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The Work of Reproduction in the Age of Digital Art: The Role of 'Aura' in the Revitalisation of Vinyl Records and Cassettes

Research Article

William E. Tsitsos[1,*], R. Saylor Breckenridge[2]

[1]*Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice, Towson University, USA*
[2]*Department of Sociology, Wake Forest University, USA*

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Abstract: We explain recent popularity in vinyl records by reframing Walter Benjamin's notion of 'aura' in terms of social forces such as alienation and cultural capital. Where he pays attention to specific artefacts' mechanical reproducibility as a way of assessing their aura, we consider how *mediums* themselves broadly possess variable levels of aura inversely related to their ability to be mechanically reproduced by consumers. The more easily consumers can reproduce a medium, the less aura it possesses.

Keywords: *Aura • vinyl records • audio cassettes • Walter Benjamin*

Introduction

Walter Benjamin's influence on the study of culture continues to be strong and his concept of 'aura' is still invoked, decades after being presented in his 1936 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Despite its enduring influence, his conceptualisation of aura is somewhat nebulous and difficult to operationalise. In this article, we compare examples of musical mediums, the material formats through which they are distributed, such as vinyl records, cassettes or digital files, to establish a more defined and functionally usable version of this concept. We propose that aura pertains to specific relationships between producers, artists and consumers that can be identified and measured. Our work here focuses on medium, not content: we are attentive to the modality of art, not to the nature of any particular artefact – specifically as a case, we are examining the auratic nature of vinyl records (and cassettes) as distinct from other formats by which music is consumed, but are not considering any particular artist, album or song.

Our contention is that the inability of people to physically produce or reproduce a medium increases the auratic value of that medium. For our case, the difficulty typical consumers have in actually producing vinyl records themselves (e.g. pressing the liquid vinyl into a grooved disc that contains a spiralling scratch that can be turned into audible sound with the use of precise equipment) will mean that there is a persistent aura possessed by the medium. Similarly, while cassettes were at one time the preeminent reproducible medium of recorded music by home consumers, the systemic exclusion and elimination of cassette reproduction capabilities from home stereos in the 21st century has contributed to a rise in aura attached to the cassette medium. And alternately, the immediate

* *E-mail: wtsitsos@towson.edu*

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facility to reproduce digital files reduces their auratic qualities. In addition to locating aura in relation to technological reproducibility, we also contend that aura is a form of legitimacy, a sort of taken-for-grantedness, as described by Schoon (2022), and we situate aura in relation to Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural and symbolic capital.

Beginning in the last quarter of the 20th Century, the relative rates of use of the common mediums through which music is reproduced and consumed—vinyl records, cassettes, compact discs, privately owned files and streamed files—began to rapidly change. Vinyl records were virtually the only available and consumed medium for recorded music from the inception of the 10-inch, 78 revolutions-per-minute disc around the turn of the 20th Century, through the introduction of 12- and 7-inch records in the 1940s, all the way until cassette tapes took a small share of the market in the 1970s. Both of these formats were eclipsed in popularity by CDs in the 1990s. By the turn of the 21st Century, vinyl and cassettes had fallen from the radar of consumers almost completely, CDs were in steep decline as musical medium of interest, and digital files were dominating the market either via private ownership or, by the 2010s, via digital streaming services (Recording Industry Association of America 2021). We have limited our discussion here to mediums that are still produced. As a result, eight track tapes, such as wax cylinders, are not included in our discussion.

Curiously, and importantly for our formalisation of the notion of aura, complementing the domination of digital music formats in the second decade of the 21st Century has been a resurgence in the sales of vinyl records and, to a lesser degree, cassettes. These formats have re-entered both the marketplace and popular culture with a steady increase in legitimacy as a medium through which to consume music. Vinyl and cassette sales had reached their nadir in the US in the early 2000s, with fewer than 1 million vinyl LP/EPs sold in 2006 and approximately 100,000 sales of cassettes in 2008, after which the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) stopped tracking cassette sales altogether (Recording Industry Association of America 2021). However, since the end of the second decade of the 21st Century, vinyl sales have seen a resurgence, as shown in Figure 1. Similarly, Nielsen Music reported that cassette sales increased by 23% in the US in 2018, after increasing by 35% in 2017 (Yoo 2019). More recently in the US, "[s]ales of cassettes nearly doubled from 173,000 in 2020 to 343,000 in 2021" (Bomey 2022). While cassettes still comprise a lesser portion of the market, this resurgence is noteworthy.

