

Aesthetic Theory

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Dieter Mersch, Sylvia Sasse, Sandro Zanetti

Introduction

*Emphasizing art as an instrument of analysis
(rather than of expression, statement, etc.).*

Susan Sontag

There is no theory which is not in some way related to perception—to αἴσθησις (*aísthēsis*)—and in this sense to the aesthetic, to the sensually perceptible. Conversely, perceptions without theoretical conceptualization, and thus without a relationship to theory—θεωρία (*theōria*)—dissipate into indeterminacy. Theories are unable to form without perspectives or ideas concerning what they are about (just as sensual perception would remain diffuse without the power of distinction and judgment). They would also—in the way they are *formulated* as arguments or, more generally, as figurations which make use of texts and discourses—be imperceptible and incommunicable if they did not refer back to perception-oriented media, through which they first become readable and comprehensible. Readability in a double sense—of the senses and of comprehensibility—is coupled to basal structures in the realm of language where the sensual aspect of language becomes just as noticeable as its ability to function conceptually. The merely seen or heard, in contrast, would, without theory, remain blurred or indistinct, consisting solely of scattered stimuli and affections.

It was an insight of the Enlightenment, specifically Immanuel Kant and his dictum that perception without concepts is blind and thought without perception empty, that both sides are reliant upon each other and belong together.¹

1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Sandro Zanetti

Auratic Theory: Walter Benjamin

*La mésaventure du vilain style est arrivée à plus
d'un philosophe – à tous peut-être : la chose est
bien connue.*

Jean-Luc Nancy

There exists no theory in which language, or communication more broadly, is exclusively an object of analysis. However narrowly we want to define “theory”—as a more or less systematic way of looking at things or as a methodological foundation for the development of something—the explanatory potential of a theory never results solely from *what* is thought in or with the theory, but always from *how* this thought occurs as well. In the case of theories, this *how* is in turn necessarily reliant upon symbolic mediation. That means, however, that theories always simultaneously feature a sensually perceptible (medial-material) side, and an immaterial side which has been brought into representation with or through it. Each side always refers to the other, or at least opens onto it—and the *how* of a theory exists (not only, but also) in the way this reciprocal relationship receives concrete expression: which pattern, which principles, and which forms of development it follows.

If we take as our starting point the sensually perceptible side of theory itself and associate the concept of aesthetics with the characteristic of such perceptibility or perception-relatedness, then we can affirm: every theory exhibits a certain aesthetics. Even if a theory, in terms of its object, has nothing at all to say about aesthetics, the theory itself must in a certain way be formulated, presented, and thus perceptible—to the extent that it is to be communicable or comprehensible at all. In the sense of αἴσθησις (*aísthēsis*: “perception”), every theory, considered

in terms of its own concrete expression, is perception-related and in this sense aesthetic. Even mathematical theories are reliant upon perceptible signs. This is not a direct reference to the actually quite revealing fact that “theory,” as derived from θεωρία (*theōria*: “view, contemplation, perspective”), is itself a form of looking, of contemplation, perception, intellectual “insight.” Crucial, rather, is that the *way* of (theoretical) looking which theories contain or outline itself demonstrates a perceptible structure.¹

This aspect is usually ignored when speaking of “aesthetic theory.” If we take the formulation “aesthetic theory” seriously—not least with a view to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*—then the point, in a purely grammatical sense, is not that there is a theory that is concerned with aesthetics as its subject or with individual aesthetic objects or events. Neither does the term “aesthetic theory” express that theory in this case is identical with the concept of aesthetics (and certainly not with the restricted concept of an aesthetics that would be a simple doctrine of art). Instead, “theory” here proves to be fundamentally, in the sense of *aísthēsis*, aesthetically qualified.² The question is simply *which type* of aesthetics a theory implies, and even the specific mode of rejection of (a certain) aesthetics would still need to be composed or contoured in an aesthetic way.³ *How*,

1 We touch here on the phenomenon that theories allow something to be seen (*show* something) and at the same time can show *how* this allowing-to-be-seen (or, more precisely, this showing) *happens*. Sylvia Sasse’s contribution in this volume considers this situation under the keyword of the “theoretical act.”

