
THE LOSS OF AURA IN EDUCATION

Dan Mamlok
Miami University

The allegory of the cave illustrates one of the central problems in philosophy: the gap between reality as it appears to be and the reality in itself.¹ The allegory of prisoners in the cave, as opposed to being free out of the cave, symbolizes the gap between illusion and truth—between the thing and the thing in itself. The moment of getting out of the cave is an educative act, a unique moment of illumination that requires one's action toward awareness. Benjamin interprets the unique moment of experience as *aura*.² In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin elucidates the disappearance of aura as a result of technological progress that entails social reproduction. His analysis focuses on the sociological and cultural aspects of the changes in human experience that are a result of technological and socio-economical processes.³

Since Benjamin's essay, the influence of technology⁴ has increased, becoming an integral part of our lives. While Benjamin portrayed the influences of the revolution of the camera on human perception, we currently live in a cyber-world in which individuals, at least in the western world, have become increasingly more dependent on digital technology. It is suggested that digital technology has changed the way learners perceive information—the unique moment of appreciating an experience is missed. Rather, technology offers a readymade formula for learning that is based on standardized methods. In the first part of this paper, I will draw on Walter Benjamin's notion of “aura,” and discuss the relationship between aura and education. Then I will elaborate on the notion of reproduction by following Jean Baudrillard's concept of “simulacra.” Finally, I will examine the ramifications of globalization and consumerism on knowledge reproduction in a simulated world, following Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of globalization. My intent is to argue that the decay of *aura* in education in a simulated globalized world may lead to two opposite trajectories: indoctrination or social emancipation.

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (London: W. Heinemann, 1930), 119–233.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (1936; repr., Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008), 20–21. Though Benjamin's analysis focuses mainly on the work of art, my intention is to expand the meaning of the term in regard to the uniqueness of any epistemological activity.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Technology in this essay refers mainly to digital technology (computers, tablets, smart-phones, Web, and mass media).

THE LOSS OF AURA

Walter Benjamin is interested in the influences of technological developments on human experience. His exploration focuses mainly on the work of art, but his conclusions are broader than the relationships between the art piece and the beholder. Technological innovations such as the camera, film, and the video modified human perception; the initial excitement of the world was replaced by reproduction of objects:

The core is its authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition.⁵

Technological reproduction standardizes objects and blurs their authenticity and uniqueness. For instance, the camera's lens may expose aspects that the human eye cannot see. In addition, pictures can be manipulated: one may watch a beautiful picture of the Grand Canyon that was graphically edited. The viewer, however, may think that s/he looks at the Grand Canyon (as is), but s/he is not necessarily aware of the filters that have been added to the picture. Moreover, technological reproduction detaches one from the actual experience and from his/her sense data: viewing a picture involves only the sense of sight, while all other senses that are involved in human experience are excluded. As a result of technological reproduction one can watch high quality pictures and videos. Yet what is missed is the unique epistemological experience. The best video recording of a symphony cannot replace the drama in a concert hall; the most beautiful picture of a sunset cannot replace the smell of the sea, the feeling of the sand, and the sounds of the waves.

Benjamin argues that before the era of technological reproduction, coming in contact with artwork used to be an almost religious ritual that occurred within a certain domain (e.g., churches, museums), that required distance between the artwork and the viewer. Nevertheless, the reproduction of artworks to many copies has made all works of art available and has replaced *authenticity* with *sameness*—reproduction of objects that obscures the nuances between the origin and its replication.⁶

Concerning education, I argue that the decay of aura is related to new modes of perception in times of technological reproduction. While digital technology enables one to acquire all kinds of information instantly, the

