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The Return of "Aura" and the Carnival of "Simulacra" A Dialectic of Imagery in the Post-Digital Era

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Abstract: Amid the global prevalence of digital imagery and AI-generated content (AIGC), a nostalgic trend for peel-apart film has paradoxically surged on social media. Characterized by its high cost and aesthetic uncertainty, peel-apart film is often regarded as a "luxury" photographic experience, which makes it in stark contrast to the perfectly controllable virtual images enabled by AIGC. The resurgence of peel-apart film is not merely a kind of retro fashion, but a cultural counter-movement with significant theoretical implications. Grounded in Walter Benjamin's concept of "Aura" and Jean Baudrillard's theory of "Simulacra", this paper examines the dialectical coexistence of peel-apart film and AIGC technologies in the post-digital era, which provides a new perspective on contemporary visual culture.

Keywords: Simulacra; Aura; Peel-apart film; AIGC.

1. Anti-Digital Social Carnival

When searching "peel-apart film" on social media such as RED and Weibo, you will immediately be immersed in a nostalgic world of soft tones and hazy textures. In 2025, Chinese celebrities such as Ju Jingyi and Liu Shishi shared peel-apart film portraits on social media, attracting billions of views and triggering a nationwide artistic revival. Originally invented by Polaroid in the mid-20th century, peel-apart film requires manual separation of the positive and negative sheets after exposure. The tearing action ruptures reagent pods, allowing developer chemistry to react with light and ambient temperature to produce a print—thus the colloquial name "peel-apart film." [1]

Due to high production costs and the rise of digital photography, the production lines of peel-apart film have been gradually shut down since 2008. As a result, all the remaining stocks are expired and finite, and each frame will reduce its global supply irrevocably. Driven by the influencer effect, photo studios featuring peel-apart film as their selling point have transformed from niche options into highly popular ones. Using the slogan "One shot taken, one less to go," the studios convince customers to willingly pay hefty fees from 300 to 500 yuan for what is essentially a technologically obsolete product. Since the image formation in peel-apart film relies on chemicals stored within the photo paper, the prolonged storage of these chemicals in expired paper leads to instability. Consequently, the resulting image quality is entirely dependent on luck and cannot be replicated.

Digital photography technology has reached new heights in the post-digital era, with smartphone photography becoming widely adopted. By integrating various built-in AI algorithms, it meets people's diverse shooting needs across different scenarios. Artificial Intelligence Generated Content (AIGC) technology offers a diverse array of models that provide flawless virtual imagery in various styles for the public. Against this backdrop, the frenzy surrounding peel-apart film seems particularly bizarre: on one side lies the pursuit of tangible photo through costly chemical development processes with uncertain outcomes, while on the other stands the absolutely controllable, dream-fulfilling digital virtual imagery—manufactured at virtually zero cost compared to peel-apart film. Technological advancement propels people into a virtual realm of perfect illusions, yet their yearning for authenticity and materiality continues to stir waves of resistance. The resurgence of peel-apart film and the fascination with AIGC technology are both reflecting the technological anxiety and identity exploration now, and their coexisting could be regarded as a cultural microcosm of the digital age. Therefore, we should transcend its superficial "nostalgia" narrative and engage in deeper philosophical inquiry: In the post-digital era, what exactly are people captivated by in images? This paper attempts to decipher the value struggle over "authenticity", via the theories of two 20th-century intellectual giants—Walter Benjamin's 'Aura' and Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacrum"—as decoding tools.

2. Revisiting "Aura" and "Simulacra"

To understand this contest over "authenticity", we must revisit two key concepts and grasp their meaning in the post-digital era. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin introduced the concept of "aura"—a peculiar fabric woven from time and space: the singular manifestation of something distant, yet potentially so near.[2] It possesses immediacy (Hier und Jetzt), authenticity (Echtheit), and a sense of distance (whether physical or psychological), which endows the artwork with a "cult value" (Kultwert).[3] Benjamin argues in his book that mechanical reproduction techniques sever artworks from their original contexts. Works created through photography and printing—capable of infinite replication—destroy the "aura," causing art's value to shift from "cult value" to "exhibition value."

In Baudrillard's view, the problem with contemporary artworks is no longer the disappearance of "aura," but the death of "authenticity" itself. In response, he proposed the order of "simulacra": the evolution of symbols progresses from imitating reality to producing reality, ultimately entering a stage of hyperreality—where "by cloning replicas of the real and the actual, reality itself is annihilated. Not only has our past become virtual, but our present itself has been simulated."[4] Under the order of "simulacra," symbols need not be modeled after reality; they merely require their own models (algorithms, code, etc.) for iteration and generation. Virtual avatars generated by AIGC technology operate

precisely within this framework, where data model computations produce "perfect simulacra" that align more closely with ideal standards than real-world counterparts.