2 This fact is reflected in the title, if less in the individual contributions, of Joachim Küpper et al., eds., *The Beauty of Theory. Zur Ästhetik und Affektökonomie von Theorien* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013).

3 From the perspective of literary studies, a terminological problem stands out here: why speak of “aesthetics” and not of “rhetoric”? The question would merit more extensive engagement, but here a brief comment: the battle lines which are occasionally drawn in literary theory (especially in the case of Paul de Man) between rhetoric and aesthetics make strategic sense. They also, however, create an often extremely abbreviated understanding of aesthetics. Here, rhetoric could itself be defined as a way of describing the aesthetics of *linguistic* articulation

then, are theories aesthetically composed or contoured? And how in individual cases?

This raises further questions: is there a specific attractiveness to theories which can be attributed to their aesthetics? What makes a theory attractive? For whom? Why? How exactly? Are there linguistic characteristics which we can read as signs of an attempt to increase a theory's attractiveness? And what poetics might such attempts to increase a theory's attractiveness follow?

Benjamin's theory of the aura

These questions will be addressed in the following alongside several passages in Walter Benjamin's theory of the aura. This theory is not formulated in a single conclusive text but is instead scattered throughout his work, in highly diverse observations, discussions, and fragments. One finds remarks on the aura above all in Benjamin's writings of the 1930s, i.e. in his late work. These remarks first appear in the hashish studies (1930),⁴ then in the "Short History of Photography" (1931),⁵ then in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

with a view to its style and effects. In any case, the tropes and figures familiar from rhetoric—which is to say all stylistic forms of articulation—themselves exhibit a perceptible and thus *aisthētic* dimension. It would therefore be false to essentially define rhetoric as an- or anti-aesthetic. The question is rather whether there is not an ideology of the rhetorical (insofar as it is based on a limited, historically-situated concept of aesthetics and in the process excludes its own perceptible aspect).

4 Walter Benjamin, "Haschisch Anfang März 1930" ("Hashish, Beginning of March 1930"), in *Gesammelte Schriften 6: Fragmente, Autobiographische Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 587–591 (Part of "Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen"). The *Gesammelte Schriften* ("Collected Works") of Benjamin are referred to in the following as GS Volume·Subvolume, page number. All English translations are direct translations from the cited German by Brian Alkire.

5 Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie" ("Short History of Photography"), GS 2·1, pp. 368–385.

(1935ff.),⁶ as well as in the Baudelaire studies (1939),⁷ and finally in parts of the *Arcades Project* (1927 to 1940).⁸

Benjamin's theory of the aura is, if there is in fact such a theory, a scattered one. This already relates, however, to our subject: clearly, there are theories which do not exist in a closed, systematic form. Some are not even very rigorously or comprehensibly formulated. Benjamin's theory of the aura—the aura of works of art and other things—belongs to this category. Benjamin's relevant statements are certainly perceived as theory both in the research literature and by an interested public. Benjamin's theory of the aura has even repeatedly been seen as a particularly *attractive*—if not uncontroversial—theory.⁹

The thesis of the following remarks is that the attractiveness of Benjamin's theory of the aura consists precisely in the fact that the elements of this theory contain, first, strong, marked, and well-citable claims (assertions) and leave, second, a great deal open, unclear, unstated for critical reception—which means, conversely, that the critics can see themselves impelled to cooperate intelligently at the level of interpretation and (de-) enigmatization, as well as continue the theoretical work gener-

6 Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"), GS 1·2, pp. 471–508.

7 Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"), GS 1·2, pp. 605–653.

8 Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* ("The Arcades Project"), GS 5·1, p. 560.

