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AMPLIFYING THEATRE AURA IN THE ERA OF AMPLIFIED TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract
Theatre scholars and practitioners have expressed concerns about the state of theatre, with some even proclaiming that it is dying or dead. This viewpoint is often rooted in the observation of the growing competition in the art and culture sector, driven by the advancements in technology that have led to the emergence of digital art and Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). While these technological innovations have the potential to enhance the quality of theatre content, they also present a new alternative that theatre finds hard to compete with. This article builds on Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, to explore the concept of aura and its relevance in contemporary Nigerian theatre. The study delves into the nature of the aura's manifestation, examines Benjamin's claims on the decay of the aura, and investigates how the aura has survived in the past. It further examines how modern art, particularly digital art and NFTs, have created a new form of utility. The study aims to identify strategies that can amplify theatre's aura to compete favourably with modern technology and attract new audiences whose tastes are heavily influenced by modern technology. The study finds that the theatre and its artists can use NFTs to record the provenance of their physical artworks, such as costumes, props, and set designs to allow potential buyers to easily check for the authenticity of the artwork and preserve the aura of the piece. Thereby, providing insights on how the aura can be preserved and revitalised to ensure theatre's continued relevance in the age of technology.

Keywords: Amplified technology, Nigerian theatre, Amplifying theatre aura, NFTs.

Introduction

Theatre in Nigeria started in the most unsophisticated spaces; not in gated halls or stadium-like arenas as was obtained in Greece, but in secret spots on nights during rituals and in open fields during festivals. Dandaura describes pre-colonial Nigerian theatre as "indigenous, eclectic, boisterous, diverse and abounding in every community" (1). One part of it took the form of ritualistic performances, chants, masquerades, and festivals, while the other part of it featured folktales, fables, praise songs, mimes and dances done during social events and notable occasions. It was revered, experienced, and celebrated right there on the spot before its audience. Even in the present dispensation, many forms of art are still consumed in this way. For instance, a gospel artist sings before a crowd that worships with him/her right there on

the spot. The secular musician also performs before a crowd that experiences his/her art right there on the spot.

In the era of amplified technology, the experience of live theatre has changed significantly. With the advent of digital media, many forms of art are now consumed through screens, often with the aid of sophisticated technology. Despite this shift, the on-the-spot experience of art remains a unique and cherished experience that people continue to crave. In this article, we examine how we can amplify the aura of live theatre in the era of amplified technology. Specifically, we explore how technology can be deployed to enhance the on-the-spot experience of live theatre and provide audiences with a more immersive and engaging involvement. By examining case studies and analysing existing technologies, we hope to provide insights into how we can leverage technology to create a more memorable and impactful theatre experience for audiences in the modern age in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Theatre Time

Art is a double-edged sword; art educates, informs, and even heals, it also serves as a means of fun and relaxation. There is a belief that people consume art, especially the theatre arts, in their leisure time (Awodiya 19). Due to technological advancements, people also consume art, like music, during work time. However, in most situations, art is mostly consumed during leisure periods. Since theatre arts is the focal point of this study, leisure time is then referred to as theatre time.

Amplified Technological Rivalry

This refers to technological innovations which compete for attention at leisure time. Any technology which aids a form or medium of entertainment to fill that space (leisure time) or used during leisure time contributes in creating rivalry for theatre. Emerging technologies have created a competitive landscape for theatre, as they offer various forms of entertainment during leisure time. These technologies, such as radio players, music boxes, MP3 players, mobile phones with music player applications, film projectors, video players, digital video players, and online streaming services, are live-theatre rivals that are continuously amplified by technology.

Aura

Basically, aura is about the unique value of something. However, many scholars have contributed to the understanding of the concept of aura. For Bolter et al, "aura is the personal and cultural significance that an object or place holds for an individual or a group of viewers" (26). Olorunsomo and Zacchaeus submit that "aura is a person or thing's defining character" (94). They add that aura is that thing or experience that is unique to a person or thing. Their view is similar to Walter Benjamin's, who believes that every true work of art is unique as most works of art were before the invention of means of mechanical (mass) reproduction. Mass reproduction, Benjamin believes, destroys the uniqueness of art and ultimately its aura.

