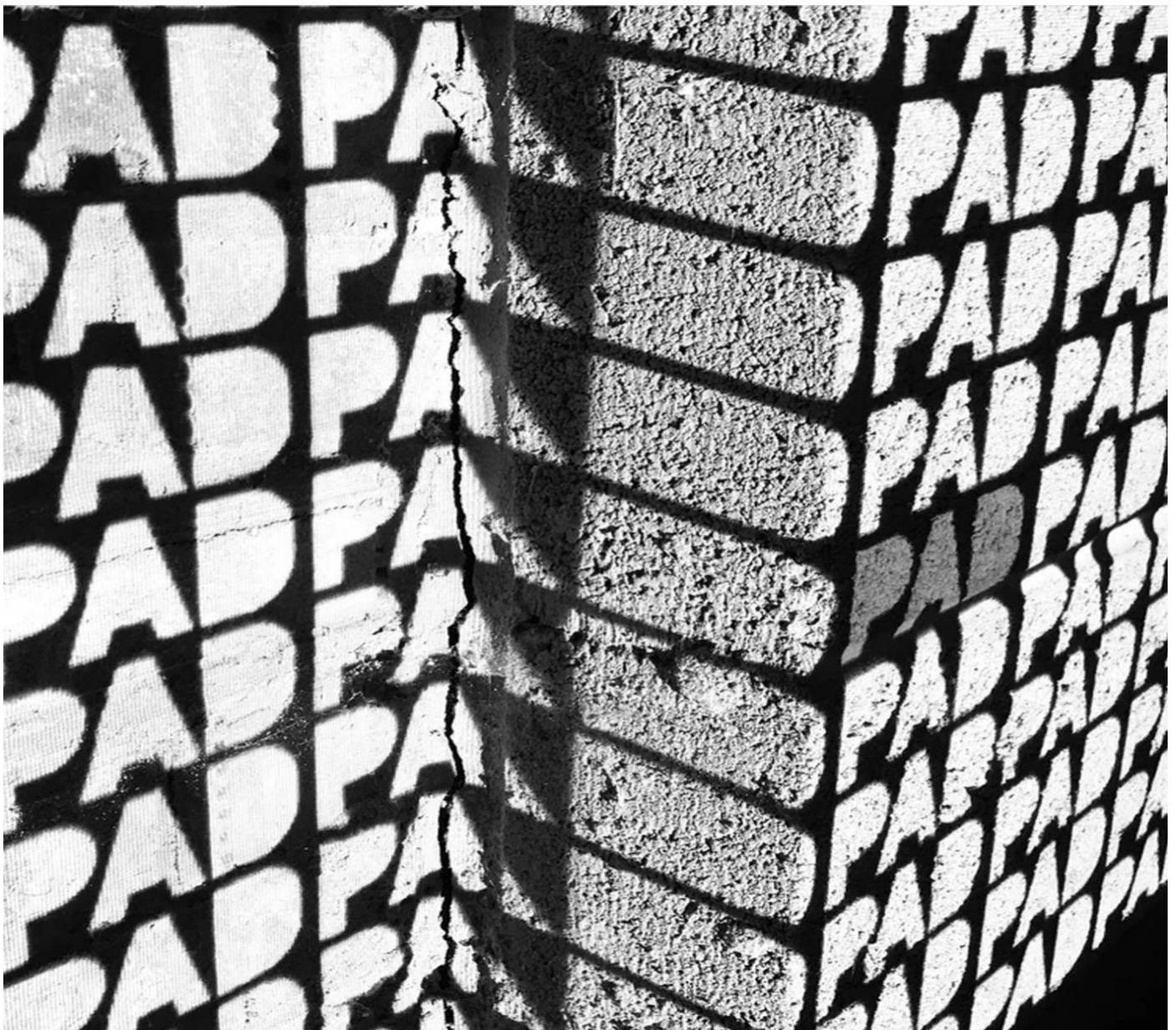


November 2022

Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's Aura in relation to 'A Short History of Photography', 1931

Fi McClurg, BA Hons Photographic Practice, Level 6



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Kleine Geschichte der Photographie, or 'Little History of Photography' in literal translation, was published between September and October 1931 in the German periodical 'Literarische Welt'. An early document in the development of photographic criticism, it forms an important part of Benjamin's body of work. Known for his Marxist influenced literary criticism, Benjamin was among the first to discover Kafka, and his essays on Baudelaire and Proust are considered landmarks (Kirsch, 2006, p35). Benjamin further developed ideas conceived in the 'Short History of Photography' in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin 1936).

