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# A Semiotic Approach to Post-Humanity in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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## 1.

Within the framework of this international conference on “The Human Image in a Changing World,” I would like to start with the final passage of *The Order of Things* by Michel Foucault:

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

The ending of Foucault’s monumental oeuvre raises many questions. Can it be read as alluding to the extinction of our species? Or is the death of man a strong appeal for the birth of a new man in the history of humanity? In that case, how should we think about “man after man”? When AlphaGo defeated 18-time world Go champion Lee Sedol, winning all but the fourth game at the Google deepMind Challenge Match held in Seoul between 9 and 15 March 2016, these questions became serious, as “some event” of which Foucault could “no more than sense the possibility” really took place. As the face of a man “drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” begins to blur, has the time now come to take Foucault’s wager seriously and discuss “post-humanity?”

## 2.

In this paper, I address this issue from a semiotic perspective, making use of what Jacques Fontanille calls the “tensive schema.” The aim of my paper is not to define post-humanity. It is out of the question for me to state categorically what humanity looks like in the present or the future. Rather, I aim to establish the range of the related discussion such that it is possible to seek an appropriate way of reformulating the question of humanity in the era of post-humanity. Notice that

the prefix “post-” can be interpreted in various ways. It can mean “super-” as in the concept of the Übermensch/Superman developed by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. However, the Superman concept is not contemporaneous with the death of Man but with the death of God. In my view, the Desiring Machine proposed by Deleuze and Gattari in *Anti-Oedipus* in 1972 might be a new version of Nietzsche’s Superman in the era of the death of Man. Further, “post-” can also signify “neo-”, giving birth to the concept of “neo-humanity,” which Franz Fanon and his followers, for instance, still dreamed of in the context of the post-colonial movement, where “neo-Humanity” is referred to as “neither white nor black.”

Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth. (*The wretched of the earth*)

In the Marxist tradition, those who gain the opportunity to live in a society without social classes are supposed to be endowed with the status of neo-humanity, being “neither superior nor inferior.” However, the realization of this utopian dream is always deferred to the future. “Post-Humanity” can also be translated as “trans-humanity,” which has many technological or mechanical implications. Contrary to the image of the beasts connected to Superman as illustrated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it is technological or mechanical images that prevail in the conception of trans-humanity. In this paper, I attempt a new arrangement of the elements that constitute post-humanity. I refer to Benjamin’s concept of *aura* to gain access to this conceptual arrangement, with a special focus on “the human image in a changing world, or the “face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”

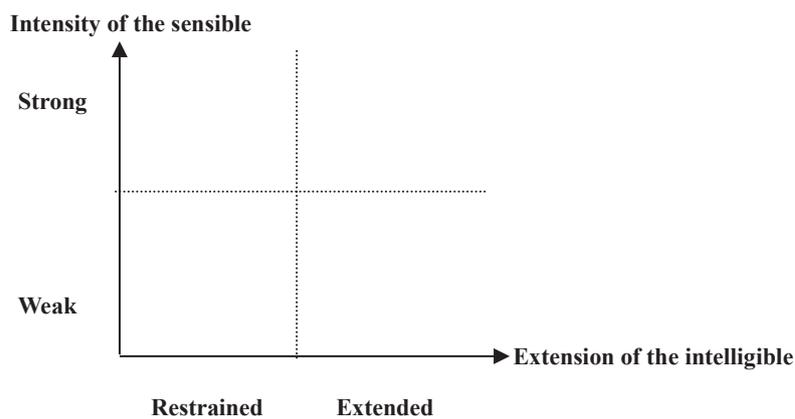
### 3.

Yoon Tae Ho is a webtoon artist in Korea, renowned especially for *Misaeng* (“an incomplete life”), which ran online from 2012 to 2013, drawing 1 billion hits. The story is about white collar workers’ daily life at a trading company. One of the reasons for the great success of this webtoon is the very interesting allegorical connections that Yoon established between the Go match record and workers’ daily life. The artist placed the former before each episode so that it could operate as the allegory of the latter. However, curiously after the defeat of Lee Sedol, when I reread *Misaeng* or read *Misaeng Part II*, which was recently released online, my interest in the Go(or Baduk) record had been drastically diminished. It was as if the aura of Go, which has been regarded as a rare game based on human creativity, had disappeared, being transferred quietly to AlphaGo. It is interesting to note that contrary to the remark Benjamin made in his 1935 article, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” AlphaGo seemed to win the humanity aura that previously belonged to Go. How can this be explained?

