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The Dissipation and Reconstruction of "Aura": A Comparative Study of Object-Self Relations in Benjamin and Song-Dynasty Literati Aesthetics of Appreciation

Pei Liu^{1*}, Ruxue Dou²

*Correspondence: Pei Liu

^{1&2}Department of Calligraphy, School of Fine Arts & Calligraphy, Sichuan Normal University, China.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dissipation and reconstruction of "aura" through a comparative study of Walter Benjamin's concept and Song-dynasty literati aesthetics of appreciation, analyzing the similarities and differences in object-self relations manifested in this process. Benjamin argues that modern technological reproduction leads to the dissipation of the aura of the artwork's authenticity, transforming the object into a mass-producible commodity and widening the distance between human and object. By contrast, Song literati, through practices such as connoisseurship, inscription, and refined appreciation, imbued objects with personal ideals and historical consciousness, reconstructing the aura of objects in everyday appreciation and achieving an aesthetic state of object-self integration. This paper contends that both confront the crisis of aura's dissolution, yet Benjamin adopts a melancholy perspective of modernist critique, while Song literati actively reconstruct object-self identity through aesthetic participation. Through this comparison, the study reveals the dynamic negotiation mechanisms of object-self relations in different cultural contexts, offering a cross-cultural reference for contemporary reflections on materiality, humanistic spirit, and the value of art in the technological age.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Aura of Objects

"Aura," as a core concept in Walter Benjamin's aesthetic thought¹, denotes the unique quality of pre-modern art objects, grounded in their authenticity, here-and-nowness, and cult value. In The

¹ Walter Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005.

Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Benjamin acutely observes how modern technology—particularly photography and film—has irreversibly led to the dissipation of the artwork's aura through transformations in modes of production. The artwork, stripped from its sacred traditional context and unique spatiotemporal existence, is reduced to an object infinitely reproducible and widely disseminated; the contemplative relationship of distance-in-intimacy between human and object likewise dissolves. This dissipation of aura is not merely a crisis of artistic authenticity, but profoundly reflects a fundamental estrangement in subject-object relations within the process of modernity—namely, the disenchantment of the object, its reduction to a manipulable, mass-producible resource, while the human subject, under the shadow of instrumental rationality, falls into unprecedented spiritual isolation.

Concurrently, during the Song dynasty—the apex of classical Chinese aesthetics—the literati class undertook a profound and self-conscious aesthetic reconfiguration of the relationship between "object" and "self." Facing the transformation of social structure since the mid-Tang, the material abundance brought by incipient commodity economy, and the potential expansion of material desire, Song literati did not simply reject the material world. Rather, through a refined and elegant set of appreciative practices—encompassing epigraphic collecting, painting and calligraphy connoisseurship, scholarly studio objects, even obsessions with fantastical rocks, antiquities, and flowers—they actively constructed a meaning-laden aesthetic universe. In this process, the practical utility of objects was set aside, while their historical sedimentation, formal interest, and personal symbolism were highly accentuated. The object was no longer a cold, external thing, but a literati-infused, spiritually saturated aesthetic subject, serving as a medium for embodying ideal character, communicating with antiquity, and anchoring individual existence. Su Shi's dialectical notion of "taking pleasure in things" rather than "being attached to things"², Mi Fu's ritual bowing to fantastical rocks, and Zhao Xihu's systematic discourse on antique connoisseurship in *Dongtian Qinglu Ji*³—all point toward an aesthetic mode of existence characterized by mutual interpenetration and integration of object and self. This effectively constitutes a creative reconstruction of the "aura of objects," rekindling their spiritual radiance within everyday life.

Placing Benjamin's modern critique of aura's dissipation alongside the Song literati's aesthetic practice of aura reconstruction within a comparative framework raises the central question of this study: in the face of transformations in "objecthood"—whether the authenticity crisis induced by technological reproduction or the crisis of meaning dilution brought by material abundance—

² Su Shi, in *Record of the Hall of Treasured Paintings*, proposed that "the gentleman may take pleasure in things, but should not be attached to things," synthesizing Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought to articulate his profound views on human-object relations.