A Short History of Photography, as the work is generally known in English, does not seek to chronicle the literal development of the photographic medium but rather charts the consequences of the development of photography on the concept of art.

But that is gainsaid by the fact that the development of reproductive techniques has been more or less paralleled by a change in the appreciation of great works of art. The latter can no longer be seen as the productions of individuals; they have become collective formations of such enormous dimensions that their assimilation is dependent precisely on their diminution (Benjamin, 1931 p19).

At the time of Benjamin's writing there was already the capacity to take 'instant' colour photographs. Benjamin believed that the mechanism of early photographic process, specifically portraiture photography, was entwined with the formation of 'aura', as defined by the author. He used the concept to describe the innate properties of an individual work of art. "*What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be*" (Benjamin 1931 p16).

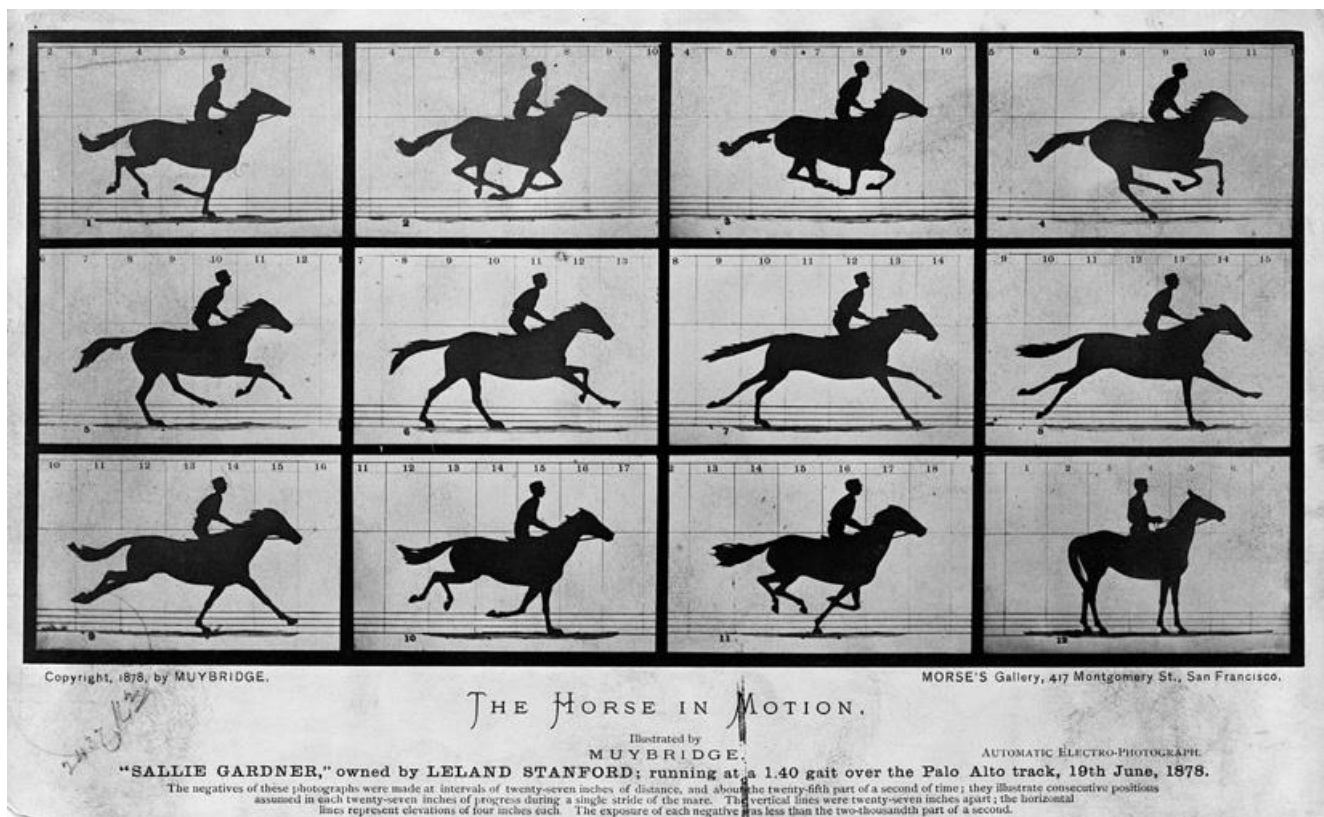
Early photography, specifically portrait photography, the genre which Benjamin focuses on mainly in his essay, was subject to both contemplation and criticism from the established art world. Photography was seen as a mechanical process, a triumph of man's technological skill surely, but could the output of a photographer be compared to the work of the painter? The latter studied their craft for years before attaining technical excellence, the former was the end user of a technological process that, in the eyes of photography's critics, did the work for them.