Before getting to the heart of the matter, let me first briefly look at the semiotic model known as “tensive schema.” The tensive schema elaborated by Fontanille to reformulate semiosis on the basis

of perceptual experience consists of the correlation between the intensity of the sensible and the extension of the intelligible. In short, the intensity of the sensible is the degree of perception, which can be either strong or weak. The extension designates the domain to which this perceptual intensity is applied: the domain of extension can be either restrained or extended. According to Fontanille, the combination of the intensity of the sensible with the extension of the intelligible brings about a field of presence in which semiotic experience takes place, as represented in the following model.

### Tensive Schema



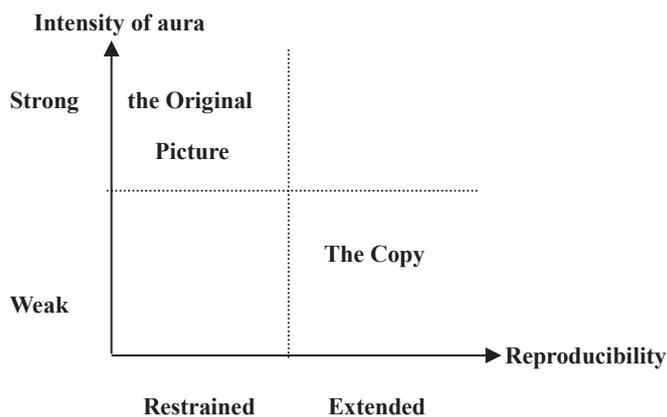
Let me now apply this semiotic model to Benjamin’s concept of aura. In the well-known passage from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin offers a definition for his enigmatic concept of aura.

A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountain on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. Now, to bring things closer to us or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the objet in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. The difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. (Benjamin 1935)

This passage, about which much has been written and spoken is far from clear. It seems that the focus of the discussion is perceptual experience, a kind of optical illusion, poetically described in terms of spatiotemporal distance, “A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance

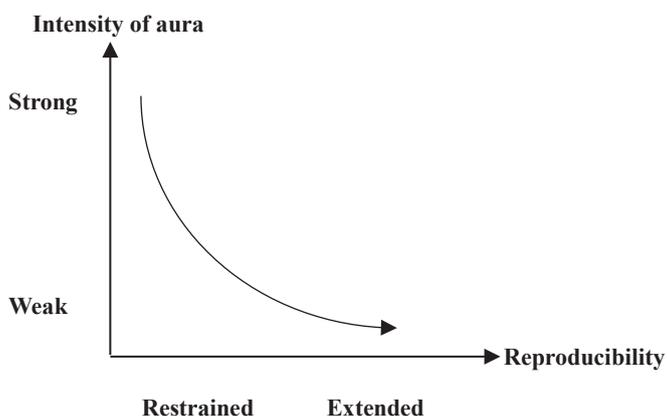
or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be.” In the tensive schema illustrated above, the degree of vividness connected to this optical illusion called aura constitutes the intensity axis that can be either strong or weak, while the reproducibility delimits the extensive range to which the aura intensity is applied, which can be either restrained or extended. The combination of the aura intensity with the extension of reproducibility gives birth to a field of aura where the optical illusion takes place. The tensive schema of aura thus constructed is capable of visualizing a new arrangement of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, in which a distinction between “the original picture” and “the copy” is established. For instance, the “uniqueness and duration” of the original picture can be characterized by the combination of a strong aura intensity with a drastically restrained reproducibility. So it can be situated in the upper left corner of the aura field. The copy, whose aura intensity is by definition very weak, is designed to be repeatedly reproduced. Characterized in terms of “transience and reproducibility,” it can be situated in the lower right corner of the aura field.

### Tensive Schema of Aura (1)



Let me risk generalizing this example to a work of art. Then, the age of mechanical reproduction can be characterized by the following graph, which shows a descending tendency.

