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Walter Benjamin's Literary *Aura*: A Stylistic and Thematic Analysis of *One-Way Street*

Abstract

“Brevity” epitomizes Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, an avant-garde text composed entirely of aphorisms. Benjamin's ideal of literary montage involves the utilization of ideas that he refers to as *Abfall*, or detritus, and rearranging them—preserved in the momentary spontaneity in which they were conceived—in order to create an entirely new meaning. Noteworthy about Benjamin's style is the manner in which the assembly of momentary thoughts and impressions creates, in a literary sense, the artistic *aura* of authenticity introduced in his seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” By preserving the form, content, and style of the original thoughts and impressions instead of proposing a thesis, Benjamin succeeds in retaining the unadulterated essence of language as a reflection of a modern and dynamic world of momentary sensual and intellectual impressions. Although these ideas are a mixture of the incomplete, the mundane, the esoteric, and the irrational, Benjamin proves that immediately explicated purposefulness is not a prerequisite for meaning, and that brevity offers the possibility for a multiplicity of interpretations.

This paper will encompass the following: 1) a discussion of Benjamin's understanding of *aura*, in the process analyzing the extent to which Benjamin's own work on *One-Way Street* could be interpreted as an attempt to illustrate the changes that occurred in society's relationship with art as a consequence of growing modernization; and 2) an examination of the structure of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, which will include a stylistic and thematic analysis of several aphorisms, and, in particular, how they reinforce Benjamin's social and political aims and his attempts to create a new literature reflective of modernity.

There is no better place to start this discussion of Benjamin's ideology regarding modern aesthetics than with his seminal article, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." First we must approach Benjamin's concern with the authenticity of reproduced artwork. He asserts that it is the "here and now" (Das Hier und Jetzt; pg. 352) of the original that makes all the difference in terms of expressing its intent and maintaining its authenticity. In section three of his essay, he writes the following regarding why a manually produced reproduction is not as inauthentic as a technical reproduction of the same,

Während das Echte aber der manuellen Reproduktion gegenüber, die von ihm im Regelfalle als Fälschung abgestempelt wurde, seine volle Autorität bewahrt, ist das der technischen Reproduktion gegenüber nicht der Fall. Der Grund ist ein doppelter. Erstens erweist sich die technische Reproduktion dem Original gegenüber selbstständiger als die manuelle. (352-3)

Here Benjamin is communicating that a technical reproduction assumes a life of its own that is even farther removed from the impression created by the original than would be the case with a manual reproduction. Technical reproduction is inclined to produce a false image of art—one that is overly perfected (granted, glitches are possible in technical reproduction, but they manifest themselves differently) and represented rather impersonally, so that the observer's senses remain unfulfilled. This lack of fulfillment ultimately leaves the observer wanting more.

The second issue that Benjamin highlights with regard to the authenticity problem pertains to the disjointedness between the context in which an artistic creation is presented and its original intent, including the location in which it took shape and the audience for whom it was intended. Benjamin writes the following,

Sie kann zudem zweitens das Abbild des Originals in Situationen bringen, die dem Original selbst nicht erreichbar sind. Vor allem macht sie ihm möglich, dem Aufnehmenden entgegenzukommen, sei es in der Gestalt der Photographie, sei es in der Schallplatte. Die Kathedrale verläßt ihren Platz, um in dem Studio eines Kunstfreundes Aufnahme zu finden; das Chorwerk, das in einem Saal oder unter freiem Himmel exekutiert wurde, läßt sich in einem Zimmer vernehmen. (353)

The gist of Benjamin's problem here is very simple. Every work of art, whether it be part of the visual, auditory, or linguistic domain, unfolds itself. This is as opposed to being created, a notion which Benjamin opposes, as he views the artist as an instrument of his own art, not merely as an agent. Further, this unfolding must take place under a certain set of conditions and within the framework of a specific time and place. He cites a situation in which one must take music that has been performed in a cathedral and move it into the the recording studio. It may have been performed in a cathedral with impressive vaulted ceilings or under the open sky, for example, but if it is to be captured to serve the purposes of modern mass reproduction, it must be confined to a closed space removed from the impressions, emotions, and intuitions of the moment and the location in which it took form. This recreation and entrapment in a closed space naturally causes the music itself to lose some of the qualities that it possessed in its original presentation.

The loss of authenticity in art and the search for new meanings and representations in the face of an ever-evolving modernity depend, ultimately, on the creation of fads and socially necessary illusions. Perhaps there is no space in which the intersection of these elements is more evident than in the modern metropolis. This is a topic that David Frisby explores in his essay, “Benjamin's Prehistory of Modernity,”

Benjamin explores modernity in such dialectical images as those of modernity and antiquity, the masses and the city, the new and the ever-same, in order to build up a constellation of interrelated dimensions of modernity. In these and other dialectical images, there is a conscious abandonment of linear progression from the postmodern to the modern: antiquity, for instance, is recognized as lying in modernity itself. Antinomies are dissolved in dialectical images. (18-19)

In the aforementioned passage, Frisby highlights Benjamin's approach toward temporality and historicity. He writes that Benjamin abandons linear progressions, instead regarding past and present as interrelated—this presents his view that modernism is influenced inextricably by the eras preceding it, and, in fact, contains elements of both the old and the new. Furthermore, Frisby points out that Benjamin depicts far more than just materialistic elements of representation, such as regarding human beings as commodities. Instead, he characterizes antiquity not merely as a representation of things dead and gone, but as a source for dreams and desires. The points that Frisby highlights in his analysis are of significance when viewing Benjamin's work as a whole, as Benjamin is concerned both as an artistic and literary critic and philosopher, with how the past shapes present and future potentials. This interrelationship between different stages of social and historical development shaped Benjamin's interest in the cinematic montage, which is reflect in his *One-Way Street*.