³ Zhao Xihu. *Dongtian Qinglu Ji* [M]. Jiangsu: Jiangsu Guangling Press, 2020.

how do these two highly developed civilizations understand and handle the relationship between object and self? What different philosophical presuppositions and cultural strategies regarding the nature of art, aesthetic experience, and human-world relations lie beneath the seemingly divergent tendencies of dissipation and reconstruction? This comparison is by no means a mere catalog of similarities and differences; its deeper significance lies in transcending the limitations of a single cultural lineage to reveal the complex historical dynamic mechanisms behind the persistence and transformation of "aura" as a symbol of object-self relations. In the contemporary global context of technological culture, where forms of object existence—such as digital virtual objects and intelligent artifacts—are undergoing even more radical transformations, revisiting these two historical experiences may offer valuable intellectual resources for reflecting on how to reconstruct spiritually meaningful object-self connections in a highly technological age.

Currently, scholarship on Benjamin's aura theory is extensive, largely focusing on its connections to modernity, philosophy of technology, and art criticism. Research on Song-dynasty literati appreciation culture, connoisseurship history, and scholar-official aesthetic life is also rich. However, systematic comparative studies of the two remain rare. Existing studies may occasionally note certain similarities in "object veneration" or "distance," but such observations tend to be fragmentary analogies, lacking sustained dialogue grounded in their respective complete historical-cultural contexts and problematics. This paper aims to fill this gap. Accordingly, it will adopt a methodology combining cross-cultural comparative aesthetics and conceptual-historical analysis. It will first elaborate on Benjamin's concept of aura and the crisis of modern subject-object relations embedded in his thesis of dissipation; second, systematically examine the main paradigms of Song literati appreciation aesthetics, analyzing their practical and conceptual mechanisms for reconstructing the "aura of objects"; third, on a basis of comparability, conduct a structural comparison across dimensions such as the status of objects, modes of aesthetic experience, temporal consciousness, and subjective stance, revealing their fundamental differences and convergences; and finally, explore the implications of this comparison for understanding artistic authenticity, aesthetic redemption, and contemporary cultural predicaments. Through this trans-temporal aesthetic dialogue, this paper hopes not only to deepen our understanding of both comparative objects themselves, but also to open a more universal space for reflection on "object," "self," "aura," and the condition of civilization.

2. Benjamin on the Dissipation of Aura

Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura," articulated in his seminal work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*⁴, constitutes the theoretical foundation of his critique of artistic modernity. His most poetic formulation describes aura as "the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be." This is not a substantive definition but a phenomenological grasp of a particular perceptual relationship. Its connotations can be elucidated from three aspects. First, authenticity—the unique existence of the artwork in its material as transmitted through history, which forms the basis of the original's authority. Second, here-and-nowness—the irreproducible presence of the artwork embedded in a specific spatiotemporal context, which constitutes its historical testimony. Third, cult value—the solemn and mysterious aura that the artwork, originating in ritual, carries, demanding contemplative distance from the beholder. In sum, aura is an aesthetic halo surrounding traditional art objects, woven from historical distance, authentic authority, and ritual foundation. It demands of the appreciator a mode of concentrated, individualized, immersive contemplation while maintaining proper distance. This mode of beholding establishes a contemplative object-self relationship centered on the object, tinged with residues of the sacred.

However, Benjamin argues that since the nineteenth century, the rise and proliferation of mechanical reproduction technologies—exemplified by photography and film—have fundamentally undermined the conditions of aura's existence, leading to its inevitable dissipation. Reproduction is not a new phenomenon, but mechanical reproduction has effected a revolutionary transformation in both quality and quantity. It enables near-infinite reproduction at extremely low cost and high precision, and allows reproductions to reach any spatiotemporal situation inaccessible to the original. This process has produced several decisive consequences. First, reproduction technology strips the artwork of its here-and-nowness. A photographic reproduction of a famous painting can hang in any family's living room, detached from the original context of church, palace, or museum, dissolving its unique historical presence. Second, mass reproduction erases the absolute boundary between authenticity and forgery. When countless identical reproductions flood the world, the authority of the original is diluted, and its unique value is challenged. Third, and most subversively, reproduction technologies—especially film—fundamentally transform the mode of artistic production and reception. Through montage,

⁴ Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005.

close-ups, camera movement, and other techniques, film no longer presents a complete, autonomous world waiting contemplative beholding, but decomposes and reassembles the world, coercively channeling the viewer's perception. Benjamin contends that the reception of film is one of distraction and diversion, in contrast to the concentrated contemplation required by traditional art. The viewer, immersed in the continuous flow of cinematic images, cannot engage in sustained individual reflection, but is captured by collective, dynamic visual effects.