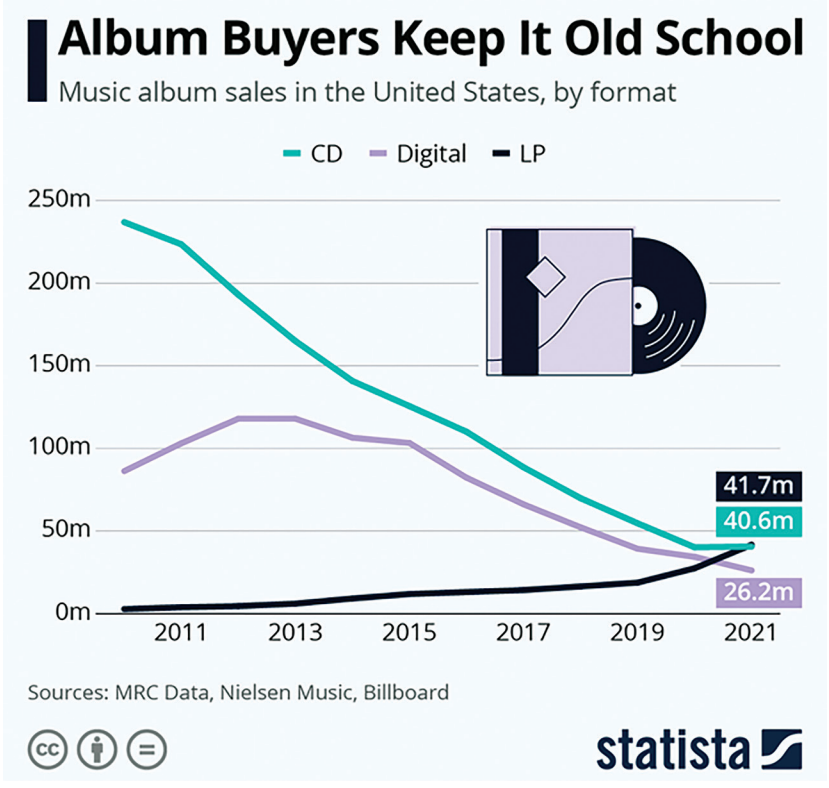


Figure 1. Music album sales in the United States, by format 2011-2021. https://www.statista.com/chart/26583/music-album-sales-in-the-united-states-by-format/

Why have vinyl and cassette formats experienced this resurgence? Explanations for this growth have focussed on vinyl's sound quality (Richardson 2013) and social prestige characteristics afforded consumers (Winters 2016), and cassettes' linkage to subcultural status (Baldwin 2015). These factors ostensibly offset the higher cost, additional equipment and lack of portability that serve as ongoing inhibitors to the use of these media formats in the current landscape of music consumption. We move away from these more economic and rational-choice explanations to develop a specifically relational, sociological mechanism by which to explain this rise in consumption of vinyl and cassettes. We propose that Walter Benjamin's concept of aura can be formalised to capture a quality of the relationship between the art-as-product (i.e. the medium by which music is delivered) and consumers that explains why these formats may be increasingly desirable, independent of any distinction in the technical sound quality or personal status attained by identifying as a consumer. In the process, we heed Emirbayer's call for a turn towards relational sociology as a framework for repositioning the social relationship between people and artefacts from one that is a static link between the consumer of art and the reward it may provide to one that is based on "dynamic, unfolding relations" (1997: 281). We contend that this dynamism, this varying aura, can be illustrated in the relationships between actors and the different mediums through which music can be consumed.

In his 1936 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin argues that the ability to mass produce identical versions of artworks, such as films and photographs, threatens certain, longstanding characteristics of art. One such change is the loss of an artwork's 'aura'. The most basic definition of this term provided by Benjamin is that it describes "[an artwork's] unique existence in the place where it is at this moment" (2008: 5, trans. Underwood). So, for example, whereas an original painting possesses an aura by virtue of its singular presence, images of the painting mechanically reproduced on millions of identical postcards possess less aura, and the digital version of the image which is widely distributed has even less. If we were to think of aura in terms of supply and demand, then aura would seem to be a product of scarcity. Benjamin, however, suggests that scarcity is only part of aura. He draws a parallel between aura and "genuineness" (2008: 5, trans. Underwood), which a previous translator termed "authenticity" (1955: 223, trans. Zohn). However linguistically useful these analogous terms might be, using them as the core definitional concept of 'aura' does not make it much easier to understand, let alone measure.

In his article, 'Aura, Self and Aesthetic Experience', Marshall Battani develops the idea of aura in a sociologically useful direction. Battani asserts, "The idea of aura as it is developed most famously by Walter Benjamin is, frankly, confusing" (2011: 6). Benjamin writes that mechanical reproduction "removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition" (2008: 7, trans. Underwood), with 'tradition' usually reflecting ritual (often religious). Battani explains, "Originally art objects were dependent on ritual and were thus only ever fleetingly available" (2011: 6). In these cases, aura is a characteristic of the ritualised relationship between the actor and the artefact. Battani continues, "In the modern era of autonomous (i.e., mechanically reproduced) art, objects were freed from their 'parasitical dependence' on ritual and their literal uniqueness, their status as originals enshrined in museums, imbued them with an appearance of distance" (2011: 6). Here we see Battani making a connection between the existence of aura and (the appearance of) 'distance' from an artwork. He elaborates by stating that "what is clear from his [Benjamin's] various descriptions of the phenomenon is that aura is experienced as a collapse of the distinction between proximity and distance" (2011: 6). Standing before a painting such as the 'Mona Lisa', for example, a viewer senses the aura of the work, despite the auratic 'distance' created by its uniqueness. For Battani, 'distance' symbolises "the unobtainable...the unintelligible...the unknowable" (2011: 11), and the aura of an artwork makes this all knowable.

