In Light of the Aura: Benjamin’s Aesthetics in Contemporary Fiction

by

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Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in English
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Thanks to my friends for their patience and their understanding and to my fellow thesis writers for their comradeship.

Thanks to Casey Baird for his suggestions, which could not have come at a better time.

Thanks to my parents for their unconditional support and love and for asking me at the beginning of this process to “explain one more time what your thesis is about?” Only when I realized that I hadn’t yet figured it out was I ready to begin in earnest.

Thanks to Khachig Tölöyan for inspiring a genuine interest in theory (I didn’t think it could be done) and for introducing me to the texts on which this project was built. Thanks to Matthew Garrett for taking a genuine interest in this thesis early on in the process. Many thanks to Uli Plass for his illuminating lectures and for generously sharing his expertise in all things Benjamin with me. If there are any moments of lucidity or insight in my writing about Benjamin, chances are I have Uli to thank for that.

Finally, I would particularly like to thank Sally Bachner for helping guide this project out of its prolonged nascent stages, for her editing which has helped me become a better writer, and for modeling such a high level of scholarship to which I could aspire.
Introduction: The Return of Aura

In his 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, Walter Benjamin famously proclaimed the death of the authentic work of art which, from that point on, could only be useful for the purposes of fascism. He enumerated the outmoded qualities of authentic art under the heading of “aura.” The present study germinates from wondering whether this proclamation of the death of aura was premature, not unlike Benjamin’s own death. Where investment in aura has persisted, it has not been made to serve the cruel masters that Benjamin imagined.

Contemporary critics, taking up the ideas of the *Work of Art* essay, have since noted a continual cropping up of aura in the work of certain novelists. They find moments in contemporary fictions where the aura, in the words of Timothy Lenoir and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “conquer[s] the field of art’s technical reproduction,” insinuating itself into the simulacra of the photograph, the film, or the magnetic tape.1 Other novels imagine the thriving aura in its original form as Benjamin had it, outside of mechanical reproduction, maintaining a unique existence in time in space and a connectedness to both ritual function and tradition. In either case, by imagining the persistence of the aura, the novelist becomes implicated in an ongoing aesthetic crisis in the culture that they write about and of which their novels form a part. A closer look at Benjamin’s work will help define the terms of this crisis and the meaning of “aura.”

Such an examination is vital because so many critical efforts to bring Benjamin’s aesthetics to bear on literary works display an incomplete understanding of what Benjamin meant by the term “aura.” This chapter aims to provide a more

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1 Lenoir & Gumbrecht, xvi.
thoroughgoing account of aura by charting its development in Benjamin’s aesthetic
writings. Benjamin’s aura is constituted in and by human modes of perception, ideas
of artistic autonomy and authenticity, and the formative power of ritual and tradition.
Real attention to Benjamin’s writings will give us the ground from which to ask what
it might mean to imagine authentic works of art in an era long past the initial rise of
duplicative technology.

A Derivation of Aura

Perception and Aura

In a letter from 1918, Benjamin writes to his friend Gershon Scholem arguing
that a “work of art in and of itself…can be understood in contemplation alone…the
person contemplating it can do it justice.”\(^2\) The contemplation of a work entails
meditation over sensory impressions of that work. Matters of sensation remain central
to Benjamin’s writings on aesthetics, so much so that he would go on to define the
work of art itself as a function of human perception. In 1914, still a perennial student
not yet disillusioned with academia, Benjamin published his first dissertation, The
Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism, where he defined the work of art as “a
determination of the medium of reflection.”\(^3\) In Benjamin’s framework, a subject
creates a space for art via their mediation on perceptual impressions of the work.
Since the artwork begins to reveal itself through the viewer’s contemplation of it, the
work of art is only considered as such when a human subject is there to perceive it.
According to Benjamin, the artwork gives way to radical new depths for the

\(^2\) Benjamin, Complete Correspondence, 119.
\(^3\) Benjamin, The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism, 151.
contemplative subject: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it.” The work becomes a world unto itself.

In addition to constituting the work of art itself, perception will be definitive in Benjamin’s early metaphorical formulation of the aura. By the time Benjamin coined the term and offered his first assessment of radical changes in mechanically reproduced art in his 1931 essay Little History of Photography, he had experienced a drastic transformation. Through the influence of both his friend Bertolt Brecht and his Soviet lover Asja Lacis, Benjamin adopted an unorthodox form of dialectical materialism and proclaimed himself a Marxist. Even so, his aesthetic vision was never exclusively materialistic. Although Marxism gave Benjamin insight into the essential social and political character of the work, he always stressed the primacy of art’s metaphysical aspect. This “metaphysical” quality, emerging mysteriously from human perception, is central to the art and cultural criticism that Benjamin developed in his theory of aura.

In his often-quoted first formulation of aura, Benjamin gestured at both a natural, intrinsic aura and aura as a function of perception.

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.5

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5 Benjamin, Little History of Photography, 519. Benjamin redeployed this formulation almost verbatim in the Work of Art essay.
The metaphor of a natural scene suggests either the a priori existence of the aura and its immanence in the world—in the branch that casts its shadow during a particular moment of the sun’s course across the sky, in the particular range of mountains—or its inherence within the structure of human sense perception. The observer, in a moment of leisure on a summer’s day, is free to contemplate and “breath the aura” of the natural object. In this moment of leisure, the perceptual apparatus has the luxury to contemplate the luminous auratic object at length within the unique context of a particular moment. The process of auratic perception necessitates complex perceptual oscillations, between the physical and the metaphysical, between sense perception and a natural immanence. At the very least, Benjamin’s first formulation registers the important fact that aura is never exclusively a function of artistic production, that it emerges in and through an active awareness. To rephrase a quote from the philosopher Novalis, one of Benjamin’s favorites—aura is an attentiveness.

The “weave of time and space” that constitutes aura can be understood in the context of unique occurrence set apart and available for contemplative immersion. Benjamin’s definition, bordering on paradox, weaves together two distinct aspects of human perception—awareness of time and awareness of space. The “moment” in time is somehow subsumed into the “appearance” of the object or its distance. Visual

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6 It also presages Benjamin’s argument about technologies that work within nature as opposed to technologies that dominate nature. In chapter VI of the Work of Art essay, Benjamin makes a distinction between technologies that incorporate human labor, “the subjects of which were humans and their environment,” and alienating machine age technologies that “by an unconscious ruse…distance [human beings] from nature.” (Selected Writings III, 107)

7 Leisure may be an overlooked element in Benjamin’s aesthetics. In Unpacking My Library Benjamin extols the virtues of leisure: “O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure!” (67). Leisure is requisite for the collector, the reader of texts, and the aesthete. Free time and relaxation seem to animate the perceptual apparatus and sensitize us to the aura.
perception becomes one with temporal perception. But the observer’s visual perception of the branch encompasses not only its external appearance, but also a complicated spatial awareness. In the unique moment of contemplative immersion, auratic perception oscillates between the natural distance of the auratic object set apart, and the inherent “closeness” of immersion. Benjamin’s branch may be spatially close, close enough to reach out and touch, but he insists that its aesthetic essence remains distant, available either fleetingly or not at all.\(^8\) In the moment of auratic perception, the subject can recognize “closeness” and “natural distance” simultaneously. This borderline contradiction suggests a resistance to interpretation that inheres in Benjamin’s initial formulation. As Yvonne Sherratt has described it, this “indeterminate” quality of the aura indicates either an intrinsic vagueness or perhaps the persistent mysticism of Benjamin’s thought.\(^9\)

At the moment of auratic perception, subjective perceptual abilities are transfigured, as are those of the object itself. In his first dissertation, Benjamin already argues that the work can actually be “brought to consciousness and to knowledge of itself.”\(^10\) In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, he takes this notion of the sentient work of art a step further: “To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.”\(^11\) In the moment of auratic perception, the auratic object takes on an awareness of its own, looking back into us in the style of Nietzsche’s abyss. Benjamin was fascinated by the photographic

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\(^8\) Benjamin’s discussion of cult objects provides an illustrative example of art works glimpsed fleetingly. For an account of Benjamin’s ideas about cult value see the final section of this chapter.

\(^9\) Sherratt, 161.

\(^10\) Benjamin, *Concept of Criticism*, 151.

portrait, the art object that “looks back” in the most literal sense. In Little History of Photography, early portrait photographs take on an aura in part due through the inscrutable gazes of the subjects they represent. The gaze of the portrait draws us in, luring us into immersion in the fashion of the Adornian enigma.

The Little History of Photography essay captures a fascinating transitional moment in Benjamin’s philosophy. Mechanically reproduced portrait photographs could retain aura, even as technological advancements began to hem it in and, in some cases, destroy it entirely. But that essay marked the end of auratic possibility for the technologically reproduced work in Benjamin’s oeuvre. The gap between the photography essay and Benjamin’s later work can be described by changes in human modes of perception. Benjamin posits an antithetical relationship between “contemplative immersion,” the meditative, rigorous mode of perception engendered by auratic works, and lackadasical “reception in distraction,” the mode of perception brought about by mechanically reproduced art.

The Loss of Aura

The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility put forth both Benjamin’s most detailed account of the aura and the particulars of its decline. He suggests that auratic works of art have been available for contemplative immersion since the inception of art itself, and that they continued to enjoy that status throughout even the era of bourgeois prosperity that culminated in the doctrine of “art for art’s

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12 Alternately titled The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Benjamin wrote three versions of the essay, the first of which was published in 1935 under the former title. The developments between the first two versions are striking. I will be quoting from the second revised and expanded version, found in volume three of his Selected Writings, unpublished during Benjamin’s lifetime.
sake.” Art works were a “medium for reflection,” and presumed a high level engagement on the part of the viewer. Alternately, in the age of mechanical reproduction, arts like cinema train the modern populace to receive works of art in a state of distraction. Benjamin compares this type of apperception to the experience of architecture, “which has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction.”

We perceive the new art—film for example—in the same way that we notice a building as we walk by it on our way to the factory. In the case of the work of the Dadaist painter August Stramm, Benjamin finds it “impossible to take time for concentration and evaluation as one can before a painting by Derain…Contemplative immersion…is here opposed by distraction.” Dadaism anticipates both the “shock effect” of film and, like architecture, engenders an early mode of reception in distraction.

Benjamin’s dialectic chiasmus, “the alignment of reality with the masses and the masses with reality,” entails both the new modes of perception—the most important of which is the style of “reception in distraction” that technology inculcates

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13 Ibid, 119.
14 Ibid, 119.
15 Ibid, 105.
16 Benjamin also pointed out more extreme cases, where technological changes radically undermine even the ontological bulwarks of human perception. The camera actually changes our perceptual experience of reality: “with the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended…[bringing] to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them” (Work of Art, 105). By exposing new facets of movement and matter, film foregrounds the limits of the human perceptual apparatus. Timothy Lenoir and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht go so far as to understand “the intellectual background of aura as Benjamin’s last ditch effort to save, in the face of a growing challenge from technology, the physical limits of our human bodies as the yardstick of perception itself” (Lenoir, Gumbrecht, 7). The link between aura and this pervasive ontological anxiety culminated in Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay, where he argued that our only point of access to the experience of modernity were the quasi-traumatic “shock experiences” of urban life. According to Benjamin, these shock experiences grant momentary ontological purchase that comes only with the destruction of the aura.
in the masses—and the actual physical changes in the work of art brought about by technology and the mass market. These physical changes are not limited to mechanically reproduced works of art, since the underlying paradigm shift in perception creates a different type of market demand across the spectrum. The vogue for reproduction revolves around “the desire of the present-day masses to “get closer” to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.”17 Technological reproduction is a “technique of diminution” that allows the masses to harness the work and, therefore, its latent political power.18 The diminution is both metaphorical and literal.

Benjamin saw photography as a paradigmatic example of this diminution. Through photography, a painting like the Mona Lisa is “miniaturized,” even if its dimensions stay consistent, as it can be transported to meet the viewer in his own unique situation. The “miniaturized” Mona Lisa is removed from its unique location in the Lourvre and transported, for example, to the wall of a college dorm room. The increased mobility of the work of art was one of the reasons for its newfound political efficacy in the age of technological reproduction, since a photograph or a film with a strong ideological message could easily be made available to a huge proportion of the population.19

17Ibid, 105.
18Benjamin, Little History of Photography, 523.
19Although it is the central thesis of Benjamin’s essay that the aura was inherently fascistic, and that the new technological art was valuable only insofar as it could foment revolutionary sentiment, his political argument has been variously ignored and deplored. For Adorno, Benjamin’s teleological view of the work of art precluded the “liberation from the principle of utility which [art] is supposed to bring about”(Horkheimer & Adorno 128). Purposeless art is the last bastion against the “culture industry” which, according to Adorno, homogenizes all art down to its lowest common denominator and eliminates both contemplative, intellectually rigorous autonomous art at one end of the spectrum, and the free play of irrational
The new miniature work of art gains mobility at the price of its uniqueness:
“In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the
work of art—its unique existence in a particular place.”

A photograph, or a photographic reproduction, is always already reproduced and exists in a plurality of
copies. Substituting “a mass existence” for a unique one, the photograph shatters the
auratic weave of time and space. The “mass existence” of the photograph becomes
the norm for art in the era of technological reproduction, and replaces an older
religious model in which the work is available only fleetingly, and remains essentially
unapproachable. The technologically reproduced artwork is available at all times and
infinitely approachable.

The increased mobility of the miniaturized reproduction compromises the
uniqueness, but this is not the only sense in which “uniqueness” is destroyed by
reproduction. Prefiguring Fredric Jameson’s complaint about cultural homogeneity
under late capitalism, the new, non-auratic style of perception “extracts sameness
even from what is unique.”

As the masses “align with reality” and become
absorbed by a culture industry flooded with reproductions, uniqueness disappears
from the work of art. The goal of a unique work, a work that set up a subjective set of
aesthetic criteria by which it might be judged, was underwritten by an imagined idea
of artistic autonomy.

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entertainment at the other. Most of the literary critics that take up the idea of aura (like Frank
Letricchia, Timothy L. Parrish, and Jeremy Green) ignore Benjamin’s political teleology in
the Work of Art Essay in order to make aesthetic arguments about the duplicative image.

Benjamin, Work of Art, 103.

Ibid, 104.

Ibid, 105.
Benjamin’s first dissertation also offers an early conception of the “autonomous work of art”—a term that remains intimately bound up, even synonymous with the “auratic work of art”. The written correspondence between Benjamin and his protégé (and colleague in the Frankfurt School for Social Research) Theodor Adorno makes this synonymous relationship explicit. By 1936, the terms are used interchangeably. In 1919, Benjamin uses the language of autonomy to describe how the romantics “achieve freedom from heteronymous aesthetic doctrines, but [make] this freedom possible in the first place by setting up for artworks a criterion other than the rule—namely, the criterion of an immanent structure specific to the work itself.”

Benjamin obliquely refers to what Adorno will later make explicit about the status of art under bourgeois capitalism. In Benjamin’s view, during romantic times of economic prosperity “art was...able to exist as a separate sphere in its bourgeois form.” Here, Adorno’s words may be helpful in understanding the notion of art’s “immanent structure” and its early bourgeois status.