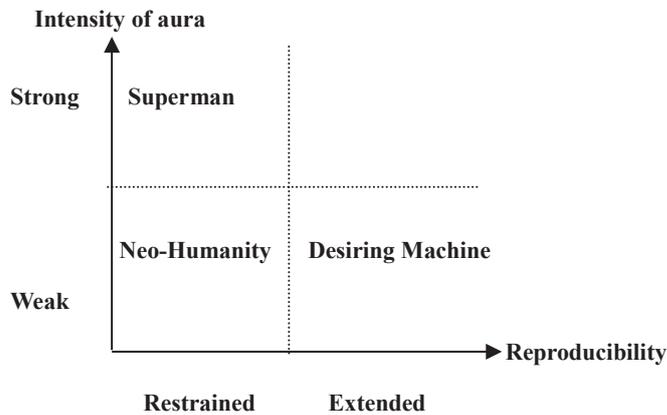
### Tensive Schema of Aura (2)



4.

Based on this model, I now attempt to arrange the different concepts of post-humanity briefly outlined at the beginning of this paper. In brief, I propose the following arrangement.

**Tensive Schema of Aura**



A strong aura emanates from Nietzsche’s Superman, singular in personality: “In truth, man is a polluted river. One must be a sea to receive a polluted river without becoming defiled. I bring you the Superman! He is that sea; in him your great contempt can be submerged.” Stripped of this heroic aura, Deleuze and Gattari’s Desiring Machine is designed to produce infinitely and to reproduce itself repeatedly.

There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.(Deleuze and Gattari 1977: 2)

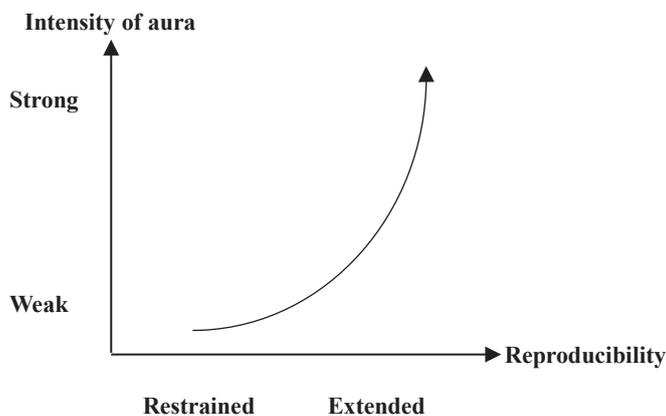
As Benjamin argues with respect to the work of art, from the death of God to the death of Man, the history of humanity can be summed up by the loss of aura. The neo-human, living in a society in which perfect equality is realized is capable of maintaining his personality without any aura. He can be described in terms of the combination of weak aura intensity with restrained reproducibility. As Fredric Jameson argues with respect to the Greimasian semiotic model in *The Political Unconscious*, the advantage of the tensive schema developed by Fontanille lies in the fact that it can foreshow the realization of possibilities in a logical way. Thus a question can be raised with respect to the unoccupied corner of the aura field.

5.

As mentioned above, Benjamin’s aura can be viewed in terms of an optical illusion. Let me go

one step further and claim that this optical illusion is caused by the overlapping of two different dimensions, such as material and spiritual or human and mechanical. On the one hand, the optical illusion can be regarded as a subjective phenomenon. On the other hand, it seems that the aura emanating from an original picture, for instance, belongs to this picture as an objective “thing.” I think that AlphaGo was left without any aura just before defeating Lee Sedol. By this, I mean that aura is not simply given but it can be produced through an interaction between human and non-human. In the age of mechanical reproduction, the aura that has been lost can be regained through this interactivity. Even a copy can be endowed with a sort of aura, provided, for instance, that it testifies to bygone days for a user or viewer. To take another example, *Her* is a science-fiction film by Spike Jonze, released in 2013. In this film, there appears a man called Theodore Twombly who is excited about being able to develop a relationship with an intelligent computer operating system called Samantha, whose learning ability is unrivaled. He starts to have feelings of love while talking with her, and their intimacy rapidly grows through a verbal sexual encounter. At the end of the film, Theodore is disheartened to find out that there are many Samanthas. Theodore falls in love with a female operating system, not just because the performance of this OS is excellent, but also because it seems to be endowed with an aura of humanity. Notice that this aura is not present from the outset but is produced through the emotive interactions between Theodore and Samantha. So there is an ascending tendency even in the age of mechanical reproduction.

### Tensive Schema of Aura (2)



I conclude by claiming that the humanity image is not given but can be produced by various interactions between human and non-human, which are likely to increase more and more in the near future. What is at stake is to know what kind of interaction humanity should develop such that we do not lose our human nature. The following schema represents the new arrangement of the human image in a changing world.

## Tensive Schema of Aura

