1977b: 376). Yet just as these auratic portraits are revealed to have an unlikely “pendant” in Kafka’s childhood image, the description of the young narrator’s humiliating photographic experience in the memoirs likewise takes an unexpected turn.

The chapter’s particular dynamic derives from its dual narrative perspective: the experiences of the photographed child are interspersed with comments by the adult narrator. Moving on from the Alpine portrait, the narrator turns to another picture and is immediately struck by a “saddening” (*betäubend*) gaze “which plunges into me [*sich in mich senkt*] from the child’s face, which lies in the shadow of a potted palm. The latter comes from one of those studios which—with their footstools and tripods, tapestries and easels—put you in mind of both a boudoir and a torture chamber” (2002: 392; 1972: 261). The wording of this passage closely resembles Benjamin’s account of the nineteenth-century studio in the “Little History of Photography.” Indeed, as in the earlier text, this account is followed by the familiar description of a particular photograph whose appearance in the memoirs is nonetheless rather surprising. At this point in the narrative, the Kafka photograph makes an unexpected return, albeit with a crucial twist: here the narrator projects his childhood self into the photographic scene, thus describing its scenario from a first-person perspective:

I am standing there bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero which I dangle with studied grace. My right hand is occupied with a walking stick, whose curved handle can be seen in the foreground while its tip remains hidden in a bunch of flowers spilling from a garden table. (Ibid.)

Given the photographic precision of this account, which picks up on previously unmentioned details, such as the boy’s stick and the flower decoration, the change of narrative perspective is all the more striking. Benjamin here performs a textual sleight of hand; covertly repeating his own description from the “Photography” essay, he performs a narrative act of imposture in which he appropriates Kafka’s portrait as his own.¹¹ As will become clear, Benjamin’s identification with this image allows him to explore and expand the model of a photographic aura in a narrative whose tacit act of trickery blurs the boundary between autobiography and fiction, between the autobiographical self and its photographic double/other.

A key element in both versions of the passage is the sitter’s gaze. In the “Photography” essay, Kafka’s “immeasurably sad eyes” marked out the

11. Given the dispersed publication of Benjamin’s writings in various journals and newspapers and, in the case of *Berlin Childhood*, under a pseudonym, it is extremely unlikely that contemporary readers would have been aware of the link between the two passages.

image as a melancholy pendant to the early daguerreotypes, triggering in the observer a process of empathetic identification. In *Berlin Childhood*, in turn, the narrator singles out the young sitter's "saddening" gaze as that element which establishes a connection between the adult viewer and his photographic double or alter ego. Indeed, it is this element of the picture which provokes the narrator's curious act of photographic imposture. As the sitter's gaze "plunges into" that of the adult viewer, it acts as a conduit, enabling his imaginary entry into the picture.

What, then, are the implications of this unusual case of self-citation? Benjamin's textual trickery follows the intersubjective model of the aura as it is developed in the "Photography" essay while taking it to its paradoxical extreme. On one level, Benjamin's narrative imposture seems to replicate the erosion of subjectivity at work within bourgeois photographic practice. By projecting himself into Kafka's childhood photograph, the narrator appears to erase the difference between self and other and thereby the distance between viewer and image which, as we have seen, is essential for any form of auratic encounter. However, an important factor which distinguishes Benjamin's narrative strategy from a simple act of appropriation is his identification with the Kafka image on the basis of a shared experience of alienation. Kafka's photograph has a particular appeal for Benjamin both here and in the "Photography" essay because the sitter's melancholy expression reflects his own traumatic memories of the photographer's studio; "In experiencing the other's alterity, in experiencing alterity in the other, he [Benjamin] experiences the alteration that, 'in him', infinitely displaces and delimits his singularity" (Cadava 1997: 113).