Adorno’s more legible, materialist definition of the auratic work of art emphasizes “its freedom, as negation of the social utility which is establishing itself through the market.” In a bourgeois economy of prosperity with financially secure artists, the operations of the market upon the work of art are largely “anonymous.” These are its external freedoms. Benjamin, however, insists on a sort of metaphysical internal freedom based on an “immanent structure”. Works with an immanent structure are, in Adorno’s words, “pure works of art, which...[follow] their own

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23 Benjamin, Adorno, Complete Correspondence.
24 Benjamin, Concept of Criticism, 155.
26 Adorno & Horkheimer, 127
27 Benjamin, Concept of Criticism, 127.
inherent laws.” The work of art defines itself, sets up its own individual set of subjective criteria and engenders subjective expectations.

The materialist in Benjamin must have been aware that artistic autonomy was, at least partially, an illusion. His aesthetics do imagine an art that retains the metaphysical autonomy of the aura, the autonomy of an immanent, inherent structure. But looming economic and technological change threatens to compromise even the metaphysical within the artwork. The “anonymous” operations of the market exert themselves more forcefully upon the work of art in the age after mechanical reproduction, bringing about a veritable crisis.

When the market begins to encroach on the autonomy of a work, that work can no longer be considered “authentic” as Benjamin defines it. In the *Work of Art* essay, Benjamin makes the drastic claim that “the whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction.” Before our modern capacity for technological reproduction there was a clear distinction between the “authentic” work and the inauthentic work: the inauthentic work was a forgery, a master’s copy, a fake that tried to pass itself off as “the real thing.” The blurring of the line between the authentic work and the inauthentic work is the crux of the crisis brought about by increased capacity for technological reproduction.

In the era of photography every print becomes a mere simulacra: “From the photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense.” As Benjamin has it, artworks that exist in a plurality of copies are all equally inauthentic. The photograph that is always already

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28 Adorno & Horkheimer, 127.
30 Ibid, 106.
reproduced cannot lay claim to singularity, it cannot be unique and cannot be placed alongside the relics of an auratic past. To label a work inauthentic is to radically devalue it, to relegate its status to that of an imitation.

**Tradition and Ritual**

Benjamin imagined the birth of art taking place at the dawn of human existence. Any concept of aesthetic tradition begins with these mythical origins, where “the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in the cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious.”31 These original auratic works were fundamentally mystical, and the cult foregrounded the metaphysical (“magical, then religious”) qualities of the art work. This magical aspect emerges through collective experience of ritual.32

The ritual derives its authenticating power from the weight of collective experience which can be integrated into consciousness—as Benjamin reminds us in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, “rituals with their ceremonies…triggered recollections at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime.”33 Ritual engenders memory that leaves a trace of the past. It continues to knit together the experiences of disparate individuals in an era marked by the waning of “the ability to exchange experiences.”34 The spinning out of terms continues as ritual begets authenticity: “The

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32 In the *Baudelaire* essay, Benjamin describes how shared rituals, religious or otherwise, enable groups of people to integrate their experiences into a collective memory. Through ritual, sensations are subsumed into the “long experience” around which the aura clusters.
33 Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 159.
unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual.”^{35} “Unique value” is inherent in the authentic work. Benjamin argues that it is impossible to declare mechanically reproduced works authentic.

Tradition lends aura to the art object by determining its uniqueness: “The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition.”^{36} A work can only be unique within the context of other works from which it can distinguish itself as such. It endows the work with a sort of metaphysical uniqueness, a uniqueness not dependent on an absence of copies, but rather on its responsiveness and continuity with past works. One might be tempted to think that if a technologically reproduced work could be located in a tradition, then it, too, could be considered at least partially auratic. Benjamin himself never raised this possibility. In the era of aura’s supposed decline and disappearance, “technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object form the sphere of tradition.”^{37} Benjamin imagines dialogue between mechanically reproduced works and past works still embedded in tradition to be impossible. His historical moment of crisis becomes an opportunity for art to shake off the yoke of tradition and embrace its new reproducible character in the name of revolutionary politics.

The incommensurability of tradition and mechanical duplication in Benjamin is perhaps unsurprising given his narrow and prejudicial restriction of what counts as a tradition. In her introduction to Illuminations, Benjamin’s friend and colleague Hannah Arendt makes a dubious reference to the “relatively traditionless America.”^{38}

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^{35} Ibid, 105.
^{36} Ibid, 105.
^{37} Ibid, 104.
^{38} Arendt, 46.
Arendt and Benjamin’s idea of tradition is largely confined to Greco/Roman heritage he references sporadically throughout the Work of Art essay. Written in 1940, mere weeks before his suicide, Theses on the Philosophy of History gives a much more complicated account of a tradition freighted with historical violence.

Cultural treasures…owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not a document of barbarism…barbarism also taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.39

The “manner of transmission” of these documents of barbarism is none other than tradition itself. The entirety of Benjamin’s cultural heritage is made to testify to the violence of a hegemonic ruling class.40 The auratic work of art, passed down by tradition, arrives at its cultural prestige thanks to the anonymous toil of a subjugated class. If the ruling classes are being made to stand trial, then the auratic work of art has become merely a piece of evidence against them. Mechanically reproduced art wakes Benjamin from this nightmare of tradition. By shrugging off that bad dream, mechanically reproduced art can be truly revolutionary where auratic art is always already reactionary. But the concept of tradition is even more complicated than I have previously suggested.

In Terry Eagleton’s reading, Benjamin’s tradition does not necessarily imply the violence of the ruling hegemony and the auratic art caught in the web of a dominant ideology. Drawing on the Theses on the Philosophy of History, Eagleton reads Benjamin’s “tradition” dialectically:

39 Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History, 256.
40 Here we have a negative reformulation of the submerged political character of the work of art. The extent to which this pessimistic view of “cultural treasures” contradicts art’s claim to autonomy (as outlined above) and implicates art in a political struggle is a clear indication of the radical philosophical changes Benjamin went through towards the end of his life.
Benjamin’s tradition is certainly a totality of a kind, but at the same time a ceaseless detotalization of a triumphalist ruling-class history… it operates as a deconstructive force within hegemonic ideologies of history, yet can be seen too as a totalizing movement within which sudden affinities, correspondences and constellations may be fashioned between disparate struggles.\textsuperscript{41}

Eagleton suggests that tradition can be made to work against the forces of the ruling hegemony through active remembrance of what Benjamin termed the “tradition of the oppressed.”\textsuperscript{42} The tradition of the oppressed is a sort of shadow tradition, or an unacknowledged strain of tradition itself, that does not participate in the triumphal procession over the prostrate working classes. Instead, it operates as a dialectical foil, shedding light on the barbarism behind canonized cultural treasures and bringing the disparate struggles of the marginalized into view. Through it, shadow elements of a culture can be fashioned into a united front under a new banner, and Benjamin’s prejudicial, exclusive concept of tradition opens up. It would not tarnish a work of art to claim embeddedness in a tradition of the oppressed. Without the historical baggage of violent ruling class history, tradition is no longer a thing to be cast aside.

Following Eagleton, the tradition of the oppressed might be a new medium for the transmission of historical works of art, one that needs not bow to the standard of the hegemon or feed into the barbaric cannon. In that sense, the tradition of the oppressed is already in the position to complete Benjamin’s project of “wrest[ing] tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”\textsuperscript{43} The new shadow tradition is in a position to pass down works of art to future generations on its own terms, without being co-opted into the conformist ideological project of passing down the objects that reflect well on the ruling classes. Presumably, our aesthetic heritage

\textsuperscript{41} Eagleton, 67.
\textsuperscript{42} Benjamin, \textit{Theses}, 257.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 255.
remains, but we can recognize the “documents of barbarism” for what they really are. When all traditions become citable, not only can auratic works be made to speak about historical violence, but previously excluded works might be allowed to lay claim to a “shadow aura” through embeddedness in a tradition of the oppressed. It is on these grounds that certain contemporary works imagined in the novels in this study will lay claim to aura.

Benjamin would not attain the philosophical stature he dreamed of until long after his death. With the publication of *Illuminations*, a volume of Benjamin’s seminal essays edited by Hannah Arendt that appeared for the first time in 1968, the idea of aura found its way into the hands of a new generation of scholars. Many of Benjamin’s ideas were borne out by the technological innovations of the day, seemingly gaining new purchase in a world where duplicative technology left few arenas of experience untouched. His friend Theodor Adorno did much to facilitate the further dissemination of Benjamin’s ideas, even as Adorno’s own highly influential body of work took up much of Benjamin’s thought and circulated it in a new and more accessible form. Benjamin’s influence exerted itself across a wide range of disciplines—not only literary and art criticism, but also the burgeoning areas of film and media studies—ensuring the continued relevance of his thought which has persisted to the present day.

History and influential friends may have brought him fame, but Benjamin’s real allure will always be in his writing. The depth of his insight into the production of aesthetic works sprung, in part, from his own aesthetic production as a prose
writer. Like the artists he so admired (Paul Klee, Joyce, Kafka), Benjamin had a gift for the enigmatic. His ideas came to resemble the auratic works of art he described in his writings. At the risk of speaking tautologically, the idea of the aura itself is particularly auratic. In both its deeply obscure substantive meaning and the oracular prose that conveys its meaning, the idea of aura itself actually engenders and necessitates real contemplative immersion on the part of the reader. Benjamin’s writing about the aura lures the reader in with the promise of a fleeting glimpse a truth, of a mythical underpinning, a forgotten luster in the world. The enigma at the heart of the idea of aura guarantees it a second life.

Aura and the Novel

Novelistic Self-Justification

The continued allure of Benjamin’s aesthetics is self-evident in the body of literary criticism that heralds the return of the auratic within the text of the contemporary novel. Novels like DeLillo’s White Noise and Doctorow’s Ragtime have become sites of critical debate where Benjamin’s terms are frequently brought to bear in discussions about the representation of art and the image. Critics make use of Benjamin’s aesthetics in the name of apprehending the aesthetic spirit of our current historical moment. Each novel in this study offers its own comment on that aesthetic climate, positing a world where aura and artistic authenticity have begun once again to inhabit the object, and where the human subject has the power to both create and perceive auratic works. The meaning of this return is not immediately apparent. In the following chapters, I will attempt to chart examples of the imagined restoration of the
aura in the novel and offer several explanations of how that resurgence of aura operates in the service of a larger project.

The persistent imagined presence of the aura in contemporary novels begs an important question: to what end does the contemporary novelist write aura into the text? How can we explain its unlikely prevalence? To what use is it being put? The aura is not merely a comment on the state of artistic production in our present historical moment. I will argue, perhaps polemically, that the return of aura operates in the service of different but related authorial projects. The contemporary novel has become a site of and stage for anxiety over aesthetic authenticity in the age after Benjamin. In order to stake a claim to that authenticity, the contemporary novelist devises a number of projects and textual strategies to identify themselves and their work with the aura. I will argue that a self-conscious project of novelistic self-justification operates in and through the internal presence of auratic art and the auratic artist. The novelist, in an effort to shore up a claim to authenticity and artistic authority, embarks on the dialectical project of writing aura into the text in order to lay claim to that very aura. The goal of the contemporary novelist is that the imagined aura within the novel be transfigured. It must become the real aura of the novel itself.

**The Novel in a Culture of Authenticity**

The novel is no stranger to the authenticating project. It came into being as a form of popular entertainment, one that could serve the needs of a readership whose growth was made possible by advances in printing. Even for the modernist novelists who struggled to achieve literary prestige, the genre was never fully extricable from the technology of mass culture, and therefore continually bound up in the crisis of the
machine age, articulated so forcefully by Benjamin. In his book *The Real Thing*, Miles Orvell poses a question that suggests the terms by which Benjamin’s dilemma still resonates in contemporary North American culture: “How has the machine, with its power to produce replicas and reproductions, altered our culture? Has it, for example, degraded the quality of civilization by flooding our world with sham things? Or has it enlarged and democratized the base of our culture?”

For Benjamin, the answer was “both,” but only in the event that society managed to harness the political power of those “sham things” in the interest of that newly democratized base. The contemporary novelists in this study are not unconcerned with the political fate of art in an age of ever accelerating technologies of duplication, but they subordinate political anxieties to aesthetic ones. The novel itself, like all other duplicative works, is always under suspicion of being a “sham thing.” What Orvell calls the “culture of authenticity” is the rarefied club to which the novelist seeks admission. In the culture as described by Orvell, the novelist cannot contemplate authenticity without anxiety.

Critics like Thomas Strychacz and Mark McGurl argue that technologically reproduced mass culture, disreputable as it was, gave the novel something to pit itself against and distinguish itself from, staking a claim to authenticity by virtue of its fundamental difference. While the novel may have pretended to remove itself from the sphere of mass culture, Strychacz insists that it remained inextricable from the arena of the popular. Emphasizing the necessity of theorizing the authentic alongside the inauthentic, he posits a dialectical relationship between literary modernism and the mass culture it pretended to critique.  

Mark McGurl provides a lucid example of

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44 Miles Orvell, 36.
45 Strychacz, 15.
the dialectical “braiding” of high and low, noting the preponderance of narratives which “depart from the relatively sophisticated urban milieux in which they tend to be produced and read in order to represent social worlds pointedly lower.” Through representations of the “lower” classes and borrowings from mass cultural “low-art,” the modernist novel was able to partake of the culture from which it sought to distinguish itself. In this study, both Ragtime and Coming Through Slaughter will enact precisely this kind of cultural borrowing. Whether or not the authors in this study are the heirs to a tradition of literary high-modernism, they have certainly inherited modernism’s fraught, dialectical relationship with mass cultural and its persistent anxiety over authenticity.

A novel cannot unproblematically be characterized as auratic, since Benjamin himself explicitly foreclosed that possibility. In The Storyteller, a highly idiosyncratic look at the circulation of literary narratives in the age of mechanical reproduction, he explicitly places the aura outside the reach of the novel as a generic form. Benjamin knew that the novel was not insulated from the crisis of authenticity, since “the dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing.” The novel is an object of mechanical reproduction, subject to the same decline in aura as all other reproduced works. Materially wedded to the book, it is equally subject to the whims of the market and equally implicated in a crisis of authenticity. For

46 McGurl, 8.
47 Several of the novels in this study, particularly E.L. Doctorow’s Ragtime and Michael Ondaatje’s Coming Through Slaughter, reflect the persistence of this dialectic by pointedly enacting a departure from the confirmed urban milieux in which they were produced. Ondaatje particularly aggressive foray out of the rarefied terrain of the literary seeks both to partake of and identify itself with the world of the low classes.
48 Benjamin, The Storyteller, 87
Benjamin, the idea of an authentic novel would have been an impossibility. As early literary forms like the oral tradition of the storyteller fade away the aura disappears from literature with them, leaving only impoverished shadow forms that pretend to assume a similar function. In Benjamin’s analysis, the novelist is ill equipped to assume the mantle of the storyteller because of an inability to partake in the exchange of human experiences. Benjamin saw the writing of a novel as a fundamentally solipsistic enterprise, written by alienated, isolated figures at the margins of a culture in crisis.