9 Further information in this context can be found in Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 406–413 [*Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert-Hulot Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997) pp. 274–280]; Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): pp. 336–375; Boris Groys, "Die Geburt der Aura. Variationen über ein Thema Walter Benjamins," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 264, 11 Nov. 2000, p. 83; Josef Fürnkäs, "Aura," in Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Benjamins Begriffe*, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 95–146; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Walter Benjamin und sein Werk. Ein neu zu erkundender Kontinent," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 284, 6 Dec. 2014, p. 59; Robert Kaufman, "Aura, Still," *October* 99 (2002): pp. 45–80.

ally. There are obviously theories whose attractiveness lies not in their comprehensive explanatory potential but rather in their ability to stimulate interest while *simultaneously* generating a partial, intermittent—and maybe only intermittent—satisfaction of this interest.

One possible explanation for the attractiveness of theories which can be considered attractive *on the basis of* their only partially redeemable explanatory potential is offered by Hans Blumenberg in his *Theory of Nonconceptuality*.¹⁰ There, Blumenberg discusses where the specific attractiveness of *concepts* comes from. He derives the concepts' mode of function from anthropology, making an analogy between concepts and traps: just as a trap is designed (prospectively) to capture something which is intended to be contained by it in the near future (the animal to be captured), concepts, according to Blumenberg, are designed to capture something conceptually (or mentally), something which is intended to form its content in the future. (Blumenberg believes, at least, that the original function of concepts is based on this kind of intentionality.)

In the course of this, traps or concepts must prove to be attractive to their respective content(s) (through which they also become attractive to their users). If they were not attractive to potential content(s), they could not capture anything. One of the most important basic conditions for this is that traps and/or concepts be sufficiently large: that their form exhibit a greater extent than their potential content(s). Concepts may thus, like traps, not be conceived on too small a scale. They may not be designed or outlined as too small of containers or enticements for possible contents. Otherwise there would not be enough space in them. Stated another way: concepts must be *imprecise* to a certain extent. They may not, however, be *too* imprecise, too

10 Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 11f. Blumenberg's theory has also only been transmitted in a scattered form. *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* ("Theory of Nonconceptuality") was posthumously published.

large, too arbitrary, because they would then likewise miss—or lose hold of—their prey.

We may transfer the model sketched by Blumenberg of *conceptual leeway* to that of theories, which of course consist of concepts and establish connections between them. We could, for example, apply the model to Michel Foucault's use of the term "dispositive" or "discourse"—it is easy to see that the success of these concepts is due in no small part to their relative imprecision, their specific indefiniteness, their relative openness. Concepts which are defined too narrowly—and here is the problem—might make sense in a very clearly-defined range of application. If, however, a concept is to prove itself more broadly meaningful, then it *must* possess a certain degree of imprecision. For if everything which can be said by means of a concept is actually said, then we could presumably no longer use it anymore. It would have already, in itself, used up its entire explanatory potential.

But back to Benjamin. Unlike Blumenberg's imprecisions and indefiniteness, and also in contrast to the trap model, Benjamin's theory does not only or primarily concern imprecisions and indefiniteness. It rather concerns the opposite: an excess of definition or an overemphasis on clarity precisely where it is not immediately obvious. Here we arrive at the question of the use of language in Benjamin's theory: how does Benjamin write about the aura—or *of* the aura, or *concerning* the aura? How does Benjamin's engagement with the aura unfold chronologically? Which ruptures or changes appear in the course of this? How does aura as a topic relate to a possible aura of Benjamin's own theory? Is there a relation? And if so, which possible effects are precipitated by the corresponding statements of Benjamin, with their respective linguistic-aesthetic features at the level of reading?