The uniqueness of each work of art evokes a sense of reverence in the mind of the beholder and this is where art derives its value. For Benjamin, aura can be understood to be a psychological state, an attitude or feeling that the beholder experiences when viewing a work of art or a mountain in a summer afternoon or other manifestation of nature (223).

Aura, in this work, is conceptualised as the unique value of art and, specifically, the unique value of theatre arts. It however, includes examples from the art of football and also ritual art. In explaining the artistic qualities of football, especially in Brazil, Farogo explains that "football is not just an effort to put a ball into a net. It has, at its pinnacle, an aesthetic dimension – it is not just a game, but an art" (BBC). The work shall also seek to answer the following questions: What is theatre aura? What are emerging technologies rivalling the theatre for leisure time? How does theatre standout among these rivals? How can theatre aura be amplified?

The Decay of the Aura

The phrase, 'the decay of the aura', was first used by Walter Benjamin in his work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. While aura has already been explained to be the unique value of a given piece of art, the decay of the aura, Benjamin argues, comes from mass reproduction of art. Benjamin explains that there are two major reasons for mass reproduction of art. The first reason was the continuous leaning of the society in which he lived, towards socialism and Marx's desire for a classless society or at least one where the proletariat ruled. This led to increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. This movement birthed or at least goes hand-in-hand with the second reason which is a growing desire to overcome or, in actual sense, destroy the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction regardless of the consequence of such reproduction on its quality or value. This has led to the decay of the aura (223).

The idea of mass reproduction without considering its effect on quality is also evident in the Nigerian market. It is believed that this has led to the proliferation of highly substandard but affordable items in the Nigerian markets from Chinese manufacturers who have the capacity to, and actually do, produce high quality but also produce inferior quality to satisfy the masses' desire for an affordable version product. In 2016, the Standard Organisation of Nigeria (SON) publicly said that about 40% of Nigeria's imports from China "are substandard and have caused disasters with destruction to lives and property" (Oyebola and Adepetun). The desire to create mass replicas of products often leads to piracy, which is also done through technologies that allow for mass reproduction, otherwise called reproductive technologies.

Reproductive Technologies

These are kinds of technologies that allow for the reproduction of things which contribute significantly to the decay of the aura. The printing machine led to the abandonment of the use of scripts and scrolls. The photography machine led to a reduction in the popularity of lithography. Photography also rivalled painting, as photography offered a means of easy reproduction of images in an age that craved for

easy reproduction. Then came the film; not just the silent film of the likes of Charlie Chaplin but the sound film which took a great deal of attention and patronage from photography. The film, photography and printing machines made use of reproductive technologies which were capable of reproducing information.

The same media experience could now be offered repeatedly to a series of users because these machines could produce perfect copies of the original (Boulter et al 23). The auratic experience derived from these massively reproduced items is difficult to determine but the bigger problem created is with the determination of authenticity. Due to the ability of the printing machine to produce many copies of a book and of a filmmaking device to produce many copies of the film, they are easily pirated. Photography also suffers the same fate. Earlier forms of art did not suffer a similar fate. This is not to say that paintings were not forged or that bronze carvings were not forged but a chemical analysis could be used to determine the authenticity of an artwork, thereby preserving the original copy's value. As there were not too many copies in circulation, it was easy to test the very few copies for authenticity. This is unlike art made with reproductive technologies which sometimes run into millions of copies, thereby giving sufficient room for pirated copies to hide and, consequently, destroy the aura.

With theatre, rival technologies, like the media, attend to the desire of the masses to bring large copies of art to them. In the early days of film in Nigeria, early producers of theatre made television studio pieces (Adesokan 193). Thereby, gradually leaving their art; for this new form which could be accessed from one's home rather than from a gathering of viewers which usually took place in town halls, open fields, or the theatre. It is consequently contributing to the growing trend, at the time, of individualism. Today, even film which rivalled theatre has got a new rival of its own which better satisfies the widespread short attention span and decayed aura. This new rival is the social media film skits industry which is gaining wide acceptance in Nigeria and even rivalling the screen for 'film time' and ultimately contributing to the decay of the aura as they are often hurriedly produced and often based on lewd and immoral themes that negates the Nigerian culture.