Benjamin’s account is unusual, even incompatible with many of the more widely accepted theories of the novel. Yet it does have purchase on the central thesis of this study. Though his analysis is strange and even lacking in historical rigor, it seems that Benjamin prophesied both the dilemma and the first response of the contemporary novelist in search of aesthetic authenticity. According to Benjamin, the novelist has “isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others.”49 For the novelists in this study, that isolation is both a symptom of and an answer to their authorial dilemma.

Though is may seem damning to relegate the novelist to a sort of author’s quarantine, Don DeLillo might actually relish Benjamin’s assessment of the contemporary novelist’s situation. Benjamin’s description resembles DeLillo’s own account of the novelist’s imagined fringe position quite closely. DeLillo famously writes about men in small rooms isolated from the outside world. These men

49 Ibid, 87.
resemble DeLillo himself in their reclusiveness. As Owen Brademas remarks in DeLillo’s *The Names*: "If I were a writer, how I would enjoy being told the novel is dead. How liberating, to work in the margins, outside a central perception. You are the ghoul of literature. Lovely." Even if the novel is dead (or if the author himself is dead, as Barthes had it), the novelist as Brademas imagines him still enjoys a sort of afterlife, haunting the culture that finds him largely invisible.

DeLillo is, indeed, a novelist who has isolated himself to great effect. He is careful not to compromise the novel’s slippery claims to autonomy by speaking too much about the content of his work. But this has not prevented him from inserting internal figures for himself into his books, and then vigorously identifying with them in the service of validating his novelistic project. Indeed, there seems to be a distinct and deeply self-conscious purpose to which DeLillo’s numerous men in small rooms are put. Any doubt of the novelistic canniness I am positing might be laid to rest by the aforementioned Owen Brademas quote or a dozen others like it. Though DeLillo relishes the isolation of the modern novelist, he emphatically does not hold himself aloof from the novels he writes. He is not indifferent to the pursuit of authenticity, content to blur the lines and see his novels relegated to the category of “sham things.” Against this imagined waning of novelistic authenticity, DeLillo imagines a sort of auratic bond between himself and the artists in his texts. He is hardly alone in this.

Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* provides an illustrative example of the self-validating novelistic project that operates through an artist figure. Ondaatje vigorously identifies himself with his protagonist, the impoverished jazz

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50 Don DeLillo, *The Names*, 153
originator Buddy Bolden, another artist who retreats from fame into an anonymous small room where he is content to be a mere “king of corners.” Ondaatje follows suit, writing himself into the novel and into another small room where, unlike the repulsive world of the literary celebrity, “there are no prizes.” As it was for DeLillo, isolation is a virtue, a stave against corrupting fame. But the ultimate reason for Ondaatje to bind himself to his protagonist is not the inherent value of solitude. His actual aim is to buttress the authority of his novelistic project itself. For Ondaatje, the novelist’s isolation is not banishment, but a layer of insulation against the creeping literary market that would sap the novel of its aura through endless commodification. But isolation is not enough to counter the forces of technological reproduction, and novelists must find a more robust mode of validating their artistic project. To that end, they claim the internal aura, represented within the text, for themselves and for their novels.

Ondaatje figures Bolden as an auratic artist. He aggressively stakes a claim to Bolden’s authenticity and his aura by identifying himself with Bolden through a process of strenuous doubling. The ultimate conflation between Ondaatje and Bolden happens as the author looks at a photograph of Bolden when suddenly “the photograph moves and becomes a mirror.” Ondaatje, in a sense, enters the photograph in the fashion of Benjamin’s “Chinese painter [who] entered his completed painting while beholding it.” The photograph’s role in the union of Bolden and Ondaatje is not accidental, nor are its reflective capabilities as a “mirror.”

51 Michael Ondaatje, Coming Through Slaughter, 86.
52 Ibid, 156.
53 Ibid, 133
54 Benjamin, Work of Art, 119.
In *Coming Through Slaughter*, the photograph, too, becomes auratic. By reclaiming the aura for mechanically reproduced works of art, Ondaatje continues to shore up the claim to authenticity he made through identification with Bolden: if one mechanically reproduced art can somehow reclaim the aura, then the door is open for the novel to follow.

A novelistic strategy of self-authentication through both internal, auratic figures, and reclamation of the aura for mechanically reproduced works, is common to all of the novels I will discuss in this study, albeit in slightly different ways. The return of the aura is a symptom of that fundamentally self-interested novelistic project, the goal of which is to claim aura for both the novelist and the novel itself. The “ghoul of literature” does not aspire to be merely the guilty conscience of a broken culture. Instead, that ghost aspires to be more than just the shade of a former artist.
**Coming Through Slaughter and Novelistic Authenticity**

“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”

Walter Benjamin *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

“If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes—then you should never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history.”

Michael Ondaatje *Coming Through Slaughter*

The first page of *Coming Through Slaughter* features a sonograph—a visual representation of audio frequencies in a discrete sound—that represents the dolphin’s “squawk.” The ever-expanding web of technology is now capable of ensnaring sounds native to the deep ocean and duplicating them on the front page of a paperback. The message is clear, not even these aquatic broadcasts can completely elude the forces of technology. But mechanical reproduction does not go undefeated in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Buddy Bolden, the protagonist of the novel and the man who “began the good jazz,” is a legend for never having made a record. His music is never duplicated, never technologically reproduced, never commodified.55 Bolden has historical immunity, an exemption from the crisis of authenticity. The meaning of the sonograph would be self-evident event without the text’s description of Bolden’s manic improvisations. The “squawks” that come from Bolden’s are instantly and irrevocably lost, his music is more remote than sounds originating at the bottom of the ocean. The only technology that can bring back Buddy Bolden’s music is the technology of the novel.

Buddy Bolden, a real historical figure, was born in 1887 in New Orleans. He went on to become a seminal innovator in jazz history, widely influential despite never having

55 Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, i.
made a record. Shirking the fame which technological reproduction promised to bring him, Bolden toiled in obscurity until the end of his life. The text insists that Bolden deliberately avoided the duplicative technology of the record, that he willfully “stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history.” *Coming Through Slaughter* celebrates Bolden for his absence from history and his evasion of technology. At a decisive moment of historical and technological change, Bolden denies mechanical reproduction its Faustian claim to the aura.

Ondaatje’s imagined Bolden cuts hair by day, plays jazz all night, and follows his erratic muse on various alcoholic adventures. His friend Webb, a detective and another Ondaatje proxy, frequently takes it upon himself to track Bolden down and cut short his drinking binges and misadventures with other mens’ wives. In order to track Bolden, Webb solicits a photograph of him from the photographer E.J. Bellocq, another real historical personage whose work was rediscovered around the time Ondaatje was writing *Coming Through Slaughter.* In the 1970’s, Bellocq gained notoriety for his enigmatic portraits of Storyville prostitutes, and for the distinctive scratch marks on his prints. Here was an artist who did violence to his own art. The text stages a friendship between Bolden and Bellocq, which proves formative for both men, but the fictionalized friendship ends abruptly with Bellocq’s suicide. Bolden does not fare much better, and by the end of the novel he descends into madness, languishing in the obscurity of a positively medieval mental institution for the last thirty years of his life. Bolden’s tragic story is dappled with subplots and other media, including photographs, fake interviews, real historical documents, and the aforementioned sonograph. Against this heterogeneous aesthetic background, a
pastiche of sorts, Bolden’s music—permanently outside of mechanical reproduction—stands out for its inherent authenticity.

The text of *Coming Through Slaughter* not only figures Bolden as a quintessentially auratic artist, it endows Bellocq’s photographs with aura despite their complicity with duplicative technology. These instances of imagined aura will be central to a radical self-justifying project within the novel. Through Bolden and via Bellocq’s photograph, Ondaatje will stake a claim to the imagined aura in his text. Ondaatje figures Bellocq’s portrait of Bolden as an auratic work of art in the name of both elevating the status of the mechanically reproduced work of art more generally, and, more importantly, in order to establish the terms by which he will identify himself with Bolden. The photograph becomes both an icon of the auratic and a conduit between Ondaatje and his protagonist, allowing him to all but explicitly intrude into the text in his own voice. In one authorial incursion, Ondaatje looks into a photograph of Bolden (in the text it is falsely attributed to Bellocq) and sees an auratic mirrored image of himself.

**Buddy Bolden’s Auratic Music**

The text is explicit, even didactic, in imagining aura through the uniqueness of Bolden’s art—

> If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes—then you *should* never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history.\(^{56}\)

It is right, says the italicized “should,” that Bolden was never recorded, and that the reader’s only access to Bolden’s music is mediated by a literary text. While his

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\(^{56}\) *Ibid*, 37.
contemporaries move into the realm of the mechanically reproduced, where they consent to being removed from their unique contexts in order to meet the consumer in a contemporary one, Bolden “stays away” in isolation as an exile from both history and technology.

According to Benjamin, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Bolden’s spontaneous aesthetic productions are so completely moored to a unique moment in time and space that a momentary passing wind could “change the next series of notes” he played. Bolden’s art is so unique that it becomes utterly ephemeral. The text harps on this notion of uniqueness obsessively. Bolden himself speaks of playing his cornet “at just the right note to equal the tone of the room,” that is to say, equal to its unique location in space.57

Bolden elaborates a concept of unique time and space, of art in a swiftly passing moment, that is even more radical than Benjamin’s formulation: “When I played parades we would be going down Canal Street and at each intersection people would hear just the fragment I happened to be playing and it would fade as I went further down Canal. They would not be there to hear the ends of phrases.”58 Bolden valorizes his art’s existence in a unique moment and location even at the expense of its inherent structure. His parade concerts are perpetually in forward motion, meaning that each musical moment belongs to a space unique from the previous one. As Bolden marches forward in space his music continuously disappears, an elegy for itself. It is no coincidence that this “blurring of form” recalls the purposeful

58 Ibid, 94.
ambiguities of Ondaatje’s own prose style, the frequent lapses in time and the abrupt shifts in setting and chronology. Ondaatje goes to great lengths to valorize the spontaneous and the slurred, occasionally by contrast with more placid styles. He emphatically identifies his own style of composition with Bolden’s.

Ondaatje counterposes Bolden’s art with that of his mechanically reproduced contemporary, John Robichaux. In a scene of particular relevance, Bolden encounters this duplicated music in the house of his friend Webb. Robichaux’s staid waltzes, broadcast through Webb’s radio, are figured as being diametrically opposed to his own music.

For two hours I’ve been listening to a radio I discovered in your cupboard…I had to push it into a socket, nervous, ready to jump back …For two hours I’ve been listening. People talking about a crisis I missed that has been questionably solved. Couldn’t understand it. They were not being clear, they were not giving me the history of it all, and I didn’t know who was supposed to be the hero of the story…Robichaux’s band came on. John Robichaux! Playing his waltzes. And I hate to admit it but I enjoyed listening to the clear forms.  

The text stages this encounter between Bolden and his duplicated peer in order to juxtapose Bolden’s auratic art with the technological forces that threaten to consume it. Bolden is jittery plugging in the radio, the very electricity makes him nervous. The radio is anathema to his art, and he physically rejects it. He listens to the radio for two hours, transfixed, and yet cannot “understand it”. These ambiguous sentences are particularly resonant in light of Benjamin’s essay. The radio, broadcasting its music from an anonymous, remote location, denies the listener “the history of it all” in the manner of the mechanically reproduced work of art that has become disconnected from tradition. The radio provides the quintessential example of a technology that

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59 Ibid, 93.
permits “the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation.” Bolden’s art exists in diametrical opposition to the widely dispersed radio broadcast, happening simultaneously in a multitude of different locations. Yet Robichaux’s music is oddly seductive for Bolden, and he “hates to admit” that enjoys Robichaux’s “clear forms” that are so unlike the blurred, fragmented, lyrical style that he shares with Ondaatje. But that seduction is ultimately a dangerous one. Robichaux is pandering to his audience, offering to compromise his art and meet them half way through the apparatus of the radio, making him an original sell-out. The text will go on to offer a vision of Bolden as an artist with integrity and an increasingly rare ability to communicate the “history of it all”.

*Coming Through Slaughter* imagines Bolden’s music as being quite thoroughly “embedded in a tradition.” That tradition is not the Greco-Roman one Benjamin imagined, but rather the kind of tradition Terry Eagleton extrapolates from Benjamin, a subaltern tradition of the oppressed that can pass down aesthetic traditions unsullied by the violence of the ruling classes. The marginalized tradition of African Americans is the fertile ground from which Bolden’s music springs. Dude Botely, a legend in the tradition, gives the most revealing account of Buddy’s origins:

I thought I knew his blues before, and the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen careful for he’s playing something that sounds like both...he’s mixing them up. He’s playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues...that is the first time I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together.

They hymns represent the Christian/Western thread of Bolden’s tradition. The blues, the other key element in Bolden’s music, derives from a mix of local and African

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60 Benjamin, 104.
61 See Chapter 1.
62 Ibid, 81.
forms, from the music of American slaves. According to Botely, these two traditions intertwine fluidly in Bolden’s playing. Far from being divorced from tradition, Bolden is thoroughly embedded in a multi-ethnic lineage that is uniquely American, straddling the divide between the sort of compromised tradition Benjamin wrote about in the *Work of Art* essay and the redemptive tradition of the oppressed he imagined in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Ritual returns alongside tradition, as Botely also calls our attention to the embeddedness of the hymns in the funeral ritual, the most fundamental cultic rite, the collective marking of a death. The New Orleans funeral service would include a parade and a brass band. The hymns, originating in the service of the funeral ritual, would have moved forward through a succession of unique spaces and moments, audible only fleetingly.

**Aura and Photography**

It is no accident that E.J. Bellocq is the photographer responsible for the image that “becomes a mirror” in which Ondaatje sees Bolden. Ondaatje endows Bellocq with the ability to create images with reflective depth, a Benjaminian uniqueness (in both senses of the word), and real authenticity. He achieves aura partly through idiosyncrasy—his distinctive practice of defacing his own prints complicates their status as reproductions:

Some of the pictures have knife slashes across the bodies. Along the ribs. Some of them neatly decapitate the head of the naked body with scratches…They reflect each other, the eye moves back and forth. The cuts add a three-dimensional quality to each work. Not just physically, though you can almost see the depth of the knife slashes, but also because you think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies.\(^{63}\)

\(^{63}\) Ibid, 55.
In the *Work of Art* essay, Benjamin suggests that it does not make sense to ask for the “authentic” print of photograph because prints necessarily exist in a plurality of copies. Bellocq’s scratch marks exempt his photographs from this rule. The “knife slashes” make each print unique and necessarily different from all other Bellocq prints, even those of the same photograph. Each of the “plurality of copies” is painstakingly individualized through these markings. Made by the hand of the artist, the slashes are outside the realm of mechanical reproduction. The crude markings are necessarily imprecise, impossible to replicate consistently, and almost ostentatiously man made.\(^6^4\) The marked print takes on that elusive, unique location in time and space, and they take on authenticity. It *does* make sense to ask for an “authentic” Bellocq print. The knife scratches are part of what we’re asking for.\(^6^5\)

Benjamin’s earliest auratic criteria, outlined in his *Concept of Criticism* dissertation, specify that art is a medium for reflection and contemplative immersion. In the text, Bolden points to the immersive possibilities of Bellocq’s photographs, calling them “pictures. That were like…windows.”\(^6^6\) The photographs possess both inherent depth and artificial depth, with the “cuts add[ing] a three dimensional quality.” The depth of the knife scratches is almost visible to the naked eye. The knife scratches are Bellocq’s first attempt to “enter the photographs,” as so many other characters will try to do. All of these characters follow the precedent of the

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\(^6^4\) The markings are prominently featured in *Storyville Portraits*, the now infamous coffee table collection of Bellocq’s work.
\(^6^5\) And many *do* ask this question about the authenticity of Bellocq’s prints. There is considerable debate over whether Bellocq himself is responsible for the scratch marks. In imagining Bellocq definitely as the culprit, Ondaatje confirms his auratic status. It is also worth noting the symbolic violence of the scratch marks. In Ondaatje’s texts, violence seems to confer a sort of authenticity, in the case of both Bellocq’s photography and Billy the Kid’s gun slinging.
Chinese painter cited by Benjamin: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it.”  

