

Summary

Introduction

This paper, as well as its theme, would not have been materialized without the *consent* of two passions, namely philosophy and film. The intention to address the problem of film in a doctoral thesis, even in a restricted form, has emerged in the last year of master studies, during which I benefited from a scholarship at the Universität Konstanz. More specifically, one of the the courses attended at the university, „Film und Alterität. Das Fremde in Spielfilm" had a decisive role in shaping this work.

This *confession* should not be understood as an exercise in honesty, but rather, it is intended to present the *motivation* that led to the *integration* within a doctoral thesis, of my passion for movies. The latter helped me understand, as much as I was able to understand, the complex issues treated by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. For example, Alexander Sokurov's films have facilitated the understanding of Walter Benjamin's conception regarding the fact that the shock of metropolis fragments the continuity of tradition, while at the same time, after the decline of the „comprehensive memory" of the story, it determines the apparition of the

element of forgetfulness, by virtue of which Baudelaire's poetry records the experience which is lost/forgotten, element which also lies at the base of proustian involuntary memory.

Just as in Sokurov's films, where the relationship between father/mother and son are contoured at the crossroads between dream and reality, Benjamin's reflections seem to meet in a *Zeitraum* and then continue to debate in a *Zeitraum*. A *flood* of associations and correspondences that can be understood only if we capture them on a visual map. This is in a way self-evident, since he proposed the concept of topographic memory.

To the same extent, the films and writings of Pier Paolo Passolini showed me a different perspective on the cultural industry, beyond its being understood as an industry which produces standardized cultural goods. The *elective affinities* between Adorno's conception and Passolini's on the state of culture in contemporary society, have been reviewed briefly in the section reserved to the administration of culture, in the light of kinship between the concept of „cultural homologation" proposed by the Italian thinker and the administration of culture, as a specific characteristic of cultural industry, according to Adorno's conception.

These preceding reflections could *disorient* the potential reader - the connoisseur as well as the one least familiarized with the theme - of this work regarding the things stated above and the title of this paper. In other words, what is the connection between film and cultural industry and the decline of the aura? Allow me to present a final example to *elucidate* this mystery.

The film that led to the shaping of a work on the cultural industry and the decline of the aura is *Novecento*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. This film, due also to its title, reflects the transition between tradition and modernity, from a rural to an urban experience, from the social gap between classes to their uniformity, the transitional element or the one which determines the transition, being fascism.

In other words, in my opinion, the key elements of this film are transition and experience and according to these two terms this paper was conceived. More precisely, I tried to capture in the context of this paper the tension that occurs once the experience is transformed, its impact on the perception of the world as well as reporting to it, the way it affects the very senses and, why not, the consciousness.

It is through this filter of the *transitional* moment of experience, that this work should be looked at. This moment is

a recurring motif that I tried to capture in various forms: the transition from a mimesis of nature to one of reason, from the emancipation from myth to a return to mythology, from sacred art to a secular one - or vice versa, from desacralization of art to its re-sacralization (operated by Fascism and *continued* by culture industry), from *Erfahrung* to *Chockerlebnis*, from *Gedächtnis* to *mémoire involontaire*, etc. Each of these *transitional* motifs is *doubled* by changes in the structure of experience.

I used the term *motifs* to designate or to encapsulate in a generic way, through a particular term, the various changes which take place in the structure of a particular phenomenon – be it experience, myth, *mimesis*, ritual - along specific moments of transition.

I identified in the works of Benjamin and Adorno which I have dealt with, a specific *transitional* moment for each of these two thinkers, which determines these successive passages, in the sense that this moment acts as an intermediary, the *middle term* which conditions the transformations, which determines them. For Benjamin, the *transitional* moment is shock while for Adorno it is the instrumental reason.

The title of this paper has been conceived according to the things mentioned above, namely, as a transition from the

sacred art to the profane one, accompanied by a second *transitional* moment, that of re-sacralization of art - the decline of the aura represents the first passage and the culture industry the second one. The term art that I used should not be understood strictly in the sense of visual and plastic arts, but from the perspective according to which art is a cultural phenomenon. Therefore, in the course of this paper I took into consideration the fact that along with these moments of transition, there also occurs a shift in the *experience* of culture. As I announced above, the cultural industry and the decline of the aura are two forms (modified/altered) of experience split by the moment that was Fascism.

These two phrases are found in two essays belonging to Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin namely, Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception (*Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massenbetrug*) and *The Work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit)*.