Survival of the Aura

As mentioned earlier, reproductive technologies have a tendency to lead to a decay of the aura. However, it has been observed that even amid these wild technologies, the aura could survive especially by leaning into two major pillars based on the values art produces – ritual and cult value. Ritual value is associated with spirituality and religion while cult value is the premium a non-spiritual group of people attach to a work like family. Benjamin notes that photography understood this; hence, the choice of the portrait as the focal point of early photography. The portrait keyed into "the cult of remembrance" of loved ones, dead or absent (226). It gave the picture of one last piece of value that was hugely significant - a means to remember those who are no longer present.

The record for the largest gathering of a women's football game was set in Barcelona, Spain, when the women's teams of Barcelona Football Club and Real

Madrid played a game in April 2022. A crowd of over 91,000 people sat in a stadium to watch the game live. This is the daily fire grill reality of football around the world, as thousands of people gather in stadia to watch football games live. In March 2022, about 60, 000 people gathered in Abuja to watch Nigeria's men football team play Ghana. Football has become like the ancient duels in Greek arenas. No one knows who would win until the match is over. While it employs dramatic elements like suspense, and even does it as good as or even better than theatre, it has a longer storyline. Nigeria and Ghana have been footballing rivals for over sixty years. Each time a football contest is on-going, no one knows how it would end. This is unlike Ṣoyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman,* for example, whose story is known all over the world. Everyone coming into the theatre already knows that Ẹlẹṣin Ọba and Olunde would die. They know this because they have watched it before or at least read the script.

Music has also harnessed the cult aura. Nigeria's top music act, Wizkid, was able to sell about sixty thousand tickets in three nights at the O2 Arena in London. The singer announced on his official Instagram page that he sold out these tickets in just about 12 minutes since they were put up for sales online. The ritual value of art has also ensured art's survival through tough periods in art history. In the medieval era, the church banned arts because it perceived it as being profane and paganistic. It was the ritual value of art that was used to regain art's legitimacy and rebirth. In theatre, this era saw the production of moralist plays like *Everyman.* The aura of art that keys into ritual is difficult to destroy. The art of writing, for example, the Holy Bible and Quran are still revered. Old Catholic arts are still treated with care and reverence. It is arguable that, no matter how popular streaming services get, people will rather gather in a church to watch the preacher in person rather than stay at home. Muslims will rather go to the mosque on Friday for their Juma'at services than stream it online.

Despite the availability of streaming services, multitudes still troop into Nigeria annually for the Osun-Osogbo Festival. A church in Nigeria, House on the Rock, organises an annual musical concert titled 'The Experience' in December. It is reported that this event started in 2006 with about 40,000 people in attendance (Ojo). By 2021, the event was conducted in an hybrid fashion. It was streamed live on the internet and watched in-person. While the physical version attracted a large crowd whose exact number is unavailable, the virtual version on YouTube attracted about 288,000 views. It is said that over six million people attend the Redeemed Christian Church of God's Holy Ghost Congress when there is a full house (Daniels). The current auditorium is 3 km by 3 km big - the largest church gathering in the world. This gathering occurs in the same nation where theatre is constantly unable to pull crowd due to advancement in technology. Advancement in technology has so far been unable to affect church attendance as significantly as it seems to have affected theatre. This is evidence of long lasting nature of ritual aura.

Aura in New (Digital) Art and Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)
In recent years, Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) have gained immense popularity as a technological, cultural, and economic phenomenon (Baytas et al 1). By 2021, NFTs had become a defining trend for business, technology, and design, as Collins

Dictionary chose "NFT" as the word of the year 2021. NFTs are a data entry in a distributed blockchain database that registers an ownership relation, managed by computer programs known as 'smart contracts' (Baytas et al 1). NFTs are powered by Blockchain technology and used to register ownership of digital products, particularly digital art. "Non-Fungible" means 'irreproducible' or 'not liable to be substituted,' and "Tokens" are a symbol representing a thing. Therefore, NFTs are digital items that are irreproducible or not substitutable.