The primary focus of Benjamin's engagement with the concept and the phenomenon of the aura is, in the hashish studies, the way things appear:

First of all, the authentic aura appears with¹¹ all things. Not only with certain things, as people like to imagine. Second, the aura undergoes a thorough and radical change with every movement of the thing to which the aura belongs. Third, the authentic aura cannot at all be thought of as the leaked spiritual magical radiance which vulgar mystical books illustrate and describe. Rather, the specific feature of the authentic aura is: the ornament, an ornamental envelope (*Umzirkung*) in which the thing or essence lies like a sheath. Nothing, perhaps, gives us a more correct idea of the authentic aura than the late paintings of van Gogh, where we could say that the aura is painted along with the things themselves.¹²

Here already, the aura is not an intrinsic quality of an object but rather something that appears with or around things, and even, according to Benjamin, with *all* things. The “authentic aura,” according to Benjamin, “appears with all things.” We can already see here Benjamin’s typical handling of words which are not yet concepts: the *word* “aura” is not used in an already familiar sense, nor is it defined—instead, it is simply employed.

More precisely, “aura” is employed as a word in such a way that it appears itself as an “ornament,” as an “ornamental envelope,” an accessory, an additive to other words. For nowhere does Benjamin say what the aura is. He only says that it appears and, specifically, with things, with all things—taking as an assumption that words, too, can be things. Furthermore, we are told how the aura should *not* be conceived: not as a “leaked

11 The German preposition used by Benjamin here and in the following is “an” (“an allen Dingen”), which we have chosen to translate as “with” rather than “in” or “on,” emphasizing the way in which the aura *accompanies* the phenomenon without being “in” the phenomenon. It is important to note, however, that the preposition “an” in German implies direct physical connection in a way that “with” does not. The aura not only accompanies the phenomenon: it is also in direct, physical contact with it.

12 Benjamin, “Haschisch 1930,” p. 588.

spiritual magical radiance.” A “magical radiance” of this kind would have to be qualified as an inauthentic aura, in contrast to the “authentic aura” Benjamin has in mind. At the same time, the criterion of authenticity does not offer a further explanation of the aura. Instead, it simply introduces another element into the reflection which itself requires explanation.

The only way Benjamin sees of forming a “correct idea” of the “authentic aura” can be found at the end of his remarks—but again only maybe—in the “late paintings of van Gogh”: of all places in artistic artifacts which show something (sunflowers, ears of wheat, etc.) not directly but rather indirectly via painting. This showing also simultaneously shows the material of showing: the luxuriant brushstrokes, colors, the vividness of the application of color. Taken together, the material of the painter (in its self-reference) and that to which the material refers (externally, to materially concretized and contextualized and thus semanticized phenomena: sunflowers, ears of wheat) are in this case the intermediate space that Benjamin names the “aura.”¹³ Van Gogh, in his late paintings, seems in turn—and here Benjamin is writing in a recognizably cautious way: “we could say”—to have painted this “aura [...] along with the things themselves.”¹⁴

Aura as an intermediate space—as a “genuine” intermediate space, here between a material aspect (self-reference) and a semantic and/or referential aspect (external reference) which are in a relationship which has not already been reproduced—this could be one possible interpretation of the aura. Such an

13 See Dieter Mersch, *Was sich zeigt. Materialität, Präsenz, Ereignis* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002), pp. 90–99; and *Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 44–53.

14 In the terminology of this collection, we could also say: van Gogh’s late paintings already of themselves *imply* an aesthetic theory of the aura by simultaneously showing the aura (representationally) and making identifiable an open space between materiality and semantics. Benjamin in turn could be characterized as someone who, in all caution, admits to this “painted”—and in the cited passage *only* to this “painted”—theory the possibility of gaining a “correct idea” of the “authentic aura”: through a specific guiding of seeing.

interpretation is near at hand in Benjamin's text. It is not, however, present in an explicit form. With this, we arrive at a specific reading of Benjamin, of which there are plenty—and they are often not the worst among the philological or philosophical access points to Benjamin. What happens, though, if we continue thinking through Benjamin's terms, clarifying their possible implications, and in the process become ourselves the constructors of Benjamin's—but is it still Benjamin's?—theory?