This series of technological transformations ultimately leads to a profound dissolution of traditional object-self relations. In the process of aura's dissipation, the "object" undergoes a fundamental degradation and disenchantment. It is transformed from a sacred thing bearing historical weight and mysterious aura, to be revered from a respectful distance, into a profane object available for mass production, easy access, and arbitrary disposal. Its cult value gives way to exhibition value, and the function of art shifts from ritual foundation to political and commercial practice. Correspondingly, the "self's" mode of perception and subjective position also undergo radical change. The contemplative experience of individual, deep immersion and spiritual dialogue with the object—experienced in the presence of aura—is replaced by a surface-level, fragmented, passive state of sensory stimulation and distraction. The subject is no longer an active contemplator, but to a large extent becomes a link in a technological process of perception. The tensed, distanced interaction between subject and object is replaced by a more flattened, more instrumentalized relationship. The object no longer issues a profound call to the human, nor does the human respond with reverent answer. Benjamin's depiction of this dissipative process is imbued with profound modern critique and melancholic tone. He keenly perceives that under the combined forces of capitalism and instrumental rationality, human experience is becoming impoverished, and the holistic contexts that traditionally endowed life with continuity and meaning are fragmenting. The dissipation of art's aura is but the aesthetic symptom of this larger historical process. It symbolizes the rupture of organic connections between humans and tradition, history, and the objective world as bearer of meaning. Although Benjamin also dialectically sees the democratizing and critical potential inherent in mechanically reproduced art, in terms of object-self relations, what he depicts is unquestionably a picture of estrangement, alienation, and spiritual displacement. The aura of objects dims and extinguishes, leaving behind a modern wasteland illuminated by technical rationality but spiritually desolate. This thesis provides an acutely insightful perspective for understanding the status of art and objects in modern society, as well as the increasingly isolated condition of the individual within

it, and lays crucial groundwork for contrast with the Song literati aesthetic practice devoted to reconstructing a home of meaning within objects.

3. The "Aura" of Objects and Object-Self Construction in Song Literati Aesthetics of Appreciation

3.1 From Utensil to Refined Appreciation: The Literati Reconfiguration of Objects

The Song literati's reconfiguration of objects is primarily manifested as a systematic process of literati-ization. From the complex material world, they selected a specific range of categories—including archaic bronzes, jades, stele rubbings, paintings and calligraphy, qin and inkstones, fantastical rocks, fine porcelains, flowers, and studio implements—separating them from the realm of everyday utility and elevating them to the aesthetic level of refined appreciation. This process was not mere physical collection, but a comprehensive set of cultural operations encompassing four dimensions. First, aesthetic selection. The literati endowed specific objects with distinctive qualities according to criteria such as antiquity, simplicity, naturalness, and ruggedness—standards transcending utility and opulence. Su Shi's appreciation of the beauty within the "ugliness" of fantastical rocks, and Mi Fu's bowing to rocks and addressing them as "elder brother" for their qualities of leanness, wrinkling, perforation, and transparency—these were aesthetic valorizations based on formal interest rather than market value. Second, historicist investigation. Through examination, authentication, and cataloguing of inscriptions, forms, and provenances—as seen in Lü Dalin's *Kaogu Tu*⁵(Fig. 1) and Ouyang Xiu's *Jigulu*⁶—the literati inserted objects into grand historical narratives and intellectual genealogies. A corroded bronze thus came to bear imaginings of the golden ages of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties; a fragmentary stele rubbing was connected to lost orthodoxies of calligraphy and literati models. Historical depth became a vital source of the object's "aura." Third, technical engagement. The literati were not merely connoisseurs but active participants. They personally engaged in painting and calligraphy creation, epigraphic rubbing, inscribing objects, garden rock arrangement, and even designing studio implements. This hands-on technical involvement meant that the object was no longer an external entity, but the embodiment of the subject's spirit externalized and technical skill crystallized; the boundary between object and self-became blurred in the creative process. Fourth, theoretical codification. Works such as Zhao Xihu's *Dongtian Qinglu Ji*⁷, Zhou

⁵ Lü Dalin. *Kaogu Tu* [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 2019.

⁶ Ouyang Xiu, *Colophon to Records of Collected Antiquities, Northern Song Dynasty*, 27.2 × 171.2 cm, ink on paper, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

⁷ Zhao Xihu. *Dongtian Qinglu Ji* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1985.