As the 19th Century journal, *The New Path*, states: '*Photography can never supersede Fine Art; and, no matter what greater perfection of development it may reach, it will still remain just as*

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imperative as ever that the artist should labor faithfully and patiently to record facts of natural aspects; this labor being the only way in which the artists language can be learned' (Anon 1865 p198). Photography was lauded as a useful tool, a mechanism to take a slice out of time. It was seen as valuable for industry, scientific research or reference, but in the view of many at the time, it could not be classed as art due to its inherent nature as the product of a mechanical process. A document of reality, however reliable or technically skilled, was not comparable to the expression of human ingenuity found in traditional art.

Benjamin himself complains of a “*chauvinist rag*”, the Leipzig City Advertiser, that refers to photography as “*the French art of the devil*” (Benjamin 1931 p1).



Eadweard Muybridge, The Horse in Motion, 1872

Eadweard Muybridge was a classic example of using photography to a hard and fast scientific end. He created a method of photographing a horse in full gallop to examine its gait for the first time. It is perhaps hardly surprising that several early portraiture photographers such as David Octavius Hill, began their lives as painters who used photographs as reference material for their traditional medium.

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Things developed so quickly that by 1840 most of the innumerable miniature painters had become professional photographers, at first merely as a side-line, then exclusively so. They were assisted by the experience of their original profession, but they owed their high level of photographic achievement to their technical rather than their artistic training (Benjamin, 1931 p13).



Robert Adamson, David Octavius Hill, 1855 (Calotype)

Costello (2005) argues that painting and sculpture had their origins in rituals, both magical and religious in origin, and suggests these underpin Benjamin's notion of aura '*Benjamin ties "aura", the name he gives to this unique kind of experience, back to art's origins in magic and ritual*' (ibid p11). Ancient Polynesians created this wood carving of their god of war, named Oro.

The Polynesians are excellent carvers, but they obviously did not find it essential to make this a correct representation of a man. Only its eyes and arms are roughly shown by this fibre braid, but once we notice them, this is enough to give the pole a look of uncanny power" (Gombrich, 1950 p46).

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Oro, Polynesian God of War (Museum of Mankind, London)

What then, is the *'magical value'* of photography that Walter Benjamin celebrates and later laments the absence of? Benjamin posited that photographic portraits are attractions on their own merit, quite apart from their oil and canvas counterparts.

Look at such a picture long enough and you realise how much the opposites come together yet again: the most exact technique can give its products a magical value which a painted picture can no longer have for us. However skilful the photographer, however carefully he poses his model, the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture" (Benjamin, 1931 p3).

This *'spark of chance, of the here and now'* is the aura that Benjamin is convinced marks early photographic portraiture. The ineffable mark of the human soul represented in the predetermined reaction of chemicals. How then, can it be defined in a tangible sense? The methodology of early portraiture was long and no doubt tedious for the subjects. Due to the long exposure times

required by early cameras, they were forced to sit or stand for periods of time that would be Recommended citation: McClurg, F (2022) *Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's Aura in relation to 'A Short History of Photography', 1931. PAD| Perspectives in Art and Design*. November 2022 5

physically uncomfortable and contrary to human spontaneity. Props such as tables and high-backed chairs were used to help hold 'natural' poses, and special devices to hold the body in the desired position were provided by the photographer.