What happens is that we are pursued by a provocation in Benjamin's texts. We have entered into that “ornament” fashioned by Benjamin, the ornamental “envelope” into which we must go if we want to understand anything of these texts, or better: take anything away from them. But we have simultaneously entered into a region which is, in a strict sense, *not* already illuminated by the author Benjamin. Why Benjamin's suggestion of correctness, validity, and importance nevertheless captivates us—or at least some of us—will be addressed towards the end of this essay with a possible answer. But first, we should very briefly tread the path which emerges in the various stages of Benjamin's engagement with the aura.

In both the short outline “A Short History of Photography” and in the “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” we find the formulation, as succinct as it is enigmatic, that the aura is the “unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be.”¹⁵ Without commenting more on this formulation here, it should be clear that the aura is again—as

15 Benjamin, “Photographie,” p. 378. This passage is an echo of Rilke's 1925 poem “My eyes already touch the sunny hill, / going far ahead of the road I have begun. / So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp; / it has its inner light, even from a distance – / and changes us, even if we do not reach it, / into something else, which, hardly sensing it, / we already are; a gesture waves us on, / answering our own wave... / but what we feel is the wind in our faces.” Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly (New York: Harper Perennial, 1981), p. 177. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke, Vol. 2: Gedichte*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and the Rilke Archive, prepared by Ernst Zinn (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1966), p. 161.

in the hashish studies—described as a mode of appearance. What is new in the essays on the history of technology is only that Benjamin begins to take an interest in what inserts itself *between* the appearing things and the subjects perceiving these things, or what can be determinative from there: the technologies of perception and their media. The premises of Benjamin's engagement with the aura have in the meantime, to be sure, become negative: he speaks now,¹⁶ though appreciatively, of the “decay” and “disintegration” of the aura. There are however a series of elements which remain the same and which can be summarized as follows.¹⁷

The term “aura” always refers to an open space in which a relationship emerges between (on the one hand) something

16 In the Paris photos of Eugène Atget, which count for Benjamin as precursors of surrealist photography, he sees the “liberation of the object from the aura” and then defines the aura as “a strange tissue composed of space and time”: “He [Eugène Atget] introduced the liberation of the object from the aura which is the incontestable merit of the contemporary school of photography.” (Benjamin, “Photographie,” p. 378—contrasted with “retouching” as mere simulation of an aura on p. 377.) “What exactly is aura? A strange tissue composed of space and time: a unique appearance of a nearness, however distant it might be. Calmly following a mountain range on the horizon or on a summer afternoon, or a branch which casts its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour participates in their appearance—this means breathing the aura of these mountains, this branch.” *Ibid.*, p. 378. “[T]hat which withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is its aura.” (“Das Kunstwerk,” p. 477—see also the remarks on the “Decline of the Aura” and the “Withering Away of the Aura” and the repetition of the passage from the “Photography” essay: “On a Sunday afternoon [...],” p. 479). And further: “The definition of the aura as a ‘unique appearance of a distance, however near it might be’ presents nothing else than the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of nearness. The *essentially* distant is the unapproachable. In fact, inapproachability is a primary quality of the cult image. It remains by nature ‘distance, however near it might be.’ The nearness which one is able to gain from one’s material does not harm distance, which it preserves according to its appearance.” *Ibid.*, p. 480.

17 Both of the following paragraphs reproduce notes from a seminar that I held in the summer semester of 2003 together with Davide Giurato at the University of Basel on the topic of the “Shattering of the Aura.”

which records or receives and (on the other) something which has been recorded or received—or is to be recorded or received. The thing which records can, as in the case of early photography, be a machine. The thing which receives can, however, as in the case of Benjamin's depiction of the perception of natural phenomena, also be an observer who enters into a contemplative relationship to the thing perceived. The conceptual challenge is that the "aura" is not from the outset related to the relationship between person and person or person and thing. Instead, "aura" is the "medium" in which a relationship—and in fact a specific relationship—between entirely different correlates can develop.

