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Recuperating the Aura: The Dead on Display

Jay Williams

This essay focuses on the larger cultural significance of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame exhibition, *The Grateful Dead: The Long Strange Trip* (Kramer 2013). Two preliminary points inform my analysis. First, the example I want to use throughout is Garcia's pants—the rainbow-colored pants that Mountain Girl made for him, which is one of the first objects we encounter in the exhibition. Second, the main thrust of the essay revolves around Walter Benjamin's concept of the aura. Every object—and Benjamin includes landscape, film, and photography—has something about it that seems to exist independently of its materiality. In terms of speech, we might say that an object speaks to us, that walls tell stories, that a picture is worth a thousand words. Or, visually speaking, an object has a penumbra, a nimbus that we imagine we can see. Or, psychologically speaking, we sense an uncanniness about an object, that it might come to life, that what was once dead will return. This is the Freudian uncanny.

These common understandings of the life of an object are not its aura. In the strict Benjaminian sense, the aura is two things. It is the dis-

tance that we feel between us and an object—not physical distance, but distance in the sense that the object is always apart from us. This is the knowledge we have that the object has had a life of its own. The second defining feature of an aura is the object's place in history and tradition, its place in the history and tradition of objects and its own history and tradition: the how, where, when, why, and who made it, and also how it has stood up to the wear and tear of time. This is what Benjamin calls the here-and-now of an object. This defines its uniqueness, its authenticity, its authority.

Benjamin, who "finished" his final draft of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in 1939, was concerned with an object's aura because he wanted to talk about Fascism, Communism, and the political nature of art. His discussion of aura concerns only the first half of the essay, so he does not discuss at length the pertinence of the concept of aura to the museal display of objects. But he does discuss the importance of individual versus mass observation of an object, and this, as well as the definition of an object's aura, is very pertinent to our understanding of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame exhibition *The Grateful Dead: The Long, Strange Trip*, which ran from April 12, 2012, through March 24, 2013.

There are two points about the exhibition that I want to focus on. One is about aura and dislocation, which is part of the operation of reproducibility. Can aura survive dislocation? That is, can the aura of objects like guitars and clothing survive museum display? The second point I want to make is something that, again, is not addressed by the exhibition but that the exhibition itself cannot help but raise: that is, what is the place of the Grateful Dead in the history of American popular music? Because the Hall of Fame is the history of American popular music, the Dead, it seems, are very much a part of that history. As listeners know, the Dead played the American songbook and added to it and reinvented it; they are very much an American institution and have earned a place in popular music. But there is a difference between popular and pop. For example, when the Dead played two songs on *Late Night with David Letterman* in April 1982, they didn't play their "hit" "Truckin'" or something from their most popular albums (Greene 2015). That would have been an attempt

to be pop. No, they played "Deep Elem Blues" and "The Monkey and the Engineer." (Thoughtful fans noted the irony of those choices: when Letterman asked Garcia and Weir about their memories of life in San Francisco in the sixties, they laughed about not being able to remember it. And then they played two songs from that period.) So, because pop groups are lumped together with popular groups, because no distinction is made in the Hall of Fame between popular music and pop music, the Dead are included in the history of pop and popular music. Yet something must differentiate the Dead from the other groups and individuals honored in the Museum's exhibitions. What, then, is missing from the narrative of the Dead as one more stop on the timeline of rock's formation from early blues to its current incarnations?

Before I discuss the issue of historical specificity, I should explain what I mean by aura. Aura here is best theorized by Walter Benjamin and Miriam Hansen. We can start with its common meaning, a perhaps physically manifested glow or light or halo surrounding a person. Interestingly, Benjamin started out with this meaning, though not because he was into the Dead or American countercultural spirituality. He was acutely aware instead of spiritualism and Russian occultist Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), an esotericist best known as the founder of Theosophy. Benjamin's interest was in part Marxian in nature—he was cognizant of Marx's theorizing of capitalism and spirituality—and partly it had to do with Surrealism's attempt to disrupt the bourgeoisie. But Benjamin took the concept of aura in a different direction.