Mi's Yunyan Guoyan Lu⁸, and Cao Zhao's Gegu Yaolun⁹ systematically codified the principles, methods, and grades of appreciation, elevating this practice from personal predilection to a transmissible and communicable scholarly system, solidifying the boundaries of refined appreciation as an exclusive cultural domain of the literati.



Fig. 1 Lü Dalin, Kaogu Tu (Illustrated Catalogue of Antiquities, detail)

3.2 Taking Pleasure in Things: The Aesthetic Mechanism of Object-Self Integration

Su Shi's formulation that "the gentleman may take pleasure in things, but should not be attached to things"¹⁰ succinctly captures the core spirit and dialectical wisdom of Song literati appreciation aesthetics. "Taking pleasure in things" as a key mechanism refers to the literati projecting and entrusting their emotions, character, aspirations, and historical reflections onto and into objects. In this way, objects become extensions of personality, vehicles of emotion, and symbols of thought. Wen Tong's practice of bamboo painting embodying "having a completed bamboo in mind," Mi Fu's worship of rocks reflecting the principle of "the rock is as the man," and Ouyang Xiu's contemplation of human affairs through antiquities—all exemplify this projection. This enables objects to transcend their material properties, acquiring rich spiritual connotations and emitting a personalized "aura." "Not being attached to things," on the other hand, maintains vigilance against possible alienation. It requires the subject to preserve spiritual autonomy and transcendence, avoiding pure possession of and obsession with objects, preventing the shift from aesthetic subject to appendage of material desire. This tension constitutes precisely the unique aesthetic distance in Song literati appreciation—simultaneously deeply invested in emotional

⁸ Zhou Mi. Yunyan Guoyan Lu [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2003.

⁹ Cao Zhao. Gegu Yaolun [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012.

¹⁰ Su Shi. Su Wenzhonggong Quanji [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2006.

resonance with objects, yet able to step back for reflection, maintaining clear subjective awareness. This distance is not the estrangement and indifference Benjamin describes as resulting from technological reproduction, but an actively regulated, tensely intimate relationship.

3.3 Beyond Possession: The Manifestation of Aura in Daily Practice

The "aura" reconstructed by Song literati ultimately materialized in a series of concrete and recurrent daily practices, rather than residing solely in static acts of collecting. These practices constituted ritualized situations of object-self integration. First, connoisseurship and inscription. Several literati friends would gather in studios or gardens unfurl scrolls to view paintings, handle antiquities, judge their grades of quality, and then compose poetry and prose. Through collective viewing, discussion, and textual recording, the meaning of objects was continuously interpreted, enriched, and confirmed. Huang Tingjian's remark that "the finest scenes under heaven are available to all regardless of wisdom or folly, yet I cannot help suspecting they are specially meant for us"¹¹ aptly captures this literati community's perceived privilege of perception and co-creation of meaning. Second, spatial arrangement. The literati carefully placed selected objects within private spaces such as studies and gardens. A table, a couch, a rock, a painting—all were meticulously arranged to construct a microcosmic, orderly model of the universe. Living and moving within this space, surrounded by these aura-charged objects, one achieved a daily immersive experience of "body merged with things, environment fused with mind." Third, witness to life's journey. Objects accompanied the literatus throughout his life, bearing witness to the vicissitudes of his official career, the gatherings and partings of friends, and the silent passage of time. Su Shi's "Qiuci Stone" and Mi Fu's "Yanshan" were not merely objects of appreciation, but bearers of their life stories and repositories of emotional memory. Thus, the "aura" of objects condensed individual life trajectories and affective memories.

3.4 The Substance of Reconstruction: Cultural Resistance and the Building of a Meaning-Home

In sum, the Song literati aesthetic reconstruction of the "aura of objects" was essentially a battle for meaning waged with high cultural self-consciousness in an era of increasing material abundance and social value transformation. Through a complex set of cultural practices, they transformed "objects" from mere consumer goods or symbols of power into media of spiritual communication, catalysts of character cultivation, and bearers of historical consciousness. In this

¹¹ Huang Tingjian. Yuzhang Huang Xiansheng Wenji [M]. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1929.

process, the "object-self relationship" was not dissolved, but reconstituted as an interactive, integrated, and spiritually rich dialogical relation. Objects acquired aura through human agency; humans, through objects, settled their temperament, communed with antiquity, and established selfhood. This reconstruction was not a simple return to the kind of "aura" Benjamin refers to, but an opening-up, grounded in profound Confucian learning, Daoist sensibility, and Chan insight, of a poetic, self-sufficient meaning-home within everyday ethics. It demonstrates a possibility alternative to the path of modern estrangement: even amid worldly change, humans can, through active, aesthetic cultural practice, forge a deep, warm, soul-nourishing connection with the world of objects. This stands in sharp tension with the cold technological landscape Benjamin portrays after aura's dissipation, and offers valuable historical reference for contemporary reflection on how to rebuild harmonious human-object relations.

