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Walter Benjamin on *Kodachrome*

In the last ten years or so, polaroid cameras have been consistently on trend. They are brought along to capture moments of nights out; they are featured at weddings for guests to make memories for the bride and groom; they create galleries to be strung on dorm room walls. When most of us in postmodern society possess a smartphone that has the ability to take high quality photos and to store them in great quantities, what can be the appeal of a camera that takes poor quality photos of a limited amount? Perhaps it is the novelty of having only one chance to take a good photo. Is there something about the uniqueness and tangibility of each photo printed from the camera that has appeal? Or could it be nostalgia for an earlier era? A desire for authenticity? The film *Kodachrome* (2017), directed by Mark Raso, ponders similar questions. By use of dialogue, plot, and the character of Ben Ryder, the film *Kodachrome* (2018) both illustrates and extends Walter Benjamin's discussion of mechanical reproduction, discussing if the authenticity of art can be disconnected from its hierarchical roots.

*Kodachrome* is a poignant story of second chances. The main character Matt Ryder reluctantly embarks on a pilgrimage with his father, who is the famous photographer Ben Ryder, and his nurse, Zooey. Matt and Ben have not spoken in years, but Zooey convinces Matt to accompany them on a road trip to Parsons, Kansas to the last remaining lab that develops the kodachrome film in order to develop four rolls of film

that Ben has found from years ago before the film is discontinued in a matter of days. Ben is dying of cancer and it is Matt's last chance to have any semblance of a relationship with him. The film opens up a discussion on the value of past forms of art. One thing that is dwelt on is the value of an original work of art - to reproduce a work is to "destroy its aura" (Benjamin 246). *Kodachrome* asks the question of whether that is such a bad thing. Evading discussion of her broken marriage, Zoey at one point says, "Nothing good comes from reliving the past" (41:13). This statement resonates in a film that features twentieth-century relics such as cassette tapes, maps, record-players, and of course, kodachrome film.

Walter Benjamin's ideas from his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" provides the language and philosophical framework from which the film *Kodachrome* gains much of its meaning. In this essay, Benjamin discusses how the essence of art has evolved due to the possibility of reproducing it mechanically. Initially art had a material presence in the context of ritual. It had "cult value," which amounts to a certain sacredness of the object anchored in its physical existence (Benjamin 246). Due to its relationship to ritual, art was not accessible to everyone but was set apart; people made pilgrimages to see it. Because of the ability to mechanically reproduce art by means of prints and photographs and the like, art is now able to exist beyond its physical condition and thus became accessible to the masses. While the basic aesthetic features of an artwork may be transferable in its reproduction, one thing that cannot be reproduced is authenticity. The character of Matt's father, Ben, expresses the value of an original artwork when he says, "No matter how great something looks, you can't beat the real thing" (*Kodachrome* 51:00). Benjamin refers to

authenticity as “aura” (245). Art forgoes its aura when it is removed from its history and tradition. Instead of cult value, a reproduction possesses “exhibition value” - it is not valued in and of itself, but is valued for being seen. In essence art becomes objectified when viewers are no longer “absorbed” by it, but instead “absorb it” (149).

*Kodachrome* is a film about aura. Benjamin writes, “From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense” (Benjamin 246). Although Benjamin places photography into the category of reproduction, the kodachrome method of photography represents the authenticity of original art in the film. Because of the way the photos are “projected with light... rather than printed,” the presence of the original is essential to its form (0:9:42). The concept of aura is not explicitly discussed in the film - the film shows rather than tells. However, the term “aura” is brought up once by Matt’s aunt, Sarah, when she first meets Zooey and assumes that she is Matt’s girlfriend. When Matt repudiates this assumption, Sarah is surprised because in her words, “[their] auras are conjoined” (0:30:44). While Sarah’s ability to “see auras” is in a spiritual context and not a philosophical context, the word “aura” functions as a clue to uncovering the discussion of Wartenberg’s theory on art present in the film. As a sidebar, this comment of Aunt Sarah’s is also a foreshadowing of and reflection on the authenticity of Matt and Zooey’s relationship - it is ‘the real thing.’

Benjamin’s discussion of the loss of aura takes on new dimensions in the context of a postmodern society. Walter Benjamin writes about the nature of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. *Kodachrome* enters into the discussion of the nature of art in the age of digital reproduction. Consider the narrative of the film: three companions are

making a pilgrimage for the sake of art, a pilgrimage that they will never be able to make again as the kodachrome dye is discontinued. The story provides the perfect context in which to discuss the evolution of the nature of photography, and more broadly the nature of art. At one of the pit stops along their journey to Parsons, Kansas, Ben laments to Matt the intangibility and ephemerality of art in the digital age. He says, “People are taking more pictures now than ever before. Billions of ‘em. But there’s no slides, no prints. They’re just data. Electronic dust. Years from now, when they dig us up, there won’t be any pictures to find. No record of who we were, how we lived” (51:09). What Ben laments is the disconnection of art from history. Benjamin calls this “the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (245). What is there to inherit? There is no concrete reality in digital reproductions. At least with prints, there was the possibility of a tangible object; now photos are simply “electronic dust.” Ben considers the legacy of postmodern society and concludes that there will be none. The digital age is fleeting and transient.