⁵ Benjamin, *Work of Art*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

authentic discovery has been replaced with standard mechanisms. Examples could be found in many disciplines of education, from arts to science. Music lessons can include audio recordings. This is in many aspects an advantage for the young learner: he/she can listen to music compositions in depth, to become familiar with their themes, to increase awareness of certain nuances that are not recognized by first listening, comparing different performances of the same piece and more. Nevertheless, absent from this experience is the unique moment that occurs only in a concert hall, where a sensitive relationship between the performer/s and the audience is palpable in a one-time performance. The experience of the audience in a live performance is very intimate, on the one hand. On the other hand, this experience is also superficial, and follows rigid behavioral conventions that distance the audience from the performer. Thus, it is not suggested that the experience of listening to concert recordings or contemplating artwork copies is inferior to the unique experience of a concert, but it is rather suggested that the technological reproduction standardizes human experience and hence the learning experience. Let me elaborate on this idea in the next paragraph.

Aura occurs in a concrete moment of a subject-object meeting, while the reproduction of an object removes the corona from the experience. It gives the subject an illusion of getting closer to the object, but at the same time alienates him/her from the authentic experience. The camera replaces the audience, or the human eyes, and changes the subject-object relationships. The distance from the object inhibits the active contemplation that is necessary in the theatre, at the concert hall, and at the museum. As a result, the critical point of view has decayed.⁷ In this sense, it is noteworthy to mention the critique of Horkheimer and Adorno on the culture industry: “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together.”⁸ In general, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that there are no response mechanisms to the by-products of culture industry that are manipulated by corporations. In addition, technology becomes inherent in a consumer culture, conducted by instrumental reasoning. The critique is not against technology in itself, but against the social conditions that enable the colonization of technology as an integral part of a consumerist life. Since culture industry is motivated by the maximization of corporate profits, the focus of the culture industry is on reproducing the simple, common, and comfortable rather than the complex and controversial. While the complex opens multiple modes of thinking, the simple is deceptive; it gives one a sense that s/he is experiencing a new thing, but in fact it is a reproduction of the same commodity. The sameness in culture industry influences all political and social domains of life:

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (1947; repr., Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

“All are fungible, mere specimens. As individuals they are absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness, and are made aware of this as soon as time deprives them of their sameness.”⁹

I argue that the ramifications of culture industry on learners are significant. In a society that is driven by trade, instrumental goals, such as tactics to succeed on a standardized test, have colonized education. In other words, education is treated as one more commodity in a consumerist society. This point leads me to discuss how representation of knowledge in the age of reproduction is elusive and may lead to indoctrination. For this purpose I will employ Baudrillard’s notion of Simulacra.

THE AGE OF SIMULATION

In Peter Weir’s successful film, *The Truman Show*,¹⁰ Truman Burbank, the star of a reality show, has been living in a mega studio since his birth. He spends his fictional life in a lovely American town. His “reality” may symbolize the American dream: nice house, pretty wife, stable job, and a pleasant young man who greets everybody in the same daily clichés—“In case I don’t see you, good afternoon, good evening, and good night.”¹¹ Truman’s existence turns upside down when he realizes that he has lived in a fake world that only symbolizes the world outside. A chain of strange events had occurred as a result of the show’s production errors (such as a cinema spotlight that fell from the sky) revealing the false narrative of his life. The last scene of the film, when Truman sails toward the end of the studio and tears the scenery, can be interpreted as a moment of illumination.¹²

The world of Truman exists in the reality of “Simulacra,” a reality that is represented by simulations, but beyond its simulations holds no more connection between the “reality” and the world.¹³ The simulacra world is distorted, masked, and manipulated. According to Baudrillard there are four stages of distorting the world’s representation:

It is a reflection of a profound reality;
It masks and denatures a profound reality;
It makes the absence of a profound reality;
It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., 117.

¹⁰ *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir (1998; DVD, Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2005).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Plato, *The Republic*.