4. Comparison of Dissipation and Reconstruction

4.1 Fundamental Divergence: Critical Estrangement vs. Aesthetic Redemption

The primary divergence between the two stems from their distinct historical contexts and problematics. Benjamin's analysis is grounded in late 19th- to early 20th-century Europe, when industrial capitalism and mechanical reproduction technologies were thoroughly transforming the traditional world of experience. His thesis of aura's dissipation belongs essentially to the critique of modernity, revealing how technological rationality systematically destroyed the artwork's authenticity, sacred distance, and mode of contemplative beholding, thereby alienating and estranging object-self relations. This is a diagnostic analysis with tragic overtones, melancholic in tone, pointing to an irretrievable loss. In contrast, the Song literati operated within a period of high cultural maturation and incipient commodity economy within imperial Chinese society. Their problematic was not rupture caused by technological revolution, but how to maintain the spiritual independence and cultural identity of the scholar-official class in the face of an increasingly abundant material world and its potential for material desire. Their "aura reconstruction" was a proactive, constructive cultural strategy and aesthetic redemption. Through a series of refined practices, rather than resisting "objects," they successfully transformed them into the very foundation for building a spiritual home, opening up a transcendent space of meaning within the mundane world. If Benjamin depicts the desolate landscape after aura has been shattered by external force, the Song literati present a vision of how to cultivate and guard a spiritual garden encircled by aura within the existing life-world.

4.2 Comparison of Core Dimensions (Fig. 2)

Beneath this fundamental divergence, the object-self relations of the two exhibit sharp contrasts across specific dimensions, as detailed below:

4.2.1 Status of the Object: From "Authenticity Veneration" to "Personalized Empathy"

Benjamin emphasizes the object's "authenticity" and "here-and-nowness," with its aura closely tied to the unique original and its sacred ritual origins. The value of the object resides in its historical authority and mysterious distance. What mechanical reproduction destroys is precisely this authority based on uniqueness. While Song literati also valued the authenticity of antiquities—one manifestation of authenticity—their core concern lay more in "quality" and "resonance". The value of an object lay not primarily in its absolute, self-contained history, but in whether it could spiritually resonate with the beholder and serve as an embodiment of character and emotion. The "aura" of objects was more often stimulated and bestowed in the process of appreciation and interaction, possessing openness and shareability.

4.2.2 Aesthetic Experience: From "Contemplative Concentration" to "Wandering Mind and Directing Gaze"

The auratic experience Benjamin laments corresponds to the state of concentrated, distanced contemplation of the original. What mechanically reproduced art brings is a distracted, diverting mode of reception—a transformation in which deep inner experience is replaced by surface sensory stimulation. Song literati appreciation, by contrast, was a comprehensive experience of "wandering mind and directing gaze". It encompassed both the concentrated contemplation of calligraphy, painting, and antiquities, and the leisurely, fluid interaction with objects in elegant gatherings and gardens, where insights could be sparked at any moment. This was an aesthetic state more flexible and interactive than either concentration or distraction—one of immersive interpenetration rather than passive gazing.

4.2.3 Temporal Consciousness: Ruptured "Present" vs. Continuous "Past-Present"

Benjamin's modern temporal consciousness is marked by a strong sense of rupture. The dissipation of aura means the continuity with tradition is severed; modern humans are trapped in "homogeneous, empty time." Mechanical reproductions are de-historicized, offering fragmented present stimuli. Song literati appreciation, in contrast, was dedicated to constructing a continuous temporal consciousness. Handling antiquities was to converse with the Three Dynasties and Qin-Han; inscribing and appraising paintings and calligraphy was to continue the spirit of Jin-Tang; perceiving the seasonal changes in a garden was to integrate individual life into cosmic rhythms.

The "aura" of objects was precisely manifested in their function as temporal media connecting past and present, heaven and humans, thereby resisting the emptying of time and endowing the present with historical depth and meaning.

