

Abstract

This project interrogates the character of human meaning in digital participatory spaces—its construction and mutability in the face of algorithmic recommendation. I ask how the presence of algorithmic recommendation affects the participatory construction of meaning on YouTube, which centers personal connection and authenticity. To explore this question, I make a theoretical argument that utilizes the aura and post-ritual performance to specify the auratic quality of performance on YouTube, insisting on a quality of essentially human charisma that emerges through a creator’s knowledge of and participation within YouTube’s communicative spaces. Algorithms stand to alter this model by interfering in the dynamic between audience and creator, mediating cultural production and reorganizing conceptions of creative acts. Understanding not only how algorithms affect creative processes but also how creators conceptualize such algorithms keys us into a larger public conversation regarding cultural autonomy in the face of increasingly mediated online networks.

The Aura, Uploaded:
Conceptualizing Participatory Meaning Amidst YouTube's Algorithm

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Introduction

This paper analyzes the growing interrelation between algorithmic recommendations and cultural production. Previous literature has prioritized the audience, examining how algorithms gather data from sites and appeal to individual viewers, and asking if algorithms accurately reflect trends in the public sphere (Gillespie, 2012; Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). This project, however, examines how algorithmic recommendation alters the production of creative meaning in sites of participatory culture. These are sites where conceptions of content quality and the rationale for cultural creation are established within a communal, interactive space of simultaneous production and consumption. As such, I focus on YouTube because of the platform's longevity, its roots in participatory culture, and its longer video format compared to other social networking sites. Within YouTube's creative communities, I am concerned with how the presence of algorithmic recommender systems affects the participatory production of meaning and norms within YouTube's creative communities.

Participatory culture, a term popularized by Henry Jenkins in 2009, describes a culture, especially prominent among youth, characterized by low barriers to artistic expression and engagement, support for creating and sharing projects, informal mentorship, and a sense of social connection (Jenkins et al, p. xi; Chau 2010). Creation on YouTube is conceived this way by both creators and YouTube itself, which prioritizes "members' sense of belonging and identification with the community and, in return, loyalty to the platform" (Chau, p.69). Merging formal production qualities with digital social networking, YouTube fosters a participatory culture where content creation and consumption take place in a social, recursive environment, with projects extending beyond the individual as they feed a continuous social and creative cultural scene. This takes place through the platform's communicative infrastructure, where users interact

through commenting, liking, and subscribing across YouTube's landscape of videos. While creation on YouTube does not involve entirely collective projects—most amateur YouTubers create content individually or in small groups—their process of creation exists in a communicative and collaborative space that informs their production methods and outcomes. The expressive and aesthetic conventions of YouTube content are “produced dynamically (that is, as an ongoing process, over time) as a result of many interconnected instances of participation, by many different people” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 90). Shaped by involvement in these communicative spaces, norms for successful YouTube content reflect participatory values, prizing performances of authenticity and social connection between users (including audience and creator).

However, participatory interaction is not the only element at work on YouTube. The site is also distinctly one of algorithmic recommendation, as the site's algorithm continually recommends users videos. YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system strives to choose and promote the most relevant media objects to the user, both on their personalized feed and in manual searches. In doing so, the algorithm sorts and analyzes videos with a specific goal—predicting expected watch time and selecting those that are the highest. To achieve this goal, the algorithm is designed to calculate “the combined values of preweighted objects in the index database, in order to improve the percentage likelihood that the user clicks on one of the first ... results” (Gillespie 2016, p.2). In the case of YouTube, these objects include watch time and history (as well as that of similar viewers) alongside factors including click-through rates, “Freshness”, and device (Rosen & Gielen, 2016; Newton, 2017). Through the generation of personalized results and feeds, the algorithmic recommendation system strives to keep users on

the platform as long as possible. Recommendations for users manifest on YouTube's home page, in search results, and in "watch next" suggestions.

Considering algorithmic recommendation alongside YouTube's participatory culture, I am concerned with how YouTube's algorithm alters the participatory production of meaning by mediating both the production and consumption of content. As YouTube's creative communities, which value authentic, distinctly human qualities of authenticity, are increasingly overwhelmed by the instrumental rationality of algorithmic recommendation, I ask how YouTube's algorithm alters the construction of meaning on YouTube.

To examine the algorithmic reorganization of creative values and production on YouTube, I first discern what this value is and how it manifests through a reconstruction of theoretical texts pertaining to artistic meaning and performance in contemporary society. This thesis paper is primarily devoted to this theoretical construction of meaning on YouTube, as I argue that the social production of this meaning must be thoroughly conceptualized in order to consider how algorithms stand to alter it.

I situate this inquiry at the intersection of several fundamental texts about arts, authenticity, and digital sociality, including Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", DeMul's "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination", and Alexander's "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy". I utilize Benjamin's theory of the aura to specify a quality of transcendence and authenticity in creative works, which I argue is present even in contemporary society. De Mul then provides resources for conceptualizing an auratic quality in digital spaces, informed by both the intangibility and interactivity of the digital public sphere. To specify this quality to YouTube's participatory and performance-based content, I utilize Alexander's model of cultural

performance. This allows me to conceptualize an auratic quality of performance that emerges from the re-establishment of ritual elements through both platform infrastructure and user performances of authenticity (which are informed by the site's participatory culture).

The model I'm offering extends the idea of the aura to specify the auratic quality of performance on YouTube, insisting that the quality emerges through a creator's knowledge of and participation within YouTube's communicative spaces. Algorithms stand to alter this model by interfering in the dynamic between audience and creator, mediating understandings of creative meaning. I thus turn to a consideration of algorithms, conceptualizing their reorganization of this participatory model, which occurs as the algorithm interferes in the participatory dynamic between users.

To illustrate how the auratic quality of YouTube performance interacts with algorithmic understandings, I conduct a case study, considering how YouTubers conceptualize the algorithm in relation to their content. Engaging a "small YouTuber" subreddit as a site of analysis, I observe how YouTubers' discussions of creative meaning and production interact with their understanding of algorithms. Observing discussions within one of the largest of these subreddits, *r/SmallYTChannel*, I utilize Alexander's (2004) model of performance to consider the various elements involved in performances across the subreddit, including actors, audiences, and texts. Delineating how these elements function allows for an analysis of how actors and audiences work in tandem to continually reestablish moral narratives surrounding creation on YouTube and how algorithms are involved in such narratives. Further, by considering how performances on Reddit are meta-textual ones about performance on YouTube, I examine the connected communities and platforms at hand.

This research is deeply embedded in larger concerns regarding creative and artistic integrity processes as they are altered by digital platforms, by both algorithmic forces and the interactive dynamics of social networking sites. As mediatization persists, making society increasingly contingent on media and its logic, culture becomes increasingly algorithmic (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Personalized feeds become inescapable, fundamentally changing our relationships to the things we consume and how we consume them. This also goes for the creation of things (notably digital projects), as the algorithm becomes *the* thing creators market their content towards (the audience) or a sort of game that can be won in the quest for monetary and numerical success. As algorithms and their recursive processes continue to shape our cultural condition, it is crucial to understand how exactly this reorganizes the possibilities of creative acts and their larger social world. Understanding not only how algorithms affect creative processes but also how such algorithms are conceptualized by creators keys us into a larger public conversation regarding cultural autonomy in the face of increasingly mediated online networks.

Beyond algorithms, creative projects are further altered by the digital spaces of social media, as singular works exist within the context of a larger social platform and are directly involved in the public sphere through interactive features. The content cannot be separated from its reception or author, which are embedded in the platform alongside the work (likes, views, comments, channels). YouTube exemplifies a space where artistic practices are shaped by recursive forces, both algorithmic and participatory. It thus may provide insight into the character of modern creative practices to analyze their mediation and discussion in this sphere, as ideas of relevance and the values of creative objects continue to shift amidst context collapse (online and off).

Chapter 2: Benjamin's Aura, Into Modernity

This paper engages with Benjamin's iconic argument about the loss of artistic meaning in modernity to consider the authenticity of art and its sacred collective quality as enduring features of human creativity. Drawing on new theories of performance and participation, I explore the auratic qualities of artistic performances online, as performers and artists make meaning together in the face of rationalized media platforms and algorithmic recommendation systems.

This first chapter considers Benjamin's theory of the aura as he proposes it in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", originally published in 1935. There, Benjamin describes the aura as an authentic and transcendent quality that is present in works of art within specific ritual and sacred spaces, ritual conditions which have been disrupted and transformed in the modern rationalized world. My central question asks: Is there a way to reimagine Benjamin's argument about the aura to think about ideas like human charisma and artistic transcendence in stratified, post-ritual societies? Do artistic performances on YouTube have auratic qualities?

To translate Benjamin's theory of the aura beyond its original context, I examine how artistic engagement and social collectivity are altered in modernity, or what Jeffrey Alexander (2004) calls "post-ritual societies". These are differentiated contemporary societies that, rather than being closely bound by ritual activity and shared beliefs, "revolve around open-ended conflicts between parties who do not necessarily share beliefs, frequently do not accept the validity of one another's intention, and often disagree even about the descriptions that people offer for acts" (p.528). I begin with an examination of how artistic meanings are shaped in the shift from ritual spaces to exhibition spaces, where engagement with art becomes more individualistic and subjective. From here, I ask how the aura's fundamental qualities of

transcendence and human charisma might emerge in a post-ritual context, through alternative non-ritual or non-sacred experiences of social immersion.

I employ Alexander's (2004) theory of performance in contemporary societies to develop an idea of an auratic quality that might exist beyond the framework of tradition. In his approach to cultural pragmatics, Alexander argues that for modern performances to succeed, they must achieve "re-fusion", which he defines as a ritual-like sense of collectivity, a sacred social whole which speaks to something beyond the individual. Successful, authentic, modern performances require the performer to reassemble the elements of performance which were once seamlessly conveyed in face-to-face rituals but have long since been disassembled and disarticulated in the chaos and complexity of modern social relations.

The unique effect of the aura, which Benjamin attributes to specificity in time and place, is fundamentally about the authentic, immersive, human experience of the collective, and these are qualities that I believe persist in modern and digital creative works. In short, I argue that the aura can imbue artistic objects and performances in post-ritual societies like ours, even those that fall outside the kind of specific ritual contexts Benjamin's theory insists upon as specific to artistic aura. In fact, I think this is why Benjamin's idea of the aura pervades media studies up until today, because it remains integral to considering the social value of creative works and how such value stands to be altered by mechanical and technological forces. For example, Benjamin's concern that the shift to mechanical production, using photographic and film technologies, resulted in a devaluation of art's authentic quality might be a useful parallel to critiques of the effect of algorithms as they shape artistic content on YouTube. As the algorithm becomes a bigger governing factor on the platform, YouTubers shift artistic practices and make content in accordance with algorithmic requirements. In doing so, the content's "auratic quality" – the

socially conceived value of transcendent human creation– is at risk of being undermined by the algorithm, since the collective process through which creative value is conceived has been flattened and re-shaped by an automated, non-human process of recommendation.

