

Ross Shields: THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

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In the age of mechanical reproducibility, the ‘aura’ surrounding works of art undergoes a crisis. The contemporary relevance of Walter Benjamin’s thesis—in its societal, aesthetic, and media-theoretical significance—is illustrated by former U.S. president Donald Trump’s purported ownership of *Les deux sœurs* (*Two Sisters*), also known as *Sur la terrasse* (*On the Terrace*), by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Journalist Mark Bowden, who caught a glimpse of the painting when he was invited to Trump’s jet in 1997, describes the event in an article for *Vanity Fair*. “He showed off the gilded interior of his plane—calling me over to inspect a Renoir on its walls, beckoning me to lean in closely to see ... what? The luminosity of the brush strokes? The masterly use of color? No. The signature. ‘Worth \$10 million,’ he told me.”[1] Of course, this is the attitude that one might expect from a real-estate mogul turned art collector (although not from a future president). In ignorance of both form and content—to say nothing of their unity—the painting is reduced to its sheer exchange value, concentrated in the signature guaranteeing its authenticity.

But it would be a mistake to divorce in this way Trump’s painting from its aesthetic and social significance. After all, Benjamin’s concept of the aura does not only pertain to a work of art’s authenticity, but also to the artistic technique and social reality manifested in that work. Renoir stood at the cusp of modern painting, using the impressionists’ then-revolutionary technique to idealize a way of life that had been put in question by an increasingly politicized working class. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a painter who could more skillfully invest his subjects with the aura of natural legitimacy that had been “banished from reality by the deepening degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie”—as Benjamin writes in his essay on photography from 1931.[2] This is no less true for *Les deux sœurs*, which was painted in 1881, a decade after the confidence of the French bourgeoisie had been shaken by the Paris Commune.

Extending Benjamin’s thesis from photography to painting, one could argue that the “luminosity” that Bowden attributes to Renoir’s brush strokes compensates for the contemporaneous disappearance of the aura from bourgeois life. The “penumbral tone” (“schummeriger Ton”) afforded by his unique style could then be compared to the photographic technique of gum print used to “simulate the aura” (“die Aura [...] vorzutäuschen”) that had all but evaporated by the end of the nineteenth century.[3] It is safe to say that many of those who malign Renoir’s style (including the half-ironic “@renoir_sucks_at_painting” movement that flared up on Instagram in 2015) are in fact put off by its incongruity in relation to his subject matter.

In any case, the painting seems strangely at home among what Bowden describes as the “gilded interior” of Trump’s jet. In a second anecdote, also published by *Vanity Fair*, Tim O’Brien uses the same adjective in describing the “gilded frame” of the same painting hanging in the same plane, which is now revealed to be a forgery:

I asked him about the painting and Donald said “That’s an original Renoir.” And I said, “No its not, Donald.” And he said “That’s the original. That’s an original Renoir.” I said, “Donald, it’s not. I grew up in Chicago. That Renoir is called ‘Two Sisters on a Terrace,’ [*sic*] and it’s hanging on a wall at the *Art Institute of Chicago*. That’s not an original.” And Trump said, “oh, no no no no, it’s an original.” So I dropped it, we moved on with the interview. We get on the plane the next day, and he points to the painting again, and he says, “you know, that’s an original Renoir,” and I didn’t take him up on it.[4]

With Trump’s copy, the discrepancy between aesthetic form and social reality that was already latent in the original is reflected onto its material existence. The healthy glow radiated by the painting not only stands in tension with the subject it depicts, but with its very status as a forgery. Trump, representing a new low in the degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie, clings to the aura with the mere assertion of authenticity and value: “That’s an original Renoir”; “Worth \$10 million.” The significance of his copy can be compared to the gold-plated buckles of the Boeing 727 where it was exhibited: a superficial display of outmoded privilege in a hypermodern setting. On the other hand, one could argue that the freedom of movement afforded by the painting’s setting compensates for its lack of authenticity. In order to unfold the full import of this freedom, it will be necessary to explicate the media-theoretical aspect of Benjamin’s argument in greater detail.

Most paintings lack the mobility of Trump’s jet-set forgery. The primary advantage of newer mediums (like film) against older ones (like painting) lies in what Benjamin calls their *exhibition value* (*Ausstellungswert*): unlike a painting, which is first made accessible to a mass audience through technological reproduction, movies are designed to be seen by vast numbers of people simultaneously.[5] By contrast, paintings are imbued with a *cult value* (*Kultwert*) that depends on their complex indexical character: “The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day.”[6] This indexicality can be analyzed into three spatiotemporal moments, one of which is divisible into an infinity of sub-moments. First there is the moment of creation: the painting’s ideal origin in space and time. At the other extreme is the moment of reception, when the original comes into contact with its present audience. Connecting these is tradition, or the unique route of occasions that identifies the original viewed *here and now* to its ideal origin *then and there*. [7] Authorized by signature and validated by provenance, tradition comprises a medium of transmission that allows the then-and-there to appear in the here-and-now. Conception, tradition, and reception compress into the spatiotemporal unity that Benjamin calls the aura: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (see fig. 1). [8]



Fig. 1. The aura

As Benjamin observes, film lacks even the semblance of an aura. Not only is it impossible to trace a unique route of occasions—a tradition—between the film that is screened to the original print; that print is itself the result of an involved process of editing that defies the very notion of a single origin.[9] The situation is different for photographic reproductions of paintings, where the connection between viewing instance and original work is broken, rendering both tradition and creation irrelevant. The here-and-now no longer manifests a then-and-there. And while the distance between the work’s reproduction (the moment of reception) and its historical origin (the moment of creation) is greatly increased, the distance between the original painting and its many reproductions is virtually eliminated: the unique here-and-now is multiplied into an anywhere-and-anytime. I can enjoy *Les deux sœurs* from the comfort of my kitchen table, peruse Renoir’s oeuvre in the reading room of a college library, or access the catalogue of the Art Institute of Chicago from my smartphone on the subway. With its photographic reproduction, the aura surrounding a work of art—defined above as a function of space and time—is attenuated into a mere trace: the “appearance of a nearness, no matter how far removed the thing that left it might be” (see fig. 2)[10]