Battani's assessment of the nature of aura moves on towards the subjective "understanding of aesthetic experience" (2011: 12). This is where we diverge from Battani and invoke a relational, sociological perspective. We contend that there are broader structural factors that can help explain Benjamin's concept of aura. Rather than venturing into the realm of aesthetics or cognition, we add insight from sociological theory in order to ground Battani's framing within a more concrete social construction.

The concept of distance is central to our development of the concept of aura and its usefulness as an explanation for the resurgence of vinyl record sales as a component of the landscape of music consumption. As stated above, Benjamin (via Battani) credits aura with collapsing the distinction between proximity and distance. Distance is that which describes something as foreign and separated—perhaps even in actual physical distance—from an audience, while proximity describes a condition where something is close and controlled and 'belongs' to an audience, perhaps in an everyday casual manner. 'Aura', then, is that character which adds a closeness, an intimacy, to something

that might otherwise appear unobtainable or unique and separated from the audience – it 'collapses' proximity and distance into a condition of special, meaningful, comprehension. Benjamin himself writes that mechanical reproduction of artworks allows "the reproduction to come closer to whatever situation the person apprehending it [the artwork] is in" (2008: 7, trans. Underwood). Compared with Battani's, this closeness sounds more literal than metaphorical, such as bringing the 'Mona Lisa' from Paris to your home (albeit in postcard form). Later, Benjamin discusses the aura of 'natural objects', which he describes as "a unique manifestation of a remoteness, however close it may be" (2008: 9, trans. Underwood). This sense of remoteness does sound more metaphorical (or poetic) than literal. Regardless, it is clear that, for Benjamin, distance is a key component of aura. 'Distance' as we develop it adds a relational context that links to Marxian notions of alienated labour.

We present a technique of understanding the concept of aura by engaging with and developing the concept of distance referenced by Battani and Benjamin. In discussing works of art, Battani and Benjamin both conceptualise distance as being between the artwork and the audience. We develop this idea by focussing on the medium by which music is recorded: the more difficult it is to recreate that medium, the more distant it is from the audience. Technological developments across the last century have made it possible for people who would previously be considered solely part of a live audience in the ritualised space of a museum or performance hall to mechanically (or, more often in the 21st century, digitally) reproduce artworks themselves. In the realm of recorded music, cassette decks allow(ed) listeners to record music from the radio, vinyl records or other mediums; then compact disc burners allow(ed) listeners to copy CDs; and in the current century listeners can produce digital copies of recorded music and then identically copy those digital music files. We propose that the range of musical mediums (vinyl records, audiocassettes, compact discs and digital files) has existed historically in various levels of distance from music fans.

While Battani adds some quality of scale to his description of aura, we are interested in moving further beyond considering 'aura' as a binary, all or none, characteristic of an artefact. Discussions of the concept of aura, whether journalistic (cites) or academic (Bartmanski & Woodward 2015b), usually treat aura as a characteristic that an object can either possess or not possess. Furthermore, in these discussions, whether or not an object possesses aura is a consequence of traits of the object itself. For Benjamin, the main relevant trait is how the object was produced. What we are doing here is trying to move away from understanding aura as a characteristic embedded within an object and towards an emphasis on the relationships that people have with those objects – we will claim that it is not that vinyl records themselves have aura, but the relationship a person has with a vinyl record contains aura. Specifically, the main focus for us is the ability of an object to be mechanically reproduced by consumers. The more easily the audience themselves can reproduce a medium, the less aura it possesses. While this might resemble a characteristic of an object itself, the ability for an object to be mechanically reproduced is dependent on external factors, especially access to the technology of reproduction and the skillsets possessed by audience members to reproduce objects.

By focussing on the relationship between objects and the broader society, we align ourselves with Emirbayer's (1997) call for relational sociology. Emirbayer cites the work of Margaret Somers, who asserts that "concepts cannot be defined on their own as single, ontological entities; rather, the meaning of one concept can be deciphered only in terms of its 'place' in relation to other concepts in its web" (Somers 1995: 136). So, for us the relevant question is not merely, 'Does vinyl (or any other recorded medium) possess an aura or not?' Instead, we ask what social conditions shape the view of recorded mediums as possessing aura or not. This allows us to take into account social change processes, or as Emirbayer described them, "the dynamic processes that *transform* those matrices of transactions" (1997: 305, author's italics). We contend that 'aura' is a relative characteristic that can be located on a continuum, based on social characteristics and relationships between people and art. Aura is not a quality possessed (or not) by objects, but rather the potential result of a relationship between people and those objects. This relationship is mediated by various factors, including access to technologies and competition between alternate technologies that change and transform over time.