At different points in the text, Bellocq, Webb, Bolden, and even Ondaatje himself will step into these photographs in the manner of Benjamin’s Chinese painter. This immersive potential in Bellocq’s photographs is further confirmation of their auratic potential. Before going on to discuss Ondaatje’s complete immersion in Bellocq’s portrait of Bolden—the decisive moment where Ondaatje completes his project of novelistic self-justification by incarnating Bolden—I want to outline the extent to which Benjamin’s aesthetics of aura can be brought to bear on the imagined works of Bellocq. Casting a wider net, Bellocq becomes a quintessentially Benjaminian photographer.

Benjamin’s *Little History of Photography*, where he imagined the last vestiges of aura inhering in early examples of portrait photography, comes closest to describing the auratic potential of Bellocq’s work. Benjamin writes about the era of photography during which “the human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested.” Bellocq also captures this oddly silent gaze in his photographs. The enigmatic expressions of his subjects are the source of his photographs’ power. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin offered more relevant insight into the unique power of portraiture: “to experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.” Certainly no object “looks back at us” quite like the image of a human face. The faces in Bellocq’s photographs posses the

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67 Benjamin *Work of Art*, 119  
68 Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*  
69 Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*.  

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deep, lost gaze of fleeting aura that seems to look out at the viewer. Webb certainly partakes in this exchange of gazes within the text of *Coming Through Slaughter* while looking at a photograph of Bolden. But Benjamin’s reading of the gaze did not stop with an acknowledgement of enigma. In *Little History of Photography*, Benjamin turned the gaze of the portrait into a window to wider historical and personal realities. *Coming Through Slaughter* enacts analogous readings of Bellocq’s photographs along the same lines.

Benjamin writes about a photograph of photographer Karl Dauthendey and his fiancé, who committed suicide days after the photograph was taken. Looking into the face of the doomed Mme. Dauthendey, Benjamin finds that her “gaze passes by him, absorbed in an ominous distance.”70 The enigma of her gaze holds autobiographical secrets that threaten to “absorb” the viewer, a sort of hypnotic, forced contemplation. Benjamin wants us to “search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”71 According to Benjamin, within the gaze of the suicide and in the photograph more generally there is a presence beyond what is visually represented. Somehow, in the depths of the gaze there is a trace of tragic personal history that holds the alternate possibility of a road not taken. This leap is characteristically mystical for Benjamin, and one might be tempted to write it off as pure fancy if it didn’t reappear in such a striking way in

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Ondaatje’s work, where the photograph makes an even more dramatic hermeneutic gesture outside itself.

What Benjamin wants us to find in the face of Mme. Dauthendey, Ondaatje asks us to look for in the face of a turn of the century French Quarter prostitute as photographed by E.J. Bellocq. In an artistically calculated move designed to manipulate her gaze, Bellocq takes

one snap to quickly catch her scorching him and then waiting, waiting for minutes so she would become self-conscious toward him and the camera and her status, embarrassed at just her naked arms and neck and remembers for the first time in a long while the roads that she imagined she could take as a child. And he photographed that. 72

Just as Benjamin finds the fiancé’s tragic circumstances buried in her gaze, Ondaatje reads a tragic personal history into the gaze of Bellocq’s prostitute. Although these years of personal history, economic hardship, and social misery are, of course, impossible to reproduce in a photograph, Ondaatje insists they are an immanent presence in Bellocq’s portrait. He imagines the portrait as representing something beyond just a human visage, where the gaze masks a hermeneutic gesture towards an entire unseen life. The photograph manages to capture a shame that originates in a “tiny spark of contingency,” in a moment where a second chance might have lead anywhere but to this moment which finds her standing before Bellocq’s camera. This moment might be sentimental or it might be affecting. It is certainly Benjaminian.

Bolden is right to say that Bellocq’s photographs are “like windows,” since characters are always using them to steal into places where they might not have been let in the front door. Webb uses the photograph to find a Bolden who does not want to be found, and Ondaatje seems to climb into Bolden’s very skin through the

72 Ondaatje, 54.
window of his portrait. Ondaatje—in a dual role as author and narrator—describes looking at one of the only known photographs of the musician (it is reproduced on page 1 of most recent editions) when “it moves and becomes a mirror.”

The photograph, itself an auratic object, is the means by which Ondaatje gains access to Bolden’s very personhood. In keeping with his novelistic project of self-authentication, Ondaatje steps into Bolden’s in order to access the aura he possesses, an aura that Ondaatje figured in Bolden in the first place.

The Novelist’s Incursion

It is easy to see the attraction that Bolden held for Ondaatje. Even in a strict Benjaminitian sense, Bolden is an auratic artist. He holds on to his auratic status even throughout his descent into madness, when he pointedly retreats from public life and into isolation. Bolden’s story, his real historical narrative, makes him a ready-made internal figure for Ondaatje to endow with aura. After positing him as an auratic artist, Ondaatje is ready to enlist Bolden in his novelistic project of self-authentication. In and through Bolden, Ondaatje can enact his radical retreat from fame and from mechanical reproduction, and lay claim to the authenticity that seems

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73 Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 133.
74 The notion that Bolden “stayed away from history” points toward another complexity. Ondaatje’s works are controversial for toying with ideas of history in a typically “postmodern” way, and his alterations to the historical record were denounced in some quarters. A glance at the critical discourse gives a sense of the controversy Ondaatje was courting. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon includes Ondaatje’s work in the newly constituted category of historiographic metafiction. Against Fredric Jameson, who laments the supposed loss of the historical referent and its implications for his Marxist political project, Hutcheon suggests that postmodern historical novels like *Coming Through Slaughter* do not, in fact, dispute the existence of a historical referent at all, but rather contest the means by which we come to know history, denying the existence of any non-textual link to the historical past. Accusations of historical dilettantism and frivolity are all the more reason for him to sure up his claims to authorial authenticity.
to be slipping out of his grasp, perhaps because of his inescapable connection to the literary marketplace. Ondaatje binds himself to Bolden, blurs the line between himself and Bolden, imitates Bolden, and even incarnates Bolden in order to justify his novelistic project through him. By the end of the novel Ondaatje has disappeared, either by going into Bolden or by imitating Bolden’s own disappearance. The novel thus stages the novelist’s own return to both authenticity and isolation.

The runaway success of 1970’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* sent the young poet Ondaatje into “a tailspin.”⁷⁵ The literary market threatened to make him a celebrity. In response, his next novel was to be “a huge fury about fame.”⁷⁶ Ironically, that novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, was greeted with more accolades, and led to even greater public visibility for its author. His “huge fury about fame” is what eventually made him famous. Ondaatje enjoys an even higher profile today, thanks to the wild success of his novel *The English Patient*, later adapted into an Oscar winning film. Recently, Ondaatje seems less concerned about the treacherous pitfalls of literary celebrity. But at that pivotal moment in his career, between his first and second novels, the young writer seemed quite wary of losing his bohemian credentials, or of beings somehow corrupted by fame. His acute anxiety over the “20th century game of fame” became the grist for a vigorous argument in favor of authorial isolation, and his own continued authenticity.⁷⁷

Ondaatje was evidently both disdainful and suspicious of the literary marketplace in which his work continues to circulate. He imagined the looming promise of fame and professional status as a threat to his authenticity and artist

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⁷⁵ Dafoe, 5.
⁷⁷ Ibid, 134.
autonomy. As mass culture encroaches on the novelist’s already slippery claim to authenticity, Ondaatje embeds a countermeasure against it into his very text itself. He stakes a much more robust claim to autonomy and to aura by vigorously identifying himself and his style with the internal aural figure of Bolden. He attempts to justify his novelistic project by claiming Bolden’s aura for his own.

By the time Ondaatje sees himself in “Bellocq’s” antique photograph, Ondaatje and Bolden are so thoroughly doubled that it is no longer immediately apparent which one of them is narrating the story:

Here. Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading. So I can make something unknown in the shape of this room. Where I am the King of Corners.78

Bolden prophetically presages his eventual retreat into both the complete solitude of the mental institution and the total silence of his madness. The King of Corners is the man who revels in his isolation, the man in a small room, anonymous and hidden from the terrible eye of the public. Isolation is valuable insofar as it insulates Bolden from fame, but it is ultimately self-destructive isolation that removes him and his music from the world at large. At the end of the novel, Ondaatje links his own self-imposed isolation with Bolden’s by using almost identical language. With characteristic formal adventurousness, Ondaatje acknowledges the inherent solipsism of his novelistic project even as he tries to break out of it by speaking to the reader in his own voice:

I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with Teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes.79

78 Ibid, 86.
79 Ibid, 156.
By isolating himself in a room and fixating neurotically on its corners, Ondaatje doubles Bolden exactly. “When he went mad he was the same age I am now,” says Ondaatje during one of his incursions into the text. A moment’s research reveals that Ondaatje was thirty-one during the writing of *Coming Through Slaughter*. A historical fact sheet, one of the purportedly real documents interpolated into the text of the novel itself, tells the reader that Bolden was also, in fact, thirty-one when he was first committed. Ondaatje paints himself into the novel as Bolden’s veritable twin, a tortured artist who goes mad in a lonely room. The contemporary reader will know that things didn’t turn out quite this way for Ondaatje.

By the end of *Coming Through Slaughter*, both Ondaatje and his protagonist and avatar Buddy Bolden have retreated from fame and public scrutiny into the seclusion of anonymous rooms. For Ondaatje, this means insulating himself from the trappings of the literary celebrity, while for Bolden seclusion means thirty years of involuntary confinement in a mental institution where the treatment consists of a self-obliterating regime of sedatives and regular abuse (including rape) at the hands of the guards. The manifest disparity between author and protagonist raises some serious ethical questions about the nature of Ondaatje’s literary project, and is itself a symptom of the contemporary novelist’s precarious position.

In one of his incursions into the text, Ondaatje claims that Bolden’s story captured his imagination before he knew that the cornetist was a black man, but he was surely aware of Bolden’s race by the time he stumbled upon that crucial auratic photograph. The handling of race in the novel is occasionally clumsy and

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80 Ibid, 133.
occasionally unselfconscious. At its best, however, *Coming Through Slaughter* gives voice to Bolden as an impoverished, racially marginalized character. The text brings an “ex-centric” character to the fore, to use one of Linda Hutcheon’s terms for describing the positive dispersal of narratives in the contemporary novel. Letting the marginalized speak may be a positive step, but speaking through a marginalized person of a radically different background is certainly presumptuous. Sally Bachner has noted the text’s ethically problematic tendency to “[collapse] complex histories (and places within those histories) of cultural and economic power in placing both himself and Bolden under this shared historical ontology of fame.” In collapsing the distinctions between himself and Bolden, in presuming to “think in [Bolden’s] brain and body,” Ondaatje inadvertently lays claim to Bolden’s historically specific type of suffering. He implies an unfortunate and unpersuasive comparison when, in reality, Ondaatje’s voluntary isolation from adoring press has little in common with Bolden’s confinement in a mental institution/slaughterhouse.

Ondaatje thankfully does not want to “speak in [Bolden’s] accent,” and so avoids the pitfalls of a Canadian author working in an unfamiliar, antiquated colloquial style. Instead, he gives Bolden his own, poetic voice, avoiding one dangerous compromise only to implicate himself in another. The poetically articulate Bolden becomes little more than a puppet for Ondaatje. Polemically, we might say that Ondaatje’s attempt to “think in Bolden’s brain and body” is the fulfillment of his authorial fantasy, one in which he consummates the dream of being a tortured, oppressed, aural artist with a permanent claim to authenticity. But Ondaatje does

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81 Bachner, 218.
82 Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 133.
not merely live out his fantasy vicariously through Bolden, he insinuates himself into
Bolden’s very skin and re-enacts his life. He lays claim to Bolden’s experiences and
his aesthetic abilities. By stepping into Bolden through Bellocq’s auratic gateway,
Ondaatje himself “becomes” the auratic artist. As such, he is in a position to create an
auratic work, a blurred, fractured piece of art that resembles Bolden’s own music.

Coming Through Slaughter is intended to be precisely this type of authentic artifact.

Neither Bolden nor Ondaatje wishes to be himself if that self is going to be
compromised by the loathed 20th century fame game. The difference between them is
that Bolden really does escape the pitfalls of celebrity, while Ondaatje takes the path
away from isolated artist and becomes a full-fledged public figure. By embodying
Bolden, Ondaatje accomplishes what proved impossible in life: he walks away from
fame.
**Intertext and Aura: A Critical Blind Spot in *Ragtime***

“What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature… is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it.”

Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

**Doctorow and the Duplicated Event**

In the world of E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, what one character refers to as “the duplicated event” has become the norm. The text imagines a world where the looming presence of technology has not displaced the idea of artistic authenticity, where the imagined aura still has real purchase and possibility. Notwithstanding the common ground between them, Doctorow demurs from the suggestion that Benjamin is “present in much of [his] writings from the 70’s” as “almost a kindred spirit.”\(^{83}\) He insists on making a distinction between the figure of the philosopher and that of the novelist, suggesting that the latter’s circumscribed role is limited to “instinctively [picking] up on things that are articulated as ideas more articulately by other people.”\(^{84}\) Paradoxically inarticulate, Doctorow’s novelist nonetheless picks up the thread of Benjamin’s thought. A moment later, Doctorow the novelist waxes philosophical as he plots their common concerns:

> What does it do to your understanding of music to be able to hear it over and over again by pushing a button, rather than waiting for the next time the orchestra or the pianist comes to town? These are significant questions. *Ragtime* is set in a period when motor cars were just beginning to make their way and there are player pianos, and things were mass-produced resolutely. Benjamin is a philosopher of all that.\(^{85}\)

This account of the importance of mechanical reproduction in *Ragtime* renders explicit the deep engagement with ideas about reproducibility, political art, and the

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\(^{83}\) Wutz, 197.