4.2.4 Subjective Stance: Passive "Shock" vs. Active "Cultivation"

In Benjamin's account, the individual facing the wave of mechanical reproduction and technological perception is to a considerable extent in a passive state, undergoing the shock experience caused by aura's dissipation and the resulting impoverishment of experience. Subjectivity appears fragile in the face of overwhelming technological and social forces. By contrast, the Song literatus was a highly active cultivator. Through prolonged scholarly study, artistic practice, and social interaction, he actively enhanced his aesthetic discernment and connoisseurial ability, thereby acquiring the subjective qualification to perceive and bestow aura upon objects. This cultivation was an accumulation of cultural capital and refinement of character, ensuring the subject's dominant position and creative capacity in object-self relations.

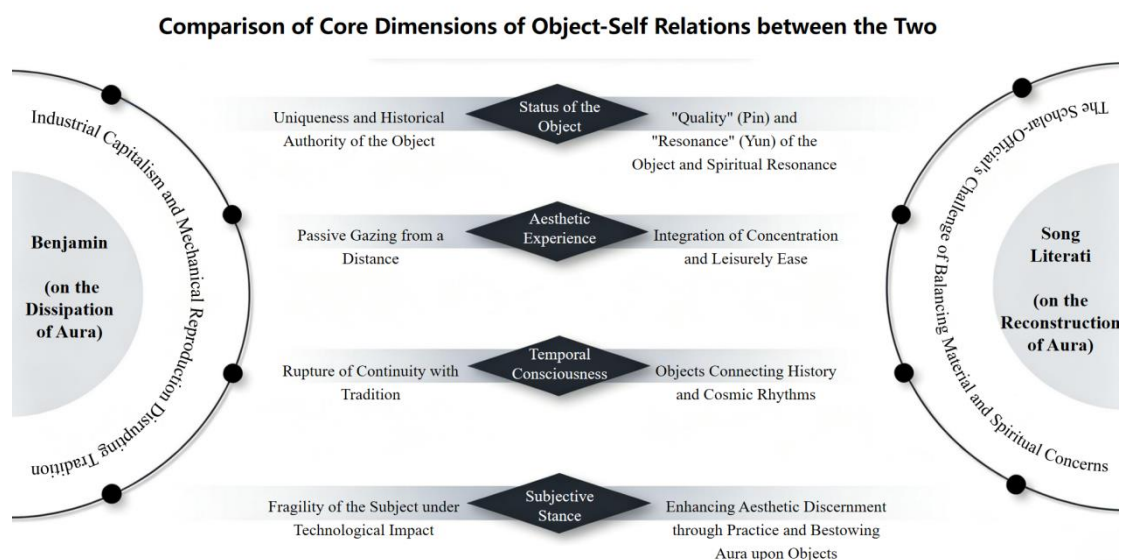


Fig. 2 Comparison of Core Dimensions of Object-Self Relations between the Two

Source: Author

4.3 Dialectical Convergence and Contemporary Implications

Despite their significant differences, at a more abstract level there exists a certain dialectical convergence. Both confront the crisis of "objects" potentially escaping human spiritual control and becoming alien forces, and both attempt to resolve this crisis through the aesthetic dimension. While criticizing, Benjamin also explored possibilities for collective political potential in emerging art forms such as film—which may be seen as a future-oriented, critical attempt at reconstruction. The Song literati practice, by contrast, may be viewed as a tradition-

oriented, self-cultivating model of reconstruction. The contemporary value of this dialogue lies in revealing that "aura" is not a static treasure left by premodernity, but a dynamic mode of object-self relation. Benjamin's warning reminds us that in the age of digital reproduction, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, the authenticity of objects and the depth of human experience may face a new round of dissolution. The wisdom of the Song literati suggests that even within a technological environment, reconstructing aura may not lie in nostalgic resistance to technology, but in whether we can develop new cultural practices and subjective cultivation that enable technological objects to be "literati-ized"—endowed with profound spiritual interaction and meaning-bearing—thereby reconstructing in a new era an object-self relationship that is neither blind worship nor cold estrangement, but creative, interactive, and spiritually rich. This is not merely a question of art theory, but a fundamental issue concerning the reconstruction of meaningful existence in modern and even postmodern society.