Our argument is that, in the case of recorded music mediums, the presence or lack of an aura is the consequence of the existence of technology that allows people to reproduce each individual medium by themselves, often in their own homes. So, for example, compact discs possessed an aura for many people when they first entered the mass marketplace and were unique and uncopiable by the end-user at home. This quality, however, diminished as personal computers emerged with the ability to burn compact discs. Similarly, cassettes lost their auratic quality as home taping became commonplace. The cassette case is notable because, as cassette players have practically disappeared from home stereos, so have cassettes begun to regain purchase in the marketplace. We contend that

this is because an aura has returned to cassettes as a format as a direct result of the loss of the ability to easily reproduce them at home. Meanwhile, as these other formats have come and gone (and, in the case of cassettes, returned again), vinyl never really lost its aura. We assert that this is because virtually no one has ever possessed the ability to press vinyl records at home.

What we present below is a kind of counterfactual mechanism to Benjamin's original argument. For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction leads to alienation of the art object from its aura. We contend that the consumer's *inability* to mechanically (re-)produce a cassette/LP/CD by themselves reinvigorates the aura of the medium. In other words, we contend that alienation from reproductive capacity produces aura, while Benjamin perceives aura as sui generis for an object that is then lost when mechanical reproduction alienates consumers from that art itself. In sum, we claim the more that people are alienated from being able to (re-)produce a medium themselves, the stronger the aura around that medium will become.

In presenting his model for operationalising the concept of legitimacy, Schoon rejects "the notion that an object can be legitimate in the sense implied by essentialist ontology" (2022: 495). Similar to aura, "[l]egitimacy is often discussed and operationalised in substantialist terms as something that an object *is* or *has*" (2022: 495, author's italics). Schoon also turns to Emirbayer's 1997 article on relational sociology to advocate for a different approach to understanding legitimacy. Using Schoon's model, we contend that aura as we present it below can be understood as a type of legitimacy. This helps us formalise the previously fuzzy concept of 'aura', so that it can be employed in a less subjective manner. At the same time, this article contributes to the production of culture perspective by emphasising the importance of consumers themselves becoming (re-)producers.

Recorded Music Mediums and Aura

In discussing mechanically reproduced art, Benjamin focuses primarily on mediums such as film (the mechanically reproduced version of live theatre) and photography (mechanically reproduced painting). Whereas live theatre and painting possess aura, in Benjamin's analysis, their mechanically reproduced counterparts do not. Some recent work in the tradition begun by Benjamin, however, has asserted that mechanically reproduced artwork can possess aura in the sense employed by Benjamin. Bartmanski and Woodward, for example, argue that "the era of digital hyper-reproducibility" has eliminated "any question of an original. Everything takes place through duplication" (2015b: 32). In 'Skilling Saws and Absorbent Catalogues', FitzGerald writes, "Eventually, art comes down to aura. Walter Benjamin predicted that works of art would lose their aura due to mass reproduction. However, it hasn't quite turned out that way. During his presentation at Fuse98, Bruce Mau noted that mass reproduction has caused art to become even more valuable. The 'Mona Lisa', for instance, now transcends valuation as a commodity" (1998). Fowler (1994) accentuates Bourdieu's (1990) argument that photography has disputed levels of aura. Photography represents a popular (and non-aura-laden) process of producing socialisation and the commemoration of rites of passage through personal photography, while simultaneously existing as a museum-bound medium of fine art. Benjamin himself makes the point that one of the consequences of mechanical reproduction is to make artworks (or their reproductions, at least) visible to a wider audience (2008: 33, trans. Underwood). To argue that this process will eliminate the aura of an original artwork, however, is debatable.

Although any original piece of art may maintain its aura, we contend that the level of aura possessed by reproductions varies and may actually be more understandable and measured. FitzGerald recognises this when he writes, "Designed artifacts may generate an aura due to the various associations people append to them. A personal example is record albums. It was aura I was experiencing when I picked up certain desired albums. I knew there were millions in circulation but it didn't matter. Purchasing one was enough. I still experience the aura when I'm shopping for CDs and run across a favorite work I already possess. I want to buy it again, to refresh the aura" (1998). FitzGerald's approach to aura focusses on the role of the consumer, with the same object having an aura for some but not for others, and links to notions of aura hinted at by Marx and Engels's discussion of the fetishism of commodities (Marx & Engels 1967), though not in the sense of conspicuous consumption and the outward revelation of status, but in the awe obtained from the character of objects themselves. Similar to our approach, this consumer-centred analysis is relational, but it differs from our emphasis on aura as a result of one's ability to be a reproducer of artwork.