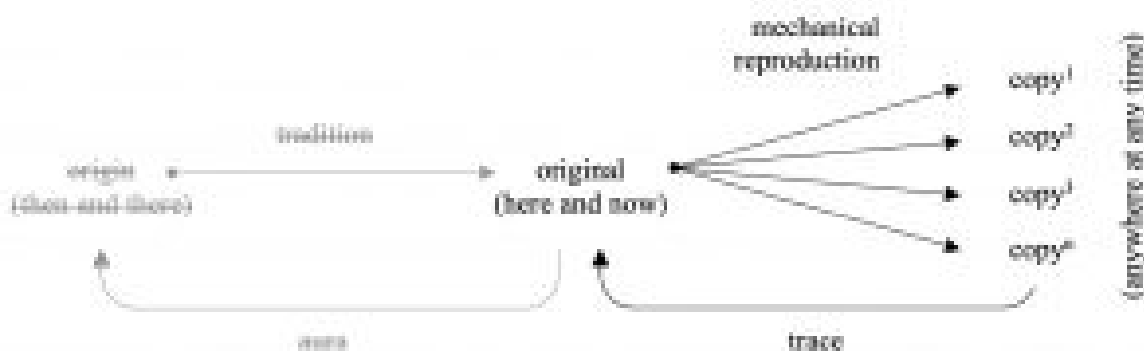


Fig. 2. The trace

Of course, Trump’s Renoir was copied by hand, not by machine. Nevertheless, it is the contemporary ubiquity of mechanical reproductions—having led to the general devaluation of origin, tradition, and aura alike—that makes the assertion of its authenticity possible. In the age of mechanical reproducibility, any convincing forgery bears the same relation to its photographic trace as the original, whose significance is reduced to mere appearance. The fact that a stretch of colored canvas once breathed the air of nineteenth century Paris, before it was sold to an art dealer, before it was sold to an art collector, before it was donated to a museum, is ontologically irrelevant. This metaphysical proposition is reflected in everyday experience. Most people—O’Brien excepted—have never set foot in the Art Institute of Chicago. Most guests on Trump’s personal jet would have recognized Renoir’s style through mechanical reproductions: on the internet, in art-

history textbooks, or—perhaps most likely—through the film *Amélie* (2001), which prominently features Renoir's *Le Déjeuner des canotiers* (*Luncheon of the Boating Party*), a work painted in the same year and on the same terrace of the same restaurant as *Les deux sœurs*.^[11] If anything, Trump's copy could be said to rival the original by virtue of its unique setting on a jet, where it could appear, at least potentially, anywhere and at any time. His forgery combines, on a symbolic level, the exhibition value of a mechanical reproduction with the cult value of an original, whose pretended authenticity is grounded not in provenance, but in the repeated assertions of a man whose political career was built on reality television and social media.

When asked by the BBC to verify their possession of the original *Les deux sœurs*, the Art Institute of Chicago chose to emphasize the number of times that their version of the truth had been witnessed: "We're proud and grateful to be able to share this exceptional work of art with our 1.5 million visitors each year."^[12] Only then is mention made of how the museum acquired the painting, as if its provenance were less important than its visibility. As if its cult value had been redefined in terms of its exhibition value. In the age of Trump, the authenticity of the original becomes a function of its views.

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[1] Mark Bowden, "Donald Trump Really Doesn't Want Me to Tell You This, But..." *Vanity Fair Hive*, 5 Dec. 2015.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography"; in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 517; "verdrängt [...] durch die zunehmende Entartung des imperialistischen Bürgertums aus der Wirklichkeit." Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1980), 377.

[3] *Ibid.* 517; 377.

[4] Tim O'Brien, "Decoding Trump's Lies," *Inside the Hive with Emily Jane Fox and Joe Hagan*, *Vanity Fair*, 13 Oct. 2017, 17:29-18:58.

[5] See Walter Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (2nd edition); in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 111; Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (2. Fassung); in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 365.

[6] *Ibid.* 103; 352: "Das Hier und Jetzt des Originals macht den Begriff seiner Echtheit aus, und auf deren Grund ihrerseits liegt die Vorstellung einer Tradition, welche dieses Objekt bis auf den heutigen Tag als ein Selbes und Identisches weitergeleitet hat."

[7] I borrow the concept of a route of occasions from Whitehead, whose process philosophy conceives of an enduring object (like a painting) as a connected sequence of transitory occasions in four-dimensional space-time. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (corrected edition), ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 80.

[8] Benjamin, "The Artwork," op. cit., 104-105; "Was ist eigentlich Aura? Ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag." Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," op. cit., 355.

[9] See Benjamin, "The Artwork," op. cit., 110; "Das Kunstwerk," op. cit. 364.

[10] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), M16a,4; translation modified; "Die Spur ist Erscheinung einer Nähe, so fern das sein mag, was sie hinterließ." Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*; in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5.1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1982), M16a,4.

[11] Note the identical railing depicted in both paintings.

[12] Amanda Hicks, cited in "Trump's Renoir Painting is Not Real, Chicago Museum Says," *BBC News*, 20 Oct. 2017. Compare this figure to the 18 million viewers who tuned in for the first episode of *The Apprentice*. See Laura Bradley, "Donald Trump's All-Consuming Obsession with TV Ratings: A History," *Vanity Fair HWD*, 20 Jan. 2017.

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