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Art, religions and digital society. Insights in the light of Walter Benjamin

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In our increasingly digital world, the ideas of Walter Benjamin on art and its "mechanical reproduction" resonate with striking relevance. Benjamin's exploration of the "decline of the aura" –the unique, irreplaceable presence of artwork that has been diminished by mechanical reproduction– provides a profound framework for understanding contemporary issues in art, religion, and society. As technological advancements such as digital reproduction, immersive experiences and artificial intelligence in general reshape our interaction with art and religious symbols, they also transform our perception of the sacred.

The proliferation of religious practices through digital media raises questions about how these reproductions affect ritual practices themselves and spiritual experiences. Benjamin's assertion that mechanical reproduction can democratize art and turn it into a political tool invites us to consider whether digital representations of the sacred can be harnessed for resistance or propaganda.

Furthermore, the aestheticization of politics, a concept Benjamin critiques, is evident in the way contemporary politics often employs religious and symbolic imagery. This raises concerns about the potential manipulation of religious symbols for political ends and the impact on democracy. With the emergence of new technologies like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), we may witness the creation of new forms of "auras" and virtual sacrality. These innovations challenge traditional notions of the sacred and offer new perspectives on how art and religion intersect in the modern era.

The following discussion seeks to explore how these technological transformations impact our understanding of the sacred, the role of art in reflecting and shaping spiritual values, and the broader implications for society.

L.T.: How is the "mechanical reproduction" of art and religious images transforming our experience of the sacred today? Can the proliferation of religious representations through digital media influence our perception and relationship with the divine?

V.D.S.: If we follow Benjamin's hypothesis, we must consider that the images of art have always been susceptible to being reproduced. Technology would only make such reproduction more common and constant. We could point out the same with respect to religious images: they have always been able to be reproduced. The crucial thing then would not be the number of reproductions in circulation, but what the reproduction itself does to the perception of the images. In that sense, if reproduction does not alter the meaning of what is reproduced and instead reinforces it, "auratic" perception does not decrease because of technology. Probably for this reason, certain religions are iconoclastic and others, on the other hand, are related to iconoduly. This dispute is the manifestation of a problematic relationship with the sacredness of the image: the first fears the trivialization of the sacred through representation, while the second is committed to an increase in fervor thanks to representation. Technology, in that sense, has always been an instrument used to increase religious fervor and today does not seem to be different.

L.T.: What is the impact of digitalization on traditional religious practices and their public visibility? How does the instant and global availability of religious images and texts change the way we live and understand religious rituals and beliefs?

V.D.S.: Traditionally, rites have had to guard their hidden nature to generate the effect of the sacred. In other words, the rituals have been structured by the premise of esotericism (knowledge reserved only for those initiated in a subject). For this reason, one could believe that its visibility and massification would affect the fervor caused by the occult. But personally, I believe that what has generated a decrease in religious faith is not the massification of the rites, but the loss of the esoteric character. When some aspects of religions become exoteric (general knowledge) the cracks and contradictions of the dogma become visible. Such contradictions establish a reasonable doubt, an operation totally opposed to faith, since it must be unquestionable.

L.T.: How do religious representations in modern media affect politics and power structures? Religious images and symbols are often used for political purposes; how does this influence power dynamics and political messages?

V.D.S.: First, we must remember that religion is also political, and it is also a power structure. Therefore, the use and circulation of their images has always been at the service of their political position in society and the strengthening of their power structure. Likewise, there has always been an appropriation of religious images by power structures other than the religious one: the king as part of the lineage of Christ, the leader as a prophet, or the politician as savior. In the political history of Western culture, the charisma of someone who leads has had to build an aura of fervor around them, especially in tyrants.

Today, thanks to new technologies, especially social networks, tyrants have found ways to promote a sectarian identity with unprecedented effectiveness. In this way, through misinformation, the alteration of facts and the construction of an epic narrative, a scenario has been created in which the follower has become a parishioner, and his critical capacity is nullified by the need for faith. In fact, there are already numerous articles that have given proof that Donald Trump's followers behave like a religious cult, and that his figure (especially after the failed attack) has become messianic for his followers.

Something similar could be said about Bolsonaro in Brazil, Kast in Chile, but in general about the close link that is perpetuated between right wing political parties and religion. All of this is also expressed in the ways of representation that the charismatic tyrant has, not very distant from Hitler's messianic way of appearing during the Nazi regime.