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Faria Glazer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

Each stage represents a level of appearance: While the image at the first stage is clear, there is an escalation of distortion on each level that finally becomes fully distorted—*simulacrum*. In a world of simulacra the relationship between the object of origin and the simulated object is vague. Thus, “illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.”¹⁵ Even the material production has become a simulation of the real thing. Since objects have different levels of simulation, it has become hard to define a straight line between the real and the simulation.¹⁶

Representation in a simulated world is illusive. Television produces illusions, and even the documentary film provides the audience with an illusion of reality. For instance, Baudrillard points out that the producer’s triumph of the documentary series “Loud Family” is that “they lived as if we were not there.”¹⁷ The absurd is in the illusion: When millions of people watch you, how could one live as s/he were not there? This is part of the hyperreality world. It is no longer the age of absolute power of the panopticon system, but a manipulative reality “of the laser that touches and pierces, of computer cards that retain your preferred sequences, of the genetic code that controls your combination, of cells that inform your sensory universe.”¹⁸ Thus, TV information represents a filtered reality that is located within the range of the four stages of simulacra: it manipulates one’s perception, knowledge, and preferences. While Benjamin describes the changing relationships between the subject and the object,¹⁹ Baudrillard elaborates on this notion and argues that the inherent distance between the subject and the object has vanished.²⁰ The erasure of separation and the “zoom in” gaze does not allow inquiry for truth, but rather a constant reproduction of simulations. This insight is crucial when thinking about perception and knowledge, since the whole discourse of meaning becomes insignificant.

Baudrillard argues that as we acquire more information, we get less meaning. Instead of creating meaning, the media simulates an overwhelming amount of information. The arrangement of contents manipulates and tempts rather than informs, thus devouring the meaning: “Beyond meaning, there is the fascination that results from the neutralization and the implosion of meaning. Beyond the horizon of the social, there are the masses, which result from the neutralization and the implosion of the social.”²¹ The culture of the mass media

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27–28. The “Loud Family” was a TV experiment that documented in 1971 “seven months of uninterrupted shooting, three hundreds hours of nonstop broadcasting, without a script or a screen play, the odyssey of a family, its dramas, its joys, its unexpected events, nonstop.”

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁹ Benjamin, *Work of Art*.

²⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

²¹ Ibid., 83.

is determined by the trends, fashions, and commercial market, and functions as a commodity. The separation between art and entertainment is as nebulous as the distinction between technology and its function.²²

Knowledge in the era of simulation may be associated with fast and technical responses. Television game shows demonstrate this point. The participants on game shows are required to answer questions, asked by computers demanding an answer within a limited time. The winner is not the smartest or the most intellectual gamer, but the one who most expediently responds to the trivia questions. Knowledge, in this case is not a prompt for intellectual discourse, but rather for a modern ceremony of communication: “Communication is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium, but through a technical one.”²³ Thus, mass media excludes the bounded relation of culture and knowledge. In a society that glorifies instantaneously simulated knowledge it is not surprising that rather than developing the appreciation for experience, education and knowledge are perceived mainly as instrumental tools.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin warns us that the decay of the aura and the transition of human experience from aesthetic to politic can lead to the aesthetization of politics. In other words, Benjamin proposes that the society stands in danger of utilizing the aesthetic in order to disguise practices of indoctrination.²⁴ Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra demonstrates the manipulations of mass media, and the ways it distorts knowledge and illusion. I argue that globalization and consumerism have entailed replacing appreciation for experience with technical devices. In this sense, Bauman’s analysis of globalization illuminates some aspects of knowledge in a connected world.

KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE IN A LIQUID WORLD

While Baudrillard analyzes the appearance of the world of simulations,²⁵ Bauman redefines the notion of culture in a *globalized* and *liquid* world.²⁶ The concept of borders in a globalized world has changed; distance is no longer a significant factor. The concept of borders today can be understood more as a social rather than natural construction. Digital technology enables individuals to communicate easily with people in countries around the world. In the past, travelling from one place to another was a complex process that included transition between the *common* and the *unknown*, *here* and *there*, and

²² Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage, 1998).

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴ Benjamin developed this notion by analyzing fascism.

²⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

²⁶ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Condition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011).

between *one's culture* to a *different culture*.²⁷ The invention of the Internet has abolished the notion of “transition,” since information is no longer dependent upon physical bodies to transmit information from one place to another. In addition, the velocity of transferring information has blurred distances. A message that once took weeks to deliver can be transferred promptly via email or text message. The influence of this informational revolution has a great impact on sociocultural aspects. Whereas the concept of communities in the past was based on limited proximity (where people could communicate with each other), in times of digital technology, people have a variety of sources from which to gain knowledge that are not limited to geographic borders. Furthermore, in traditional societies, social commitment required common knowledge, history, and acceptance of communities. Globalized culture is dependent upon fast communication and on the ability to forget history and common knowledge. Thus, Bauman argues that excessive communication damages the memory rather than stabilizing it.²⁸

Globalization has changed social life structures and mundane rituals. For instance, once upon a time the act of washing laundry was a social event that has been replaced by automatic machines; discussions that once took place in the town square now occur in an ex-territory without borders (weblogs, chats, wiki, talkbacks). In other words, public spaces used to be a vivid arena, where people communicated with each other. These spaces were important for creating cultural norms. The modern market that is located in large malls could potentially be a new community's meeting point. However, the inherent rationality of shopping malls is not social, but economical: malls are domains that consistently try to entertain and tempt visitors. The disappearance of physical public spaces has numerous ethical implications. Human experience becomes dependent on ex-territorial authorities, which have no connection to one's culture and do not allow for authentic communication. Rather, one's experience is dominated by the free market and obsessive consumerism.²⁹ Elaborating on this notion of replacing social life with automatic machines, one may connect to the structure of e-learning methods. Social life occurs not only in the “real world” but also in cyberspace—for instance, young people use social media platforms to communicate on a daily basis, such as Facebook and Twitter. These mass media forums, like shopping malls, are in many cases realms of consumerism and instant information. While there are indeed advantages in new technologies, we should be cautious about the effect of consumerism on youth and its social ramifications. In what follows I will elaborate on some aspects of consumerism and its relation to the loss of aura, reproduction, and indoctrination.

As previously mentioned, Bauman argues that we live in a society in which consuming has become an integral part of daily life. He asks “whether

²⁷ Bauman, *Globalization*, 77–79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18–26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77–85.

one needs to consume in order to live or whether one lives so that one can consume."³⁰ In a consumerist society, people are not deeply committed to anything but to the inherent economic principle of obsessive shopping. The satisfaction of the consuming act is instantaneous, as there is no place for suspension or reflection in a continuous race from one desire to another. Thus, culture today has no Archimedean point; it changes all the time and is dominated by trend, or in Bauman's words:

If there is anything in relation to which today's culture plays the role of homeostat, it is not the conservation of the current state, but the overwhelming demand for constant change (although, as distinct from the phase of the enlightenment, change without direction, or in direction not established in advance). One might say that it serves not so much the stratifications and divisions of society, as the turnover-oriented consumer market.³¹

Following Horkheimer and Adorno,³² Bauman unpacks the implication of a consumerist society. On the one hand, the market converts human values to *production and exchange*. On the other hand, so-called *freedom of choice* has increased. It appears that there is no more need for art connoisseurs since everyone knows what s/he prefers. Everyone can influence TV and radio broadcast programs that try to cater to all tastes.³³ Digital technology today offers a vast variety of art. For example, one can find on websites, like YouTube, music from any genre, style, period, etc. The listener can comment on the video/music no matter his/her knowledge on the field and vote with a click of the "like" or "dislike" button. Not only has culture's hierarchy been broken, but also culture has become one more commodity in a consumerist society. If culture once had an educative role by molding one's identity, then "the culture of liquid modernity has no 'populace' to enlighten and ennoble; it does, however, have clients to seduce."³⁴

The shift from a productive society to a consumerist society requires one to make choices. In a world in which happiness is determined by materialistic delectations, ontological and ethical questions are raised. Nevertheless, Bauman suggests that in a liquid world, the hope of happiness, moral actions, and knowledge is dependent on individuals. Since there are no more authorities, people should be the artists of their lives.³⁵ Similar to artists, people have to organize their lives in a world in which boundaries, limits, and

³⁰ Bauman, *Globalization*, 80-81.