Despite the generative nature of Benjamin’s theory of the aura, I acknowledge that a strict reading of his work would exclude the kinds of online artistic performances I seek to embellish with the idea of the aura. The contexts through which Benjamin understands the value of the aura (ritual, specificity of time and space) experience significant collapse in contemporary society, particularly in online spaces. That said, I still contend that Benjamin’s model offers a useful way to think about the sacred value of the aura as something that emerges socially, and which is affected by the technological landscape around it. Importantly, Benjamin’s model emphasizes the transcendent values of art and the importance of the human scale, which emerges through ritual to create authentic meaning. Further, Benjamin warns us of the vulnerability of this central human value in contemporary society. It is for this reason that I think Benjamin’s theory offers insights for modern and online spaces, because it allows us to better conceptualize the human quality of creative production, which is at stake in online spaces.

Benjamin’s theory of the aura

An influential member of the Frankfurt school, Benjamin’s theory of art reflects a disillusioned Marxist view that the growing dominance of the culture industries was a key to the hegemonic domination of the public (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). As a politically oriented thinker, Benjamin was especially concerned with the commodification of art, arguing that mechanical reproduction stripped the artwork of its ritualistic meaning, or aura. The aura, Benjamin explained, is the element of a work of art rooted in its unique existence in time and

space. This specificity grants the work a quality of authenticity, which Benjamin defines as “the essence of all that is transmissible from [an artwork’s] beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (1969, p.3). This is also what lends the work of art a sense of authority, as the viewer is drawn closer to the work through a perception of its creative specificity. Creative specificity is connected to the ritual function of art, which Benjamin calls the artwork’s “cult value”. The ritual nature of art lies in its connection to “the fabric of tradition”, which, while it may take place through a variety of forms (even secular ones), indicates the artwork is contextually ingrained in social thought and practice, with its original use value in ritual preceding its identity as a work of art (p.6).

This cult value is most evident in magical and ritual settings, for example, as artworks gesture towards or represent the sacred. Accordingly, works with cult value are often exclusionary, available only to a select few or available only at certain times, since their function is not public display but aims instead to create transcendent meaning for and of the group. This is art’s ritual function. As Benjamin notes, “one may assume that what mattered was their existence [i.e., the artwork’s existence], not their being on view” (p.7). In the domain of cult value, the work of art is first and foremost associated with its ritual use, with the aura emerging through ritual function based in the work’s uniqueness. Together, these qualities—specificity in time and place and ritual function—lend the artwork a sense of perpetual distance “however close it may be” (p.5). While the materiality and historical presence of the work draw the viewer closer, the cult value points beyond the immediate and mundane moment to establish a sense of distance that points to something larger. Something of the artwork remains unreachable, concealed, and ineffable through its relationship with the sacred. The aura lives here: in something specific and knowable, but ultimately elusive.

For Benjamin, then, the aura is reliant on these two features, and it is diminished by the loss of cult value to “exhibition value”, and then devastated altogether with the rise of mechanical reproduction. In Benjamin’s narrative, exhibition value is a second kind of artistic value that arises as artistic practices and artworks are severed from their ritual function and exhibited for viewing. This is what occurred as modern societies developed, and art began to be defined through frameworks of mobility and public access. Exhibition changed art’s value, which became associated with visibility rather than its ritual use value. According to Benjamin, the growing emphasis on exhibition value meant that the work of art became “a creation with entirely new functions” (p.7). These new functions, which prioritized public presentability, resulted in an increased interest in artistic forms that were symbiotic with exhibition. As Benjamin describes, “it is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple” (p.7). As works of art are distanced from ritualistic use value, they take on new forms and meanings and are no longer bound to contexts of ritual signification.

The growth of exhibition value and the diminution of cult value have dire consequences for the aura. As Benjamin writes, “It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function” (p.6). This ritual element, which Benjamin insists is tied to the specific location of a work of art, is strained by the growth of exhibition value and is further attenuated by mechanical reproduction. Made dramatically more accessible by the introduction of photography and film, advances in the ability to reproduce images wholly alters how humans engage with art and how they value artworks. Mechanical reproduction makes art transient, decontextualized, and subject to the viewer, who can acquire a reproduction of any image they wish to see and view it in the context of their choosing. Rather

than meeting the work of art in a specific, singular space and time, the viewer can now bring the work to themselves and evaluate it on individualistic terms, emancipating “the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (p.6). This development spells the end of the aura, although Benjamin argues that the aura does not go without a fight; “the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face”, instilled through “the cult of remembrance” (p.7). However, as mechanical reproduction grows beyond the cult use of honoring loved ones to the reproduction of images more generally, the aura dissipates.

For Benjamin, then, the aura is no longer present in artworks that are reproducible (photographs, prints, films), and his claim extends beyond these artistic mediums too. Growing use of these reproductive technologies, he argues, alters the nature of artistic engagement at large so that it becomes “designed for reproducibility” (p.6). The shape of artistic engagement, which is informed by a technological social reality, is fundamentally altered by mechanical reproduction. For Benjamin, the act of reproduction changes the experience of art in such a way that the experience of authenticity no longer exists. And, as the elements of ritualistic use value and specificity in time and place are lost, works of art are dissociated from the simultaneous transcendence and tangibility of the aura. While art continues to have a social function, particularly in the realm of politics, the innate charisma of simultaneous sacred and human scale, which defines the aura, is absent.

Theorizing the aura in modernity

Creation on YouTube might seem far beyond the reach of Benjamin’s theory of the aura, but I am interested in exploring the degree to which the sacred and transcendent qualities associated with the aura inform creative production in online spaces nonetheless. I am troubled

by the idea that modernity equals the end of the aura, or that art no longer invokes the sacred in a way that speaks to larger symbolic meaning.

Reading Benjamin critically, I find myself at odds with the argument that the aura's qualities can be derived *only* from unique and ritually functioning works of art. This insistence denies the situational nature of aesthetic judgment and the creative possibilities inherent in collective experience. Such an argument decides by fiat, or at least by implication, that the notion of perpetual distance from which the aura emerges cannot be achieved through any other means than ritual. I want to explore ways the aura, defined by perpetual distance, authenticity, and a notion of ritualized collectivity, might persist in modernity, despite the conditions of pervasive context collapse that shape the ways art is conceptualized and valued.

To elaborate this argument, I first examine how artistic meanings and artistic practices are altered by exhibition spaces, where the ritual cult value of art is disrupted. From there, I draw on Jeffrey Alexander's discussions of iconic meaning and cultural performances in post-ritual societies to consider how a new kind of online context offers conditions for the re-emergence of the aura, previously associated with the "work of art", now emergent in creative YouTube performances. Finally, looking at artistic practices as they are discussed by YouTube creators themselves, I show that digital artistic practices are widely understood through ideas associated with the aura, even as they are being actively re-shaped by the algorithmic recommendation systems that drive social media engagement.

The aura, beyond ritual

The democratization of art in modernity alters understandings of aesthetic value and authority, "increasing incorporation of formerly 'low' subject matter into allegedly 'high' art"

(Jay 1999, p.16). Context collapse is especially visible in modern and contemporary art movements that seek to integrate the world of low-culture commodities into that of high-culture art. Incorporating unexpected objects or materials into exhibition spaces, it is the work's placement in such a space that indicates its artistic status. By seeking to provoke definitions of art and how far they extend, artists involved in such work reveal the great shift at work that produces exhibition value as a novel, modern quality of art.

Not only does the work of art gain meaning through its exhibition context, but the meaning of the artwork becomes subjective because it is removed from any contained, ritual-bound understandings. If, for example, a work of art is featured in the exhibition space of a gallery, any individual's engagement with it is singular, because meaning is interpreted through the frames that the individual viewer brings to the exhibition space. In contrast, if a work of art is viewed in a "cult" space – for example, when a religious image is painted on the wall of a church – an individual's engagement with it would be facilitated by the artwork's location which is integrally tied to the ritual function of the church itself. In the absence of such ritual framing, engagement with art becomes more diffuse, individual, and stratified, since it is approached and engaged based on a variety of possible contexts.

While the move from cult value to exhibition value is undeniably significant, in both cases, artistic meanings persist, as people continue to imbue artistic objects with emotion and social value that reach beyond the individual, towards a larger collective. As Domenech Oneto (2009) remarks of Benjamin, “Even though modernity shows that ‘art’ is nothing but a nominal concept, changing throughout the times; one can still argue that there must be a species of will to art... beyond that... In other words, there is an aura of the work of art that is not based on ritual” (p. 60). This argument is appealing because although the process through which the aura emerges

faces challenges in contemporary society, removed from ritualistic meanings and facing a larger collapse in context, the aura has not vanished altogether. I agree with Oneto that the fundamental quality of human charisma, or “species of will to art” that the aura ultimately encompasses, prevails into modernity. How does the aura persist and prevail, despite the incursions of technical rationality?

Benjamin’s insistence on ritual and physical originality implies that the aura’s power lies in its ability to extend beyond the work of art itself, integrating the viewer into a larger social whole. This is the artwork’s symbolic role. For Benjamin, artistic meaning is never discerned objectively; instead, it emerges when the viewer is compelled by those physical elements in the artwork that symbolically represent the collectivity and are invoked by ritual. While Benjamin emphasizes religious or cult ritual, I suggest that the aura’s qualities may also emerge through other avenues of social immersion, which create a ritual-like effect.

This occurs when the symbolic meaning of the art evokes a greater social meaning. As Alexander (2008) argues, artistic objects, “can be hierarchically arranged by proximity to some archetype, some ideal of the sublime, defined not intellectually but by reference to some actual material object, to its shape, its feel. We judge authenticity by such proximity”, he contends, “when an iconic representation captures something of the archetype that lies beneath” (p.9). Authenticity, then, and by the same logic the aura of the work of art, can also rely on a more abstract type of ritually imbued construct, such as an archetype– a collectively imagined original. While achieving authenticity under modern conditions of fragmentation and differentiation is undeniably difficult, it is not impossible. The aura is not extinct in contemporary times.