Mediums such as vinyl records possess an aura for people beyond just FitzGerald. A *New York Times* (*NYT*) article about the reissuing of Beatles albums on vinyl compared the experience of listening to digital music files to vinyl, concluding that "many fans of the group have argued that such newfangled ways of hearing the band are inauthentic—that the experience just isn't the same on anything but vinyl, the format on which the albums were originally released" (Kozinn 2012). This provides another answer to the question raised above, regarding originality and mechanical reproduction. In this formulation, vinyl records are the originals, and not just mechanical reproductions. This connection to the original format is the first way in which Benjamin defines 'aura', as an object's "presence in time and place" (1955: 222, trans. Zohn). Other news coverage of the resurgence of vinyl records has specifically noted the authenticity of vinyl, in a seeming nod to Benjamin. In the *NYT*, a vice president at the EMI record label claimed that "people who buy vinyl nowadays are charmed by the format's earthy authenticity" (Williams 2008). Benjamin emphasises the connection between originality and authenticity when he writes, "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (1955: 222, trans. Zohn). Whether or not a vinyl record is itself an original or a mechanical reproduction of an original medium, vinyl records do seem to possess an aura for many listeners. Is it possible, however, to move beyond the subjective ways of describing aura ('The aura exists because I say it does.') to a more systematic definition?

Bartmanski and Woodward, in making the case for viewing the vinyl record as "an auratic object" (2015a: 3), point the way towards what we are trying to do here by advocating a more relational approach. According to Bartmanski and Woodward, "Benjamin believed that the uniqueness—and thus aura of an object—is strictly dependent on the unity of creative intentionality, specific time and particular place recognisable in the object" (2015a: 18). In response, they argue that Benjamin's "conception of *uniqueness* is too rigid" (Bartmanski & Woodward 2015a: 18) and that his "understanding of 'copy' is not nuanced enough to account for the variegated forms we observe today" (Bartmanski & Woodward 2015a: 18). To resolve these criticisms of Benjamin, Bartmanski and Woodward propose to replace uniqueness with "*relative rarity*" and to reframe "aura as relational and multidimensional, not just an intrinsic quality" (2015a: 19). In this paper, we are building upon the idea of aura as relational to consider other physical forms of recorded music, including cassettes, compact discs and vinyl records. Rather than think about aura as something that an object does or does not possess, we follow Bartmanski and Woodward's suggestion that aura can be conceptualised as a spectrum or continuum, on which auratic objects can be compared with each other.

What about cassettes? Are they also 'auratic objects'? As with vinyl, cassette sales have been increasing in recent years. Is there evidence suggesting that cassettes possess an aura that comprises some of their appeal? We argue that there is, especially since much of the discussion of the resurgence of cassettes emphasises the connection to a specific "time and place" (Benjamin 1955: 222, trans. Zohn) that is symbolised by the medium. For example, Baldwin emphasises the importance of nostalgia in explaining the resurgence of cassettes (2015). Wells, meanwhile, quotes Craig Golding, a lecturer from a British college of music, who also recognises the nostalgic appeal of cassettes. However, Golding continues, "Taping the Radio 1 chart show and making mixtapes will always seem a lot nicer than just sending someone a link to Spotify. But advancements in technology have taken away that personal investment in music" (Wells 2016). Ironically, as music has become easier to reproduce and disseminate digitally, the 'personal investment in music' has decreased. As a result, the mediums that are not easily reproduced have gained an aura of uniqueness. Whatever nostalgic appeal cassettes (and vinyl records) have, we argue that their aura also comes from the relative difficulty of reproducing them. After all, no one is claiming that all of the people currently buying cassettes (and vinyl records) were born before the 1980s, during the original heydays of the mediums.

Figure 2 shows multiple continuums, each of which plots varying levels of phenomena such as aura, alienation of labour/distance, technological reproducibility, etc. in relation to each other, as well as relative to the different physical mediums listed along the top row. The mediums in Row 1 are arranged from right to left in order of descending aura and increasing technological reproducibility. The physical medium with the highest level of aura is the vinyl record. This assertion is based on the combination of an increase in sales for the vinyl records in recent years, coupled with the discourse (quoted above) about vinyl and its ostensible 'authenticity'. As discussed above, records possess an aura beyond that of other physical mediums. After the vinyl record, the audiocassette comes next on the auratic continuum, due to a similar recent sales increase and discourse (albeit more muted and sceptical, compared to vinyl records) about the appeal of cassettes. Lastly are the compact disc and the digital file, which both possess relatively low auratic qualities. As we will discuss later, however, the recent upturn in compact disc sales sets the stage for the possible re-emergence of the CD as an auratic object.