\(^{84}\) Ibid, 197.

\(^{85}\) Ibid, 197.
aura. Even though Doctorow does not take up or endorse Benjamin’s ideas systematically, he does “instinctively pick up” on Benjamin’s line of thought, entering into the implicit dialogue touched off by Benjamin in the *Work of Art* essay. Ultimately, Doctorow comes to different conclusions that offer a wider range of possibility for both auratic art and political action in the age of technological reproduction.

*Ragtime*, set in the years between 1902 and the dawn of the First World War, finds an archetypal middle class family, simply called “The Family,” crossing paths with a litany of historical and fictional characters. Among Doctorow’s creations are the Jewish immigrant peddler Tateh and the ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker. The Family meets Tateh at the end of his years of grinding poverty, as he begins to fulfill the American promise of class mobility. By the novel’s end, Tateh has finally left behind his life as a street artist, making cut-out silhouettes for pennies. He enters the nascent film industry and refashions himself “Baron Ashkenazy,” dissimulating his class origins as he triumphantly ascends into the ranks of the ruling class. By contrast, Coalhouse Walker’s story is not so uplifting. When Coalhouse crosses paths with The Family he unwittingly stands at the precipice of a fall that will end in his death. With stable employment as a working musician, Coalhouse has much to lose when he becomes embroiled in a dispute with a group of racist community firemen after they vandalize his prized Model-T. He is met with massive resistance from white policemen and lawyers as he tries to enlist the help of the authorities. After exhausting all peaceable options of legal redress, Coalhouse burns down the

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86 So archetypal, in fact, that no one in the family is given a proper name and are instead referred to as “Mother,” “Younger Brother,” etc. The generic aspects of the family contrast starkly with the eccentricities the text bestows on its immigrant characters.
firehouse, killing two inside, and initiates a wild rampage that culminates with the attempted bombing of J.P. Morgan’s New York mansion. At the end of the novel Coalhouse is assassinated while attempting to surrender to the racist police against whom he has been battling. In death, he becomes a martyr for equal justice under the law for African Americans, his chief political project. The opposing narrative trajectories of Coalhouse and Tateh are essential to an understanding of the novel’s aesthetic implications and political meaning.

My reading of *Ragtime* centers around Coalhouse. I want to examine him from three separate perspectives. In my first two readings of Coalhouse, I will attempt to identify him as both an auratic artist and second a political martyr. In *Ragtime*, Coalhouse enacts a reconciliation of the persistence of the aura and the possibility of leftist political action, imagining an artistic authenticity that is not inherently reactionary. He would have presented a glaring contradiction for Benjamin as both a revolutionary political actor and an auratic artist.87 The full meaning of his political actions will come to complete fruition through comparison with Tateh. Finally, I propose a third reading of Coalhouse, as an intertextual figure for the blues hero Stagolee and an allegory for an oral “tradition of the oppressed.” These readings impinge upon each other (and upon Benjamin’s aesthetic philosophy), and ultimately allow Doctorow to advance his own project of novelistic self-authentication.

87 Linda Hutcheon touched off a notable critical debate with Fredric Jameson over *Ragtime* by calling attention to the fact of aesthetic production: “the black Coalhouse, the white Houdini, the immigrant Tateh are all working class, and because of this—not in spite of it—all can therefore work to create new aesthetic forms (ragtime, vaudeville, movies)” (61). Jameson, in his *Postmodernism*, brushed aside Hutcheon’s assertion by interrogating the very representational capabilities of the postmodern historical novel, effectively shifting the critical discourse away from the decisive theme of aesthetic production in the novel. By returning to the subject of art in *Ragtime*, I hope to offer a take on the novel’s political significance that differs slightly from Jameson’s.
Through the multi-faceted figure of Coalhouse, Doctorow binds together both artistic authenticity and political agency.

Coalhouse as Auratic Artist

Coalhouse’s ragtime, like that of Scott Joplin, is on the verge of being technologically reproduced. Father can easily summon a rag on his player piano, and the Boy revels in the “duplicated event” of recorded music.\(^8\) Nevertheless, even in the face of so much technology, Coalhouse’s art is figured in the text as authentic and even auratic through emphasis on a unique location in time and space and through a juxtaposition against technological art that hemis it in. Much as Coalhouse’s acts of resistance later in the novel will align him with Stagolee, the musical tradition from which he draws establishes the continuity of his art with a well-established folk tradition, a tradition of the oppressed. Coalhouse’s ragtime music, born of both urban and industrial spaces, travels to the suburbs meet the Family in their own context not through the mechanical reproduction offered by father’s player piano, but rather through an authentic live performance:

“Wall Street Rag,” [Coalhouse] said. Composed by the great Scott Joplin. He began to play. Ill-tuned or not the Aeolian had never made such sounds. There seemed to be no other possibilities for life than those delineated by this music…younger brother had heard it in his nightlife period in New York. He had never expected to hear it in his sister’s home.\(^9\)

In a world where technological reproduction is becoming the rule, Coalhouse delivers an affecting live performance that undoes the power the “duplicated event.” The

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\(^8\) Doctorow, 117.
\(^9\) Ibid, 159.
music has traveled to an alien locale without the aid of electronics. Younger Brother rightly fixates on the strangeness of hearing ragtime in his living room. His moment of defamiliarization belies the importance of the music’s “unique location in time and space,” which contrasts starkly with the increased mobility of the “miniaturized,” easily transportable duplicated event. Coalhouse himself harps on the importance of a unique location in time and space, repeatedly emphasizing that he is “done traveling.” The implication here is his art’s rooted-ness in the place where he happens to be. His music lays claim not only to both Benjamin’s spatial and temporal uniqueness, but also to uniqueness in relation to other works (“the Aeolian had never made such sounds”). This uniqueness in relation to other works is, as always, determined by the music’s embeddedness in the context of tradition. When Coalhouse speaks the name Scott Joplin, the utterance is an invocation that calls forth the bearers of a marginalized tradition of African American music. The figure of Joplin immediately precedes Coalhouse in the lineage of a rich tradition of the oppressed. In the style typical of auratic perception, the Family’s perspective on Coalhouse and his music oscillates between the “otherness” and distance of his race and his exotic new music, and their closeness with Coalhouse both personally and spatially. The music is positively auratic. 

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90 Ibid, 140.
91 Doctorow continually brings his characters face to face with the aura inside the “duplicated event” of modernity. In World’s Fair, Doctorow’s young protagonist Edgar finds a surfeit of aura in the technologically reproduced objects that surround him. With all his faculties geared toward auratic perception, he ends the novel by immersing himself in the mysterious spectacle of the fair, which occasions both his initiation as a writer, through an essay contest on “American Boyhood,” and even his initiation into the world of sex as he watches bawdy underwater strip-tease. The novel is a bildungsroman in the age of technological reproduction, and its structure as such is determined by the spectacle of World’s Fair, the climax during which the boy shakes off his innocence.
Coalhouse answers Doctorow’s Benjaminian question: (“What does it do to your understanding of music to be able to hear it over and over again by pushing a button, rather than waiting for the next time the orchestra or the pianist comes to town?”). The prevalence of the duplicated event does not destroy or hamper the aura of his art. Coalhouse resolves anxiety over the authenticity of the work of art by imagining the continuing presence of the auratic, authentic work of art within the industrial world.

Coalhouse as Revolutionary Political Actor

Coalhouse’s ragtime is the unheard music of the working classes, much as Ragtime is the unwritten history of working people at the turn of the century. In Ragtime, Coalhouse and his auratic music are enmeshed in the political struggles of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The action of the book takes place against the background of massive civil unrest and inequality. Labor disputes are juxtaposed with the enormous wealth of a J.P. Morgan or a Henry Ford. The class struggle turns violent. Racism and oppression are pervasive. As Hilton Kramer points out in an early review of novel for Commentary, this type of political situation was not unfamiliar to the original readers of Doctorow’s novel. The upheaval of the 20’s had particular resonance during the Nixon era, when Doctorow wrote Ragtime.\textsuperscript{92} The failures of the old left were obvious, and Ragtime is, in part, a chronicle of those numerous defeats. But class strife and massive inequity were, of course not unique to the 1920’s. The downtrodden and marginalized were railing against the new manifestations old social problems as Doctorow wrote his book. The novel takes on political significance in

\textsuperscript{92} Kramer, 74.
part thanks to the dynamic similarities and tensions between the era it chronicles and the era that saw it written, particularly in the case of two characters who embody specific political struggles. Tateh’s battle, that of the Jewish immigrant, is resolved in the text. Coalhouse represents the ongoing struggle for equal rights for African Americans, pointedly unresolved in *Ragtime*. The juxtaposition of Tateh and Coalhouse pits an ethos of assimilation against the righteous stand of the armed rebel.

After he burns down the firehouse, Coalhouse is joined by a band of agitators that includes the Family’s own Younger Brother. These men consistently figure themselves as a collective, as the embodiment or symbolic representatives of a class: “We all Coalhouse.”93 “They said they were a nation.”94 Coalhouse and his co-conspirators insist on the collective spirit of their actions, that they are acting on the part of oppressed African Americans and not themselves. Though the group’s “nationhood” may call to mind the Nation of Islam, it may be more useful to read “Coalhouse’s” actions into a broader context. Doctorow’s text seems to conflate various strains of black activism—the armed, separatist revolt of black nationalism and the integrationist, civil-disobedience model of social reformers—in the person of Coalhouse.95 Later, I will examine the nature of Coalhouse’s property dispute at length, but for now it will be useful to remember that his revolt starts in the name of a very specific goal. He wants equal protection under the law. Instead, he faces arrest at the hands of racist law enforcement and a judicial system within which only the

93 Doctorow, 291.
94 Ibid, 295.
95 Though the novel does seem to favor the more radical, armed style of resistance, as evinced by an unfavorable portrait of Booker T. Washington, who, contrary to Coalhouse, is “against all Negro agitation on questions of political and social equality”(279).
advocacy of a white man like Father can save him from jail time. A city official tells Father: “When a property owner in this city walks into court with a Negro, a charge like this is usually dismissed.”96 At first, Coalhouse opposes this deeply entrenched institutional racism in the same way that 60’s civil rights activists fought for a seat on the bus or at the lunch counter, integrated schools, and equal protection under the law. Only after his attempt to redress his grievances within the system fails does he turn towards radical political action.

The full significance of Coalhouse’s political actions, both as a character in the text and as a parallel for contemporaneous political developments, is revealed through the disparity between him and Tateh. Tateh follows a distinctly different and historically specific pattern of social mobility. The 1960’s were an era of assimilation and prosperity for American Jews, as chronicled by Doctorow’s peer novelist Philip Roth. This context is crucial for an understanding of Tateh’s transformation from immigrant peddler to movie-mogul. Through his economic success, he becomes a sort of allegory for contemporary Jews as a class. He ends the novel far removed from his origins as a street peddler and “president of the Socialists Artist Alliance of the Lower East Side.”97 By the novel’s end he has turned to modes of technological reproduction and made a fortune in the film industry and even refashions himself as “Baron Ashkenazy.” Tateh’s class mobility, like Coalhouse’s political struggle, is not without its historical counterparts. In an article on Ragtime, Benjamin, and film, Angela Hague rightly points out the parallel between Tateh’s entrance into the film

96 Ibid, 184.
97 Doctorow, 44.
industry and the concurrent historical entrance of Jews into Hollywood. After years of violent oppression and pervasive racial prejudice, he becomes a model of social mobility and assimilation. Through the juxtaposition of Coalhouse and Tateh, the novel enacts a comparison between the American Jews of the 1960’s, who were experiencing previously unknown levels of success, and the Black Americans who were still locked in a desperate battle for even the most basic civil rights. Tateh’s success belongs merely to himself and his immediate family. From a revolutionary political standpoint, his is pyrrhic victory at best. Coalhouse takes up arms to redress grievances of racial injustice perpetrated against an entire class, becoming a revolutionary political actor. The collective spirit of Coalhouse’s political project casts Tateh’s success in a radically different light.

Coalhouse as Intertext

The group of agitators who join Coalhouse Walker in his fight are referred to only as “Coalhouse,” a singular proper name. The signifying power of that proper name is greatly expanded in Doctorow’s novel. The word “Coalhouse” never stands only for the ragtime pianist from St. Louis, and instead always functions metonymically. Politically, “Coalhouse” comes to stand for the various branches of the civil rights movement and political advocacy on behalf of black people. In the

98 Hague, 173. After her initial observation about Tateh and Jews in the film industry, Hague’s insight seems to evaporate. She goes on to assert that “Tateh’s choice of filmmaking as a career allows him to remain philosophically entrenched in the working class—he still calls himself ‘a Jewish socialist from Latvia’ at the novel’s end—and provides him with the economic mobility to leave the ghetto”(174). The irony of “Baron Ashkenazy’s” modest self-identification as merely a “Jewish socialist from Latvia” seems to be lost on Hague.

99 Doctorow does not shy away from chronicling the brutality of anti-Semitism in his texts—*World’s Fair* contains a particularly harrowing instance.
realm of aesthetics, “Coalhouse” goes a step further, becoming an allegorical figure for an entire aesthetic tradition of the oppressed. Fredric Jameson and others have already pointed out that Coalhouse is interpolated from German writer Heinrich Von Kleist’s 1811 novella Michael Kohlhaas, a story about a man who engages in terrorist acts against the state after his horses are unjustly seized. Doctorow himself has called attention to the parallel. It is plain that interpolated texts and characters are an important formal conceit in Ragtime. I want to suggest a second, heretofore unacknowledged intertextual precedent for Coalhouse.

Coalhouse’s story resembles a mythic narrative drawn not from literature, strictly speaking, but from a rich oral tradition. Its contours resemble those of the legendary, possibly apocryphal blues legend of Stagolee, a story passed down in bawdy “toasts,” oral recitations, and most popularly in the blues music that originated his legend. In the definitive study of the legend, Cecil Brown, a novelist in the tradition of Ishmael Reed and a respected folklorist, exhaustively historicizes Lee Shelton, a man Brown identifies as the historical Stagolee. Brown exhaustively chronicles Shelton and his social context, and traces the morphology of the Stagolee ballad.

The book’s introduction outlines what anyone who has heard one of the hundreds of famous versions of the ballad – by Bob Dylan, Nick Cave, Mississippi John Hurt, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Wilson Pickett – already knows. Though the lyrics of the song are variable, it always tells the same story: Stagolee, a black

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100 Jameson’s assertion that intertextual characters are fundamentally “incommensurable” with standard issue characters could be construed to support an allegorical reading of Coalhouse. Insoluble in the text, Coalhouse becomes purely an idea.
101 Trenner, 39.
man from St. Louis, shoots and kills Billy Lyons after Lyons robs him of his John B. Stetson hat. The particulars of the three narratives—Kohlhaas, Coalhouse, and Stagolee—are different, but the essential structure is the same. Each man vengefully and violently reasserts himself after a supposedly humiliating property dispute. These are stories of a violent revolt against injustice, both imagined and real.