NFTs have become a cultural and economic trend, with participants and stakeholders boosting its awareness and creating demand for it and job opportunities. Sales of NFTs increased from $12 million in December 2020 to $340 million in February 2021, within just two months (Wang et al, 2). Digital arts are the most popular forms of NFTs, with digital artists creating virtual visual art and selling NFTs that are directly associated with their artwork. Even physical artists can use NFTs to augment the value proposition of their art by recording its provenance. This makes it easy for potential buyers to verify the authenticity of the artwork without the need for chemical tests. The use of NFTs also enables the originator to earn royalties whenever the artwork is resold, creating a new and important opportunity in the arts.

NFTs and digital art involve the creation of digital items around which values are built. Just like in virtual reality game software, users sometimes have to purchase digital assets to unlock new difficulty or experience levels. These assets belong to the buyer and are used in playing the game. Similarly, digital art is created and traded in the digital marketplace, with its eventual owners using it for various functions. Some collect these arts because they are scarce and designed by top artists, just as a collector would collect the original version of a painting. Owners of such art experience its aura in the same way as they would with physical art.

Amplifying Theatre Aura

To amplify the aura of theatre is to understand and take into consideration some fundamental and cognizant elements that institutionalised the exegesis of theatre. Some of these include the ritualistic, social and functionalistic imperatives of theatre. And more recently, the influence and role of government, technological advancement and utility of art.

The Ritualistic Imperative

Rituals have a powerful attribute: their sacredness. When something is considered sacred, it gains immunity from economic downturns, changing trends, and even death. Most rituals continue to exist long after their founders have passed. Rather than advocating for a return to religious institutions, we should examine what makes them successful in retaining their followers. While miracles play a significant role in religion, many devotees have never experienced them first-hand. Instead, they remain loyal to their religious practices and beliefs. People crave for meaningful experiences that transcend the mundane, especially because they encounter it so often in their daily lives. They seek answers to their unanswered questions and unsatisfied desires. Religion provides a break from the physical world and offers a glimpse of the soul and

sometimes, a sense of hope. While theatre may not offer miracles, it can provide a space for catharsis and allow people to connect with their inner selves. By creating a ritualistic aura that transports people from the physical to the metaphysical or to a deeper level of consciousness, theatre can cultivate a loyal following that rivals that of religion. Theatre can become an essential part of people's lives, fulfilling a vital human need for meaningful experiences.

Social significance

Aura is the personal and social significance that an object or place holds for an individual or a group of people. One example of this is the attachment that football fans have to their club's stadium, as demonstrated by the fans of Chelsea Football Club. Despite the team's rivals having larger stadia, the fans refused a billionaire's plan to move Stamford Bridge to a different site and build a new stadium. They believed that the name 'Chelsea' and the pitch 'Stamford Bridge' belonged together and that the club should always play on that pitch due to its historical significance. Similarly, people in Nigeria prefer to bury their dead loved ones in their family compounds and to pass down inherited real estate to their descendants as it is seen as taboo to sell such property.

For a theatre to have an aura, it needs to have cultural and social significance. This is not handed over freely, but rather earned intentionally over time. The pandemic provided opportunities for Stamford Bridge to earn social significance by hosting England's National Health Service and giving its hotel to the city for Covid-19 patients' isolation. Afrika Shrine in Nigeria hosted talk shows on anti-police brutality during the #EndSARS protests, demonstrating its commitment to people-oriented community engagement.

Theatre seeking to amplify its aura should aim to create memories with its audience. It should be more than a space to watch shows; rather, it should be a place where people can feel a sense of belonging and participate in the performance. African theatre, which is participatory in nature and often performed in local languages, can create a unique and immersive experience for its audience. For example, Fẹla Kuti would ask the audience to clap or sound in a certain way, making them co-performers and immersing them in the performance. By building cultural and social significance, creating memorable experiences and encouraging audience participation, a theatre can develop an aura that attracts and retains audiences.

Adoption of Rival Technology

Many people have what is called the 'shiny object syndrome'. It is the urge to chase after something new, and the next new thing. Psychologists refer to it as the pursuit of the new to the detriment of the tried and trusted. It is humans' tendency to chase something that is new and exciting rather than stick to our original goals. It is a phenomenon rooted in constant distraction (Hills and Pearson 9). Bulearca and Tamarjan add that it only lasts for the short-term (239). This 'Shiny Object Syndrome' is also relevant with regard to the theatre's aura. The theatre manager needs to first get people interested in theatre before they can even experience its aura.