Re-fusing the aura

To explore how the aura can emerge outside traditional ritual social forms, I draw on Alexander’s (2004) theory of fusion and his “practical pragmatics of performance,” which seeks to understand the cultural rationale of social life in contemporary, stratified societies (Alexander 2004, p.530). Alexander’s overall explanatory goal is to delineate how collectives are formed and persist in modernity, despite the complex differentiation of contemporary societies. In post-ritual societies like ours, he contends, the elements of social performance -- actors, audience, means of symbolic production, background representations, *mise en scene*, and social power -- have become separated. The challenge for successful performances, then, is to “re-fuse” these elements because “to the degree they achieve re-fusion, social performances become convincing and effective — more ritual-like” (p.529)

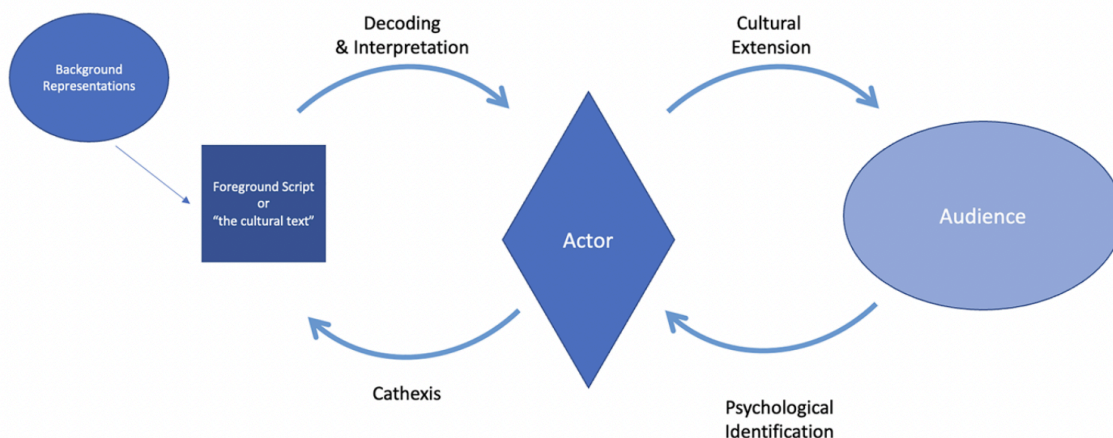


Fig. 1. Alexander’s successful performances of re-fusion. Reprinted from “Harry Potter and the 'Death of the Actor': reimagining fusion in cultural pragmatics,” by A. Taylor, 2024, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 43(1), p. 65.

Alexander argues that refusion is possible through symbolic communication. Successful performances begin with “background representations” – common codes and cultural meanings.

From such collective representations, actors build specific scripts, creating an “immediate referential text” to communicate meaning (p.530). An actor’s performance decodes these deep cultural texts and extends their meaning to the audience, with the goal of psychological identification “of audience with actor and text” (p.547). As the audience experiences identification or emotional connection, they cathect to the cultural texts, achieving “re-fusion”. This is a ritual-like accomplishment that connects actors, audiences, and texts with deep underlying cultural meanings.

Just as social performances are challenged by the diffusion of ritual elements in modern societies, I contend that the auratic quality of art that Benjamin describes is severed from its ritual context by the rise of capitalism, the increasing prominence of exhibition value, and disenchantment of the artwork produced by technologies of mechanical reproduction. The lens Alexander brings to a reworked understanding of social performance can help us to consider the challenge of a re-fused aura in our digital societies, where meanings are multiple, fluid, and floating, and what kinds of artistic objects, practices, and performances can invoke authenticity, specificity, and a connection to the social sacred. How can the idea of re-fusing disparate elements help to reconceptualize the possibilities of the aura in contemporary conditions where the locale is less concretely defined, the cult is less well framed, and the sacred social whole is elusive? While Alexander’s model is concerned with performance rather than art, we might consider the aura similarly “de-fused”, disconnected from the collectivity of ritual which assisted its evocation.

Because contemporary collectivity is “complex, segmented and differentiated,” works of art face a difficult task of “re-fusion”, and of reestablishing their social and cultural context to

attain a collective, auratic quality (Alexander 2004, p.529). Such an achievement is impeded by an increasingly fragmented social world, where “the authentic is a localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p.13). As our social world becomes more dissociated from ritual, art’s social meanings face pervasive context collapse, with authenticity more reliant on subjective forms of cultural meaning, like archetypes and cultural narratives, rather than cult-value in all its physical specificity.

The following chapters explore the central qualities of human charisma and transcendence in Benjamin’s theory of the aura that persist in the everyday. Chapter 3 considers the degree to which we can find evidence of auratic or iconic depth in YouTube content, while Chapter 4 interrogates how values of authenticity and aesthetic authority manifest as YouTube creators consider the artistic stakes of algorithmic recommender systems.

A final note on the aura

While I assert that some version of the aura persists into modernity, I’m aware that any declaration of the aura on YouTube would be rejected by Benjamin. This is especially clear in his reflection on film, as he argues that the camera, replacing the immediacy of live performance, makes the audience “an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (p.19). By utilizing the aura to theorize about the human charisma of creation on YouTube, I do not mean to disregard the specificity of the works to which Benjamin assigns the aura. As I have sought to convey, the nature of engagement with art and its subsequent imbuelement of value changes with time and technology. Instead, I simply aim to lend authority to artistic engagement in post-ritual societies. By exploring how some kind of idea of the aura endures into modernity, I argue that the essential

human and sacred qualities that Benjamin ascribes to the aura are not limited to a ritualistic context and may arise through other forms of collectivity or in more specific contexts.

The following chapter will specify an auratic quality on YouTube, translating the essential qualities of the aura to the digital participatory context of YouTube performance to better understand the construction of meaning in these spaces and what is at stake as they are reshaped by the forces of algorithmic recommendation systems. To define this quality and specify its emergence, I reformulate the idea of the aura for digital participatory spaces, relying on de Mul's (2009) reevaluation of Benjamin's theory of the aura in digital spaces and Alexander's (2004) model of social performance discussed above. Engaging these thinkers, I conceptualize the aura online as imbued in the work through simultaneous authenticity (drawing the viewer close to the work) and digital intangibility, mirroring Benjamin's notion of 'perpetual distance'. Extending the idea of the aura for this context, I seek to apply its focus on sacrality and the specificity of human creation to an object of performance rather than one of art. As such, I specify an auratic quality of performance, employing concepts from both Alexander and Benjamin's theories to describe the emergence of the aura on YouTube as contingent on the fusion of performance with its participatory context. Once this quality has been defined, I will consider the extent to which algorithmic recommendation has altered this auratic performance by intervening in the participatory process through which the aura is collectively defined.

Chapter 3: The Auratic Quality in Online Performance

In the prior chapter, I argued that the fundamental elements of Benjamin's theory of the aura— human charisma and transcendence— persist beyond ritual cult value. I do so by suggesting that the ritualistic collectivity to which Benjamin attributes the aura may be achieved through other means, even in contemporary society. In this chapter, I conceptualize how an auratic quality manifests in online spaces, specifically considering performance on YouTube. The quality I specify, while distinctly auratic, is distinct from Benjamin's idea of the aura. Beyond ritual, I focus on elements of human charisma and transcendence as key features of auratic quality. These elements work together to create perpetual distance, as in ritual contexts where the specificity of human creation is connected with the vastness of transcendental collectivity. This chapter considers how such perpetual distance manifests in the context of YouTube's participatory culture, considering the role of this culture and that of the platform itself.

To conceptualize the aura for online objects, I begin by examining de Mul's (2009) reevaluation of the aura for digital media, which provides resources to consider how digital spaces re-collapse some of the distance of post-ritual society, creating a ritual-like effect through the abstract intangibility of digital platforms. Because the theory of the aura imagines the meaning of artistic objects based on their context and social relations, I utilize de Mul's theory to describe the nature of artistic engagement in a digital space, which is not entirely one of exhibition value. While creative works in the digital space are subject to the viewer and not bound to a specific location (as art with exhibition value often is), the digital, participatory space creates a new kind of local experience for the artist and audience and alters the nature of creative engagement in ways that assist social collectivity.

While de Mul helps me conceptualize the ritualistic ineffability that digital platforms lend to an auratic quality online, his theory overlooks the specificity of human creation that Benjamin considers essential to the aura. I then turn to conceptualizing that human element as it takes place on YouTube, first establishing the context of performance on YouTube. I focus on the nature of the participatory space and the sense of authenticity it entails. To identify this element of human charisma and the nature of an auratic quality in a participatory, distinctly social space, I turn to Alexander's (2004) model of performance. This provides resources to consider how human charisma manifests in social performance. Like Benjamin suggests, this element of specific human creation is understood through authenticity. Using Alexander's conception of re-fusion, which takes place when a performance is successfully authentic, I theorize that an auratic quality on YouTube emerges when a performance achieves authenticity. The nature of authenticity here is inextricable from the platform's participatory culture, as the interactivity and lack of barrier between audience and creator make personal connection a defining element of the experience of art and culture on YouTube. Further, the specific shape of authenticity expected on YouTube (that from which the auratic quality emerges) is rooted in creators' ability to understand and work within the platform's participatory medium.

With the intangibility of digital platforms affording ritual-like potentials, I argue that something resembling Benjamin's notion of perpetual distance takes place on YouTube as this openness is met with the specific human connection that characterizes authenticity. Utilizing Benjamin's aura alongside Alexander's model of performance, I describe a quality that, like the aura, involves the transcendent value of the human scale, emerging through collective notions of authenticity and cultural meaning. Seeking to describe such quality in relation to creation on YouTube, which is a social and distinctly performative endeavor, Alexander's model assists me

in defining an auratic quality *of performance*, which emerges as a representation of a YouTube performance that is successfully re-fused with its participatory context. Operating between spheres of social performance and artistic production, this auratic quality of performance speaks to the transcendence of the aura, which is indicative of creative engagement, but takes place in a performative, participatory setting. The emergence of such a quality relies on the re-fusion of the performative elements, requiring a performance that authentically displays an immersion in the participatory space of amateur YouTube creation, displaying a familiarity with the collectively constructed texts and background representations.

A digital aura

Defining auratic quality in regard to digital content creation, we must consider how the descriptive features of Benjamin's aura—perpetual distance, authenticity, a notion of ritualistic collectivity—take place in the digital sphere, both through platform infrastructure and social dynamics. Benjamin's aura is one of ritualistic use value, which establishes the object's meaning as stemming from notions of authenticity and sacrality. However, these qualities become skewed as we depart from a ritual framework. Amidst context collapse, which is only furthered in digital spaces, the form of authenticity and collectivity that grant a video auratic quality (an element of transcendence, connection to something outside the self) is specific, shaped by platform infrastructure and social dynamics—both of which promote a sense of close connection between creator and audience.

Benjamin's framework places a heavy emphasis on the role of technological change in reshaping our social and cultural character, arguing that artistic engagement and the social value of art changes as technologies change. This is clear in his discussion of exhibition value, as art in

the age of mechanical reproduction becomes “designed for reproducibility” (p.6). Because the technological conditions of online spaces and specifically YouTube performance differ from those of the mechanical reproduction Benjamin discussed, I examine the nature of artistic engagement in digital social spaces in some detail. I suggest that the iterative and communicative nature of these spaces, including YouTube, re-collapses some of the distance Benjamin noted of mechanical reproduction. To develop this argument, I first consider Jos de Mul’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination” (2009) to consider the role of digital infrastructure in transforming the work of art, utilizing his theory to reconceptualize the qualities of ritual and ineffability that are central to Benjamin’s theory of the aura.