L.T.: To what extent is the aestheticization of politics and public life, as observed by Benjamin, visible in contemporary religious practices? Are modern religions subject to a form of aestheticization similar to that described by Benjamin, and if so, what are the implications for their authenticity and influence?

V.D.S.: I think that one of the most interesting issues discussed by Benjamin is the aestheticization of politics. Although the famous epilogue of the essay "The work of art in the era of its technical reproducibility" does not seem to fully develop this concept, appearing as a brief mention, I consider that it is possible to deduce some of its main aspects. In this regard, we could define the aestheticization of politics as the "artificial" restitution of the aura through technology. I say "artificial" with quotes, because every auratic perception requires an artifice or an artifact, but with

technological acceleration this artificial character becomes more evident, making it difficult to sustain the auratic fervor, since the characteristic of technique is to exhibit its condition. artificial (the aura, on the other hand, must be shown as "natural" despite the artifices required for its constitution).

Therefore, the only way to reinforce auratic perception using technologies is by betraying the potential that resides in said techniques. This is done by falsifying its effects, hiding its origins and transforming the potential liberating effect of doubt into the dominating effect of unrestricted certainty. That is, to subvert the question that technology establishes with the answer that faith provides. In that sense, as Benjamin foresaw, the thoughtless use of the reproductive capacities of technology has greatly facilitated the construction of a politics based on the artificial restoration of the already diminished aura, or in other words, the construction of a politics that behaves like the traditional work of art or even religion.

On the other hand, there will always be a conflict between religion and the technological image. This conflict occurs because religion requires an aura, that is, being perceived as authentic. The image whose technological reproduction becomes evident demonstrates the crisis of the concept of authenticity. This conflict has resulted from religion (and politics) taking advantage of technology to disguise the crisis of the concept of authenticity.

L.T.: Are immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) creating new forms of spiritual and transcendent experience? How are these new technologies reshaping our conception of sacrality and religious experiences?

V.D.S.: If new technologies are used in their proper sense, they could only lead us to the end of religion. Or at least the end of religion as it was originally conceived. Therefore, every technological instrument used by religion has been to disguise the fact that technology and faith are in principle incompatible. Consider, for example, the rites carried out through artificial intelligence: in them you can only observe the perpetuation of tradition although a different medium is used. The artificial intelligence used in these cases only replicates what is already established, it does not innovate or modify what is consecrated.

And regarding augmented reality and virtual reality: I personally believe that their impact has been very limited on a social or cultural level. These technologies are not yet in common use and in general remain restricted to a small circle of people, most of them related to the areas of computing, video games and entertainment. That is why I do not believe that its existence is relevant in the ways of experiencing the environment or perceiving what we call reality. Nor do I think it will

diametrically modify the ways of experiencing spirituality, since as I pointed out previously, religions use technology to preserve their traditions, not to alter them.

L.T.: How can modern and contemporary art continue to reflect and influence religious and spiritual values in an increasingly digital context? What role does art play in fostering meaningful dialogue between spiritual traditions and new forms of artistic expression?

V.D.S.: I would dare to say that art has never influenced religions. On the contrary, religion has been very influential for some artistic practices. In that sense, since modernity we have appreciated a growing process of secularization of art. Or rather: the origin of art in a modern sense coincides with the secularization of Western culture. Without this process we could not speak of art as a sphere separate from other forms of representation. However, art has nuclear elements shared with religions, for example, the need to mask the fracture of the aura as a way of self-preservation.
Therefore, art has had to incorporate technology to artificially preserve the idea of originality, originality and authenticity. That is, to keep the faith. If we think about it that way, the paradox related to art is interesting: its existence depends on the secularization of society, since only thanks to that can it be positioned as a cult. Despite this, in general it tends to happen that the art of greatest interest is that which questions and disrupts its own cult status. In that sense, if we think about the most significant contemporary artistic practices, we will observe that they have thought of themselves as counter-cultural artifacts and against cults. This is because cult and culture are two sides of the coin we call tradition. Art cannot be traditional, although it is sustained thanks to certain traditions. On the other hand, spirituality can only be traditional, even though it is sustained by certain transformations. This incompatibility will always generate deep friction between art and religion.