How does the theatre manager get people interested in the theatre when technology rapidly creates new alternatives to the theatre and people out of whom theatre gets its audience are vulnerable to the 'Shiny Object Syndrome'? Theatre can either condescendingly dismiss these people as immature and unfocused or it can find means of fighting from all fronts. By fighting from all fronts, theatre adopts technologies that should naturally rival it – the media especially. Advertisement for theatre shows can be done in the media in the most current manner. Theatre community management could also be done with a hybrid of media and manual processes where people are reached out virtually but also get to meet to watch theatre in-person respectively. The shiny new thing today is crypto currency and the block chain technology. One major crypto lingo is FOMO. FOMO means Fear of Missing Out. It is closely related to the 'Shiny Object Syndrome' in the sense that it plays on it. A hype is always built around a new project and its perks.

This new project is the shiny object. Like children abandon their toys in favour of new toys, people board onto the new project for fear of missing out on its prospects. Theatre could also adopt strategies like this in its marketing and management. It could build hype around membership processes, around community theatre projects, and events. The adoption of technology must however be done with caution as some technologies might affect the theatre's aura. Live Streaming, for example, changes a major thing with the theatre audience relationship. The audience no longer sees directly with their eyes but from the lens of the camera and based on the direction of the camera director. While the African performer tries to lure the audience to co-perform or at least participate in the process it becomes limited via live streaming. Adoption of rival technology must therefore be done in a way that it amplifies the aura and not decays it.

Create Out-of-Theatre Utility

One huge lesson to learn from the operation of digital art and NFTs is the nature of its utility. It is done in a way that provides value for even those who do not necessarily like art or those who do not necessarily like that particular art. When one buys a physical painting, it could get hung in the house for the admiration of visitors, however, buyers of NFTs can use it as a payment system. Buyers of digital art also get to use their art as profile pictures to symbolise wealth, status, or even a flair for entrepreneurship. These benefits make participating in the trade of NFTs worthwhile. Extra benefits could be attached to consistent patronising of the theatre. Loyalty points could be given to these regular patronisers. Theatre could form alliances with restaurants and bars in their cities to offer discounts to certain kinds of ticket holders, as well as slots to excursions and tours due to possession of theatre tickets.

Create Communities

Communities could be formed among regular patronisers of theatre. Benefits could include intra-community fraternising before and after shows; inclusion on the theatre board in different capacities; special discounts and special programs exclusive to members of the theatre communities. These communities go from mere theatre customers to a loyal kind of audience who form a relationship with the theatre that lasts

for many years. With time, they could even initiate their children and grandchildren into theatre culture. A classic example of this is seen with community barbers, football clubs, and religious centres. Members of the community also get priority sales and even special chats with members of the production team. All these will provide them with a wholesome theatre experience that rivals or even outmatches the offers of rivals for leisure time.

Quality and Sustainability of Art: The Marriage of Government and Theatre in Nigeria

Benjamin's essay begins by addressing Karl Marx's critique of society's inequality and his vision of a classless society. Benjamin argues that the introduction of mechanical reproduction to the arts was a result of embracing Marx's vision, which made previously exclusive art accessible to the masses, but also caused a decline in quality and aura. Benjamin calls for a return to the pre-Marx era of theatre, where quality was prioritized over quantity, and affordability and sustainability were balanced. He believes that inspiring and motivating theatre artists is key to unlocking their peak creativity. Unfortunately, in an effort to cater to the masses, theatre has been cheapened, creativity stifled, and artists left impoverished. These issues have deterred many theatre studies graduates from pursuing careers in the industry due to the lack of opportunities and low pay. The root cause of this decline in the Nigerian theatre scene is the unhealthy partnership between the government and the theatre industry, which has continuously diminished the aura of theatre.