Vinyl record	Audio cassette	Compact disc	Digital file
High	Aura		Low
Low	Technological reproducibility		High
High	Distance/alienation level of reproduction (Marx/Battani)		Low
High	Cultural/symbolic capital (Bourdieu)		Low
High	Accessibility/financial cost to consumer		Low
High	Legitimacy (Schoon 2022)		Low

Figure 2. The auratic continuum and related continuums.

The 'Distance/alienation level of reproduction' row in Figure 2 indicates the relative level of distance (as discussed by Battani and Benjamin) or alienation associated with each medium. Thinking about physical mediums in relation to alienation/distance, vinyl records are placed at the highest level of distance on the continuum. Although many people own turntables, almost no one owns the machinery necessary to produce vinyl records themselves. In other words, most people are alienated from the potential to reproduce records through their own labour.

Moving across the continuum reveals audiocassettes as the medium associated with the next lowest level of reproductive distance/alienation. This is largely because, when cassette decks (and especially dual cassette decks, which made tape dubbing possible) were common components of home stereos, audiocassettes could be easily reproduced. As cassette decks disappeared from stereos in the 2000s, the distance between the medium and listeners increased. The story of compact discs is similar to that of cassettes, but it took place slightly later in time. In the 1990s, as audiocassette decks faded away, CD players became standard equipment for most home stereos. Nowadays, CD players have largely disappeared from home stereos. The laptop computer that I bought in 2019 does not have a CD drive. Since the disappearance of CD players happened more recently than that of cassette decks, we situate compact discs at less of a distance, when it comes to reproduction.

Last in the 'Distance/alienation level of reproduction row' is the digital file, for which there is almost no distance involved in reproduction. Anyone with a computer can easily copy and disseminate digital files. Significantly, according to our argument, that is the major reason why digital files possess almost no aura. 'Aura' as used by Benjamin clearly connotes some exceptional quality, and there is nothing exceptional about digital files, in terms of prestige or cost. In fact, as shown on the 'Accessibility/cost to consumer' continuum in the last row of Figure 2, digital files are also generally the cheapest medium, as they are often traded freely.

We recognise that there is a difference between our use of the term 'alienation' and Marx's use of the same term in relation to production. In the 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', Marx describes the process by which labour becomes alienated. Relevant aspects of this process for our argument include his contention that "the object which labour produces—labour's product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer" (1978: 71, italics in original). For Marx, workers become alienated from the objects that they produce (and from other things) even as they produce them. Our use of the concept of alienation here is more literal, in the sense that we are talking about alienated would-be reproducers being unable to do the work of reproduction. Perhaps "estranged labour" (1978: 70), which Marx uses synonymously with "alienated" labour, more accurately captures what we are describing, with its more literal implication of distance. Either way, our argument here is analogous to Marx's above-quoted point about alienation because we are operationalising the concept of 'aura' as a product of the degree to which recorded media are 'something alien' to would-be reproducers. Benjamin's aura is analogous to the "*power independent* of the producer", which grows stronger as reproduction becomes less possible.

Another row in Figure 2 represents the notions of cultural and symbolic capital from Bourdieu (1984). This recognises both the elite status of consuming certain mediums as a feature of social life that adds capital to people's positions and the general social recognition and agreement of the existence of distinction associated with the medium in which music is consumed. This, then, adds a measurable and deeply sociological facet to the notion of aura: those mediums which add cultural and symbolic capital to consumers are those which have aura. Instead of merely a notion of elite self-identity associated with these anachronistic mediums, the consumption of vinyl and cassettes are legitimated and recognised by the social system as providing capital. Engagement with the medium that has the most aura—the medium whose reproductive technology is most alien from the consumer—is that which adds symbolic capital for the consumer. This would explain why the cassette medium, for example, likely retains

an aura even for some people who possess the stereo equipment required to reproduce cassettes. Based on our argument, one might expect the aura to decline for these cassette fans, given their ability to reproduce the medium. However, in cases such as this, it is the cultural capital built up around the medium that reinforces the aura.

The last row in Figure 2 indicates the degree to which the various mediums under consideration are legitimate, as operationalised by Schoon (2022). We consider aura to be a type of legitimacy, with the factors discussed above mapping onto Schoon's model as follows. Schoon argues that "[L]egitimacy implies the presence of three empirical elements: an *audience*, and *object* of legitimacy, and a *relationship* between the two" (2022: 483, author's italics). In our analysis of musical mediums, the listeners/reproducers are the audience, and the recorded mediums are the objects. For Schoon, "legitimacy implies a particular relationship among these elements: audiences are positively oriented towards an object of legitimacy based on mutual expectations to which the object conforms" (2022: 487). In the case of recorded music, the relationship primarily consists of the sales and consumption of various mediums. Schoon also contends that "an object of legitimacy can be operationalized as any entity that is subject to social expectations" (2022: 486), and an object will be legitimate to the degree that these expectations are met. When it comes to recorded musical mediums, the expectations are that some will possess an 'aura', depending (as we have argued) on whether people are broadly able to reproduce them. The last variable in Schoon's model is assent, or "agreement with, approval, or support of a relationship by the audience" (2022: 488). According to Schoon, "In some contexts, it may be possible to observe assent simply based on audiences' participation in the relationship" (2022: 489). In our case, given that musical mediums can be purchased, assent could be conceptualised through sales figures. However, it is important to emphasise that sales figures are not a proxy for aura, as we will illustrate below in our brief consideration of non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Aura might boost the sales figures of an LP, but objects without aura can be popular, as well. The list of best-selling song downloads for any given week is evidence of that.