Thus it is precisely the alienating, reifying character of photographic practice in the late nineteenth century which enables this imaginary encounter between narrator and sitter, between viewer and image. Rolf Tiedemann (1971: 652) describes aura as the investment of that which is alienated and objectified with the capacity to return the gaze; in Benjamin's account, however, this idea is taken a step further, as the observer is himself part of this reified world. To underline this sense of reification further, Benjamin adds another person to the photographic scene in *Berlin Childhood*. Having projected himself into the Kafka image, the narrator then finds himself observed by his mother, who watches the scene from the margins. Her gaze, however, is directed not at the sitter's face—thus offering a potential sense of recognition denied by the camera—but at his suit, which "looks like something out of a fashion magazine" (2002: 392; 1972: 261), thereby enforcing the objectifying effect of photography. In Benjamin's memoirs, the stuffy conventions of the bourgeois photographic portrait, which reduces the sitter to a mere passive prop in a predefined

scenario, becomes the basis for an alternative, post-auratic form of aura, which arises out of an (imaginary) encounter between the victims of this process of reification.

While any late-nineteenth-century studio portrait could have been used to illustrate this point, the Kafka photograph adds a crucial identificatory, self-reflexive dimension to this encounter. As Bernd Witte (1991: 14) puts it, the unmarked self-quotation from the “Photography” essay “simultaneously conceals and reveals Benjamin’s identification with the Prague writer who, also born into a Jewish merchant family, found in writing the strength to break out of his original milieu.” Both Kafka’s and Benjamin’s writings reflect their upbringing in a bourgeois environment whose normative conceptions of identity are emblemized in its photographic portraits, and both expose the de-individualizing effect of photography in their writings.¹² In this respect, Kafka’s childhood image, as it is discussed in Benjamin’s writings, anticipates the adult vocation of both sitter *and* viewer, as Kafka’s melancholy gaze reflects the reifying conditions of modern life, which motivate and underpin the works of both authors.

“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: Exposure and Encounter

Benjamin’s reflections on the question of a photographic aura find a later echo in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939–40), in which Baudelaire’s poetry is discussed as a response to the climate of the nineteenth century, to urbanization, mass culture, and technological progress. In his essay on the French poet, which takes the form of a wide-ranging cultural-historical investigation, Benjamin once again returns to the interpersonal dynamic between viewer and object which he holds to be a central feature of photography. As in his engagement with photographic portraiture, and with the Kafka portrait in particular, Benjamin here posits the gaze as the site of a reciprocal, auratic encounter:

Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met . . . , there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness. . . . Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that the response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (2003a: 338; 1974c: 646–47)

12. On Kafka’s engagement with photography in his fictional and personal writings, see Duttlinger 2007.

As in Benjamin's writings on photography, the experience of the aura is centered on the gaze, that element which establishes a connection between viewer and sitter. In the "Photography" essay, the viewer's emotional response is triggered by the recalcitrant, alluring, or melancholy gaze of the sitter. In *Berlin Childhood*, this dynamic is taken even further: the sitter's gaze becomes the conduit for a process of recognition and identification which blurs the opposition between viewer and image, memory and photography, autobiography and fiction. In the "Baudelaire" essay in turn, this model of the aura is projected onto the world at large, where it invests even inanimate objects with the capacity to return the viewer's gaze.

However, even though it is clearly indebted to Benjamin's writings on photography, the above definition of a reciprocal aura marks a step back from the memoirs and their precarious model of recognition in a culture of alienation. Here, the exchanged gaze is clearly marked out as the result of a one-sided projection by a human observer, who transfers this form of interpersonal response to the inanimate object. Unlike the viewer of photography, on whom the picture's auratic appeal can exert a highly emotive effect that blurs the boundaries between self and other, the observer in this scenario thus maintains a clear sense of mastery. A crucial factor in this revised framework is the precise nature of the object which is subjected to this projection; while the above passage merely refers to "inanimate or natural objects" in general terms, Benjamin in the same section explicitly excludes photography, and the photographic portrait in particular, from such an auratic encounter. Reiterating his thesis from the "Artwork" essay that "photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of a 'decline of the aura'" (2003a: 338; 1974c: 646), he then takes a crucial step further as he continues: "What was inevitably felt to be inhuman—one might even say deadly—in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likenesses without returning our gaze" (ibid.). In contrast to the "Photography" and indeed the "Artwork" essay, both of which describe the aura inherent in early daguerreotype portraits, Benjamin here reverses this argument when he denies the earliest, pre-commercial portraits any such auratic qualities, stressing instead the "deadly" effect of the photographic gaze.