Most theatre houses in Nigeria are owned by the government. The Nigerian government runs its business with socialist mind-set, with the mind-set of sharing for everyone. For politics' sake, they would rather just use these theatre houses as means of employing people loyal to their political party than to use it as a means of preserving and promoting culture. Benjamin noted that, when theatre loses its aura, its authenticity, due to its desire to satisfy, everyone is placed over the desire to produce soulful experience; it stops being art and starts being politics (224). So, there must be a mild divorce between theatre and politics in Nigeria. Evidence of this is seen in the administration of the Nigerian National Arts Theatre. From its foundational stages, that kind of structure should not have been built in Nigeria. Osofisan explains that the design was for a cold region like Bulgaria, not Africa, and certainly not Nigeria. And when it was brought to Nigeria, changes were not made to make it suitable for Nigeria climate, except for the size, ours was made three times bigger (Nwanaju 29). This is in line with the Nigerian government's penchant for embarking on projects that are often referred to as 'White Elephants.' That is, projects that are big and finance-consuming yet are not executed properly. So, they become useless. For close to 12 years, between the 1990s and 2005, the National Arts Theatre was left in ruin and abandonment (Nwanaju 29) because its political function which was to attract contracts and satisfy political bases had been served.

The same way the theatre buildings are abandoned after the political motivations have been satisfied, so are the employees abandoned. Osofisan complained about how difficult it was to work as Managing Director of the Nigerian Arts Theatre.

He mentioned that in three years he had three different Ministers with each coming with their own vision or a lack of it. This made working difficult. It, however, looks like lessons are being learned as recent developments on the National Arts Theatre was handed over to a banker's committee which had as its members, Chief Executive Officers of commercial banks, some officials of the Central Bank of Nigeria, and the Governor of the Central Bank as its Chairman (Ajaja). This is a committee of technocrats, as opposed to the usual politicisation of these kinds of projects which features party loyalists on committees rather than real technocrats. More evidence that lessons are being learned is seen in the creation of a private facility management for the newly renovated theatre complex. This facility management will be reporting to the Department of Facility Management of Public Assets which is under the Federal Ministry of Works and Housing. It is however important that the government trains these managers on facility management or employ already competent hands. The theatre could also specially train whoever is posted to work with them on facility management. For theatre to regain and even amplify its aura, it must divorce itself from government's populist politics which makes it want to satisfy everyone and consequently cheapen the art.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that NFTs can be harnessed to advance the aura of theatre arts in various ways. First, theatre artists can use NFTs to record the provenance of their physical artworks, such as costumes, props, and set designs. This will allow potential buyers to easily check for the authenticity of the artwork and preserve the aura of the piece. Additionally, theatre companies can use NFTs to tokenize their productions, creating a unique digital asset associated with each performance. This will allow theatre-goers to collect and trade tokens, creating a new form of engagement with the theatre. Furthermore, theatre artists and companies can use NFTs to offer exclusive access to behind-the-scenes content, such as rehearsal footage, interviews with cast and crew, and concept art. This will create new revenue streams and deepen the engagement of audiences with the art form. Ultimately, the NFT presents exciting opportunities for theatre artists and companies to innovate and create new ways of engaging audiences and preserving the aura of theatre arts.

The theatre culture in Nigeria is weak. While it looks like the people left the theatre, it might just be that it is the theatre that left the people. Indeed, modern technology keeps producing inventions that rival the theatre, but sometimes it appears that the theatre has stopped competing. What Walter Benjamin referred to as the decay of the aura, in his time, has somewhat become the death of the aura. This work has analysed ways in which the aura has survived in the past and also recommended ways in which it can survive in the future. Theatre producers have focused on the financing of the theatre, its marketing and management, and even the aesthetics of the theatre, but now they must find a way to use these things to produce and amplify the theatre aura as it is a valuable part of the theatre audience experience. It becomes evident from the study that Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) have emerged as a significant trend in the digital art marketplace, creating new opportunities for artists and buyers alike.

Meanwhile, amplifying the aura of theatre requires intentional efforts to cultivate social and cultural significance, create memorable experiences, and encourage audience participation. By adopting these principles, theatres can become more than just spaces to watch shows and can develop a loyal following that rivals that of religious institutions. Ultimately, both NFTs and theatre showcase the power of art to inspire and transform people's lives, providing a glimpse into the beauty and complexity of human experience.

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