For this relationship to be auratic, both counterparts must, first, stand in a relation to each other *simultaneously* and (in the estimation of the perceiver or recorder) with a certain duration. Secondly, the relationship must display a certain leeway or latitude which is determined by a *historically-situated technology* (including where it might not be expected—in natural phenomena, for example). And thirdly, the relationship is such that the perceiver or recorder acts passively with respect to the thing perceived or to be perceived (deliberately or otherwise): the perceiver or recorder, *affected* by the appearance, is *exposed to* or subject to it (empowerment of the appearance). Accordingly, "aura" should be defined as a concept which only makes sense if one further specifies the relationship to which "aura" refers.

Experiencing the aura—while reading

Decisive for the following considerations is the fact that a shift in emphasis occurs in Benjamin's remarks *after* "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." This shift occurs in the studies of Baudelaire. In these studies—composed shortly after the works on photography and the work of art—the aura is still something which *appears*. The central question is now, however, much more firmly *to whom* it appears—and why

it appears to this *whom*, primarily a human person, in a specific manner. In other words: it is no longer simply assumed that the phenomenon of the aura is something that appears with things (with all things); instead, the question is raised concerning the preconditions of the aura, for whom it appears and how it appears. What does it mean, Benjamin now asks, to *experience* the aura as a phenomenon?

Particularly revealing in this context is the following passage from the essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939): “Experiencing the aura of a phenomenon means loaning (*belehnen*) it the property of opening the gaze.”¹⁸ The difference from Benjamin’s previous comments consists in the fact that the aura is now defined by a dialogic, if not dialectic interplay between an observer and that which appears to him or her. We may assume that the anthropological components of the definition of the aura were already present in the early remarks on the topic. In the essays on photography and the work of art, the auratic potential of a phenomenon, as linked to human beings, was already recognizable *ex negativo*: to the degree that the *relationship* between film or photography and the thing perceived/

18 Benjamin, “Baudelaire,” p. 646. This sentence occurs in the following context: “The gaze, however, consists in the expectation of being returned by that to which it gifts itself. Wherever this expectation is reciprocated (which can, in thought, be attached to an intentional gaze of attention just as much as to a gaze in the simple literal sense), the experience of the aura appears to him in its fullness. ‘Perceptibility,’ as Novalis judges, is ‘an attention.’ [...] The perceptibility being spoken of here is nothing other than that of the aura. The experience of the aura is thus based on the transfer of a socially familiar form of reaction to the condition of the inanimate or from nature to human beings. That which is seen, or believes itself to be seen, opens up the gaze. Experiencing the aura of a phenomenon means loaning it the property of opening the gaze*.” And the asterisk explanation: “* This loaning is a source of poetry. Where a person, animal, or inanimate object, leant to by the poet in this way, opens its gaze, it pulls this into the distance; the gaze of a nature awoken in such a way dreams and follows the poet in his dreams. Words can also have their aura. Karl Kraus described it thus: ‘The closer one looks at a word, the more distantly the word looks back.’ (Karl Kraus: Pro domo et mundo. Munich 1912. [Selected Writings, 4.] p. 164.)” Ibid.

recorded concerns a machine and *not* a human person, the aura is subject to the process of breaking or falling into disrepair.

A positive definition of the aura only occurs again in the Baudelaire studies. There, the observer is conceived such that he or she is not merely a passive recipient of a phenomenon. Instead, the observer is that person who must do something or at least permit something *in order for* a phenomenon to be *able* to gain an auratic quality. What does the observer have to do or permit for that to happen? He or she must “loan a property” to the phenomenon—i.e. give the phenomenon something, ascribe something to it, which it does not have of its own accord. Benjamin defines this as the property of “opening the gaze.” In other words: the impression one can gain that something is looking at someone, that something concerns someone (“*cela me regarde*” in French),¹⁹ is defined, for one, as a quality of the aura; it is also simultaneously defined as a quality which only comes into place if there is *someone* prepared to ascribe this—human?—quality to the phenomenon.