Rather than understanding digital technologies as simply a new development in the age of mechanical reproduction, de Mul theorizes the introduction of digital forces as “a new stage in the development of media”, centered here around recombination (p.99). What distinguishes recombination from reproduction is a work’s “openness for manipulation...the aesthetic quality of a work strongly depends on the elegance of the structure of the database and its user interface” (p.102). These new digital dynamics are founded in their potential for interactivity, manipulation, and limitless recombination, and thus, the conditions informing the value and perception of creative works are altered by this framework. De Mul views the expansiveness and interactivity of the new digital spaces quite optimistically, claiming the limitless potential for recombination “brings about a return of the aura” (p.103). Both the interactivity and intangibility of digital works reignite the ritualistic dimension integral to auratic quality, as digital artwork “becomes an interface between the sensible and the supersensible again, now no longer located in the history of the work, but in its virtuality, that is: the intangible totality of possible recombinations” (p.103). The reinvigorated ritualistic element is derived not only from the abstraction a digital

space provides but also from the potential such abstraction and interactivity provide for a feeling of social connection. Digital works may be imbued with meaning beyond their originality in space and time, as Benjamin suggests.

Considering the ritualistic vastness of the digital spaces de Mul describes, I argue that, online, the auratic quality may draw from the direct sociality of its ritual elements, as interacting with the digital space binds individuals together, establishing a sense of unity. In the context of content creation on YouTube, these conditions allow for the deepening of social bonds between audience and creator, establishing the sense of a collective beyond the individual user. The interactivity of YouTube's interface promotes this sense of transcendence and abstraction towards a larger whole, as interactive functions (commenting, liking, and subscribing) draw the creator and audience closer together while simultaneously placing them in the seemingly limitless space of digital recombination.

While the transcendence and abstraction of the digital space is not entirely the ritual-like cult value that Benjamin describes, the interactivity and abstraction of online spaces once again shifts artistic engagement and art's subsequent value. Though audiences remain physically dispersed, the participatory interactivity of the digital platform re-collapses some of the social differences and distances that modernity has created. The digital community becomes co-present in a virtual sense, which reinvigorates the ritualistic elements of artistic engagement.

YouTube context

Before discussing the conditions or details of this auratic quality, the character of creation on YouTube must be established. No longer discussing the formal category of art that Benjamin addressed in "The Work of Art...", it is crucial to outline the characteristics of the creative

objects at hand— the general shape of content creation as it interacts with the participatory space and platform infrastructure. Translating the theory of the aura into a post-ritual age characterized by context collapse and technological change, it is necessary to explore the nuances of creation here and their greater cultural sphere in order to specify an auratic quality for digital performances.

While production and consumption on YouTube once mirrored that of other early social networking sites (SNS), often utilized to “reaffirm pre-existing social networks” through video sharing and producing in smaller networks, the platform has skewed towards a more dichotomous creator/audience relationship since its acquisition by Google in 2006 (Lange, 2007, p.368; Kim, 2012). Moving away from the person-to-person SNS model, Google’s involvement increased commercialization on YouTube, emphasizing content produced for general and mass consumption through search engine optimization (SEO), creation of a home page (where creators can buy featured space), and the addition of an advanced algorithmic recommendation system. While these changes work to institutionalize YouTube in ways that are similar to traditional broadcast media by encouraging “professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment”, the site remains differentiated from traditional media and other platforms by its user-generated content and interactive qualities (Kim, 2012, p.56). In spite of commercialization, YouTube’s SNS features allow anyone to post to the site, easy communication among users of all kinds, and a video production platform that is more personal than broadcast media or their associated streaming sites, and which rewards performances of authenticity and openness informed by participation in YouTube’s creative culture.

To be sure, professionally-generated content exists on YouTube, but the platform is defined above all by its user-generated content and ‘grassroots’ culture, with content, across

genres, involving minimal production and a personal tone. Driven by the low barriers to creation and the accessibility of interaction between audience and creator (key features of participatory culture), amateur YouTube content fosters a casual and familiar tone, promoting an ideal creator as “motivated by a desire for personal expression or community, whose original content either expresses the mundane or everyday...or demonstrates a high level of creativity and playfulness” (Burgess and Green 2009, p.90). Rather than artful cinematography or complex writing, creation on YouTube prizes personal performances of authenticity and a sense of creation driven by self-expression. Even in YouTube’s contemporary, more commercialized age, these tenets remain, as “ordinariness and amateurship markers contribute to the online construction of the authentic persona” (Riboni, 2020, p.21).

This sense of expression is especially visible in creative content forms like “vlogs”, or video blogs, where the creator takes a candid and conversational approach in speaking directly to the camera, often about their everyday life. This format draws large amounts of participation and, as such, suggests that watching or interacting with the video is not an individual act, but involves one in a substantial, social, digital community. This popular genre, which has been considered “an emblematic form of YouTube participation”, displays the symbiotic values of authenticity and interactivity that are central to creation on the platform (2009, p.94). Such values are founded in the site’s participatory culture, which continues to shape the creative values and norms across the site. Further, while these ideas of authenticity, personality, and minimal production are specifically ones of amateur production, they characterize the YouTube ‘genre’ at large. As León and Bourk (2018) note, “YouTube has created a new visual culture based on the original amateur aesthetics” (p.4).

While Benjamin is dismissive of personality in an auratic sense, claiming a film star's "spell of the personality" does not contain anything of the aura, this factor remains pertinent here. Authenticity on YouTube is "[the] creator's distinctiveness— in a massively crowded field— is his or her claim to authenticity" (Cunningham and Craig 2017, p.74). This element of distinctiveness is that element of human charisma and specificity, their authenticity manifesting through an understanding of YouTube's participatory values.

As Alexander (2004) notes, the observed authenticity of a social performance is part of the achievement of fusion, or a ritual-like effect. Benjamin's blanket dismissal, then, should be contested because it misrepresents where the auratic quality of a filmed performance originates. While Benjamin argues that filmed performances capture only the "phony spell of a commodity", later film scholars have contended that filmed performances possess an aura. Benjamin's resistance to the possibility of a filmed aura lies in the fact that the performance loses its specificity in space and time, and replaces live audiences with a camera. Along with other film critics, I respectfully disagree with Benjamin, since the aura may be considered as stemming from "the star's appearance on the screen, and it is on the screen that her stardom succeeds or fails, rises, or fades. Her presence on the projected film is her presence to the audience, and where we might find that her work is auratic or not— the camera being left behind and somewhat forgotten, not without interest, but irrelevant to aura." (Goldblatt 2017, p. 247). Regardless of a film's proliferation or technology (i.e., mechanical reproduction), the performance is valued and received on its own merits by the audience in the moment of viewing. As such, each viewing is a distinct, specific performance.

Further, the issue of the camera distancing and commodifying the performer is largely reduced in contemporary society. Naturalized by its universality in our present age, the camera is

understood as a mode of communication rather than an alienating technology. Further, the camera fades in the intimacy of the networked YouTube connection. Whereas film, as Benjamin discusses it, is entirely removed from a collective and present form of engagement, YouTube's digital participation re-enables some of that collectivity. Further, YouTube creation is a co-present, ongoing process rather than a singular object, thus providing a more collective form of engagement for both creators and viewers, as both audiences and creators re-infuse underlying codes and values with social energy and meaning.

While Benjamin invokes the aura to describe a quality of specificity within works of art, I seek to translate the essence of that quality— a transcendent value of human creation, evoked through Benjamin's perpetual distance— to creation in this digital participatory space, where creative production and surrounding norms are informed by a communicative, reciprocal environment. Within this space, social interaction and recursive, simultaneous practices of production and consumption define successful creation on the platform. The interactive spirit of creation in this setting encourages performances of authenticity and reduced boundaries between audience and creators, who are involved in the participatory processes that continually shape YouTube creation. In what follows, I consider how auratic qualities might emerge in an interactive, digital space and how they function within creative performances that unfold within and through YouTube's participatory processes.

Authenticity on YouTube

Within YouTube, the emergence of an auratic quality cannot occur purely because the work exists in a digital realm of intangibility and recombination, it must contain an element of authenticity or authorial presence that is accepted by the audience. While de Mul's arguments

about the ritual qualities and intangibility of digital spaces provide some clarity about the conditions of artistic production on YouTube, this lens does not account for the weight Benjamin's framework places on authenticity and proximity to the work of art, or the specific and subjective shape of the aura in a society defined by pervasive context collapse. The auratic quality of an artistic performance does not emerge automatically simply because the performance exists in a digital realm of intangibility and recombination. For an artistic performance to possess an auratic quality, the performance must also contain an element of authenticity or authorial presence that is accepted by the audience.

If the YouTube platform's allure and value, as a social networking site, is predicated on "a presumption of personal authenticity and connection" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p.129), then Alexander's (2004) model of re-fused social performances provides useful resources for thinking through how auratic qualities might emerge on YouTube. For Benjamin, the human element of creation is integral to the aura of a work of art, and the sense of proximity and distance it evokes. Considering this in the YouTube context, Alexander's model of performance provides a way of assessing such human charisma as it manifests through creators' performance.

For the ritualistic elements (interactivity and intangibility) to emerge within YouTube performances, I argue the performance must be authentic; that is, the performance must successfully re-fuse the disparate elements of performance, connecting actor, text, and audience in a persuasive gestalt. It is this re-fusion and the acceptance of authenticity that allows the auratic quality to manifest in the moments of digital performance. While the infrastructure of digital platforms provides ritual-like potential for the reemergence of the aura, its quality can only wholly emerge if the work's performance is effectively authentic to its audience.

While Alexander's model speaks to the role of authenticity in social performances more generally, his claims are especially pertinent for YouTube performances and their potential for developing an auratic quality. The platform's participatory culture and lack of barrier between the roles of audience and creator make authenticity an especially prominent aspect of its appeal, as well as the element from which collectivity and transcendence arise. Participatory culture, which makes production methods largely accessible and unobscured, lends itself to a particularly authenticity-driven auratic quality, as there is less of a professionalized boundary between a creator and their audience, and the means of symbolic production are widely available. The visibility and acknowledgment of production, along with the direct interaction between creators and the audience, produce an especially intimate and parasocial space. As such, there is an understanding of mutuality that emerges from the creator's performance of authenticity, something that is furthered by an understanding of how the product has been created. The act of making a YouTube video is not only approachable but understood as something that is primarily intimate—created by few (without the managerial middlemen forces of broadcast television), it is a wholly representative product of its creator. This understanding displays the collapse of social distance in online, participatory performances, as YouTube's values of personal expression and connection are furthered by the digital interactive space. This returns us to a more ritual-like form of engagement, as the YouTube community (creator and audience) is connected by shared practices, mutual recognition, and a co-constructed sense of meaning.