If the personal degrades the aura of an object by replacing the historical and traditional qualities of the object with personal qualities and values—that is, destroying the distance one feels between oneself and an object by making it intimate—then how can a museum remake aura? It can only do so by keeping the historical contextualization, by mediating the object with the proper language and images. If we feel the pedagogic nature of an exhibition, if it is teaching something, then it is restoring the aura. We should be made to feel the strangeness of the object, not its familiarity.

Miriam Hansen believes that Benjamin's concept of the aura in the artwork essay is "restrictive," as if he wanted to make it more of a meta-

physical concept and less of an empirical one (2008, 338). But even in his 1940 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin talks about the "data" of the aura. When we give an object our full attention we partake of its aura. He quotes Novalis: "'Perceptibility is an attentiveness'" ([1940] 1969, 188). Benjamin is interested in perceptibility as a medium, the aura as a way of seeing that is new in modernity. But to completely understand the aura one must examine not only how it is a way of seeing but also what it gives us as a way of seeing. And what it give us is the data of the history and tradition of the object. This is what Benjamin is leading up to when he talks about the way an object looks back at us when we look at it. And these data are what Hansen leaves out when she tries to make the aura into a metaphysical, almost mystical, concept. In "Some Motifs" Benjamin writes:

> Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at [in a photograph], or who feels he is being looked at [i.e., a live person] looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. This ability corresponds to the data of *memoire involuntaire*. These data ... are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus, they (the data) lend support to a concept of the aura that involves the "unique apparition of a distance." ([1940] 1969, 188)

That is, first the object and its data become lost through the passage of time; then the purpose, the use, the meaning, the intention, the history, the tradition of an object disappears over time. Garcia takes his pants off and puts them in a closet where they remain for years. It is this distance, expressed chronologically, that makes up its aura. But when the object is placed in front of us, when Garcia's pants reappear in front of us in a box, and we attend to the object fully, we can sense its aura. The data of its participation in a history and tradition becomes apparent to us. The object may speak to us, but what it says are historical data. But once we replace its historical context with our own experience of the pants in the here-and-now of attending to it in a museum display, the aura begins to degrade. We look at the pants and instead of hearing how and when and

where and why Garcia wore them, we find and apply other contexts: We begin to compare the pants to what we wore in the sixties. We compare them to what we are wearing now. We wonder if we actually like rainbow pants. We want to wear them. We want to make them ours. These personal desires degrade the aura by shrinking the distance between the pants and us. By trying to possess them, we destroy them. We destroy their integrity and their authenticity. By replacing the historical value of the pants with a personal value we miss—we lose—their uniqueness. As each visitor to the glass case gives the pants a personal value, the mass of visitors effectively reproduces the pants over and over, making personal copies as if they were photographing or Xeroxing the object, again and again. And then, by telling others about their personal experience of viewing the pants, the masses circulate the technological reproduction of the pants, degrading the aura even further.

Benjamin would say that this process leads to fascism. As Sinclair Lewis famously observed, it can't happen here. Of course, it can, but it does not need to. We can take steps to keep a museum object's aura intact. To stop the degradation of an object's aura a museum needs to properly contextualize the object. Such a contextualization happened in the UC Santa Cruz library exhibitions on the Grateful Dead—indeed, that was an explicit curatorial goal, not surprising, given curator Nicholas Meriwether's training as a cultural historian. In *A Box of Rain: Archiving the Grateful Dead*, which ran from April 2012 through April 2013 at UCSC's McHenry Library, one of the best examples was the display of a Modulus prototype guitar. Bob Weir developed the instrument with physicist Elizabeth Cohen, then of Stanford, and Jeff Hasselberger at Modulus, and they published an article on the project in the *Journal of Guitar Acoustics* (1982).