If 'more sales equalled more aura', then compact discs would have possessed peak aura around 2011, when CD sales dwarfed those of vinyl and cassettes, according to Figure 1. Rather, sales figures suggest the existence of 'auratic legitimacy' when they reach an inflection point. When a downward trajectory turns upward, even slightly, without plausible explanations based on price and/or convenience, then we argue that the object in question possesses aura and/or legitimacy. The existence of academic and/or journalistic discourse attributing auratic/exceptional qualities to such objects only strengthens this argument. Crucially, both aura and legitimacy are "subject to social expectations", in Schoon's words. They are not qualities innate to objects, but rather they exist relationally.

Non-Fungible Tokens

Since the development of the NFT, a natural impulse has been to try to understand NFTs through the lens of Benjamin's 'Work of Art...' essay. Whyman observes that "NFTs literally do what Benjamin claimed unique, non-reproducible art objects used to: provide a log of the history of the exchanges to which the work has been subjected" (Whyman 2021). Since blockchain technology makes it possible to identify a NFT's "unique existence in the place where it is at this moment" (Benjamin 5; trans. Underwood), NFTs would seem to possess an aura in Benjamin's sense. Whyman rejects this conclusion, though, arguing that, "[a]s NFTs are becoming more widespread, then, the aura of art has if anything just been further profaned" (Whyman 2021). Grossman is similarly pessimistic about the NFT, writing, "The NFT may have temporarily reanimated the aura, but in a carnivorous zombie form" that is "designed to preserve art's mystical capacity to funnel money from one rich person to another, any benefit to the original artist being a coincidental side effect" (Grossman 2021). Along similar lines, Gopnik writes, "Sales, not aesthetics, were the reason NFTs were created" (Gopnik 2022). Gopnik quotes a museum curator who raises the possibility of the NFT bringing about "an impoverishment – not just of digital art, but of art full stop, because it reduces art to a frictionless commodity" (Gopnik 2022). This "friction" and the way that it affects our relationship to art is the focus of our argument.

The essays quoted above are short, opinion pieces, and none was written by a sociologist. Applying our model would discourage asking, 'Do NFTs have aura or not?' Instead of viewing aura as a characteristic of an object itself, one relevant, relational question becomes, 'What social conditions influence the presence/absence of aura?' Specific questions would be related to technological access and how it affects the (re-)producibility of NFTs. For example, Whyman points out that, despite the seeming rarity associated with NFTs, the imagery depicted "remains just as reproducible as it was before" (Whyman 2021) being converted into an NFT. Access to (and ownership of)

personal computers is so widespread that most people in the US likely have the technological capacity to (re-) produce a non-fungible token. This would suggest that NFTs are not particularly auratic objects, among the other digital files in Figure 2. Again, this conclusion is based not on characteristics of NTFs themselves, but rather on the "*relational* networks" (Somers 1995:136) in which NFTs are embedded. Even though we reach a similar conclusion as critics such as Whyman and Grossman regarding the (non-)auratic status of NFTs, we believe that our route to that conclusion is preferable, primarily because it leaves open the possibility of that auratic status to change with changing social conditions, namely the conditions that make their (re-)production more or less accessible. Furthermore, our model allows for the auratic property of an object to vary not just with changing social conditions, but also across generations. This is relevant because, as one art collector recently told a reporter for the *NYT*, "Our grandsons understand NFTs, but we don't" (Reyburn 2022).

Conclusion

The emergence of digital art has once again brought the ideas of Walter Benjamin into the spotlight. Similar to Benjamin, we focus on conditions of reproduction and their influence on aura. Benjamin looks at this reproduction being done by cultural producers, including what Frankfurt Schoolers such as Benjamin called the "culture industry" (Horkheimer & Adorno etc.). However, in this paper, we have argued for understanding aura as a consequence of the ability for *consumers* themselves to reproduce media. This more dynamic approach allows us to understand (and predict) changes in how media are viewed over time, and it situates our work at the intersection of production of culture, cultural reception and studies of material culture.