Richard Beard, Jabez Hogg posing a sitter, 1843 (Daguerreotype)

This mechanical necessity led, perhaps quite unconsciously, to the introduction of a factor that allowed the 'spark of contingency', or aura, to rise above the mundane. The aura as a function or expression of time added an extra dimension to the otherwise levelled depiction of the subject. Benjamin believed that while the short exposure snapshot may allow the fixation of an instant in time, the long exposure, with the addition of the dimension of time, also allows the capture of the soul. *'The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his whole life in the moment rather than hurrying past it: during the considerable period of the exposure the subject as it were grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot'* (Benjamin 1931 p13). From a purely physical perspective, there is a specific look to some of the earliest portraits taken in this manner. A softness around the eyes caused by blinking during long exposures, and the absence of man's natural facial movements create an entirely different feel to the split-second slice of time that are seen in short exposures.

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Miss Elizabeth Rigby (David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, c1843 – 1846, Calotype)

This calotype shows the carefully posed, long exposure portrait typical of early photography. The sitter poses with downcast eyes, her arm propped up and supporting her head. This rather unnatural pose can be seen as both a planned composition by Hill, a trained artist before he became a photographer, but also a necessity due to the long exposure time required. The head is supported on the arm and the arm by the books, while Miss Rigby's other hand lays on her lap.



*William Edward Kilburn, Martha Emma Roper c1851,
(Daguerreotype)*

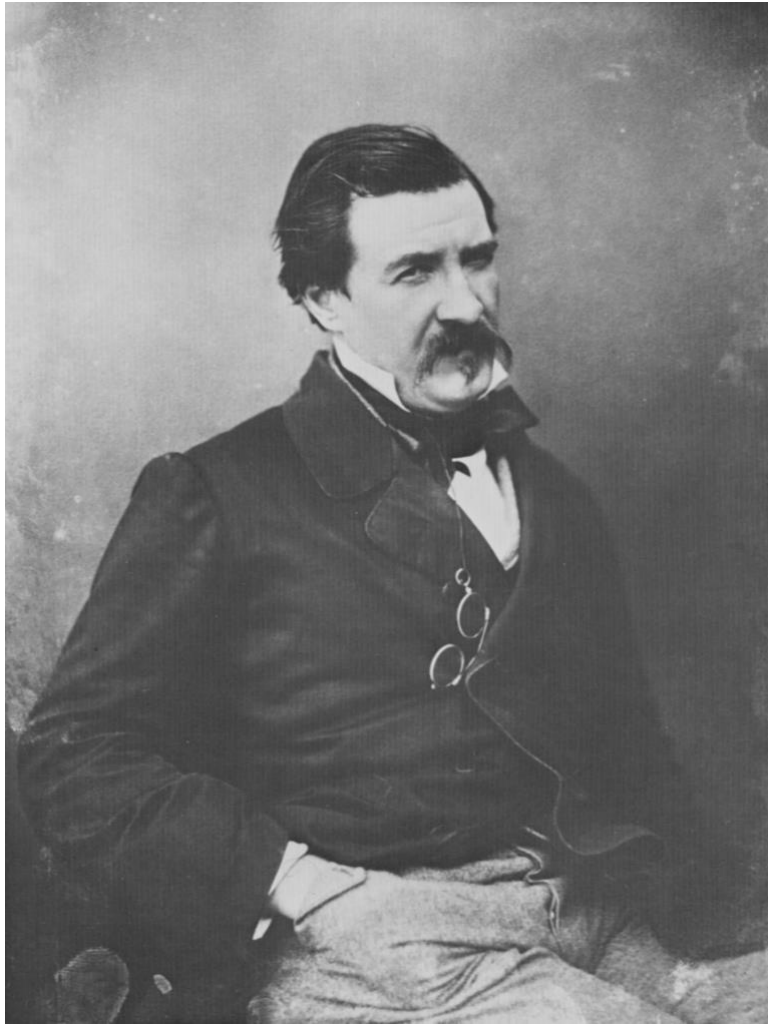
Daguerreotypes were presented in jewel-like folding cases, a one-off portrait made more unique by the framing. They were not merely depictions of the subjects but were made yet more desirable by their designation as objet d'art.