The guitar is, of course, the focus of the display, but it is surrounded by the original Fender amplifier the team used to test the prototype, sheet music of songs by Weir, a copy of the journal issue, and thorough but brief explanatory notes. The aura of the guitar feeds off of the aura of the objects that surround it. By being grouped together, the objects form an auratic resistance to our attempts to personalize the guitar. Partly this happens because most people do not try to festishize obscure academic

articles or even sheet music. But mostly it happens because our attention, our perceptibility, is directed away from the personal and to the historical. Instead of wanting to touch or play the guitar, we want to either learn more about Weir's involvement in this kind of effort (where is a tape of the guitar being played, what did it sound like?) or we turn away, bored by the arcana. Either way, the grouping works in a way that the display of Garcia's pants do not.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame exhibition cannot help but historically contextualize the Dead's objects. After all, the museum bills itself as a history museum—a history of rock and roll—and by choosing the Dead as a featured group it naturally places the Dead in the museum's history. In the basement exhibition area, the permanent collection tells us how rock and roll developed. The display cases are arranged roughly chronologically, dealing as best as possible with the fact that many groups span many decades, following musical trends as much as playing their own new music. In one of the permanent collection cases, we see a display called "The San Francisco Scene." It presents a guitar played by John Cipollina, Janis Joplin's car, and other artifacts, including some that belonged to the Dead: Pigpen's banjo, a poster, and, most interesting of all, a draft of Hunter's typed lyrics for "Truckin'."

As part of the museum's permanent exhibition, those objects do not move—and it is good that visitors to the museum can still see some Dead objects without paying an extra fee to see the special exhibition. But that policy means that the curator lost a chance to correctly contextualize some of the objects in the special exhibition. For example, while the draft of Hunter's lyrics has "Whatever became of Sweet Jane / She lost her sparkle you know she isn't the same," the sheet in the exhibition has "spot" instead of "sparkle." A minor change, perhaps, but a very interesting one to a Dead specialist, or from an intellectual historian's point of view. If the museum had brought together both sets of lyrics, we would have had the kind of historical contextualization that happened with Meriwether's exhibitions at UC Santa Cruz. But, as it stands, the lyric sheets in Cleveland that show a significant variant in a song are merely sheets of paper with writing by one of the members of the band. The banjo played by Pigpen becomes just an instrument played by one member of the band (and one

never played on stage or on a recording by the band). When the labeling of the objects is simplified to this level, we lose the requisite mediation that would establish the object's intense, full-bodied aura.

In fairness, the curatorial philosophy of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is not interested in aura. The museum's mission is to place the artists they present, including the Grateful Dead, in the history of popular American music. And the price it pays for doing this is the loss of the specificity of the band, its uniqueness, its authority. That is, any of the bands represented in the permanent collection could be pulled out of the basement and placed in a special exhibition upstairs. They all have that functionality because the museum puts them all on that same level. They are all presented as historical manifestations of changes in American taste in popular music. By inducting the band into the Hall of Fame (which the Hall of Fame did in 1994), the museum further equates the Dead with, say, Madonna or the Beatles, in a historical sense, when in fact the only thing that unites these musicians is the popularity that the Hall of Fame recognizes and perpetuates by inducting them into the Hall of Fame.

In the end, two things happen for us when we view an exhibition like *The Grateful Dead: The Long, Strange Trip*. One is that, as Benjamin says, the mass reproduction of an object "actualizes" it. That is, it is brought to life for all of us, the masses. It becomes ours. It becomes an item in a new here-and-now. But, because it is no longer unique, because its presentation makes it infinitely reproducible, the value of the item has shifted. We do not possess the original, unique object. We possess its history, its tradition, its facticity. The object, in looking back at us, does not give us itself. It gives us its history—at a great sacrifice. The unique object disappears. Once Garcia took off his pants and they ended up in the museum, they died. Their aura disappeared. We do not see Garcia's pants in that box. We do, however, see their potential for mass appeal. But that appeal should be the foundation for a correct understanding of the place of those pants in the history and tradition of the Grateful Dead.

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