Some might already object that Stagolee’s rash reaction to commonplace insult bears little relation to Coalhouse’s measured revolt to gross injustice. To be sure, Stagolee’s reaction to the temporary theft of his property is extreme (he shoots and kills Billy Lyons), and for Brown, this extreme behavior will be central to later narratives that draw on Stagolee. Conversely, Coalhouse’s actions are presented as justified, perhaps even laudable. But it is important to remember his demands: after he spares the life of Willie Conklin, the racist fireman who vandalized his Model-T in the first place, he is on a crusade merely to see “his car returned in just the condition it was when my way was blocked,” and nothing more. Coalhouse’s repeated insistence that the car is the crux of the dispute and not, for instance, the pervasive racial injustice in his society, is certainly dubious. Nevertheless, the implied frivolity of starting a war over a car is strongly reminiscent of Stagolee, as is Coalhouse’s “famous stubbornness.” Stagolee shoots a man over the loss of his hat; Coalhouse burns down a firehouse and kills two men over the loss of his car. In the age of technological reproduction, the hat is converted into the industrial car, but the story remains the same.

The text offers even more parallels. Perhaps most obvious is the similarity in origin story. Brown tells us that Lee Shelton, the historical Stagolee, was from
Chestnut Valley in St. Louis, an impoverished urban area not unlike Buddy Bolden’s Storyville. We know little of Coalhouse’s biography, but “apparently he was a native of St. Louis, Missouri. As a young man he had known and admired Scott Joplin and other St. Louis musicians.”\(^\text{102}\) Since “it is not known how he acquired his vocabulary and manner of speaker,”\(^\text{103}\) the reader is free to assume Coalhouse grew up in the same urban poverty as Stagolee, the expected milieu of marginalized African Americans of the day. Aside from their shared birthplace, the mention of Scott Joplin is particularly resonant in light of Brown’s study. Brown devotes a whole chapter to Lee Shelton’s connections to Joplin through a network of social clubs—Shelton was the president of the Four Hundred Club, and Joplin was a member of the Maple Leaf club, after which he named his most famous rag. Brown suggests that “black social clubs like the four hundred were the birthplace of Stagolee as a song. Like Joplin’s ‘Maple Leaf Rag,’ perhaps ‘Stagolee’ was initially a song dedicated to Lee Shelton’s club.”\(^\text{104}\) The Stagolee legend and Ragtime music were born side by side. They find a permanent bond in the title of Doctorow’s novel

That the extensive critical literature on Ragtime lacks any reference to Stagolee and a model for Coalhouse is surprising. Even the excellent music and cultural critic Greil Marcus, who writes extensively about Stagolee in his *Invisible Republic*, fails to notice the intertextual relationship, and ends up writing off *Ragtime* in an infamous review for the Village Voice as “the artistic equivalent of a sucker

\(^{102}\) Docotorow, 183.

\(^{103}\) Ibid, 183.

\(^{104}\) Brown, 98.
punch.” Marcus, dismisses the Kleist reference as well, scolding Doctorow for using a name like Coalhouse. “Why didn’t Doctorow just call him ‘Dinge’?” he wonders. Yet an examination of the relationship between Stagolee and Coalhouse allows for a more fleshed out and nuanced reading of both the politics and the art of *Ragtime*.

Coalhouse is reinscribed in the marginalized aesthetic tradition of African Americans through his connection to Stagolee. This embeddedness in a “tradition of the oppressed” is another means to attribute aura to his work. Through Stagolee, Coalhouse is linked not only to Joplin, is immediate predecessor, but to the foundational myths of an oral tradition, the fount of an extraordinary body of art.

Conclusions: Coalhouse’s Aura and Doctorow’s Claims to Authenticity

By Benjamin’s lights, the novel could not be auratic because it could no longer be in dialogue with oral tradition, but the covert presence of Stagolee evinces *Ragtime’s* deep, even dialectical engagement with an oral tradition. The novel removes Stagolee from the tradition and turns him into a political radical in the person of Coalhouse, effectively adding another chapter to the continually evolving oral legend. *Ragtime* breaks out of Benjamin’s novelistic bind and becomes newly eligible for aura. I take this to be merely an interesting loophole in Benjamin’s idiosyncratic framework, an opening in the implicit dialogue between Benjamin’s philosophy and *Ragtime*. There is, however, another authenticating project at work in *Ragtime*, one that suggests a level of authorial self-consciousness and complicity.

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106 Marcus, 96.
In and through Coalhouse, Doctorow imagines the kind of auratic artist he might wish to be. Instead of politicizing the work of art, Doctorow politicizes the working artist. On the surface, this act of literary imagination strongly resembles Ondaatje’s project in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ondaatje endows Bolden with the highest auratic credentials, and then identifies himself with Bolden, eventually stepping into Bolden’s skin. Doctorow is more circumspect and more historically specific than Ondaatje. Doctorow never imagines that he can *become* Coalhouse. In fact, he draws an implicit line between himself and his auratic hero. I have suggested the political significance of the disparity between Coalhouse and Tateh—Doctorow himself falls firmly on Tateh’s side of the divide. 107 In the juxtaposition between Coalhouse and Tateh, Doctorow can be made to take the place of Tateh.

Doctorow, like Tateh, is a committed leftist and a policy buff. As a respected author, Doctorow is in a position to advocate for certain causes in the public sphere. He has even make limited political interventions—during his much publicized speech to the National Endowment for the Arts he went off book to decry Reagan era budget cuts. Even so, Doctorow acknowledges the limitations of this kind of action. The wide gape between Doctorow’s entirely laudable brand of activism and the kind of radical, revolutionary action that he frequently writes into his novels is a tacit admission of the novelist’s own limited political efficacy. Through Coalhouse, Doctorow makes an auratic atonement for the actions he cannot perform, and manages to vicariously live the resolutely authentic life of both the auratic artist and the political revolutionary.

107 Readers of *World’s Fair*, a semi-autobiographical work, will know that Doctorow grew up in a working class Jewish family before reaching the heights of his profession as a novelist.
Don DeLillo’s Auratic Proxies.

“The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others.”
Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

“I was a figure in the margins, and that’s where I belonged. If I’m headed back that way, that’s fine with me.”
Don DeLillo

With both mirthful irony and a trenchant style, Don DeLillo has become a leading chronicler of contemporary American life after the age of mechanical reproduction. Much has been made of DeLillo’s incisive satire of contemporary culture in novels like *White Noise* and *Mao II*, novels that foreground a postmodern fascination with kitsch and pop detritus, and with the sort of endless reproducibility cited by Benjamin.

I want to focus on a different line of thought within DeLillo’s work. It is true that DeLillo’s novels betray deep skepticism and anxiety over the matrix of problems of authenticity and reproduction articulated by Benjamin—dissent provides the grist for DeLillo’s satire. Another group of critics, however, has also pointed out an antithetical current running through DeLillo’s novels. Amy Hungerford and Sally Bachner have located, respectively, a persistence of authentic religious feeling and the sublimity of violence in novels like *Libra* and *Underworld*, while critics like John N. Duvall, Frank Lentricchia, and Jeremy Green\(^{108}\) have undertaken studies that draw specifically on Benjamin’s aesthetics to bring out the persistence of the “miraculous,”

\(^{108}\) In *Disaster Footage: Spectacles of Violence in DeLillo’s Fiction*, Green gestures at an auratic counter-narrative throughout DeLillo’s work that operates against “the ubiquitous serial repetition of TV [and] can be counterposed to cultural instances that incarnate memory and auratic "distance" (Benjamin 222). Green stops short of identifying a concrete example of the “auratic.” In his *Baseball As Aesthetic Ideology*, Duvall makes the Adornian claim that imagined instances of “specious aura” in *Pafko At the Wall* mask “crucial political realities” and, ultimately, the inherent totalitarian leanings of mass culture.
to use Duvall’s term, in DeLillo’s fiction. Following in the spirit of these critics, if not in their lines of reasoning, I will argue that DeLillo imagines vestiges of the aura at the heart of postmodern culture.\textsuperscript{109} As Timothy Parish notes, “DeLillo is writing for a culture that watches and makes recordings. Television, movies, and cameras comprise the media through which we know ourselves.”\textsuperscript{110} DeLillo harnesses these media that are so threatening in their looming ubiquity. After examining them closely, few chosen relics are suffused with authenticity. Alongside his more widely discussed critique of commodity contemporary culture, DeLillo imagines the persistence of auratic art and the figure of the auratic artist in the unlikely back rooms of the postmodern world.

**Great Jones Street: Aura in Isolation**

*Great Jones Street,* not one of DeLillo’s most lauded works, is a satirical portrait of post 60’s decadence and a farce of urban and cultural decay through the eyes of a famous musician. Bucky Wunderlick, a reclusive, dylanesque rockstar, retreats from the limelight to his musty apartment, but can’t escape his fans or his pursuers. His conniving manager, a group of violent, counter-cultural also-rans called the Happy Valley Farm Commune, and various other addicts, derelicts, and rock musicians co-opt Bucky into a plot involving the dispersal of a drug which disarms the language centers of the brain. Bucky, a rockstar of dubious talent who becomes the comically blasé snoop of this detective story, may seem an extremely unlikely

\textsuperscript{109} See McClure, *Partial Faiths,* and Hungerford *Postmodern Belief.*

\textsuperscript{110} Timothy L. Parrish, *From Hoover’s FBI to Eisenstein’s Unterwelt: DeLillo Directs the Postmodern Novel,* 698.
candidate for auratic artist. Nevertheless, a crucial sub-plot in the book figures Bucky’s technologically reproduced rock and roll as auratic and authentic.

Bucky’s girlfriend Opel dies mysteriously, quite early in the novel, leaving behind a copy of his “Mountain Tapes,” a legendary set of recordings that he had presumed lost. As was the case for Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes, the recordings upon which Bucky’s seem to be based, the Mountain Tapes are much prized among “fetishistic rock scholars dressed like Superman,” the sort of postmodern scavengers that are the heirs to Benjamin’s figure of the collector. Bucky’s nefarious manager, Globke, decides to capitalize on the “unprecedented interest” in the tapes by releasing them to the public in a sterilized form. Globke and the multinational corporation for which he works, Transparanoia Inc., are undermined in their efforts to commodify the tapes when the Happy Valley Farm Commune, in a moment of sheer luddite fantasy, bombs the record plant where the tapes are being pressed into records, foiling the entire process of mechanical reproduction. This anti-corporate terrorist act is a surprising but effective resolution to the dilemma articulated by Benjamin in the Work of Art Essay, preserving the aura through destruction.

The eventual resolution of this crisis will be all the more surprising considering the cultural morass that Bucky is mired in. The action of the novel takes place against the background urban squalor and decay, the “ubiquitous serial repetition of TV,” and the violence of the post-60’s comedown with “Dogboy” skinheads running wild. Bucky, like Jack Gladney and James Axton, is a DeLillo narrator with a contrarian’s sense of irony, and his witty observations about the

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111 DeLillo, Great Jones Street, 148.
112 Ibid, 198
113 Green, 574.
general state of decline around him are uniformly discerning. Importantly, Bucky is particularly attentive to questions of authenticity. He calls television “a study in the art of mummification. The effect of the medium is so evanescent that those who work in its time apparatus feel the need to preserve themselves, delivering their bodies to be lacquered and trussed, sprayed with the rarest pressurized jellies”\textsuperscript{114}. In a moment of Benjaminian insight, Bucky realizes that the television personality is, for all intents and purposes, an object designed for reproduction as an image on a screen. The TV personality is mummified because mummification is conducive to an even greater uniformity of reproduction in an “object” increasingly “designed for reproducibility.”\textsuperscript{115} Bucky is surrounded by lacquered, duplicated images like those he sees on television, images that seem to flaunt their inauthenticity. As ever in DeLillo’s work, the simulacra have become ubiquitous. Through this pervasiveness of the inauthentic, the auratic work assumes real importance in \textit{Great Jones Street}.

Even before the Mountain Tapes enact the undoing of mechanical reproduction, they are imagined as having an intrinsic aura that lies at the heart of the book’s analysis of authenticity. The quality of the tapes is dubious, as evinced by the memorable lyric “I smell my nose.”\textsuperscript{116} Even according to Bucky himself, “the mountain tapes were genuinely infantile.”\textsuperscript{117} That the content of the tapes is fundamentally bizarre suggests a necessary uniqueness, a uniqueness that exerts a strong gravitational pull on the “rock scholar.” Despite the massive wellspring of interest on the part of these pop-fetishists, it seems that the willfully weird tapes are

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, 196.
\textsuperscript{115} Benjamin, \textit{Work of Art}, 106.
\textsuperscript{116} DeLillo, \textit{Great Jones Street}, 206.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 148.
not commercial enough to turn a real profit. Globke confirms this suspicion of their outré nature when he subjects them to rigorous editing. The editing proposed by Globke is a bridge too far into the realm of mechanical reproduction, and the book will rebuke him for it—still, the level of technological invasiveness in the text is deliberately unstable in a way that opens up auratic possibilities for the reproduced work.

Bucky foregrounds the mechanically reproduced nature of his tapes and, in the same moment, simultaneously begins to explore their auratic potential:

The effect of the tapes is that they’re tapes. Done at a certain time under the weight of a certain emotion. Done on the spot and with many imperfections. The material can’t be duplicated in a concert situation. So the tapes can be released, sure.¹¹⁸

The tautological first sentence emphasizes the materiality of the tapes, the fact of their mechanical reproduction is a priori. The sentence appears again on page 196, as Bucky continues to insist that the tapes’ power is bound up in the fact of their reproduction. The tapes, despite the fact of their reproduction, seem to possess certain auratic features. They’re “done at a certain time…done on the spot,” meaning they capture Benjamin’s “unique moment in time and space” without the sort of editing that would compromise access to that unique moment. By capturing a unique moment, by freezing it in magnetic amber, the tapes become sort of “primary source” for aura, on an infinite curve approaching uniqueness without touching it. And though the fact of their mechanical reproduction is taken for granted alongside the fact of their eventual commercial release, there is still one sense in which the “material can’t be duplicated.” The material can’t be promoted on the tour because it

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 188.
can’t be played live. In Benjaminian terms, the “exhibition value” of the tapes is compromised not only by their fundamental strangeness (which repels the listener) but also by the fact that they can’t be “exhibited” in a concert situation.

The tapes are not a mass cultural object “increasingly designed for reproduction,” but rather an oddity that is totally immune to mass consumption. In Bucky’s own analysis, they are “a collection of songs whose release would be sure to cause vast confusion.” They're essence is elusive, and even Bucky can’t pin it down. That essence is a sort of semi-aura. In the way “fetishistic rock scholars dressed like Superman” worship the tapes, and in the way a fan makes a sort of religious pilgrimage to the mountain lodge in an early chapter, there is a vestige of the cultic, a covert return of the religious. In Great Jones Street, the pop-music fanatic is no longer Theodor Adorno’s preposterous “radio-ham,” but rather a seeker of the authentic. Through the uncompromising music of the Mountain Tapes, Bucky gains access to an authenticity that is rare in the debased world of the novel.