An approach of these two essays, however, is followed by a certain *fatality*, meaning that it will be more or less, articulated in antithetical terms, aspect otherwise justified since both of them, have two different reference points. Adorno's essay has as its reference point the American

industry film of the forties and Benjamin's essay, the avant-garde film of the thirties. For this reason or precisely by virtue of this fact, this paper is not intended as a comparative study of these two essays - because it would be reduced, more or less, to highlight the differences - neither as a *classical* approach, neo-Marxist, but from the perspective of the transformation of the structure of experience which occurs along with a particular transient moment, this being, as in Bertolucci's film, the fascism.

A final aspect that I took into account when I operated an analysis of these two works, is on one hand, Adorno's philosophical *consistency* and on the other hand, Benjamin's philosophical *ambivalence* - as we can see, it is almost inevitable to treat these two authors in antithetical terms. I have in mind that Adorno's reflections on cultural industry show no changes throughout his work - they are present in his work on music as well as in his *Aesthetic Theory*.

At Benjamin instead, we can notice an opposite attitude, meaning that the phenomena he deals with are viewed from a double perspective, namely, *ambivalently*.

For example, photography is a space of the presence of the aura but also, depending on the historical perspective, it is a place of recording the decline of the aura.

I used this feature of Benjamin's philosophy, as we shall see below, in order to oppose it to the *consistency* of Adorno's conception of mimesis and ritual, the ambivalence of Benjamin's conception regarding the latter.

Outlined in terms of a thesis, this paper aims to identify the changes that occur in the structure of experience along the *transient* moments of ritual and mimesis according to Adorno's and Benjamin's conceptions. More specifically, together with the transition from tradition to modernity as well as the *transitional* moment which was the Fascism, there takes place an *alteration* of the ritual and mimetic experience.

I followed this point from the perspective of Adorno's conception of the culture industry in the following way. First, I understood the culture industry not as an abstract concept, but rather as an expression of the *experience* of culture, an experience which arises after the transformation of experience at the mimetic and ritual level. The *transitional* moment of science through which the project of Enlightenment can be achieved, namely, the liberation from the fear of nature, superstitions, meaning the disenchantment of nature and hence the world, supposes a transformation in the structure of

experience. This appears in the experience of culture industry as a reiteration of myth.

Starting from Adorno's reflections on culture industry, I considered that the experience of this culture is only a recurrence of the mimetic and ritual experience performed by the mythical man. I took into consideration here the conception of Adorno and Horkheimer regarding the regression of Enlightenment into mythology.

Briefly, the regression of Enlightenment into mythology is determined by the instrumental reason/*ratio* which, although it frees us from the mythical *mimesis*, will assimilate this mimetic process within its own structures, which results in a regression into mythology. In other words, instrumental reason becomes enchanted and culture industry will also continue this mimetic process.

In other words, I considered that the basis of culture industry is the instrumental reason which shapes every cultural element through systematizing and imposing a set of rules, such as standardization and uniformity, so that every distinct thing should be adjusted to the *universal* proposed by it.

Why is the experience of cultural industry a reiteration of the mimetic and ritual experience performed by the mythical man? Starting from the fact that instrumental reason is the central axis of culture industry - it forms the basis of any manifestation of this industry - and that it is also enchanted, then it will *impose* to the products of culture industry the same mimetic mechanism taken over

after the deliverance from the fear of nature. At the same time, this mimetic mechanism is extended also to the individuals, meaning that the latter will mimic the cultural products of this industry. I considered that the *motivation* of the rationalization process of the cultural industry is precisely this mimetic mechanism through which instrumental reason seeks to maintain its dominance.

I have named this process the *rearguard* of the culture industry, in the sense that the standardized products of culture industry - the *vanguard* of the industry - are the result of this mimetic process - which is prior (namely the *rearguard*) to the standardization of the products or in other words, they are standardized by virtue of this mimetic process - the *imitation of the* characteristics of this form of reason. The mimetic action of this process is not confined only to the products of culture industry, but it also reflects upon the (pseudo)individuals in the sense that they will behave mimetically towards the products of this industry. It is in this way that I understood the regression into mythology which is achieved through culture industry.

I have treated the decline of the aura according to Benjamin's conception following the same perspective

mentioned above namely, the experience of a culture at a mimetic and ritual level.

Before showing how Benjamin understands the latter, I would specify that I considered the issues raised in the essay *The Work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (as an alternative to the one presented in the *Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*) from the standpoint of the experience of the aura or more precisely, of its decline.

I dealt with the problem of the experience of the aura starting from the broader conception of experience in general, which Benjamin draws in the essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*.

In other words, the experience of aura is a particular case of experience (*Erfahrung*) and therefore, it is circumscribed to her characteristics and also, it is dependent on the transformations which experience is subjected to.

