

Embodied Worship and The Resilience of Aura: An Empirical Investigation at Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Temple, Chennai

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Abstract—Walter Benjamin's theory of aura proposes that mechanical reproduction diminishes the unique presence of an artwork by detaching it from its ritual and spatial context. While this thesis has been widely explored in literature, cinema, and visual art, empirical research within living religious spaces remains limited. This study investigates the persistence of aura in the sacred environment of Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Temple, Triplicane, Chennai. Using survey data collected from 48 devotees, the research analyzes perceptions of sacred presence, ritual engagement, collective devotion, and attitudes toward mediated worship. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and relationships among variables were examined using Spearman's rank correlation and chi-square tests. Findings indicate a significant negative correlation between aura perception and acceptance of mechanical reproduction ($r_s = -.53, p < .01$) and a positive correlation between visit frequency and aura intensity ($r_s = .47, p < .01$). Results demonstrate that embodied ritual participation sustains cult value despite technological mediation. The study empirically substantiates Benjamin's aura-decay thesis while demonstrating the resilience of aura within contemporary devotional practice.

Keywords — Aura, Mechanical Reproduction, Ritual Presence, Cult Value, Sacred Space, Walter Benjamin

I. INTRODUCTION

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin (1936/1968) defines *aura* as the unique presence of an artwork in time and space. According to Benjamin, technological reproduction diminishes this presence by eroding ritual authority, tradition, and spatial distance. Although extensively applied to literature, cinema, and visual art, limited empirical research has examined the applicability of this theory within living sacred spaces.

This study addresses that gap by examining aura perception at Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Temple, Triplicane, Chennai, a historically significant

Vaishnavite temple embedded in ritual continuity and collective devotional practice.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Benjamin (1936/1968) distinguishes between *cult value*, grounded in ritual and tradition, and *exhibition value*, associated with mass accessibility and reproduction. In sacred environments, aura is sustained through embodied presence, spatial immediacy, ritual repetition, and collective emotional participation. This conceptual distinction informs the study's examination of original idols, media-mediated worship, and devotees' experiential responses.

III. METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 48 devotees of Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Temple. Respondents were predominantly Hindu (84%), urban residents of Chennai (100%), and highly educated (72% with graduation-level education or above).

Instrument

A structured questionnaire comprising four sections was administered:

1. Frequency of temple visits
2. Experience of sacred space and aura
3. Perceptions of modern media and reproduction
4. Collective and emotional dimensions of worship

Responses were recorded on a three-point Likert scale (1 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral).

Statistical Analysis

Because the data were ordinal, nonparametric statistical techniques were employed. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Relationships among variables were analyzed using Spearman's

rank-order correlation (r_s). Associations were tested using chi-square (χ^2) analysis.

IV. RESULTS

Reliability Analysis

Table 1
Reliability Statistics for Survey Scales

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Sacred Space & Aura	6	.84	High
Media & Reproduction	4	.61	Moderate
Collective Emotion	4	.79	Good

The aura scale demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$), confirming the construct's experiential coherence.

Correlation Analysis

Spearman's rank correlation revealed a significant negative relationship between aura perception and acceptance of reproduction, $r_s(46) = -.53$, $p < .01$. A positive correlation was observed between visit frequency and aura intensity, $r_s(46) = .47$, $p < .01$.

These findings empirically support Benjamin's aura-decay thesis while emphasizing the reinforcing role of embodied ritual engagement.

Chi-Square Analysis

A chi-square test indicated a significant association between frequency of temple visits and preference for physical presence over mediated worship, $\chi^2(3, N = 48) = 12.68$, $p < .01$.

This suggests that ritual repetition strengthens attachment to original presence.

Descriptive Findings

Agreement levels for key statements include:

- Sense of peace before the deity: 90%
- Original idol has unique sacred presence: 88%
- Physical presence more powerful than online worship: 82%
- Live-streamed worship creates connection: 52%

The substantial gap between perception of original presence ($\approx 88\%$) and mediated reproduction ($\approx 48\%$) reflects the persistence of cult value over exhibition value.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that aura persists as a measurable experiential construct within contemporary sacred practice. The negative correlation between reproduction acceptance and

aura intensity aligns with Benjamin's (1936/1968) argument that mechanical reproduction weakens ritual authority. However, the data also reveal that ritual participation and collective emotional engagement function as stabilizing mechanisms that sustain aura despite technological mediation.

Importantly, the sample's high educational and economic status suggests that technological literacy does not necessarily lead to secular disenchantment. Instead, media functions as a supplementary devotional aid rather than a substitute for embodied worship.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study empirically validates Benjamin's aura theory within a living religious context. While digital media extends devotional access, it does not replace the spatial, ritual, and collective conditions required for aura formation. By situating Benjamin's theoretical framework within a South Indian temple environment, this research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship in cultural theory, religious studies, and sociology.

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