³¹ Bauman, *Culture*, 13.

³² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

³³ Bauman, *Culture*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

identities are not clear. Unlike the absolute regimes of the 19th century, which tried to educate people to fit a specific culture, today one has a variety of options. It is a world that is defined by Bauman as “liquid.” How does one organize life? Bauman suggests that within the structures of a consumerist society, there is freedom of choice that enables one to choose based on moral emancipation: “Ethics is not stronger or ‘more real’ than existence; it is only better. Taking responsibility for my responsibility is the outcome of pursuing that ‘better’—of a pursuit that may or may not be undertaken.”³⁶

Bauman emphasizes the fine line between surrendering to a bulimic consumerist culture and overpowering it.³⁷ Unlike the modern ethos of a categorical imperative, the individual in a liquid modern era has his/her own moral responsibility (and interest) to shape his/her life. One can wonder if the current social and economic conditions enable one to become the artist of his/her life. If, as Bauman argues, the world has become liquid, and people are motivated mainly by consumerism, then the idea of moral emancipation is reserved, if available at all, for very few people. Moral responsibility requires one to develop his/her critical senses and autonomous thinking.

In this sense, education may lead to different trajectories. The first, as Benjamin suggested, may lead to indoctrination of the mass, by utilizing practices of standardization. However, education may have the potential to encourage young people to shape their lives as artwork, to construct new personalities that are not tied to dogmas, to create authentic meaning for life. It requires educators to focus on different epistemologies that would enable preparing young people to navigate and shape their lives in a liquid world. Being an artist of one’s life in a connected world requires action, dedication, and imagination. Education in this sense is similar to love: “Love is not something that can be found; not an object trouvé or a ‘ready-made.’ It is something that always needs to be made anew and remade daily, hourly; constantly resuscitated, reaffirmed, attended to and cared on,”³⁸ In other words, invigorating education by adopting an active and heuristic approach, counter to ready-made structures, might enable students to appreciate learning experiences; even in a globalized liquid world.

CONCLUSION

Human experience has dramatically changed as a result of technological developments. While Benjamin focuses on the replacement of the aura with reproductive objects,³⁹ Baudrillard argues that we live in a hyperreality-simulated world, where the distinction between the authentic and the illusion is tenuous.⁴⁰ Bauman elucidates the meanings of living in a

³⁶ Ibid., 124.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 132.

³⁹ Benjamin, *Work of Art*.

⁴⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

globalized and *liquid* world.⁴¹ Although they use different approaches, each of the thinkers above emphasizes the influences of a consumerist society and the fact that in a technological world, the reproduction, the Simulacra, and globalization have changed the notion of knowledge. Knowledge has no absolute authorities, it is diverse and lacking of hierarchies, and the old epistemological questions regarding the gap between truth and illusion may be more relevant than ever.

My claim is that the discrepancy between truth and illusion is not merely an epistemological question nor aesthetical. Rather, the reproduction of knowledge in a simulated globalized world comprises ethical dimensions that lead to indoctrination and perpetuation of the social status quo. Nevertheless, it is suggested that education can serve as an emancipatory realm that extends beyond consumerism and standardization, enabling students to develop appreciation for experience. In this sense, it would be proper to end with Bauman's statement:

The ancients probably suspected as much but, guided by the principle *dum spiro, spero* (as long as I breathe, I hope), they suggested that without hard work, life would offer nothing to make worthwhile. Two millennia later, the suggestion seems to have lost none of its topicality.⁴²

⁴¹ Bauman, *Globalization*.

⁴² Bauman, *Art of Life*, 133.