Something is causing increased demand for vinyl records (and, to a lesser degree, cassettes), and it is not relatively low cost (especially in the case of vinyl, which is now the most expensive medium among the ones considered here) or increased convenience. If anything, vinyl records and cassettes are much less convenient mediums than CDs or digital files. For one thing, CDs and digital files do not have different sides that need to be changed in order to listen to an entire recording. Moreover, some news articles (Wang 2017; Iqbal 2019) suggest that vinyl records and cassettes are being bought by many people who do not (and perhaps cannot) even listen to them. If this is the case, that would only strengthen our argument that what is appealing about vinyl and cassettes is their aura more than their convenience, cost and/or sound quality (or lack thereof, in the case of cassettes).

In the above analysis, we have attempted to understand Benjamin's concept of aura more systematically than more esoteric analyses that depict it as "some mystical or pseudo-mystical experience" (Battani 2011: 6). To do so, we have invoked sociological concepts such as alienation of labour, legitimacy and symbolic/cultural capital in an attempt to reframe aura as a continuum, instead of as a binary trait. Taking recorded musical mediums as our object of analysis, our argument is that the presence of an aura is the consequence of the relative rarity of technology that allows people to reproduce each individual medium by themselves. The mediums with the most auratic presence, specifically vinyl records and cassettes, are also the ones that provide the most benefit in terms of symbolic/cultural capital. One prediction that is implied by our analysis is that, as compact disc burners disappear from home computers, the compact disc will (re-)gain its aura and reverse its long sales decline. As implausible as that may sound, year-end sales data from 2021 indicate that CD sales increased in 2021 by 1.1% over 2020 sales (Bloom 2022). This was the first sales increase for compact discs since 2004.

For the last 40 years, the 'production of culture' perspective has dominated the sociological study of culture. As explained by Peterson and Anand, "The production of culture perspective focuses on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved" (2004: 311). In the above analysis, we examine Walter Benjamin's concept of aura from the intersection of the production and consumption of culture. The inability of people to produce vinyl records themselves has contributed to the persistent aura possessed by the medium. Meanwhile, the elimination of cassette reproduction capabilities from home stereos contributed to the recently resurgent aura of the cassette medium. In acknowledging the role of consumers as reproducers, we connect the production of culture perspective to earlier cultural analyses, such as Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), which discuss the ways in which consumers produce meaning. We accept Hebdige's position that meaning is not inherent to cultural objects but is rather constructed through their use. In our case, the type of 'use' that we focus on is reproduction, thus linking these two traditions (production and consumption) in cultural analysis.

Aura is tied to the 'prestige' of having a unique physical object, even if its meaning (i.e. the songs it contains) might be accessible independent of the object, such as on the internet. Aura is also linked to the relationship between the artist and consumer that is represented by an object that is more (or less) difficult for consumers to recreate on their own. A particular advantage of this model is that it can be assessed via application to other objects. For example, it may be useful to assess the changing nature of movie viewing or book reading via the relative popularity of digital streaming options and their physical object counterparts. Perhaps tangible books have retained appeal for some readers in part because of an aura derived from the distance that exists between most people and printing presses. Or, similarly, the relationship between viewers and movies can be assessed relative to different levels of aura. The cinematic experience in the theatre is the least open to reproducibility and, thus, has the most aura associated with it. VHS tapes are experiencing a resurgence (Arkin 2020), and this could be linked to increased aura stemming from the difficulty in obtaining players to view them and, even more so, second recorders with which to copy the movie. DVDs are more handily reproducible with today's technology, while streaming services, as with music, have the least aura because of the perfect reproducibility and shareability of the movie.

We develop 'aura' as a function of the replicability of the medium in which art is (re)produced – in our case, focussing on music and its delivery via vinyl records and cassettes, which are not typically producible by consumers, compared to copyable digital files. While being attentive to this angle of the construction of aura, we also recognise that there are additional parameterisable facets of art and art mediums that are connected to our argument and are of interest to cultural and social scientists and scholars. For example, the scarcity of a medium not only leverages an economic value—the limited nature of a lithograph compared to the multitudes of printed postcards bearing that same image is analogous to our musical case—but also engages with the auratic distinction of engagement with an 'original' item compared to its reproduced replicas. Fandom-based collectability further adds value to an artefact alongside scarcity: physical object themselves, along with the content of the artefact (e.g. vinyl records of the album 'Un Verano Sin Ti' by Bad Bunny), attain increased aura in direct correlation to their irreproducibility and the intensity of an artist–fan relationship. So, the 'aura' that derives from irreproducibility interacts with the more economic force of scarcity and relational component of fandom to impact sales. Taking this trajectory further as a next step in this research agenda would telegraph research projects about distinctions between popular and subcultural art, their respective fans, and intensity of fandom as factors affecting aura and thus impacting sales and the longevity of the mediums through which art is reproduced.

What we have presented here is a systematic attempt to understand aura in a formal way and to connect aura to other classic concepts in cultural sociology, including social distance, alienation, prestige and Bourdieu's cultural and symbolic capital. Our contention is that this allows for one of Walter Benjamin's most celebrated concepts to be applied in new, more systematic ways.

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