In the piece “Central Park,” which is part of the observations surrounding the Baudelaire studies, Benjamin does not hesitate in calling this event a “projection”—a “projection” emerging from and corresponding to a social experience: “Derivation of the aura as projection of a social experience among humans in nature: the gaze is returned.”²⁰ This projection corresponds exactly to that loan which Benjamin also called a “source of poetry” in the essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” where he explains:

Words can also have their aura. Karl Kraus described it thus: “The closer one looks at a word, the more distantly the word looks back.”²¹

19 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992).

20 Benjamin, “Zentralpark” (“Central Park”), GS 1·2, pp. 655–690, here: p. 670.

21 Benjamin, “Baudelaire,” p. 646.

Karl Kraus's quote emphasizes the increasingly important role of *reciprocity* for Benjamin's concept of the aura. This concept is equally decisive for the process of projection (and its retroactive effect) and for that of loaning or returning a gaze. However, Benjamin does not offer a precise definition of the aura in these late remarks either—and the Kraus quote is more of a *bon mot* than an explanation.

The observation that “words can also have their aura” is, however, a good starting point for answering the question of the relationship between the aura and language, and that not only in a general sense but specifically with respect to the way Benjamin himself works with language. According to Benjamin's own observations on the topic of the aura, it is basically impossible to define the aura as a property of things. Aura is something that appears with or around things, but, according to the later remarks, only if there are people who grant to that which appears to them a power of reciprocating the gaze—an opportunity to answer.

With respect to the appearance of words, this means that the aura in this case cannot be defined as a property of the words themselves. Rather, there can only be an aura to words if there is someone—like Karl Kraus's reader—who is prepared to examine a word very closely. What can then arise for the reader is precisely this difference between the materiality of things—in this case words—and their sense. This difference is called the distance of the returned gaze in the Kraus citation—and in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” it is expressed in the phrase “appearance of a distance, however near it might be.” An aura so understood no longer has anything to do with that “leaked spiritual magical radiance” which Benjamin criticizes in his first observations on the aura. Aura only exists where there is a difference between that which one is able to perceive and that which the perceived thing can mean *on the basis of its being perceived*. The uniqueness of the aura proves to be unique *in each case*, as the experience of difference is fundamentally dependent on the

continually changing constellations, which are always in need of redefinition, between the perceivers (the subjects) and the thing appearing to them.

If we assume that enabling such an experience of difference—in an epistemological sense also—is something basically desirable, then the question arises for writers, as well as for all who write, perhaps, whether one can *provoke* such an experience through writing. Again: there are no words, and thus no texts, which would be auratic *of their own accord* in the sense that they would have already “absorbed” that experience of difference which is so important for Benjamin. An experience of difference can at most—vis-à-vis potential readers—be encouraged, suggested, provoked. One frequently encounters such enabling moments in Benjamin’s texts, however—both in those on the aura and others. “The closer one looks at a word, the more distantly the word looks back,”²² as Karl Kraus put it. And Benjamin cites the passage to make clear what the aura of words can consist of for him. What does one need to do, we could ask, if one wants to *enable* such an experience of the aura in and with words? One must write texts that provoke their own close reading; texts whose words are traces, which make their deciphering appear valuable.²³ One must write texts which are not immediately comprehensible, but instead

22 Ibid.

23 “Trace and aura: The trace is the appearance of a nearness, however distant what it leaves behind might be. The aura is the appearance of a distance, however near what it elicits might be. In the trace, we apprehend the thing; in the aura, it seizes us.” Benjamin, “The Arcades Project,” GS 5·1, p. 560. In written correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin, the idea of the trace is connected to the aura: “Is the aura not also the trace of forgotten humanity in the thing?” Adorno asks in a letter on February 29, 1940 (GS 1·3, p. 1132). Benjamin answered on May 7, 1940: “Tree and shrub, which are being loaned to [belehnt], are not made by human beings. There must be something human in things which is *not* created through work.” Walter Benjamin, *Briefe 2*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 849.

only indirectly,²⁴ and this not coincidentally includes working with citations.²⁵

Benjamin himself seems to follow this kind of writing program: whoever uses words—like the word “aura”—in such a way that they are not defined or explained but instead continually suggested and used in an idiosyncratic way, provokes a closer examination of these words. Those texts of Benjamin’s which follow such a poetics, reduced in their specific esotericism and terseness to the ability to be cited, hardly reveal anything if one is not ready to perform a close reading of them. But whoever is prepared to do so might very well find this poetics, and the aesthetics of these texts, based on a combination of abrupt usage and conceptual openness, *attractive*.