To be sure, what I describe is an ideal of participatory community. In real life, this is not perfect, since creators are still driven by a number of corporate forces as they prioritize monetizable content. Nonetheless, it is this ideal understanding of content as embodying the creator's genuine nature and intent that promotes the auratic quality of some YouTube

performances. More specifically, I argue that the idea of auratic quality remains important and possible on YouTube, despite these entrepreneurial factors that influence creative production. The platform remains one of human expression and collectivity, and understanding how such values are enacted as they grapple with YouTube's commercial aspects remains vital.

Authenticity through participatory performance

As the achievement of the aura is increasingly subjective, dependent on the cultural context the work is situated within, it's integral to note what constitutes authenticity on YouTube. I contend that the specific shape of authenticity expected on YouTube (that from which the auratic quality emerges) is rooted in creators' ability to understand and work within the platform's participatory medium. The success of content is reliant on "the extent to which content producers understand YouTube as a participatory medium, and work responsively and proactively within it" (Burgess & Green, 2009, p.104). Authenticity here is defined in and through participation, since it can only emerge through a creator's knowledge of and participation within YouTube's communicative spaces. Rooted in participatory culture, creators immersed in this cultural environment are always audience members as well. This participation involves knowledge of the many components of the platform and the way they interact– what form YouTube's culture. These "media forms and practices that combine to constitute the 'YouTube-ness' of YouTube" include platform infrastructure, users who create content, and audiences who engage with such content (p.103). Culture, and thus the texts and archetypes that content must refer to in order to achieve authenticity, is participatory. Contemporary, secular performances, as Alexander notes, "stand or fall on their ability to produce psychological identification and cultural extension. The aim is to create, via skillful and affecting performance,

the emotional connection of the audience with actor and text and thereby to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience” (2004, p.547). To create and successfully project such meaning, the creator must display their involvement in YouTube’s cultural setting, which is integrally participatory.

Considering performance and the conditions for an auratic quality as constructed through participatory interaction, it is useful to employ Taylor’s (2024) adaptation of Alexander’s model, which argues that audiences have more agency in performances than originally granted. In other words, the performative process is more participatory than Alexander first discerned. While Alexander posits the actor as the central element of re-fusion, because it is their performance that acts as a conduit connecting the audience to the background representations and the text’s moral significations, Taylor argues instead that the text is central, situated between actor and audience. The text becomes the “reference point for the arbitration of fusion”, extended outwards by the actor while the audience performs fusion or de-fusion back towards the actor, decoding the text and adding new meanings in the process.

This configuration posits refusion as largely participatory, occurring through the recursive responses of actor and audience, which work to establish and reaffirm cultural codes and boundaries. Applying this model of performance to amateur YouTube’s participatory culture, we can understand fusion and the possibility of a re-fused aura, as occurring when a video successfully engages in the participatory environment that shapes the nature of creation on the platform.

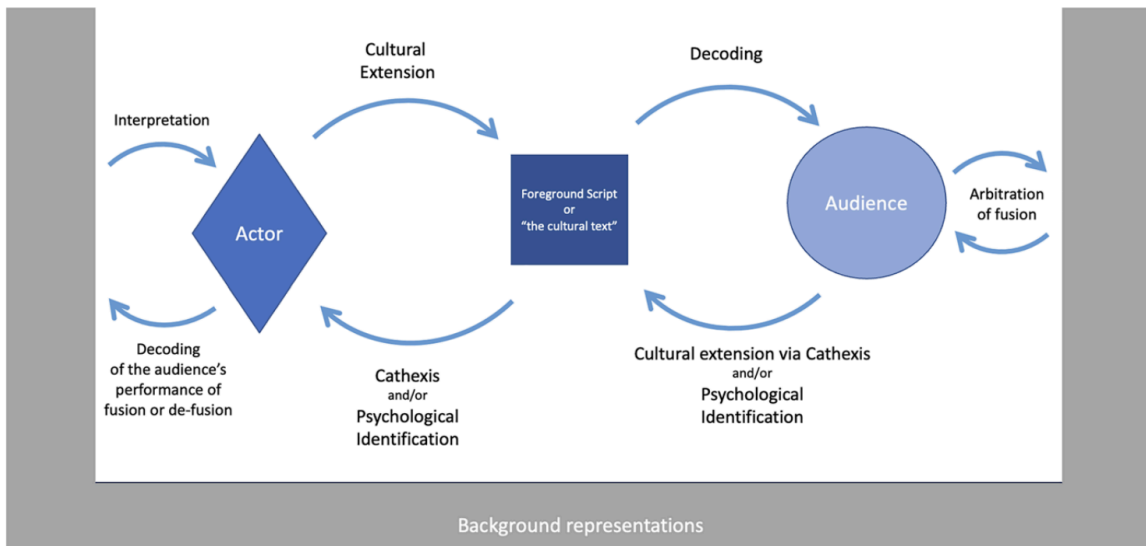


Fig. 2. Taylor’s reconfiguration of re-fusion. Reprinted from “Harry Potter and the 'Death of the Actor': reimagining fusion in cultural pragmatics,” by A. Taylor, 2024, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 43(1), p. 67.

Situated in a platform that necessitates interpersonal connection as much as it does entertainment, an auratic quality emerges when such genuineness is successfully employed through participatory knowledge and means. While authenticity draws the viewer closer to the work, displaying intimacy and a lack of mediation, the intangibility and limitless space of the content maintain an insurmountable distance, thus achieving Benjamin’s perpetual distance, as it gestures to a great social whole. As the viewer experiences identification with a YouTube performance, they are integrated into a greater, participatory collective via the platform’s mystified interactivity and parasocial intimacy with the other users.

The auratic quality of performance

The above writing has drawn connections between de Mul, Alexander, and Taylor’s work to detail how an auratic quality emerges in the digital, performative context on YouTube. This

section seeks to define that quality which, while referring to the essentially human and sacred qualities of the aura, emerges through creative performance in a participatory, online setting. I argue that the auratic quality of performance in this setting is a fused performance, emerging in part through a successful achievement of authenticity and a re-fusion of the performative elements in this participatory space. However, this quality is different from fusion in that there is a distinctly creative element to the performative object. Rather than fusing an audience to background representations and achieving the ritual-like collectivity that stems from fusion to culturally significant representations, this auratic quality instigates a notion of simultaneous distance and proximity that is indicative of artistic engagement. This ‘perpetual distance’ is indicative of the charisma of human creation that is integral to the aura and separates this quality from that of fusion. Engaging with a performative work that is imbued with unique touches and which is authentically produced not only fuses the performance with the cultural texts and background representations of participatory YouTube communities, but also generates an auratic quality— drawing the viewer closer through interactivity and an authentic performance of personality while suspending them in the illimitable distance of digital recombination that points to a greater social whole.

In the following chapter, I will consider the extent to which algorithmic recommendation has altered this auratic performance by intervening in the participatory process through which the aura is defined collectively on YouTube. After exploring how algorithmic recommendation affects the auratic quality produced through performance, I turn to an empirical analysis of how YouTube creators understand YouTube’s algorithm. To do so, I analyze comments on *r/SmallYTChannel*, a subreddit where amateur YouTubers discuss their creative practices. Examining the ways the YouTube algorithm shapes how creators think about their own creative

performances on YouTube, I consider what insights their discussions provide about the auratic quality of YouTube performances.

Chapter 4: Algorithmic Alterations and Understandings

In the last two chapters, I described the auratic quality of performance that encapsulates creative meaning on YouTube as something expressly participatory, emerging from the notion of authenticity constructed through interaction between audience and creators and performed throughout these spaces. This chapter focuses on how YouTube creators think about this participatory auratic quality, especially as this interacts with the YouTube algorithm. While I maintain that the contexts for authenticity and the aura emerge from participatory interaction, it is creators who have to negotiate understandings of the algorithm as they relate to creative meaning on YouTube and affect their performances. I pursue an analysis of how YouTube creators understand YouTube's algorithm. I analyze a self-identified small-YouTuber subreddit (*r/SmallyTChannel*) to consider the question of how the YouTube algorithm shapes how creators think about their creative performances on YouTube. I ask: what light does this shed on the auratic quality of YouTube performances?

The forum, *r/SmallyTChannel*, serves as a backstage space for individuals to discuss the intricacies of creation on YouTube, ranging from technical questions to more general queries about what YouTube is for. Working through a set of extended examples, I illustrate how YouTube creators construct and negotiate an understanding of auratic quality in relation to algorithms in their backstage performances on *r/SmallyTChannel*. Creators share their content and knowledge in pursuit of mutual growth, and they engage in performances that construct and question understandings about creating "good content," often portrayed as growing viewership while remaining authentic. Analyzing this subreddit with an emphasis on Alexander's model of performance also reveals that discussions of content and algorithms on the subreddit are

performances in and of themselves. These discussions are a part of the overall performative action on YouTube, operating as an important contextual background for the auratic quality of the performances that creators construct on YouTube. Examining these background performances aids me in considering how algorithms interfere with the auratic quality of performances and helps to develop a theory of the auratic quality of social performance in a digital space like YouTube.

How does algorithmic recommendation alter auratic performance?

If the auratic quality of performance on YouTube is one that relies on the specific human elements of creative production and participatory interaction, then it stands to reason that algorithmic recommendation would alter the conditions under which the aura might emerge. Like mechanical reproduction for Benjamin, algorithmic recommendation shifts the context of creative engagement on YouTube, distancing the viewer from the human specificity of the creative work. Considering this within the performative model, YouTube's algorithm can be understood as not only distancing creator and audience through recommendation but also altering the nature of participatory meaning altogether. As Bishop (2020) suggests, algorithmic recommendation gives rise to an algorithmic logic among creators, which alters how they understand and create content. She writes, "On YouTube, this [algorithmic] logic shapes the topics discussed in videos, genres engaged with, video lengths, titles utilized, video thumbnail design, and organization of speech" (p.3). The reason is that creators are gearing their content towards algorithmic recommendation. In performative terms, creators now understand the algorithm as their audience, or at least as part of their audience. As such, the ways creators understand meaning regarding content creation shift. Meaning is no longer solely informed by

the audience's direct response of fusion or de-fusion, which is reflected back to the creator, but the very possibility of fusion is now filtered through rationally presented, algorithmic-friendly feedback that includes statistics like the audience's click-through rate, retention, and watch time. This altered performative process "marks the reorganization of cultural production and circulation, rendering cultural commodities contingent" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p.4289). Informed by the platform's algorithmic recommendations, the meaning created on YouTube becomes specified and contingent on that platform, rather than one wholly of human participation.

