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Victor Burgin: Returning to Benjamin: Art in the Age of AI

Burgin argues that **AI doesn't just reproduce images—it fundamentally changes what an "image" is**, forcing us to rethink Benjamin's idea of "aura."

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### 1. What Benjamin said (starting point)

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin argued:

- Technologies like **photography and film** allow infinite copying
- This destroys the artwork's "**aura**" (its unique presence in time and space)
- Art shifts from ritual → mass circulation → politics
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👉 Key idea: **reproduction weakens originality**

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### 2. Burgin's move: AI is not just "better reproduction"

Burgin says: applying Benjamin directly to AI is **too simplistic**.

Why?

- AI images are **not copies of originals**
- They are **statistical syntheses** from massive datasets
- There often is **no original image at all**

👉 So the old framework—original vs copy—breaks down.

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### 3. The key shift: from image → model

This is the most important conceptual move:

- Photography = image derived from a **real scene**
- AI = image derived from a **model of many images**

So:

- The "source" is no longer a moment in reality
- It's a **latent space** (a probabilistic structure)

👉 Meaning: **images no longer refer back to a single origin**

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### 4. What happens to "aura"?

Burgin doesn't just say aura disappears—he complicates it:

- In AI, **aura doesn't belong to a physical object anymore**
- It can attach to:
  - the **system** (e.g., Midjourney, DALL·E)
  - the **prompting act**
  - the **circulation context**

So instead of:

unique artwork → aura

We get:

**networked process → distributed aura**

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### 5. Authorship collapses

AI destabilizes authorship more radically than photography:

- Who is the author?
  - the user?
  - the model creators?
  - the dataset (millions of artists)?
- The image is **collectively produced but anonymously structured**

👉 Burgin: authorship becomes **diffuse and impersonal**

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## 6. Images become “post-photographic”

Burgin frames AI as part of a broader shift:

- We no longer live in a photographic culture
- We live in a **post-photographic, computational image culture**

Key traits:

- Images are **generated, not captured**
- They are **detached from physical reality**
- They function more like **language or code**

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## 7. Political implications (very Benjamin-like)

Burgin echoes Benjamin’s concern with politics:

- Control shifts to those who:
  - build models
  - own datasets
  - define outputs
- AI images can:
  - reinforce dominant visual norms
  - erase minority representation
  - simulate reality convincingly (deepfakes, etc.)

👉 So the question becomes:

**Who controls the visual field?**

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### Bottom line

Burgin’s argument isn’t “AI kills aura.”

It’s more subtle:

AI **breaks the original/copy distinction**, replaces it with **model-based generation**, and forces us to rethink aura, authorship, and politics in a world where images no longer come from reality—but from data.