The novel recognizes the web of commercial interests in which Bucky finds himself. Big business is a fact, and Bucky kowtows to the monopoly corporation he works for, consenting to the release of the tapes (“So the tapes can be released, sure”). His “so” suggests that the reason the tapes can be released is precisely because they possess an aura, the implication being that the commercial release of the tapes is not a threat to their authenticity. Either that, or Bucky simply doesn’t care what becomes of the tapes. Despite being embroiled in both mechanical reproduction and potentially

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unsavory commodification, the tapes retain their “special desolation, a kind of abnormal naturalness.”

Not only does Great Jones Street imagine “The Mountain Tapes” as a technologically reproduced work of art with its aura still intact, it also enacts the undoing of the process of mechanical reproduction on that work. After Bucky consents to the release of the tapes, Globke moves forward with a dubious plan to clean up the recordings and unleash them on the populace:

Early spring release. Obvious title: The Mountain Tapes. We’d be crazy to call it anything else since that’s the name everybody knows it by. Right now we’re culling. We’re editing down to twenty cuts. Getting rid of tape hiss and other noises. Snipping and clipping. Moving things around. Making up titles. Mixing in some instrumental work on about three quarters of the cuts. The thing’s going to be rough as hell.

In service of the profit motive, Globke would compromise the unique status of the tapes, their “abnormal naturalness,” to make them more commercial. By cleaning the tapes up, Globke reinscribes the tapes in the compromised matrix of reproduction and artifice, adding in new music that was not recorded “at a certain time under the weight of a certain emotion” in the unique time and space of Bucky’s mountain lodge, and making them more accessible by toning down the weirdness that makes them unique in the first place. The process described by Globke recalls Benjamin’s account of film montage, where, through the editing process, the “apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality” and then covered its tracks to simulate “an equipment free aspect of reality [which] has become the height of artifice.” Here the process of mechanical reproduction threatens to become invasive. Having

\[120\] Ibid, 148.
\[121\] Ibid, 199.
\[122\] Benjamin, Work of Art, 115.
miraculously conquered a duplicative medium, the aura of the tapes is threatened by an editing process that is overwhelmingly artificial, and originates in the service of dubious commercial interests. After Globke jeopardizes the status of the aura, the plot of *Great Jones Street* enacts the undoing of technological reproduction with a moment of symbolic destruction.

The Commune’s motives are hazy at best. They want to suppress the mountain tapes because “there’s no silence with the tapes on the market. It would hurt us. It would cause psychological pain.” The sentiment is unsurprising coming from a group bidding on a drug that prohibits speech. In the interest of silencing Bucky once and for all, they not only administer the drug, they destroy the record plant where the Mountain Tapes are being mechanically reproduced. Bohack, the shadowy leader of Happy Valley, is determined to “play it safe. We don’t know what stage of production the record’s at. So we’re blowing the whole plant.” Bohack’s commitment means the reversal will be complete, and any operations of mechanical reproduction upon the tapes will be undone with the destruction of the record plant. Happy Valley is not interested in preserving the authenticity of the tapes, but their destruction of the plant inadvertently resolves the momentary crisis of authenticity—the tapes will avoid the disastrous editing proposed by Globke. The tapes miraculously hold on to the aura of a unique moment in the instant of their production. When that aura is threatened anew by an even more invasive strain of mechanical reproduction the tapes are destroyed without being commercialized, commodified, or reproduced in the decisive, commercial sense.

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124 Ibid, 246.
The Mountain Tapes sub-plot plays out the drama of authenticity in the age of mechanical reproduction and, through the tapes and their eventual destruction, imagines a fantasy aura that can survive even with mechanically reproduced art objects. Bucky becomes one of DeLillo’s many men alone in small rooms, isolated in his squalid apartment on Great Jones or in his mountain lodge, making his strange auratic music. In a self-interested move, DeLillo, one isolated artist alone in a room, confers autonomy and authenticity on another. The process works both ways: DeLillo’s novelistic cache rises with the aura of the Mountain Tapes.

*Falling Man and the Project of Authorial Self-Justification*

“We depend on disaster to consolidate our vision.”
-Don DeLillo *The Power of History*

It is not surprising that *Falling Man* offers the most dramatic example of an auratic artist as an internal, self-justifying proxy for the novelist. Of all the ambitious novels that we have examined, with their presumptions and elaborate pretensions, *Falling Man* aspires to the most difficult task. Published in 2007, the novel attempts to represent the events of September 11th, reconstructing that day and its aftermath. He imagines the plotting that preceded it from the perspective of both the New Yorkers that experienced the attack and the terrorists who hatched the plot. DeLillo even stages some of the action of the novel in the towers and on the planes. The very fact of the book is a testament to the belief that the novel can still be commensurate with the events that shake our world. *Falling Man* makes an implicit argument for the continued relevance of its own generic form, its persistent ability to speak to people about even the most harrowing events in their lives, and the novel’s continued
dignity and authenticity. DeLillo does not stumble blindly into such an endeavor. In fact, he self-consciously structures his book around the premise that his novelistic project needs justifying. He acknowledges and answers possible criticisms through the figure of the “Falling Man,” the performance artist after whom the book is named and who has himself borrowed that name from the anonymous victim he imitates.

The Falling Man and DeLillo undertake the same controversial task—they make art out of the events of September 11th, DeLillo with his novel, and the Falling Man by recreating the image of a “jumper” falling from the heights of the World Trade Center. Both artists inspire confusion and rage as they bring “it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump.”¹²⁵ This post-traumatic high wire act isolates the Falling Man, making him “a notorious figure” hated by thousands.¹²⁶ Knowing he would inevitably engender like sentiment in his readership, the stakes are enormously high for DeLillo. Their shared predicament is all the more reason for him to validate the Falling Man’s performance in his text and vigorously proclaim his authenticity. By figuring the falling man as auratic, DeLillo answers his critics and stakes a claim to that authenticity, self-consciously proceeding with his literary project of reconstruction with the Falling Man as a buffer.

_Falling Man_ mainly occupies itself with the story of Keith Neudecker, a man who experiences September 11th from within the south tower of the World Trade Center. Keith is a typical DeLillo male: white, educated, moneyed, and a bit of a lothario. After surviving the attacks, Keith has a chance affair with a woman who

¹²⁵ DeLillo, _Falling Man_, 33.
also worked in the towers. He develops a gambling addiction and quits his white-collar job to enter the world of high stakes poker. Immediately after the towers fall, Keith walks across Manhattan to reunite with his wife Lianne, from whom he had been separated, and their son Justin. The family has mixed results as they try to resume their normal lives. Other characters include Lianne’s ailing mother, Nina Bartos—a professor of art history—and her mysterious lover, a German art dealer whom the family refers to as Martin. It is revealed that Martin is actually a man named Ernst Hechinger, a former member of a Baader-Meinhof style leftist group who has gone underground. The book includes numerous sub-plots, including the training and preparations of Hammad, a fictional 9/11 hijacker, and the recurring performances of the Falling Man, witnessed twice by Lianne. The Falling Man sub-plot does little to move the narrative along, and is a comparatively small part of the novel, but its significance is pivotal. The ambitious narrative of the novel as a whole—which, in its harrowing climactic scene, culminates in an abrupt shift in focalization as Hammad’s plane crashes into Keith’s tower—depends upon the Falling Man sub-plot as a legitimizing force. It bears repeating that any post 9/11 novel that seeks to engage with terrorism, both in theory and practice, sets the stakes quite high. The Falling Man sub-plot will allow DeLillo to navigate such an audacious project and broadcast an insulating layer of self-awareness, even granting him aura.

*Falling Man* imagines a heterogeneous aesthetic world where aura is possible but not prevalent, setting the auratic art of the Falling Man in sharp relief. A few of
Falling Man’s characters are aesthetes who still indulge in the contemplative immersion of auratic perception. Nina, for instance, has not fallen prey to the mode of reception in distraction, and still lingers in front of “three or four pictures in an hour and a half of looking...she liked the big rooms, the old masters, what was unfailing in its grip on the eye and mind.” Lianne, who has a more intensely fraught relationship with art, particularly with the art of the Falling Man, can nevertheless perceive in a Giorgio Morandi still life “a mystery she could not name.” The work of art can still lure these cultured characters into reflection, and their perceptual abilities remain in tact despite the pervasive influence of technology. The works of the “old masters,” have not lost their aesthetic gravity. Technological art, however, presents new ambiguities. These characters are not without a sense of alienation from their culture.

There are instances in the text where the aura seems wedged out by technology, as when Keith listens to the competing sounds of classical music and the massive electronic whirring of an MRI machine. This moment of palpable discomfort for Keith could be seen as the nadir of Adorno’s “regressive listening,” where classical music has been relegated the role of soporific, or where it is actually intended to be received in a state of severe distraction. But, as in Great Jones Street, there are also instances where the aura is imagined to conquer the field of technological reproduction. Nina hangs two antique passport photos on her wall.

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127 DeLillo, Falling Man, 11.
128 Ibid, 12.
129 Several critics characterize the cropping up of aura in DeLillo’s work as a continual conquest of technological media. In his Tales of the Electronic Tribe, Frank Lentricchia argues that aura’s conquest is most prevalent in White Noise, as the mass produced image becomes a ritual object integrated into collective experience through its increased visibility.
taken from Martin’s collection. The portraits, like Bellocq’s prints, hold a special interest for Lianne, who is drawn into contemplation despite the “bureaucratic intent” of the pictures.\textsuperscript{130} Just as Ondaatje is drawn into Bolden’s life by Bellocq’s print, Lianne is brought “paradoxically into the lives of the subjects…she saw people fleeing, there to here, with darkest hardship pressing the edges of the frame.”\textsuperscript{131} As it was in Benjamin’s \textit{Little History of Photography}, the unique auratic moment, outside of what is represented visually in the photograph, embeds itself in the image. Captured within the photographs is the “here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject.”\textsuperscript{132} Aura is at least partially compatible with these machine made images, but the performance of the Falling Man has more in common with the Giorgio Morandi paintings than the passport photos. The Falling Man’s re-enactment represents the persistence of the auratic in its original form, outside the world of mechanical reproduction.

The Falling Man’s harrowing performance is imagined to be auratic in strict Benjaminian terms. A description of Lianne’s first encounter with the Falling Man registers multiple auratic possibilities:

\begin{quote}
A man was dangling there, above the street, upside down…A safety harness was barely visible, emerging from his trousers at the straightened leg and fasted to the decorative rail of the viaduct. She’d heard of him, a performance artist know as Falling Man. He’d appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or another structure…There were people shouting at him, outraged at the spectacle, the
\end{quote}

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Lentricchia’s analysis is reliant upon both an overly literal interpretation of Murray Siskind’s use of the word “aura,” and a circumscribed concept of the aura itself. It will be important to my argument that the aura persists in DeLillo’s texts not only within the technological media which it “conquers,” but also its original form as Benjamin described it.
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\textsuperscript{130} Ibid, 142.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, 142.
\textsuperscript{132} Benjamin, \textit{Little History of Photography}, 523.
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puppetry of human desperation, a body’s last fleet breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world, she thought.\textsuperscript{133} Lianne stumbles upon this piece of guerilla art completely by chance, and the enigma of the Falling Man’s static performance beguiles and shocks her.\textsuperscript{134} The Falling Man, like the novelist, is toeing a transgressive line, and the discomfort of the audience is manifest in the “outrage” of the spectators and Lianne’s anxiety. But Lianne’s reaction is multifaceted. She is not merely repulsed or fascinated by the Falling Man, and in fact her reaction has much in common with her response to the passport photographs and the Morandi paintings. Alongside feelings of revulsion or confusion, Lianne perceives the Falling Man auratically.

The complex nature of Lianne’s perception crystallizes when she realizes that the Falling Man’s performance “held the gaze of the world.” The phrase is ambiguous and gestures at two auratic possibilities. The Falling Man certainly holds the gaze of his audience, he keeps their rapt attention for the duration of the moment. Even the vitriol of the spectators is confirmation of their deep engagement with the confrontational performance. Lianne, too, is riveted by the image of the dangling man, and her own unwavering gaze also confirms the applicability of this reading. Another equally plausible reading reveals that perhaps the “gaze” is dialectical, referring to both the audience that looks at the Falling Man and the Falling Man that gazes out at the audience.

\textsuperscript{133} DeLillo, \textit{Falling Man}, 33.
\textsuperscript{134} The performance of the Falling Man is, arguably, a more polarizing “shock of urban modernity” than those discussed by Benjamin in \textit{On Some Motifs In Baudelaire}. Comparing the two texts, it is interesting to note that while Benjamin claimed that the shocking experiences of the industrialized city offered access to reality only insofar as they dissolved the aura, DeLillo actually imagines witnessing the Falling Man’s performance, the most shocking of urban experiences, as having an auratic sublimity.
Another inherent feature of this type of performance, one that might explain the appeal it held for DeLillo, is its ability to reconstitute the human body as a work of art. The performance artist supercedes the portrait as the work of art with the greatest “ability to look back at us.”135 In the Benjimnian sense, the Falling Man achieves aura through the depth of his own gaze, from the way he looks out on the spectators without really seeing them. His gaze has a sort of aesthetic gravity, maybe because it is the gaze not only of David Janiak, the name of the performance artist behind Falling Man, but of all those actual falling people who did jump from the towers looking out from a pair of eyes. Upon seeing Janiak a second time, Lianne is still equally drawn in by the inscrutable look on Janiak’s face: “there was a blankness in his face, but deep, a kind of lost gaze.”136 Lianne reads Janiak’s gaze in the same way Benjamin reads the gaze of Mme. Dauthenday in Little History of Photography, another seemingly tortured figure with a deep “lost gaze.” Janiak’s gaze has enormous signifying power, but, for Lianne, it remains at least partially inscrutable. It is the dynamic ambiguity of Janiak’s gaze, the enigma at its core, that confirms its auralic power.

Part of the auralic appeal of performance art is bound up in the necessary fact of its unique location in time and space. Janiak never falls in the same spot twice. Lianne becomes hypersensitive to the passage of time as she watches him prepare for a jump. As Janiak makes his move, he “jumps or falls” and the narrative voice switches from past tense to present tense. The performance is always happening in the unique moment of “now.” Janiak spreads out, covering a variety of unique

135 Benjamin, On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.
136 DeLillo, Falling Man, 167.
locations in the city, showing up “unannounced” and clearly not seeking any media attention. It is easy to take this statement at face value and be credulous of Janiak’s motives when we learn a bit of his personal history. As Lianne researches Janiak online, the reader learns of his dedication to the art of performance, and of his erratic temperament. He is both a serious artist—he trains in both New York and Moscow—and a wild, unpredictable figure who, in one memorable performance, “assaulted another actor, seemingly trying to rip the man’s tongue out of his mouth during what was supposed to be a structured improvisation.”137 Yet his extreme approach to performance is not a narcissistic attention grab. In fact, he explicitly shuns notoriety, turning down an opportunity to perform at the Guggenheim and refusing to speak to the press.