Through this statement I wish to pinpoint the fact that the experience of aura is not static or identical in any context, but on the contrary, it is reconfigured by the transformations to which the experience is subjected to. In the context of the essay *The Work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, experience (*Erfahrung*) is detached from the frame of tradition

namely, from the space of cult and ritual and therefore, the experience of aura will no longer have a cultic valence.

According to the perspective announced above, I followed a different approach regarding the way the decline of the aura takes place in the context of the essay „Artwork”. The latter consists in the fact that the decline of aura from the work of art that has a cultic value takes place due to the possibilities of technical reproduction of works of art. In a way, this is a *baffling* argument since the decline of aura is treated from the perspective of undermining the uniqueness, authority and authenticity of the artwork. This means the detachment of the artwork from the frame of tradition which is accomplished by/through the act of technical reproduction. But the reproduction of what exactly? Of the artwork? This perspective is also a *baffling* one since at the beginning of the first section of the essay „Artwork”, Benjamin states that an artwork is always reproducible.

What exactly does this technical reproduction mean? In other words, what does it *reproduce*? The dilemma can be solved if we understand the aura or its experience from the perspective of its *history* – namely that, the technical reproduction determines the decline of the aura because it reproduces the image of the work of art that has a cultic value.

It is in this sense that I understood the role played by the technical reproduction in the process of the decline of the aura.

Argument: the techniques of reproduction mentioned by Benjamin are photography and film, therefore, visual arts, arts that can capture the image that was previously unique, the inaccessible image of the work of art that had a cult value.

I consider that this image was inaccessible not because it could not be seen, but because it could not be recorded, kept constant in our proximity, these being actions that destroy the aura, according to the definition proposed by Benjamin.

Within this paper, the decline of the aura which is determined by technical reproduction should be seen in this light and not from the perspective of undermining the uniqueness, authority and authenticity of the artwork.

From the standpoint of the experience of *mimesis* and ritual, Benjamin considers that the ritual experience of the craftsman – exemplified through the act of storytelling which keeps the transmissible character of experience (*Erfahrung*) – is replaced by the ritual act in front of the machine, meaning the ritual of work which appears with the process of urbanization, that due to the shock factor present in factory, cleaves the continuum of experience.

The mimetic experience is understood by Benjamin from a double perspective, one of language and one of game. The first involves the referral like a flash of the meaning of a word or a sound which is captured in language, either spoken or written. The second consists in childrens' games – various personifications or transformations of basic things, like the wool bag into a sock. Instead, what is important for this paper is the fact that within the innocent childrens' (mimetic) games, the intervention of the technical element does not act as a dominant factor of nature. Therefore, the correlation between nature and technology could allow or create the condition of a *fraternal coexistence* between man and nature. This understanding of mimesis could be related to the distinction that Benjamin draws between the first technology that seeks to dominate nature [*Naturbeherrschung*] and which culminates in human sacrifice and the second technology which has as objective the inter-action [*Zusammenspiel*] between nature and humanity and which is represented by the social function of contemporary art (to Benjamin and Adorno) namely, film.

The desacralization of image – the *loss* of the aural character of the cult image – due to the reproduction technics, is manifested through the *profane* images of photography and film but which – *consistent* with the *ambivalence* principle of

his philosophy – due to the montage technique, either as Dada photomontage or the avant-garde film, will *reveal* the mystery of the world, the intention of Benjamin's project entitled *profane illumination (profane Erleuchtung)*. In other words, if the sacred image imposes a form of worship upon us and in the same time involves a form of domination of perception, aspects which presuppose, to a certain extent, the maintaining of the mythical character of the world, with the appearance of the *profane* images of photography and film there takes place a deliverance of the perceptive act which involves a demytization (or disenchantment or desacralization) of the world through images or their *play* undertaken by the montage technique.

Structure of the thesis

As a structure, i divided the thesis into four chapters. The ones dedicated to the central issues of this paper namely, the culture industry and the decline of aura, have been *accompanied* by two introductory chapters, whose role is to offer an overview upon these two concepts, to point what stood at the basis of their development and/or the way they were treated in other works of Adorno and Benjamin except

the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

In the first chapter I drew the main ideas of *Critical Theory*, project outlined by Max Horkheimer which stood at the basis of the further critical and philosophical developments undertaken by the Frankfurt School. In the next chapter I turned my attention to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which I showed how the instrumental form of reason becomes the dominant form of reason and which, paradoxically, although it frees us from the power of myth, it will devise new forms of subjugation. Special attention has been paid to the problem of how the instrumental reason/*ratio* performs the *mimesis*, due to the importance of this aspect for this paper. I have also outlined the influence of Max Weber and Siegfried Kracauer on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In the section „Critique of instrumental reason” I highlighted the main arguments that Horkheimer and Adorno bring concerning the emergence of this new form of barbarism, as well as possible ways out of this situation.