5. Rethinking in the Contemporary Context

Entering the digital age, the mechanical reproduction Benjamin addressed has evolved into an even more thoroughgoing state of digital virtuality and global circulation. High-resolution scanning can reveal every detail of artworks, 3D printing can replicate any object with precision, and social media enables exponential dissemination of images. The "aura" of objects seems to face a more severe crisis of dissipation than in Benjamin's time. The "here-and-nowness" of the original is deconstructed in the cloud into data streams accessible infinitely; materiality itself becomes programmable and malleable in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) contexts; blockchain technology, exemplified by NFTs, attempts to redefine the "authenticity" and ownership of digital artworks through cryptographic certification—yet the technological logic and financial attributes on which it relies precisely reveal that the historical sensibility and unique presence underpinning aura are being replaced by pure code and market valuation. We seem to find ourselves in a hyperreal world constructed of simulacra and fragments, with object-self relations facing a more profound level of abstraction and evacuation.

However, historical juxtaposition often engenders opportunity for reflection in times of crisis. The Song literati practice suggests that "aura" does not depend entirely on the physical uniqueness or sacred origin of the object, but rather on the depth of connection constructed by the subject through cultural practice and meaning-endowment. In the contemporary context, a complete return to the pre-technological contemplative state is no longer realistically possible, yet the logic of reconstruction may continue in new forms. The hope for reconstruction may lie

not in resisting technology, but in how to "literati-ize" technological media—that is, to cultivate a novel, depthful participatory culture within the digital environment. This requires a shift from passive consumption to active digital literacy and aesthetic agency. Meanwhile, the dialectical wisdom of Song literati in "taking pleasure in things" rather than "being attached to things" offers ethical reference for handling contemporary human-machine relations and material proliferation. Faced with smart devices and mass consumer goods, the key may not be to abandon them, but to reflect on whether we can build a relationship less instrumental and more spiritually dialogical with them—for instance, treating everyday objects as companions bearing personal memories and life stories, or incorporating unique life experience and critical reflection into digital creation to transcend empty signs. This is essentially a contemporary art of cultivation, aimed at restoring the subject's capacity for meaning-endowment and spiritual autonomy in the technological world. Thus, the contemporary reconstruction of "aura" is neither a simple restoration of the traditional aura Benjamin lamented, nor a direct emulation of Song literati taste, but a cultural innovation renegotiating object-self relations under new technological-material conditions. It may take the form of a hybrid state—embracing the ubiquity of digital reproduction while cherishing irreplaceable material tactility and live interaction; employing technology's connective capacities while defending spaces of deep concentration and introspection. The key to its success lies in whether we can cultivate cultural wisdom and aesthetic self-discipline commensurate with technological speed, enabling "objects"—whether virtual or real—to once again become mirrors reflecting our existence and settling our spirits, rather than barriers obscuring authentic life. In this sense, Benjamin's melancholic warning and the Song literati's constructive practice together illuminate the complex path ahead. The future of aura depends on whether humans can still exist as guardians and creators of meaning amid the tidal waves of technology.

6. Conclusion

Through a systematic comparison of Benjamin's thesis of "aura dissipation" and Song literati aesthetics of appreciation, this paper has revealed two profound paradigms for handling object-self relations. From the perspective of modern rupture, Benjamin precisely analyzed the mechanisms by which mechanical reproduction technology dissolves the artwork's authenticity, historical presence, and sacred distance, leading object-self relations toward estrangement and alienation—an account imbued with the critical consciousness of modernity. The Song literati, situated in an era of material abundance, transformed objects into spiritual anchors and extensions of personhood through the aesthetic practice of "taking pleasure in things," actively

reconstructing a meaning-world of object-self integration within everyday ethics. The fundamental divergence between the two lies in the former being a critical revelation of the passive dissipation of traditional aura, the latter a constructive practice of active reconstruction of a new aura; the former pointing to estrangement and objectification of object-self relations, the latter pursuing their integration and personalization. Yet at a deeper level, both jointly address the fundamental question of how objects bear spiritual value and how aesthetics responds to crises of meaning. In the present era, when digital technology is profoundly reshaping the material world, Benjamin's warning becomes ever more pertinent, while Song literati wisdom offers possibilities for reconstruction. Contemporary "aura" reconstruction is not a simple return to premodernity, but should consist, under new technological conditions, of re-establishing object-self dialogue with both critical awareness and spiritual depth through enhancing the subject's aesthetic literacy and cultural creativity. This trans-temporal aesthetic dialogue not only deepens our understanding of object-self relations, but also provides valuable intellectual resources for seeking meaningful existence in the technological age.

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