The text insists that Janiak’s rejection of media attention is not a pose. His “performance pieces were not designed to be recorded by a photographer.”138 Janiak’s rejection of the press registers two important meanings: The Falling Man performance is emphatically not intended to bring about material gain, and the performance has been devised to be unassimilable into the world of mechanical reproduction. In true auratic style, Janiak insulates himself from the encroachments of the photograph. Though he does not police the incidental taking of photographs, he holds himself aloof from the lens of the passersby. Lianne searches online through the photographs of chance witnesses, looking for a rendering of the fall that she witnessed, but “there were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph, the

137 Ibid, 223.
138 Ibid, 221.
photosensitive surface.”139 Lianne’s experience of Janiak’s fall is un tarnished by forces of mechanical reproduction. Instead, her experience of Janiak’s performance reverses the process of mechanical reproduction as Lianne becomes the camera. As a reproduction in her memory, the image of the falling man and its aura is “hers to record and absorb.”140

If the photograph is an ambiguous icon in Falling Man, it may be because the Falling Man is already, in some sense, a reproduction. Both readers of the text and characters within the text presume that the Falling Man performance is actually intended to reproduce the notorious image from the photograph taken by Richard Drew of a man falling with terrible grace from the burning north tower. Within the text of the novel, the relation between Janiak and the man in the photograph remains ambiguous, and “if this photograph was an element in his performances he said nothing about it.”141 The text courts further ambiguity by allowing Lianne to come upon the Drew photograph during her online research session. In this moment, the text of Falling Man is explicitly acknowledging the photographic precedent for Janiak’s performances. DeLillo, in essence, lays bare the artifice of his novel, acknowledging the alleged assimilation of the media image into the text in the same way Janiak openly exposes the minimal artifice, the barely visible safety harness and the cord, of his performance. The text invites the reader to infer that the real falling man may be precedent for Janiak, even as it invites the reader to identify Janiak with DeLillo himself.

139 Ibid, 222.
140 Ibid, 223.
141 Ibid, 222.
It is highly probable that DeLillo saw the photograph in question. The text describes it in great detail, and quite accurately, through the eyes of Lianne. She sees the figure of the man as a “falling angel…his beauty was horrific.”\(^{142}\) The odd thing about Lianne’s description of the photograph is that, unlike almost everything else in the novel, the reader can conjure up the image in his own mind not as DeLillo imagined it, but as it actually exists in the ubiquitous, constantly circulating media. The reader, too, has seen the photograph. There is no need for the text to describe the image, unless it is not really seeking to describe Drew’s photograph at all, and instead seeks to register a different sort of meaning through that description. This moment, in all its strangeness, is typical of DeLillo, and cannot be mentioned without a discussion of an analogous moment in 1988’s *Libra*.

The terrible climax of *Libra* is the Kennedy assassination itself, which DeLillo writes and rewrites, painstakingly documenting every possible perspective, including that of the camera that captures and duplicates the horrible scene. DeLillo’s excruciating descriptions of the fatal shot ends only to begin again, replaying like a tape on loop. “A misty light around the President’s head. Two pink-white jets of tissue rising from the mist. The movie camera running.”\(^{143}\) The movie camera, always already implied in the era after mechanical reproduction, is presumably that of Abraham Zapruder. The description of “two pink-white jets,” with all its gruesome lucidity, becomes a textual distillation of that notorious frame of film. The frame of film, leaving the realm of duplicative technology and going back in to language,

\(^{142}\) Ibid, 222.  
\(^{143}\) DeLillo, *Libra*, 400.
becomes impossible to forget. Through verbalizing the Zapruder film, DeLillo foregrounds the tyranny of the mass-produced image.

A new introduction to the 2006 edition of Libra—written in 2005, two years before the publication of Falling Man—offers a compelling account of the type of performance that will be so central to Falling Man. DeLillo’s interest in performance art is as keen as ever, and he describes the reenactments of a macabre group called Ant Farm, who re-stage the Kennedy assassination in drag. According to DeLillo, this collective, complete with their own film and camera crew, was actually “recreating a media event, not a shooting. They were, in effect, restaging the Zapruder film…[in] an eerie act of deadpan surrealism, with meanings collecting by the minute in an enormous plastic baggie of assassination aura.”

At first DeLillo seems to be suggesting that this type of performance art is merely a reproduction of a reproduction, a simulacrum of a simulacrum, done for the camera’s benefit. This double-reproduction, on the surface, looks like the height of artifice and superficiality, until DeLillo asserts that the performance is somehow accruing meanings upon meanings in that baggie of “assassination aura.” The “assassination aura” may not be precisely the same Benjamin’s aura, but the word is still made to evoke a luminous aesthetic potential. DeLillo’s point seems to be that even the contemporary art that posits the most radical possible relationship to duplicative technology by trying to imitate what is already a simulacrum can still continue to mean deeply. He does not dismiss Ant Farm’s performance as an ironic joke, and perhaps this too evinces another layer of self-consciousness, that DeLillo is

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144 DeLillo, Introduction to Libra, x.
prepared to see himself grouped in with the image pranksters and purveyors of inscrutable irony with full knowledge that he is up to something quite different.

In a different context, Fredric Jameson anxiously described our present age as “new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history.”¹⁴⁵ DeLillo’s performance artists, both Ant Farm and Janiak, essentially embark on the exact project described by Jameson. Ant Farm and Janiak (and maybe DeLillo as well) base their re-enactments of historical events not on the “events” themselves (what that would entail is certainly unclear) but on the familiar, already duplicated media images of those historical events. But DeLillo chronicles this fixation on the duplicative image without any of Jameson’s Marxist hand wringing. Where Jameson sees a nihilistic threat to political consciousness, DeLillo sees an unlikely but almost realizable return to an aesthetics of sublimity. Where Jameson sees only rupture, discontinuity, and the absence of meaning, DeLillo sees the aura coming back up through that rupture, making its most mysterious return to contemporary modernity yet. The duplication of the duplication creates a sort of hall of mirrors effect in which an aura re-appears.

In a particularly nuanced account of DeLillo and the duplicative image, Timothy L. Parrish claims that “DeLillo's novelistic ambition is to absorb the unauthorized cultural power of the Zapruder film and fuse it with the artistic authority.”¹⁴⁶ I follow Parrish in locating artistic authority (I would say “auratic potential”) in the Zapruder film. It takes on an aura through the public’s collective experience of it, and through an immanent aesthetic power. By textualizing the film,

¹⁴⁵ Jameson, 25.
¹⁴⁶ Parrish, 284.
he embeds it and its auratic content with his text, lending it a previously unavailable authenticity. Reproductions of media events can have aura, duplications of those reproductions can also have aura. What seems like an infinite regress is actually a testament to the binding power of the image, particularly the violent image of an assassination or a national tragedy. DeLillo himself has described these images as having a “binding power. They draw people together in ways that only the most disastrous contemporary events can match. We depend on disaster to consolidate our vision.”

The assassination aura reemerges in the collective ritual experience of national disaster.

David Janiak may also be “recreating a media event,” the widely reproduced photograph taken by Richard Drew or any of the other widely broadcast images of human beings falling from the towers. Even if this is the case, he is in a position to accrue even more aura, to assimilate new meanings into his auratic performance. As he is imagined in the text, Janiak clearly does not condemn the viewer to seek history by way of the simulacra. Instead, he takes the ubiquitous duplicated simulacra and remakes it in his own auratic image. The ritual element of his re-enactments has an

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148 Any discussion of the binding power of the image in DeLillo would be incomplete without a further look at the infamous “most photographed barn in the world” scene from White Noise, in which Murray Siskind claims that he and Jack are standing within the aura of the barn. In Tales of the Electronic Tribe, Lentricchia identifies Murray’s “aura” with Benjamin’s in order to claim that “DeLillo’s point, unlike Benjamin’s, is not the nostalgic one that aura is in decline, but that its source has been replaced”(92). Lentricchia, like many critics who make use of the aura, misapprehends Benjamin (Benjamin was, of course, not nostalgic about the death of aura—he embraced it for its political efficacy). But Lentricchia is (rather awkwardly) making a claim similar to the one I am trying to make about Libra. In the barn, he sees Benjamin’s “aura… the indicator of depth, origin, and authenticity---everything, in other words, presumably unavailable to the postmodern world of reproduction, simulation, repetition, and image---suddenly and stunningly restored by the supermarket, the mall, the poetry of media glut”(111).
abiding binding force, the same power possessed by the event itself. The re-enactment reproduces this effect.

Both DeLillo and Janiak refuse to speak about their works with the certainty of fixed meaning, but neither artist makes any attempt to conceal the materials, harvested from reality and from mechanically reproduced media like Richard Drew’s photograph, which they re-imagine and then reassemble into works of art. They undertake this task at great personal and professional risk. DeLillo risked taking on a subject that was too big, an event that could not possibly receive its due justice on the printed page. He risked being accused of shameless opportunism, of capitalizing on human tragedy. Worse still, thanks to the Hammad sub-plot, DeLillo put himself at the mercy of jingoistic flag-wavers who have been ready to label him a terrorist sympathizer since Libra and Mao II. DeLillo’s artistic gamble manifests itself in and through Janiak as he endures extreme bodily harm and even risks death in the name of his performance. “His falls were said to be painful and highly dangerous due to the rudimentary equipment he used.”¹⁴⁹ Janiak’s persistence in the face of great bodily risk represents a physical analogy for the novelistic bind in which DeLillo finds himself. Both artists refuse to be dissuaded, pushing the very boundaries of their art, consequences be damned.

Janiak extrapolates wildly from his original project, taking his role as the Falling Man to its logical conclusion. “Plans for a jump at some unforeseen future time did not include a harness.”¹⁵⁰ Janiak’s risk taking (he has a heart condition, perhaps final proof of his death wish) gets the better of him before he can shrug off

¹⁴⁹ DeLillo, Falling Man, 222.
¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 223.
the last of residual artifice and actually become the Falling Man. Is Janiak merely “following the plot” which he has laid out for himself, as so many of DeLillo’s characters do? After all, every Falling Man eventually arrives at the ground. Or is it possible that Janiak’s death is a referendum on his actions, his just desert for transgressing the bounds of good taste and acceptable art? Taking into account the auratic nature of Janiak’s performances, we might reconsider his project as an attempt to remake the endlessly reproduced media image of the falling man auratically. Janiak strips away the veil of mechanical reproduction and returns the gaze to the image, instantiating real aura in the image, returning aura to the work of art.

When Janiak dies under mysterious circumstances in a small motel, the public high-wire act is over and he is free to join the ranks of DeLillo’s “men in small rooms.” Janiak always insulated himself from the media and guarded his privacy intensely, but his isolation becomes complete in death. Janiak comes to resemble the figure of the novelist more closely than ever in the moment of his death. The reader might register the suggestion that the novelist, like Janiak or any artist who attempts to make art out of human suffering, suffers intensely as a result. But Janiak is no mere internal apology, nor is he strictly a double for the text’s author.

*Falling Man* enacts a transference of aura between DeLillo and his internal proxy in the name of validating DeLillo’s artistic project on both a macro and a micro level. DeLillo is prepared to go the way of the falling man and leave his novelistic prestige behind. “I was a figure in the margins, and that’s where I belonged. If I’m headed back that way, that’s fine with me, because that’s always where I felt I belonged...I always preferred to be somewhere in the corner of a room,
observing.” He embraces the novelist’s culturally marginal isolation, implicitly embracing part of Benjamin’s indictment of the contemporary novelist. Isolation is a welcome part of his job. But DeLillo would not be able to brook Benjamin’s suggesting that the aura eludes him, that he no longer has access to authenticity, that these things are vanishing from the world thanks to the creeping advances of technology.

Self-conscious enough to avoid any grand proclamations about novelistic integrity and authenticity, DeLillo imagines the aura in a figure that resembles him, continually registering the distinct possibility of “a kind of mystical shiver, an awakening.” Through the Falling Man, DeLillo imagines that a project much like his own novelistic project can still hold the rapt attention of an audience, can still shock and provoke from the safety of the cultural fringe, and can still lay claim to an eternal aesthetic value in an era when aura is out of style.

Even the cagey, self-conscious novelist cannot resist the occasional proclamation. In an interview for The Guardian, DeLillo states explicitly what he continually implies through the auratic proxies of his novels: that novels that imagine art are always imagining themselves, and are always seeking admission into the most rarified aesthetic categories. Even after the crisis of the mechanical age “the novel, simply, offers more opportunities for a reader to understand the world better, including the world of artistic creation.” In words about auratic art, the novel continually speaks of itself, of its own project, and of the continued relevance of the ambitious, the self-consciously literary, and the auratic.

151 Caesar, 1.
152 DeLillo, Falling Man, 187.
153 Caesar, 2.
Conclusion: The Ghoul of Literature

According to Miles Orvell, "for many artists after World War II, the whole quest for authenticity that marks the first half of the twentieth century had reached its end."154 But, as an increasing number of critics have noted, the search for authenticity has, if anything, intensified.155 It seems that in the era after 1945 the “quest” for authenticity was just beginning, albeit under changing material and technological conditions. The ghouls of literature continued to seek the authentic and the auratic by covert means, under cover of an apparent embrace of the ersatz, the simulation, the copy. With the help of internal proxies they charted new territories and posited authenticity in previously unimaginable locations. They paradoxically imagined the aura into the technological apparatus itself. They did so in the name of authenticating their own artistic projects—the contemporary novelist that sows aura does so in order to harvest it for himself.

The novelists in this study have been fundamentally unwilling to give up their claim to artistic authenticity. As technology becomes all the more complex and labile in its ability to proliferate reproductions, the novelist and his auratic proxies become even more resourceful. Falling Man takes one authorial project of self-justification to its logical extreme. The most recently published novel in this study, it stages the aura’s most dramatic and most unexpected return by imagining it in the most unlikely, even paradoxical place. In the Work of Art essay, Benjamin described the rise of the duplicated image as antithetical to aura. It was the increasing effectiveness of duplicative technology that made aura obsolete in the first place, and the simulacra

154 Orvell, 295.
155 See Abigail Cheever, Real Phonies.
came to displace it. *Falling Man* charts the rise of what we might term the simulacra to the second power—the Falling Man performance as the restaging of the media event, the duplication of what was already a duplication, a simulacrum of a simulacrum. Paradoxically, by raising the duplicated image to the second power, the aura actually begins to manifest itself anew within the ostensibly superficial work of art. Janiak’s performance is not the end of art, nor is it a mere pastiche, nor is it a meaningless intertext for its own sake. By holding up a mirror to the duplicated image, DeLillo suggests that Janiak manages to recreate the aura (in the classic sense) anew from within the framework of the technological apparatus.

As an internal auratic figure for DeLillo himself, Janiak enacts the culmination of the project of the contemporary novelist who is the real herald of aura’s return. The novelist catches the duplicated media image in a hall of mirrors, and, at the end of that infinite regress of reproduction, places a human face, a gaze, and an aura. As DeLillo has it, the method of technological reproduction, taken to its logical extreme, occasions not the end of art but rather the return of the aesthetic. Whether this authenticity is the same one posited by Benjamin, or merely the next in a series of aesthetic mysteries, is unclear. Perhaps it represents another variation on the afterlife of aura. After all, it is only fitting that the ghoul of literature should be able to conjure up the ghost of the aura.
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