Rufus Choate (Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, c1851, Calotype)

The sitter is again propped up for the duration of the exposure. His off-camera gaze allows for the softness in the eyes caused by blinking to add to his dignity rather than blur the photograph in any significant way.

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*Jules Champfleury (Gaspard-Felix Tournachon (Nadar),
c1865, Calotype)*

By the 1860s photography had advanced to the point where exposure times were much faster and a change in facial expression could be captured. The necessity of the fixed moment of elongated time also fixes the subject specifically into place and creates an immersion in the moment. This combination of time and space concentrated into a single portrait results in a sense of continuity of self, a feature shared with the great artwork of the past that photography had historically been seen as inferior to.

Benjamin's *'peculiar web'* made solid and fixed. But what of the photographers themselves? Benjamin's theory of aura as relates to the photographic process is inextricably linked to the mechanical medium of the art. If this was the entirety of the concept then there would be no distinction between the photographers that Benjamin most admired, such as David Octavius Hill, Robert Adamson, Eugene Atget and August Sander and anyone who had the money to buy a camera. Benjamin clearly believed in the innate talent of the photographers, many of whom had learned their craft as painters before switching to photography.

And yet the decisive thing about photography is the relationship of the photographer to his technique. Camille Recht catches it by an attractive comparison: 'The violinist', he says, 'has first to create his note, to search for and find it with lightning speed; the pianist strikes the keys and produces a sound. Both painter and photographer use an instrument. The painter's drawing and colouring corresponds to the violinist's forming of his notes; the photographer like the pianist is given an apparatus in advance which is subject to much more restrictive laws than those imposed on the violinist (Benjamin 1931 p15).

By 1931 Benjamin was already mourning a lost concept. *'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'* (Duttlinger 2008 p9). Benjamin regards the *'emancipation of object from aura'* as the regrettable progression to a new age of artistic expression. He believed that the era of mass commercialisation and reproduction was the end of the auratic photograph. The unique position of a work of art in time and space was usurped by it becoming accessible to all.

And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. The prizing of the object from its shell, the destruction of its aura is the mark that the sense of the sameness of things in the world has grown to such an extent that by means of reproduction even the unique is made to yield up its uniqueness (Benjamin 1931 p17).

Although Benjamin's theory of aura was to fluctuate throughout his career, in the *The Short History of Photography* it can be distilled down to two concepts. Firstly aura, as seen in early photographic portraiture, is related to the aura of paintings, i.e. it is the distillation of the area of time and space

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occupied by the artwork, as interpreted by the viewer. Secondly, aura is waning. Newer photographs do not possess this intrinsic quality through their accessibility and reproducibility. Photography has been reduced to the “snapshot” and propagated to the world through the means of mass communication. Objects without aura lose not only their authenticity but also their authority.

Benjamin regarded this as a degradation of art, a view that is perhaps contrary to his Marxist ideals. In 1931, this new experience of mass consumerism would seem to follow the precepts of Marxism and could greatly benefit the new world order that Marx promotes. Conversely, it could also be a tool in the hands of Marxism’s enemies, namely the rise of fascist regimes throughout the thirties. Benjamin, as a German Jew, would have been sensitive to such possibilities. Art and photography were gaining a new role in modern life. Benjamin bemoans both the lack of general skill in “reading” a photograph and the lack of a modern photographer providing anything to read. He predicted that soon captions would be required alongside an image to tell the public what it was about, and thus foretold the rise of photo essay magazines such as *Life* and *Picture Post*.

Ultimately the world moved on and away from this specific interpretation of the intrinsic value of a piece of art. As John Berger wrote over forty years later in response to Benjamin’s theories, ‘*The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images*’ (Berger 1972 p33). While Benjamin’s views are still valid, they are enveloped by a longing for a past that was already over by the time of his birth, and for a time when art held a different role. He makes not only a ‘little’ history of photography, but a valuable record of the contemporary reactions to its development.

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