A possible explanation for this apparent U-turn, however, lies in the underlying model of aura which is at play in both cases. The aura of early photography, as thematized in the "Photography" and "Artwork" essays, is essentially a historical phenomenon, a quality inherent to these early portraits, whose simplicity and uniqueness—the daguerreotype cannot be reproduced—sets them apart from their later, mass-produced counterparts. By comparison, the aura which Benjamin discerns in Kafka's por-

trait, the “pendant” of these early photographs, is not founded on historical categories but on a process of reception and imaginary encounter which arises less as a result of than as a reaction against the reifying photographic technique. In contrast, Benjamin’s late critique of the daguerreotype as an alienating and reifying medium concerns not the process of viewing but that of recording, in which the gaze of the apparatus undermines the potential for mutual, auratic recognition. Rather than contradicting his earlier reflections, Benjamin’s “Baudelaire” essay thus further underlines the turn away from aura as a fixed historical category toward its reconceptualization as a transhistorical model for interpersonal encounter. As Benjamin’s argument suggests, it is only in the subsequent (in relation to the recording process, retrospective) act of viewing that this aura, which is absent in the sitter’s confrontation with the apparatus, can be (re)established. Indeed, just as the aura of Kafka’s photograph emerges only in retrospect, as a result of the anti-auratic conditions of its recording, so does Benjamin’s conception of the aura—whether in its historical or its interpersonal dimension—only arise with the hindsight of theoretical engagement.

Yet while Benjamin’s argument in the “Baudelaire” essay marks a more general shift in his assessment of photography, his unusually critical stance toward early portrait photography can also be read as an implicit reflection of the author’s own personal and political context. In a preceding essay, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1938), the photographic portrait is presented as a tool of administrative control:

Photography made it possible for the first time to preserve permanent and unmistakable traces of a human being. The detective story came into being when this most decisive of all conquests of a person’s incognito had been accomplished. Since that time, there has been no end to the efforts to capture [*dingfest machen*] a man in his speech and actions. (2003b: 27; 1974b: 550)

In the nineteenth century, the medium of photography was employed not only for the purpose of private portraiture but also in disciplinary contexts, for the recording and categorization of various forms of dissident identity—whether social or racial, physical or psychological. The growing significance of portrait photography in disciplines such as ethnology, criminology, and psychiatry in the nineteenth century thus echoes a point which Benjamin makes in relation to the studio portrait: while photography is used to impose a normative identity on its bourgeois sitter, it is likewise employed to police the boundaries of the socially normative. In both respects, however, the medium does not offer a means of self-expression and -presentation but perpetuates a process of objectification.

Benjamin's own experiences of persecution and exile in the 1930s form a personal backdrop to his historical argument in the above quotation, which implicitly discerns the origins of fascist policies of surveillance and discrimination in the photographic practices of the nineteenth century. Indeed, as if to reflect the author's growing suspicion of the disciplinary dimension of photographic portraiture, the photography episode is deleted from the revised 1938 version of *Berlin Childhood*. This move emblemizes the author's more general attempt to establish an authorial incognito in the face of a modern culture of surveillance.¹³ Yet while the dissociation of aura from photography in the "Baudelaire" essay reflects Benjamin's revised stance toward the photographic medium, this move also forecloses the vital opportunities inherent in their conjuncture—opportunities which are mobilized in Benjamin's identificatory engagement with portrait photography in both his theoretical and literary writings. In *Berlin Childhood* in particular the photographic portrait emerges as a medium of identification which can offer, if not an escape, then at least a fragile relief through the shared experience of alienation.