Dourish (2016) notes the cultural significance of algorithms, as they "shape the flow of information in social media, the distribution of search results in search engines, and the production of recommendations in online retail" (p.7). Of course, this does not mean that online publics are entirely constrained by algorithms, since people influence algorithms as well. While bound up in the technology of algorithms and information infrastructure, online life is also informed by the publics within it, who "continue to experience the need to invest the world with metaphysical meaning and to experience solidarity with objects outside the self" (Alexander, 1990, p.184). Human meaning is still made in a context of algorithmic recommendation, but the extent to which the platform is involved in making meaning changes.

Performance on Reddit

To examine how the auratic quality of performance functions in relation to YouTube's algorithm, I analyze creators' backstage performances on a small-YouTuber subreddit, considering the texts that emerge and their relation to YouTube performance. Doing so requires a specification of how performance functions in the subreddit and how it connects to a larger world of YouTube performances. I rely on Taylor's adaptation of Alexander's model of fusion by

centering the text in the performative process (rather than the actor, as posited by Alexander).

Taylor emphasizes the agency of audiences, arguing that their role in the production of fusion is not simply to receive the performance and psychologically identify with the actor but to perform fusion back to them, decoding the text and adding their interpretations to the performance in the process. Taylor's adaptation is useful here as it helps me discuss how performance functions in a participatory space such as Reddit, where the back-and-forth discussions between users continually form and reform meanings in a performative exchange of texts.

Though YouTube and Reddit are both participatory platforms, and participation informs the notions of authenticity constructed in both formats, YouTubers perform to a more public audience, while users active on the subreddit perform and participate with fellow creators, seeking to better their content, provide advice, or discuss their video practices. Within the participatory space of the subreddit, audience and actor roles are interchangeable, and users move fluidly between roles as they post, comment, upvote/downvote, and browse other posts. The many ways of participating in the space result in an especially malleable boundary between actor and audience, similar to Alexander's suggestion that a performance may not have "an audience in the contemporary sense at all, but only participants observing themselves and their fellow performers", a condition that "facilitates cultural identification and psychological extension" (2004, p.35). The space may be considered a backroom of sorts where actors perform to each other, and as such, facilitated identification remains prominent, aiding fusion across the subreddit.

While performing for fellow performers aids cultural identification between individuals involved in a performance, making fusion somewhat easier, the object of authenticity becomes more complicated, rooted in concepts of expertise and experience. The amateur quality of

creativity is important to these YouTubers, and individuals risk coming off as pretentious or too self-important if they overstate their success in the YouTube space. In offering or asking for advice, users stake their legitimacy in this space by performing a careful mix of expert and peer roles. For instance, a user may state their experience in YouTube creation but qualify it in some way, ultimately affirming their participation in the subreddit while remaining approachable in the way the subreddit's participatory environment requires.

Who are actors and audiences?

Performance in the collaborative Reddit space facilitates a fluid version of the actor and audience roles presented by Alexander, since users occupy equal status in the subreddit and take on similar roles as they engage in discussions. However, this condition does not abdicate the participants of actor and audience roles throughout their participation on the site. Such roles, despite their fluidity and members' shared status as amateur YouTubers, are still taken on throughout performances. While roles overlap, audience members still take on the significant task of performing fusion or de-fusion as they elaborate and iterate a shared sense of the performance.

Both actors and audiences engage in performances, so how do we differentiate them amidst their overlapping characteristics? While actors perform authenticity as they extend the text to the audience, audience members perform "fusion or de-fusion in dialogic relation back to the actor, and to others around them" (Taylor, 2021, p.69). An audience member here, however, performs in ways beyond fusion. Because many posts ask for advice or feedback, audience members may respond in a way that seeks to perform authenticity (presenting themselves as an experienced and knowledgeable peer), legitimizing their advice. Since the nature of actor and

audience performances overlaps, the roles may instead be distinguished by the sequential form of an individual performance, which the actor *initiates*. The role of the actor includes commencing the performance, and as such, they perform authenticity to appeal to an audience. As audience members may perform in similar ways to the actor, they take on performative qualities associated with actors, but the actor of a performance may still be delineated as the initiator “for descriptive clarity” (Malacarne, 2021, p.23). Further, by initiating the performance, the actor formulates and presents the text. While the text is continually altered and honed by actor and audience throughout the performance, which continues through the post’s ensuing comments, the original script is extended by the actor.

What is the text?

Alexander’s model posits the cultural text, or foreground script, as the element that is performed in order to display meaning to others. This “immediate referential text” that is presented to the audience is constructed from collective “background representations” – common narratives, codes, and myths which live within the realm of culture. On Reddit, these texts are not simply an abstract means of conveying symbolic reference, but the mode of performance itself. As Taylor (2024) discusses in regard to Harry Potter, “The books are discursive artifacts that are temporally bounded, reflect the author’s intention, are representations of shared values, and are directed out to someone else as a performance” (p.7). Performances on Reddit operate similarly, authoring cultural codes and values through a written performance as a small YouTube creator. Because performances on Reddit are text-based, there are several levels at which the “text” can be considered. The text here includes not only societal background representations and foreground scripts that Alexander suggests, but also the literal written text of the post.

After the initial text has been presented, audience members offer performative responses, decoding the text and offering their interpretations in the form of advice. The digital interface of Reddit allows individuals to participate actively, interacting with the post through commenting, upvoting, or downvoting a particular post. Performative success can be gauged in part through these metrics, though “it is not as simple as equating fusion to applause or a majority of votes tallied” (Taylor, 2021, p.7). Especially in this participatory space, an audience member may cathect with a performance when they encounter it and only display this in later interactions or approaches to content creation. While the interactivity of the digital space lends audience reception something of a tangible quality, the formation of wider cultural texts that might be said to emerge on the subreddit remains somewhat nebulous.

Cultural texts, in the more abstract sense of symbolic meaning, extend beyond specific individual posts. Considering performance within the subreddit as a participatory and recursive process, similar to Taylor’s idea of reconfiguration, the text may be conceptualized on a broader level as a collective endeavor that is continually reevaluated. As Alexander suggests, “cultural texts are performed so that meanings can be displayed to others...[who] decode what actors have encoded” (2004, p.34). This sequence occurs in the subreddit but operates continually as users continue to interact through a variety of means, persisting in building a collective text that denotes what creation on YouTube is— how to make YouTube videos and why they make them. Within the subreddit, the actor initiates the performance and puts a text forward, but from this point forward, the roles played are more ambiguous. The subreddit (and the platform infrastructure it’s built upon) is discursive by nature, leading to the more malleable form of performance that is ongoing and iterative. That is, because performances take place in forums that largely ask for advice or input, many of the characteristics that distinguish actor and

audience roles are merged (performing authenticity and fusion), and the text emerges as the primary object of concern, engaged and revised through a variety of performances. Rather than a leader-and-follower dynamic, the “back-and-forth, dialectical resonance” of performance occurs largely between mutual roles, fusing a collective through a shared negotiation and understanding of the text (Taylor 2022, p.72).

Methodology

r/SmallYTChannel is a subreddit that describes itself as a dedicated space for small YouTubers to “share feedback, discuss content creation, and collaborate!”. In this sense, *r/SmallYTChannel* sets itself up to be representative of participatory culture, interested in informal mentorship and social connection. The forum was established in 2013 and currently has 162,000 members. The forum’s popularity, focus on smaller YouTubers, and its descriptive commitment to participatory and collaborative values are why I choose to utilize its discussions here. As YouTube has formalized and grown, backstage spaces like this have been increasingly utilized as ones of participatory culture that contribute to the construction of meaning on YouTube. Observing discussions on the subreddit allows me to examine direct discussions of algorithms and creation on YouTube, within a participatory space.

I selected posts by focusing on posts and comments that centered algorithms in their discussions of video-making. While this examination does not claim to be representative, I have attempted to select posts that discuss the algorithm in distinct and different ways. I seek to highlight the variable ways algorithmic recommendation characterizes creative meaning and production within the subreddit. These posts reveal something of a range of strategies and

interpretations that creators employ when making sense of and responding to algorithmic recommendation.

Logic of focus and selection

While previous studies have analyzed the discussions of self-proclaimed “algorithmic experts” to explore the role of algorithms in shaping the character of YouTube content (Bishop 2020), analysis of the *r/SmallYTChannel* subreddit lends insight into more amateur spaces; it allows us to glimpse the backstage of YouTuber performances as they perform commitments to authenticity and participatory culture. *r/SmallYTChannel* offers examples of creator-to-creator discussions, revealing how individuals value and conceptualize their video production in a wider performative context. More specifically, the site provides insight into the logic and moral narratives built around the YouTube algorithm among amateur YouTubers and reveals how ideas of creative production and performance work in relation to the algorithm. As creators assess the values of creative production, they characterize both their production and the algorithm in ways that reveal the complexity of artistic and performative value amidst the obligations of viewership on a digital platform.

Small creators are especially apt for examining such considerations, as most create YouTube videos not as a source of income but as a hobby, driven by personal interest. However, as the subreddit’s discussions indicate, like more commercially oriented content creators, small YouTube creators are also interested in adapting their craft in pursuit of higher quality and viewership, too. This creates tensions around artistic value, and the forum is ripe with discussions of the YouTube algorithm as it relates to creative expression and meaning. Further, the subreddit provides insight (albeit through a limited subset of creators) into the character of

participatory culture among YouTube creators, and how this culture influences the shifting character of creative meaning online as a whole. By examining the elements of performance in this participatory context, we gain insight into the construction of norms and values relating to creative production and algorithms as these are expressed in individual performances of YouTuber identity, both behind and in front of the camera.

The three main posts I have selected specifically concern algorithms as they relate to video-making on YouTube, and are substantive enough for analysis. These posts are by no means representative of all the posts across *r/SmallYTChannel*. They were chosen because they touched on questions about how creators navigate YouTube's participatory culture in the face of YouTube's algorithm. This necessary focus is a limitation of the current research. That said, these materials enable me to consider the role of performance on this subreddit (and others like it) in constructing the auratic quality of performance on YouTube, and in future work, such an approach might help to map directly how discussions in these spaces contribute to the formation of texts and background representations that are employed in YouTube performance.

Scope

YouTube is a broad platform, and any theory of performance or theory about the auratic quality of performance will fail to capture the state of all YouTube content. As much as it is filled with creative projects in the form of entertainment (spanning comedy, animation, academic deep-dives, gaming, and endlessly more), the platform is also populated with more utilitarian and standardized content, including how-tos, compiled and reuploaded video clips, and walkthroughs. Importantly, too, Reddit's demographics as a whole skew male and young.

Observations from any subreddit about YouTube creation, then, are limited in scope and will not apply to the wider universe of YouTube performances (Proferes et al., 2021).

The central concern of this research is to center the role of performances on YouTube in creating auratic quality, and thus, I focus on creative projects that are indicative of YouTube content as a form of entertainment, one that centers a creator's performance and favors an amateur production style. While the specific form of creative value is likely to shift between "niches" or genres of YouTube content, my analysis of *r/SmallyTChannel* seeks to provide substantive insight into the production of norms and values around content that might be understood as a distinctive, creative, participatory YouTube genre. That is, I observe that there is a general logic through which users approach YouTube content, with common standards of performance and presentation. Elements of this common logic are discussed on the subreddit *r/SmallyTChannel*, as, regardless of the specific type of content someone is making, users highlight generalized aspects of performance, including snappy writing, 'finding your niche', and conveying personality.