In the chapter reserved to the culture industry I outlined the main characteristics of this (pseudo)cultural form - administration of culture, (pseudo)culture and (pseudo)individuality, as it is also a problem of culture kitsch.

In the next two chapters I have undertaken two personal approaches upon culture industry entitled „Culture industry’s rearguard” and „, *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The dominating power of reason”.

In chapter three, I draw a *history* of the concept of aura and its experience. Briefly, the aura is first conceived as an ornament, a characteristic through which Benjamin intends to distance from the theosophical conception regarding the aura, anticipating to some extent the secularization of this phenomenon. Then, I analyzed the problem of the aura in the context of the essay *Short history of photography (Kleine Geschichte der Photographie)*, outlining its essential elements, like the relation between a subject and an object and that of medium (the phenomenon of aura manifests within a medium or a space of reciprocity, like memory or language).

The subchapter entitled ”The mystery of aura” is a personal approach regarding the manifestation/non manifestation of the aura within photography, starting from the examples mentioned by Benjamin – those of the first photographs and the ones by Eugène Atget.

In the subchapter reserved to the experience of the aura, I outlined Benjamin’s conception regarding this phenomenon depending on various relations (and the related

consequences) between this experience and schock, memory, tradition and metropolis. I took also into consideration Benjamin conception upon a "theory of experience" which is essential for understanding a particular experience like that of the aura.

Briefly, within tradition, experience (*Erfahrung*) is long-term, memory (*Gedächtnis*) is an „all encompassing" experience, and from the point of view of the experience of the aura, we have an aural experience of nature and of the work of art that has a cultic value. Within the metropolis instead, the long-term experience will become a shock experience (*Chockerlebnis*) and *Gedächtnis* will become a memory whose defining element is *forgetting* – *mémoire involontaire*. The schock experience destroys (*Zertrümmerung*) the experience of the aura by annihilating what is specific to this experience – the distance, no matter how big it may be, between a subject and an object and the impossibility to maintain a fix gaze, due to the visual/auditory stimuli present in big cities.

The *transitional* moment which registers all that is lost in the transition from tradition to modernity at the level of experience – *only* the cult one this time, meaning the cult experience which takes place within tradition, of the aural

experience of nature and of the work of art that has a cult value – is the one of *correspondances*.

In the subchapter „Reconstitution of experience”, I tried to emphasize how experience could be *reconstituted* (not *as* it was in tradition, but *as* it is in metropolis). Also, starting from the fact that the involuntary memory is transformed by Benjamin into a commemorative (*Eingedenken*) memory, a memory which gathers, like a collector, past images, to use them in *future*, I considered that the experience of the aura, through this new medium of memory, can capture images of the past for the purpose of embodying a better future – the *hope in the past* case.

In the last chapter I turned my attention firstly to the impact of the technical reproduction of artworks which have a cult value and on the *agreement* between Benjamin and Adorno concerning the fact that Fascism represents a recurrence of the myth under the form of ritual manifestations, magic/religious type of mimetic behavior, and of a technology that is in the service of spreading (false) values.

Secondly, I dwelt Benjamin’s conception regarding to *mimesis*, whose characteristics I mentioned above. The last part is dedicated the influence of the avant-garde arts (*Futurism, Dada, Surrealism*) upon Walter Benjamin’s

conception regarding the role of photography and film in society.

Concluzions

Understood from the perspective of the desacralization of image, the decline of the aura opens up the possibilities limited until then of an *Zusammenspiel* between nature and humanity, which will not be shaped in the form of a domination of nature, according the Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis and extended upon the domination of the internal nature, of the individuals through the culture industry, but will take the shape of the initial project of Enlightenment, namely that of deliverance from any mythic form present in daily life.

This mythic form represents a *concealment* of the truth of reality, according to Frankfurt School. The task of this deliverance from myth and of the interaction with nature pertains to film (which registers the decline of the aura) which, according to the montage technique, will unveil new layers of the everyday experience, new ways of relating to existence and of perceiving it.

Thanks to the possibilities of the technical medium – overlapping images, interruption of chronological line of happenings, the zoom in and out technique, and so on – it is possible to create in images, meaning give way, even if only visually, to a phrase that can *label* the philosophy of the Frankfurt School: *une promesse du bonheur* or, if we were to use the particular phrases of the two main authors treated in this paper, it will preserve the *hope in the past* for Benjamin and it will offer an alternative to a *damaged life* for Adorno. The technical device (exemplified by Benjamin through film) will not serve the domination of external/internal nature (according to the first technology), but to a fraternal interaction between nature and humanity (according to the second technology).