In Matt’s response to his father, he demonstrates the interconnection between the discussion of aura and the discussion of patriarchal society. Matt replies, “What’s the point of having an artifact if you never see it with your own eyes?” (51:32). The first layer of this question serves to point out the elitist nature of art that is rooted in ritual. Benjamin discusses the ability to reproduce art as the “emancipation” of art from ritual (247). Thus, from his perspective, it is a positive thing. Reproduction is freed from its elite context for the benefit of the masses; art is brought “‘closer’ spatially and humanly” (246). Art becomes widely accessible with the ability to reproduce it. We can all experience art that most of us would never have been able to experience before the age

of mechanical reproduction. This question hails back to the discussion of cult value versus exhibition value - art today is valued as it is beheld. It is of no value if it cannot be seen. The underlayer of Matt's question is a fairly blatant dig at Ben's absentee fatherhood. Ben follows up Matt's question saying, "You still talking about film?" and it is obvious that the word "artifact" could easily be substituted for the word "father" in Matt's question.

The setting of Ben's house is key to the introduction to his character. The house has arched doorways and ornate bannisters; it oozes "authenticity." Evidently the house is an original New York century home. Inherent in original art is the "concept of authority" (Benjamin 245). The house can be seen as representative of a bygone patriarchal era. It is significant that the character who espouses the doctrine of aura and ritual is the character that embodies toxic masculinity. This line sums up Ben's toxic traits pretty well: "No art worth a damn was ever created out of happiness. I can tell you that. Ambition, narcissism, sex, rage. Those are the engines that drive every great artist, every great man" (48:19). Here is an explicit connection between what Ben considers art and toxic masculinity. To Ben, "every great man" is defined by "ambition, narcissism, sex, [and] rage." It hardly bears needing to be explained. If asked to provide a list of traits that fall under the umbrella of toxic masculinity, these four might top the list. The relationship between cult value and patriarchal society is evident when he equates these traits as characteristics of both "great art" and "great men." He does contradict himself twenty seconds later when he smiles widely as he takes a photograph of a little girl with her head out the window of a train, the picture of innocence, leaving the discussion open for what really makes up great art.

Several questions are provoked by the philosophical discussion of aura in the film. What is the place of aura in a postmodern world? Does aura still have value? Can aura exist apart from its patriarchal, hegemonic roots? It would be easy enough to conclude that *Kodachrome* discounts the value of aura as a remnant of patriarchal society. However, the ending of the film complicates the discussion.

Though “the end of an era” is marked by the discontinuation of kodachrome film in tandem with the death of Ben (1:25:27), the film does not completely throw out relics, ritual, and cult value. The “symmetry” of the end of kodachrome in line with Ben’s death can be interpreted as the end of the patriarchal roots of art. “Nothing good comes from reliving the past,” right? Yet the film ends with Matt and Zooey doing just that. As they embark on a new beginning, a fresh start in love for them both, they are absorbed by Ben’s final exhibit. The rolls of kodachrome film that they had made their pilgrimage for turn out to be photographs from Matt’s early childhood - beautifully vulnerable shots of Matt with his mother and, in some, with a tenderly-smiling Ben. Ben’s legacy to his son is the best part of himself. It is not art motivated by ambition or narcissism, sex or rage; it is art from what Ben, in his first display of vulnerability in the film, terms as the time in his life that he would choose to relive (1:18:25). Ben recognizes that his fatherhood was damaged; “Maybe I was always broken. I don’t know.” And this could be a concession of the modernist patriarchal era; maybe it was always a broken system. But perhaps, like Ben, it has not left a completely tarnished legacy. *Kodachrome* advocates for the appreciation of ritual separated from hierarchical contexts. Matt not wanting to know his father is emblematic of a postmodern generation wanting to separate from their patriarchal historical roots. But modernism birthed postmodernism. While there are

certainly many things from which it is good to detach from the past, there are many elements worth preserving and remembering. There is value in tangible experience. To engage with physical reality is to participate in the full human experience. As embodied beings, there is value in ritual.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Continental Philosophy: an Anthology*, edited by William McNeill et al., Wiley-Blackwell, 1998, pp. 244-252.

*Kodachrome*. Directed by Mark Raso. 21 Laps Entertainment. 2017.