Examining *r/SmallyTChannel* Posts

Studying discussions of YouTube creation on the *r/SmallyTChannel* subreddit also provides a vantage point to see how creators understand the YouTube algorithm and algorithmic culture more generally. I conceptualize these subreddit discussions as performances through which small YouTube creators aim to achieve the refusion of performative elements through their videos, especially as these have been disarticulated or re-positioned by algorithmic recommendation systems on YouTube. Following Taylor (2024), I emphasize the centrality of the text in these performances, as performers and their audiences collaborate on *r/SmallyTChannel*

to iteratively establish a shared conception of their creative practice as it interacts with the platform demands of *YouTuber/SmallYTChannel*. In these collaborative performances, amateur YouTubers create moral narratives that serve as background representations, or a shared context, of their auratic performances on YouTube.

In other words, I am approaching the auratic quality of performance on YouTube through the backstage perspective of these subreddit discussions, so I can disembed the background representations of performance on YouTube. This provides access to creators' understandings of the relationship between the YouTube recommendation algorithm and their performances. Creators are clearly aware that the YouTube algorithm stands to affect the auratic quality of their YouTube videos, especially as the recommendation algorithm disrupts the participatory process through which this auratic quality is understood to arise.

In examining the posts I have selected, I consider a few key elements, including the collective representations the post invokes, how these reflect the auratic quality I've described, and how the post positions the algorithm in relation to creating YouTube content. I draw on original posts as well as comments, which, while performances themselves, are also audience responses to an initial performance. An analysis of these comment-performances, which shape the initial text by decoding it and offering new meanings in response, provides insight into the collaborative construction of meaning that occurs on the subreddit. In what follows, I draw on three performances from *r/SmallYTChannel*, all of which distinctly characterize the algorithm as it is understood by these amateur YouTubers to affect their video performances. In this sense, performances on *r/SmallYTChannel* are directly connected to a wider world of YouTube video performances, which may be happening elsewhere, but which are also central to this backstage space of the subreddit. The initial post I examine portrays what I take to be the epitome of the

effect instigated by algorithmic recommendation, plainly weighing the benefits of visibility that come with making content geared towards the algorithm against the autonomy of personal creation.

After utilizing this post to lay out a moral construction of meaning on YouTube in relation to the algorithms, I consider two other posts which, while also characterizing the algorithm as a tool for growth, construct different moral narratives around the algorithm and its effect on the meaning present within YouTube creation. While all these users seemingly understand the algorithm as a means towards a larger audience, how this tool is constructed morally in relation to their creative practices differs drastically. By examining the construction of these performances and the broader text they inform, I demonstrate how amateur YouTubers forge meaning through performance and participatory methods, while exploring how these users conceptualize algorithms in relation to their performative conditions.

Post #1:

The first post I employ is titled “Do I Cave In And Give [the] Youtube Algorithm What It Wants”, posted by user *hf_vlogs1* five years ago¹. It reads:

“I do a vlog and want to grow (...currently near 400 subs). I’m no celebrity and vlogs are life-focused so I anticipate people won’t care at first. However, I believe my content is original & entertaining and for not “riding the algorithm at all” thus far I think my growth suggests I am doing alright.

I feel fresh content is diminishing on YouTube yet my channel growth is slowed because I don’t follow trends loved by the algorithm. I want my videos to withstand the test of time and show my life adventures rather than just talk about X challenge, Y celebrity, or Z video game that was popular back in 20XX.

Does anybody have ideas how to work like this or should I just cave and start doing exactly what the algorithm wants?”

¹ I cite these Reddit posts using media studies common practice, providing the title and user handle in-text, without a separate bibliographic citation. This subreddit is public and nothing in their description speaks to the contrary. No personal information that could put someone at risk is present.

The user's concern is a common one across the subreddit, explicitly considering the negotiation creators face as they weigh their creative autonomy against algorithmic appeal. The performance creates a moral distinction regarding types of content on YouTube, suggesting that there exists quality content, which is personal, fresh, and original, and inferior content, which revolves around aspects of popular culture. This suggests that the second type of content, which focuses on the trendy cultural matters of "X challenge, Y celebrity, or Z video game that was popular back in 20XX", is amoral, as it lacks meaning and is based around a topic that will eventually be outdated. By contrast, meaningful content (a category the user positions themselves in) is characterized by longevity, personal interest, and experience, displaying the creator's "life adventures". This user invokes collective representations of independence and authenticity as the moral centers of creative production, constructing these qualities into a script arguing that good content is not superficial or centered around popular culture, but an expression of self and experience.

Such content, beyond being characterized as morally good, is also imbued with an element of real meaning, unlike the trendy, algorithmically friendly content. This is clear in the user's description of good content as something evergreen that will "withstand the test of time". This notion of quality content— which is authentic and experience-based— as imbued with something deeper and long-lasting, gestures towards the auratic quality of performance on YouTube. Good YouTube videos, as this creator describes, are an authentic display of the user's personality and experience, striving to fuse with collective understandings of the human experience. Their characterization of quality content is distinctly one of auratic human charisma, based around a sense of intimacy and singularity in production. This auratic quality, emergent through human charisma and authenticity, is, according to this user, apparent only in a display of

personal experience. This type of content and its inherent personal nature, however, do not incite mass appeal. While the user asserts their content is “original and entertaining”, they contend that viewers will not initially be interested in their content because it is “life-focused”.

In this way, the post suggests that YouTube’s algorithm reorganizes content’s value around the superficial and sensational, aligned with the amoral desire for general and impersonal entertainment rather than the specific and personal that is associated with the platform. In Benjamin’s terms, the user posits the display of personal experience or self-expression as the ritual object of YouTube performance, as it is the element that lends the creative work a sense of specificity and human charisma. However, this ritual object does not appear to elicit much cult value. As the user describes, the cult value of works like their own is diminished by algorithmically favored content, which is devoid of any such meaning.

In asking if they should give in and begin “riding the algorithm,” the user asserts that a YouTube channel can only be successful if it follows trends apparently prized by the algorithm. In terms of performance, this suggests that the algorithm alters the process of fusion by “subbing in” for the audience in terms of responding to the text of a performance. Rather than purely receiving an audience’s decoding of their performance, the actor is faced with an algorithmic interpretation of what will increase visibility and audience reception. This creates dissonance for the actor, whose understandings of authenticity are now put at odds with fusion, which is conceived as “doing exactly what the algorithm wants”.

This post was very well received, prompting a large discussion (63 comments, all of which engage faithfully with the topic). Such reception suggests the post was accepted as authentic, since users will generally only want to provide in-depth responses to performances they consider earnest and culturally resonant. Further, the poster (*hf_vlogsl*) responds to many of

these comments, providing an example of the continual construction and alteration of the text through performance in the subreddit. This is made explicit by *hf_vlogsl* in one comment, where, responding to another user's suggestion that they try appealing to the algorithms for a short period of time, they write:

"You're pretty much spot on here. And the thread seems to echo the same. May be time to pilot giving the algorithm what it wants or a fraction of what it wants to see how things go. But in the long haul I got to remain true to what I want my channel to be or it doesn't count for much."

This response suggests that *hf_vlogsl*'s understanding of meaningful YouTube content has been adjusted and further contextualized through the "back-and-forth, dialectical resonance" of the comment thread. This new script displays the participatory, continual formation of meaning amongst creators.

Post #2:

The next example I consider is a response to a post offering a similar quandary to the prior post: "Can I do YouTube without trying to play the algorithm?". The post, written one year ago by a deleted user, states essentially this, claiming that "I don't really want to play the algorithm, doing exactly what it wants, doing specific things to get more retention or watch-through or whatever. I wanna have fun making videos, but I also don't want to be stuck at 100 views per video". Considering the similarity between this claim and the prior post (which generated a large discussion), we may understand that prior post as part of the collective text, as this concern continues to pervade user discussions.

Rather than focusing on this concern, which invokes moral codes similar to those already discussed (negotiating the moral idea of making personal, autonomous content with the amoral idea of appealing to the algorithm, which may improve success), I want to focus on a comment responding to this post. The comment, written by *Either_Alternative52*, offers an answer to the

poster's question and provides another characterization of algorithmic recommendation in relation to creative practice on YouTube. Further, analyzing this comment provides insight into the participatory nature of the collective text here, as the comment decodes and offers new interpretations of the issue at hand. The comment, responding to the initial post's ending question, "Do I really need to play the algorithm to grow?" reads:

"Truth be told, I think you do.

In this new over saturated age of Youtube you do, I'm not saying that you have to give up on your personal projects, but that you should compromise a bit, because no matter how great a video you make is, if no one knows you, no one will find the video. And if you find smaller than 100k sub channels you'll realize that really quick, in many cases they have quite a few videos but with only one or two pushing big numbers, and almost every time, it's the ones that a broader audience would naturally click on, regardless if their other content is just as good, if not better, but thanks to those one or two big videos, viewers will also be more willing to give the other smaller videos a chance as well. At least that's my opinion."

This post makes the claim that it is necessary to "play the algorithm" to see growth on YouTube, by which they mean that a video must have a sense of general appeal for a growth in viewership. Whereas the first post ascribes moral qualities to YouTube videos with clear delineations of what they consider good and bad, the post here makes a distinction between a video's quality and its view count. Visibility, they argue, is not just a matter of quality, but one of generalizability. While a similar notion exists in the first post, it is presented here without the same severity in moral implications, as the user argues that appealing to the algorithm does not mean giving up on personal projects. Rather, this user promotes compromise as the ultimate value in YouTube creation, where competition for audience attention is stiff among small channels. In another example of conversational "dialectical resonance," many of the comments in this thread reiterate a similar idea. One user (*bguerra91*) claims "you need good titles and thumbnails that make people want to click", while another (*AlphaTeamPlays*) notes, "'playing the algorithm' is really just making videos that people want to watch, so if you learn to edit, learn

what makes a good thumbnail and title, etc., you can do whatever you want”. Throughout the initial post’s discussion, a cultural text is collectively formed and adapted, highlighting both the meaning of personal expression on YouTube and the importance of public presentability.

Similar to Benjamin's notion of exhibition value, this suggests that some element of meaning is attributed to the fact that the creative work is publicly exhibited. While quality here may be independent of visibility, YouTube creation is characterized as an integrally social practice where a wider audience constitutes something of a video’s meaning.