3. The Return of Aura and the Carnival of "Simulacra"

Because photography, based on optical and chemical principles, enables infinite reproduction, Benjamin believed it would ultimately destroy the "aura" of traditional artworks. Yet in his book, he proposed that early photography offered "the last refuge of aura, in the irresistible presence of the earliest portrait photographs." [5] The imperfections of the technology unexpectedly preserved authenticity, authority, a sense of distance, and temporal immersion. Thus, it comes as no surprise that peel-apart film plays a rebellious role as a keeper of the "aura" in the post-digital era. There is no exaggeration to describe the act of taking peel-apart films as a solemn ritual. The high-priced film, the one-time exposure, the anticipation of manually separating the film to reveal the image, and the lingering scent of chemicals on the film all collectively construct this ritual. Ultimately, you will obtain a physical photograph without a negative, whose physical existence is its sole significance. The texture and tactile quality of photographic paper may be compromised by light leaks, color shifts, blurring, or even chemical diffusion across the surface due to expiration, resulting in a "ruined photo" with barely any image. These imperfections no longer serve as symbolic flaws, but rather stand as testaments to the manufacturing process and historical traces, forming a unique "authenticity." This is fundamentally different from digital photographs composed of electronic code, which can be infinitely modified, adjusted, copied, and disseminated.

The high cost of peel-apart film and the unpredictability of its results create a barrier for potential users. Unlike snapping hundreds or thousands of photos with a camera or smartphone, each exposure with peel-apart film carries a significant financial and emotional investment. The scarcity and uncertainty it bring, imbue the image with a sense of sacredness and authority, constructing a "cult value" of scarcity in the post-digital era. Peel-apart film, which cannot be predicted or mass-produced, yields an irresistibly captivating aura. The imperfect flaws arising from expired peel-apart film, in a sense, re-enact early photography. In this highly technologically advanced post-digital era, they bring about a fleeting return to questions of "authenticity," "time," and "materiality."

As peel-apart film struggle to make a comeback, the rapid advancement of AIGC technology has ushered humanity into the "hyperreal" carnival world foretold by Baudrillard. Although real photographs can be fed to AI and instructed to generate stylized virtual images based on them, but fundamentally, the images produced by AIGC are not "copies of the original." AIGC generates images based on textual prompts using large-scale model technology. These large models are not created based on any specific individual as a prototype, but rather are refined statistical models optimized through learning from vast amounts of human image data. Whether generated directly by large models as entirely virtual imagery, or produced by large models through stylized processing of real photographs, these images are detached from any specific material-world source objects. These virtual images no longer reflect reality but define new standards of reality. As people begin posting AI-generated "virtual avatars" on social media, the real-world self becomes an imperfect copy.

Some even become obsessed with the virtual fantasies generated by AIGC—flawless skin, perfectly proportioned features, idealized lighting, and ever-changing outfits. The "perfect self" is born in the virtual world. This is precisely the triumph of the "simulacrum" over "authenticity." This obsession is the enjoyment of absolute control—by tweaking a few key prompts, one can achieve total mastery over virtual images, experiencing godlike power in the digital realm as they create one digital avatar after another, each perfectly tailored to their desires. This stands in stark contrast to the "uncertainty" of peel-apart film. With the aid of AIGC technology, the core of the experience shifts from receiving material gifts to executing the algorithm's will. People are captivated by a fantasy constructed by code algorithms—one more satisfying than the real world, a truly controllable realm of "hyper-reality."

4. Conclusion

The preservation of "aura" and the fabrication of "simulacra" may appear as opposing forces, yet they collectively address the common anxieties of our era. They are both cultural artifacts of the post-digital era, representing a rebellion against mainstream digital imaging technology—whether out of dissatisfaction or a desire to transcend it. Peel-apart films achieve superiority through technological "regression," while AIGC accomplishes it through technological "radicalism." Both of the two serve as crucial social tools for contemporary individuals to construct their self-identity. The crowds, who following the celebrity trend to shoot peel-apart films, are to showcase a unique taste and economic capital on social media. At its root, it may not stem from an obsession with the texture of the image itself. Meanwhile, the fascination with virtual imagery generated by AIGC stems from a desire to showcase an embrace of cutting-edge technology and a pursuit of an idealized self, ultimately aiming to enhance social experiences. These two technical practices concerning imagery coexist in the post-digital era, satisfying the contradictory psychological needs of modern people. They crave the absolute sense of control and self-transcendence offered by AIGC technology to counter reality's imperfections, yet also yearn for the authentic experience and tactile presence of peel-apart films to combat the emptiness and disembodiment brought by the digital age. People aspire to the boundless freedom of virtual avatars, yet at certain moments, they yearn to touch an imperfect photograph with warmth.

This is a dialogue within the realm of imagery, exploring the questions of "what constitutes truth" and "how to exist." Peel-apart films, with their imperfect yet authentic materiality, remind us not to forget the value of the "aura"—a world that matters here and now, that cares about the traces of life and approaches them with reverence. Meanwhile, AIGC with its hyper-realistic virtuality, heralds the irreversible march toward the era of "simulacra"—a digital, model-driven world, capable of infinite optimization yet fraught with the peril of losing touch with reality. Both phenomena collectively reveal the psychological complexity of humanity in the post-digital era—charging forward relentlessly amid technological upheaval, yet constantly yearning to look back at the past, searching for those precious values left behind by rapid development. Like boxes of expired peel-apart films unearthed from a forgotten warehouse, they will eventually

be used up completely.

Perhaps the future path of visual media will not fully embrace "simulacra," yet it will also struggle to recapture the "aura". May we cherish those authentic experiences that constitute the essence of humanity—experiences that cannot be replicated—even as technology liberates creativity.

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