Outlook: Photography—Aura—Narrative

Benjamin's explorations of photographic portraiture, and of Kafka's childhood portrait in particular, illustrate the auratic potential of photography in the face of reifying sociocultural dynamics and conventions. The empathetic engagement with particular images breaks down rigid boundaries between self and other, creating a play of identification between viewer and image. Benjamin's writings on photography are thus groundbreaking in several respects. On one level, they anticipate subsequent contributions to photography theory, such as Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, where the critic's detached analytical stance gives way to a more intuitive, emotive

13. The history of *Berlin Childhood* illustrates Benjamin's concern to maintain his autobiographical incognito. Benjamin published most chapters individually under the pseudonym Detlev Holz in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Tiedemann 2000: 124). In the later versions of the text written in exile in Paris, Benjamin incorporated this strategy of authorial incognito into the work: while the "Mummerehlen" chapter formed the first section of the earliest version of the text, the recently recovered so-called *Gießen Version* of 1932/33, it was later moved toward the end of the text in the final version of 1938, where the account of the photographs is left out altogether. Benjamin (1989: 385; 2006: 38) himself comments on this strategy in his preface to this version: "Certain biographical features . . . altogether recede in the present undertaking. And with them go the physiognomies—those of my family and comrades alike." On the paradoxical features of Benjamin's autobiographical writings, which involve the dissolution of identity in the very process of its (narrative) construction, see Rugg 1997 and Richter 2004.

form of engagement. Both Benjamin and Barthes stress the power of individual photographs to disturb and affect the viewer in ways which break down any sense of critical distance and detachment. More specifically, Benjamin's strategy of singling out particular photographic details, such as Kafka's melancholy eyes, which are said to "reign over" the formulaic backdrop, prefigure Barthes's opposition of *studium* and *punctum*, that is, a mode of photographic interpretation which privileges an inherently personal encounter with particular images over a concern with photography's general stylistic, semiotic, or cultural dimensions.

Yet Benjamin's engagement with photography through the auratic model of reciprocal encounter is significant not only for the field of photography theory but also for the relationship between photography and fiction. By transplanting the discussion of the Kafka photograph from his "Photography" essay into his memoirs, Benjamin illustrates that the detailed engagement with particular images can change the relation not only between viewer and photograph but also between the discursive categories of theory and literature, autobiography and fiction. Through his technique of covert self-citation, Benjamin supplements his personal recollections with an imaginary episode which remains, however, within the historical-psychological framework of the text, by emerging from the empathetic engagement with the photograph of the young Kafka. In this respect, Benjamin's memoirs prefigure a tendency in more recent literature, where the narrative engagement with photography both thematizes and challenges the boundaries between documentary and fiction. As in the case of Benjamin, the narrative mobilization of photography in these recent texts is often founded on a precarious interplay of proximity and distance, identification and estrangement, thus illustrating the continued validity of Benjamin's photographic model of the aura in contemporary literature. A prime example of this dynamic, and its role in processes of memory and (self-)exploration, is provided by the childhood photograph of the eponymous protagonist in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001: 259–60). As in the case of the Kafka photograph, the picture's air of contrived masquerade becomes a focal point in the adult viewer's response, whose failure to relate to his photographic self in turn facilitates an indirect confrontation with the traumas of the past (Duttlinger 2004: 163–66).

Rather than simply positing photography in clear-cut opposition to his concept of the aura, Benjamin's writings thus bring photography and aura into constructive interplay. Not only is the notion of aura first developed in relation to early photography, but this historical model is subsequently revised and expanded in line with the evolving focus of Benjamin's thought.

In Benjamin's memoirs and later essays, photography emerges as a medium of imaginary encounter despite, and indeed because of, the medium's complicity with uniformity, conventionality, and reification. Within Benjamin's childhood memories in particular, the model of a photographic aura facilitates a mode of literary engagement which, while arising out of theoretical reflection, is founded on a deeply personal, emotive form of photographic interpretation from which neither viewer nor image emerge unchanged.

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