In making this claim, the user describes multiple performances that take place within YouTube creation: while the video performance is one, there is another, initial performance that takes place through a video’s thumbnail and title. This performance, in its limited capacity, must perform successfully enough to intrigue the viewer to click on the video. As this user describes, the algorithm is unrelated to any sense of meaning or quality within a video. Instead, it is a system that, in a direct, uncomplicated manner, reflects audience interest. Rather than being indicative of the content’s meaning or quality, it represents the viewer’s initial reaction to it. The title and thumbnail of a video are not simply supplementary but akin to a performance in their own right— a condensed, strategic act of visibility designed to translate personal expression into discoverability. In this sense, the user reframes algorithmic engagement not as a betrayal of human charisma or authenticity, but as a necessary element of performance within YouTube production—an opening act that determines whether the main performance will even be seen. This indicates some acculturation to the algorithm, as this comment suggests that it is simply a new part of performance on YouTube that must be fused with the audience.

Post #3:

The third example on *r/SmallyTChannel* I'll consider is also a response to a post, here titled "Let's Share Tips: What's Helping Your Channel Grow?". In this instance, I will point to a comment which, while it is relatively short, offers advice that is characterized by algorithmic optimization. The suggestions the user provides are pertinent for considering YouTube's algorithmic recommendation as a means of growth, and how this stands to alter the process of creative production on YouTube at large. The comment, posted four months ago by *RivalsOshun*, states:

"-Using trends.google for my niche.

-Studying what's working in my niche and adding my personality to it.

-Using perplexity.ai to help me improve titles

-Depending on the video topic, the title is more important than the thumbnail

started at Dec 24th and have gained 32 subs and 2.6k views across 4 videos. It's a gaming channel for a new game thats pretty popular, but i think the tips above can help anyone."

This user's advice conceives of creative production in a way that counters what has previously been established, beginning with studying apparent trends and algorithmically favored concepts and then "adding my personality to it". Here, creative meaning as an authentic or human element is not mentioned beyond this notion of personality, which is secondary to the strategic, data-informed methods that shape this user's production. This conception of production seeks to 'know' or appeal to an audience through entirely removed means rather than through participatory interaction. In this sense, the collaborative model of performance that I claim shapes the auratic quality of performance on YouTube is largely bypassed. While the YouTube audience is still present, their feedback and decoding of the user's videos is not received directly but consumed through compiled data.

It's worth noting that the user's conception of the meaning central to YouTube content cannot be fully grasped from this statement, which is brief and specifically concerned with technical advice for growth. However, the advice offered provides a characterization of creation on YouTube that is not entirely based on personal expression, but in the strategic manipulation of platform dynamics—an approach that prioritizes visibility and reach over interpersonal connection or authenticity. As meaning on YouTube is increasingly one of exhibition value, finding value in algorithmic tactics of visibility, this comment signals a shift in how creators may understand meaning on the platform: not as a result of reciprocal engagement with an audience, but as a product of mastering tools, trends, and algorithmic cues. By emphasizing tools like Google Trends and AI-assisted title generation, the comment suggests a model of content creation that foregrounds values of research, optimization, and adaptability. Rather than resisting the algorithm, the user embraces it as a collaborator in the creative process, suggesting that creation on YouTube is less about originality and self-expression than about effectively situating one's content within recognizable patterns of audience interest.

This example is not representative of opinions on the subreddit at large, nor an indication that algorithmic recommendation removes all elements of human meaning from creative production. I highlight it here to provide an example of how ideas of meaning, which are contextualized by creative production and engagement, stand to change with that context. A response to this comment from the original poster, *Low_Practive7772*, provides some insight into how ideas of auratic meaning like authenticity and collectivity are recontextualized by algorithmic visibility:

“That’s dope, especially starting from scratch and seeing that kind of growth already! Using trends.google and perplexity.ai is smart— it’s all about knowing your audience and what works in your niche... You’re definitely on the right track, and it’s cool to see your personality shine through. Keep it going!”

In the poster's decoding of *RivalOshun*'s tips, the use of tools like Google Trends and AI is not considered to be in conflict with ideas of human creation or collectivity. In fact, this user's claim that "it's all about knowing your audience" suggests that these tools may assist the social elements of YouTube performance. Further, the note on 'personality shining through' indicates that an element of human specificity is still present and important here. While the user's post does not necessarily indicate that ideas of authenticity or personhood are at odds with public visibility, the focus on creating widely appealing videos alters how ideas of authenticity and social connection are pursued. Rather than being founded in YouTube's participatory culture, these elements, being understood as meaningful, are an addition to the production of a video designed for algorithmic appeal.

Discussion

The prioritization of public visibility and the dwindling value of personal expression that these posts suggest raises the question: Was Benjamin right about the death of the aura? Certainly, the discussions of algorithmic recommendation here reflect Benjamin's thoughts on mechanical reproduction, displaying the prominence of public visibility, or exhibition value, in video creation. Similarly to mechanical reproduction, algorithmic recommendation alters the ritual element of creation by intervening in the collective processes through which meaning is established. However, as I proposed in Chapter 2, the auratic qualities of human charisma and transcendence do not disappear, though they are made more difficult by the differentiation of contemporary society. This holds for YouTube creation, as algorithmic recommendation poses further difficulties for auratic meaning by filtering ideas of fusion through statistical feedback and ideas of continual growth. This idea is central to the challenges the aura faces in modernity.

As technological realities tend towards commercialization, so do our social ones. While ideas of auratic meaning, grounded in authentic and participatory creation, persist, they are increasingly met with conceptions of success that foreground broad relevancy and engagement. Much of these discussions indicate that meaning is not entirely derived from subscriber or view counts, but the concerns of growth, characterized by YouTube's algorithm, destabilize the auratic quality's participatory model by distancing YouTubers from the social processes of decoding audience feedback.

Analyzing discussions in *r/SmallYTChannel* suggests that how YouTubers understand the auratic quality of performance on YouTube— a participatory, authentic notion of human meaning— is altered by algorithmic recommendation. Creators platform concerns of algorithmic visibility and growth, seeking to negotiate ideas of meaning, understood through personal expression, with the demands of mass appeal and generalizability that are associated with YouTube's recommendation algorithm. The posts I've pointed to suggest that creative practices on YouTube remain understood though ideas associated with the aura, particularly in terms of expressing selfhood. However, the presence of algorithmic recommendation continues to reshape how creators approach meaning in their content creation, separating the process of re-fusion from the immediate audience.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This thesis paper has sought to better conceptualize the construction of meaning in YouTube's communicative spaces and its alteration by algorithmic recommendation. Chapter 2 rethought Benjamin's theory of the aura, arguing that the key qualities of the aura— authentic human charisma, inciting a moment of transcendence— carry on into contemporary society, beyond mechanical reproduction. I argued that these qualities should be extended to creation and art in online spaces, as they help us think about the essentially human charisma of art and its meaning, as well as its precarity in post-ritual society.

To theorize an auratic quality on YouTube, Chapter 3 considered the participatory culture and digital intangibility of these spaces. The interactive digital space helps achieve a ritual-like collectivity, while YouTube's participatory culture defines a notion of authenticity, centered around self-expression, amateurship, and personality. I utilized Alexander's model of cultural performance alongside Benjamin's aura to describe an auratic quality of performance on YouTube, emerging from the re-establishment of ritual elements through both platform infrastructure and user performances of authenticity (which are informed by the site's participatory culture). This auratic quality takes place in the moment of viewing a successfully authentic performance, which integrates the viewer into a ritual-like collective via the platform's digital abstraction and sociality.

To examine how creative practices and meaning are discussed by YouTube creators themselves, Chapter 4 turned to *r/SmallyTChannel*, an amateur YouTuber subreddit. Here, I considered examples of how creators discuss creation on YouTube in relation to algorithmic recommendation. Ultimately, ideas of authentic human meaning associated with the aura still

characterize much of small YouTubers' discussions of creative practice on Reddit. However, the algorithm's presence complicates the production of such meaning in variable ways, as creators seek to fuse algorithmic success with ideas of auratic meaning.

In building on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," I have sought to strike a delicate balance, critiquing Benjamin's limited application of the aura and drawing parallels between mechanical reproduction and algorithmic recommendation, both of which stand to alter the auratic quality of artistic objects. In doing so, I highlight two major aspects of Benjamin's theory. First, his theory of the aura emphasizes the element of human specificity in creative practice as something paramount, which holds transcendental potentials and is put at risk by technological developments that distance us from such specificity. Second, his theory is one of social and technological context, considering works of art and the meaning they're imbued with as informed by how they are engaged. In developing an auratic quality of performance on YouTube, I foreground the element of human specificity and its transcendence, arguing that such qualities are still experienced in post-ritual society, though they face difficulties in both society's differentiation and new modes of commercialization. Conceptualizing the contexts in which artistic objects are created and consumed remains pertinent as social life becomes increasingly embedded in digital platforms, which mediate and restructure such actions.

By utilizing theories in the Durkheimian tradition, highlighting ideas of ritual, collectivity, and transcendence, I emphasize the social life present in online spaces, which takes place within a distinct context of cultural performance. Understanding this— how social realities take place within and adapt to technological ones — is integral for considering how algorithms alter cultural production. By emphasizing the participatory, collective meaning on YouTube and in digital social sites at large, I characterize these cultural sites as ones of possibility, exploration,

and connection. These ideas face further instability as online platforms increasingly become sites of instrumental rationality, prioritizing marketability and defining platform success in discrete terms. The commercialization of artistic practices, which Benjamin identifies in discussing mechanical reproduction, remains a prevalent issue to consider in the contemporary age, particularly within digital spaces. Algorithmic recommendation interferes with the ritual-like elements of meaning in online creative production, translating the social elements of these creative objects into numeric and rationalized ones. In doing so, the transcendent notions of creation online become, if not reduced, displaced and reorganized in ways that necessitate consideration.

The observational portion of this thesis is quite limited, as I came late to the empirical work and faced difficulties regarding the data I had access to. Instead, I focus primarily on a theoretical exploration of meaning in YouTube's participatory spaces, an idea that has not been well conceptualized, utilizing *r/SmallYTChannel* to provide examples of this conceptualization. Because of this limitation, there is much work to be done in documenting the auratic quality of performance on YouTube.

As previously mentioned, future work may continue to explore the use of Reddit as a backstage space, mapping how conversations on *r/SmallYTChannel* and similar forums assist in the construction of texts and background representations, and tracing these elements as they manifest in performances on YouTube. At large, the performative elements may be further identified, on YouTube and off, as meaning is constructed, performed, and received. Beyond this, the algorithmic alteration of participatory culture on YouTube may be examined historically. A more specific historical delineation of meaning on YouTube and how its construction changes with the site's growth, commercialization, and algorithmic recommendation over the past 20

years would provide further insight into changes the algorithm has invoked and how different backstage spaces have come into play. Interviews of YouTubers who have been on the platform for much of its duration may prove useful for such considerations. Pursuing these elements further may also provide insight into backstage spaces, more concretely displaying if and when they are turned to as a new center of participatory culture.

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