Not every reader knew what to do with this kind of aesthetics and theoretical poetry. Bertolt Brecht found Benjamin’s remarks on the aura specifically to be a peculiar kind of “spleen,” or, more pointedly, “it is pretty dreadful.”²⁶ And Adorno famously had a very difficult time with the Baudelaire studies: “Unless I am seriously mistaken, this dialectic lacks one thing: mediation (*Vermittlung*).”²⁷ This lack of mediation is,

24 In his readings, Benjamin himself seems to favor those poetics which elude direct understanding. For example, the essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” begins with this conclusion: “Baudelaire counted on readers for whom the reading of poetry would be difficult.” Benjamin, “Baudelaire,” p. 607.

25 Quotations like those from Karl Kraus or references like those to the late works of van Gogh should—depending on the attitude towards them one gains while reading—be read as invitations to auratization or de-auratization. In the quotation, something distant (the cited thing) appears quite near. Benjamin’s (scattered) theory of the aura has a counterpart in his theory (both scattered and provocatively performed) of the quote and quotation. See Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (“On the Concept of History”), GS I-2, pp. 691–704, especially p. 701.

26 Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal* (“Working Journal”), vol. 1: 1938–1942, ed. Werner Hecht (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 16.

27 Adorno’s letter to Benjamin on November 10, 1938 from New York, in Benjamin, *Briefe* (“Letters”), p. 785. The cited passage is prepared by the following: “Motifs are collected but not carried out. In your accompanying letter to Max, you presented this as your explicit perspective,

however, exactly the necessary precondition for a textual experience oriented towards enabling an experience of difference for the reader—an experience of the aura.²⁸

The auratic effect during a close reading of Benjamin's texts (like those on the aura) can begin in various ways. Analogously to conceptions of the aura in the hashish studies, one can begin with the assumption that it is the texts themselves which *of themselves* display an auratic effect. We find a more methodologically promising option, however, in Benjamin's own shift of emphasis in the remarks on the aura in the late Baudelaire studies, especially: the option of conceiving of the possible auratic effect of Benjamin's texts as the effect of an interplay between usage and provocation in the text and attributions and concessions by the reader.

Whoever conceives of both Benjamin's provocations and our own projections as elements which, in their productive interplay, form the basis of the poetics and aesthetics of Benjamin's texts also contributes to *not* simply being at the mercy of the aura—evoked by language—of this theory. Knowledge only emerges once the potential auratic effect of the texts is broken through: that is, once the aura is simultaneously recognized for its potential and destroyed in its possible tendency towards incapacitation. Whoever recognizes this is possibly even more

and I cannot fail to recognize the ascetic discipline that was at work there to everywhere omit the decisive theoretical answers to the questions and even to only allow the questions to be visible to the initiated. [...] Flaneur and arcades, modernity and always the same *without* a theoretical interpretation—is that a 'material' that can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura? Does not the pragmatic content of those objects conspire in an almost demonic way against the possibility of its interpretation?" Ibid., p. 783.

²⁸ It would be worth considering whether enabling this kind of experience of difference is not a fundamental feature of literature—or could be. Benjamin's texts would then have to be read as literature in an emphatic (not affirmative, but rather difference-oriented) sense. This kind of "reading-as-literature" would then, however, have to be considered for *all* texts whose readings turn out to be theoretically relevant.

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intelligent than the texts: texts which might have provoked this intelligence but did not themselves necessarily contain this intelligence in the first place.