Knowing the value that Benjamin places on the cinematic montage as an instrument for the modernization of art, it is logical to inquire as to what Benjamin contributes to the literary sphere of representation to reflect a changing thematic shaped by the evolution of technology. In a chapter pertaining to the structure and content of Benjamin's essays on art work, Miriam

Hansen characterizes Benjamin's writing style,

Framed by a preface and an epilogue, the essay (in its third version) consists of fifteen discrete sections or theses, which highlight, from distinct vantage points, different aspects of the problem posed in the title, the question of art under conditions of technological reproducibility. It could be argued that these sections are arranged to suggest alternating camera setups or, to use Benjamin's words, a "sequence of positional views" (*SW* 4:259). Thus, we might think of them as master shots taken from the larger perspectives of, respectively, the institution of art and the aesthetic, including film; reproduction technology and changes in human sense perception; and the political formation of the masses. We could trace this design through more detailed textual moves patterned on cinematic devices such as closer framing, parallel editing, or superimposition—the whole essay could be considered an example of modernist literary and artistic practices predicated on cinematic montage. (88-9)

Here Hansen points out a number of important aspects of Benjamin's literary performativity. She highlights the fact that Benjamin effectively varies his style structurally and rhetorically to mirror his subject matter. Furthermore, she asserts that Benjamin's utilization of both literary devices and the organization of his ideas allow him to mimic cinematic art. Three of the devices she mentions are closer framing, parallel editing, and superimposition, all of which are significant to the portrayal of the subject at hand. One can surmise that closer framing is useful when highlighting the importance of a main theme such as the dichotomy between distance and proximity in artistic representation, the historicity of objects, or the meaningfulness of the

interrelationship between authorship and literary criticism. Parallel editing transferred into the literary domain is helpful when portraying two or more perspectives regarding the same topic, especially when one rebuts or contradicts another, and this is something that Benjamin effectively accomplishes in the aphorisms in which he articulates thirteen theses and arranges them in succession. Superimposition is something that Benjamin accomplishes, for example, when he arranges thirteen of his theses into two columns, one expressing what he refers to as “a drawing by a child” and the other that he refers to as “a fetish” (49). I will return to these topics later as a part of my analysis of Benjamin's aphorisms.

This gives the reader an idea of what to expect, although the endings of the aphorisms themselves are open-ended. There is no clear end to the thought process that is generated in the reader when assimilating the text. This can be attributed to its fluidity and thematic variations, and ultimately, if there is any interruption in the thought process or conclusion to be formed, it is immediately deflected by yet another idea or impression. Thus Benjamin is effectively able to create a dynamic text that is paradoxically formless, yet defined by structure.

Another topic of interest to Benjamin, as alluded to earlier, is historicity. Esther Leslie describes how the writing of one of Benjamin's aphorisms in *One-Way Street* called 'Stereoscope' conveys the mundane as extraordinary, and that this is done through the unique spatial construction of the text. She writes,

There is a movement in the passage, turning textual strategies photographic, as the long view moves into close-up, and the close-up itself is superimposed and confused by the oversized character of the commodity signs. These filmic cuts, swift shifts of angle and scale, attempt to map a three-dimensional space, as the

title 'Stereoscope' insinuates. This was appropriate, perhaps, for the hometown of montagist film-maker Sergei Eisenstein. Stereoscopy is exposed most dramatically in the split-view introduced in the final line of the piece. Speaking of the pictures that permeate the city, he notes that between them, however, rise tall, fortress-like desolate buildings bringing to life all the terrors of tsarism. Here is signaled a bisected history of past and present—an example of Benjamin 'telescoping the past through the present'—whereby the horrors of tsarism become their own portentous memorial in the new Riga. (65-6)

Leslie emphasizes that there are elements of photography and cinematography at work in Benjamin's aphorism pertaining to stereoscopy. In order to fully understand the aphorism, it is imperative to understand what a stereoscope is and how it works—namely, that it is a device that allows one to view stereoscopic pairs of different images as one three-dimensional image with a left and right eye view. She notes that the oversized commodity signs detract attention from the “close-up” that Benjamin presents. This again, has the effect of pulling the reader out of complacency, whilst simultaneously reemphasizing his thematic. He does this by simulating the effect that advertising has on the consumer, which reiterates his concerns regarding the commodification of artwork. The image with which he leaves the reader is with that of the intersection of present and past, and in doing so, he highlights the importance of retrospection—a concept highly meaningful to Benjamin in his philosophy and his criticism.

It is obvious based on the content of Benjamin's writings that historicity is an important part of art criticism and of society itself. One aphorism that magnifies the importance of historicity and timelessness is entitled, *Heidelberger Schloß*. It goes as follows,

-Ruinen, deren Trümmer gegen den Himmel ragen, erscheinen bisweilen doppelt schön an klaren Tagen, wenn der Blick in ihren Fenstern oder zu Häupten den vorüberziehenden Wolken begegnet. Die Zerstörung bekräftigt durch das vergängliche Schauspiel, das sie am Himmel eröffnet, die Ewigkeit dieser Trümmer. (79)

The significance of this aphorism is strong in that the ruins of what was once a majestic castle reemphasize the past as part of contemporary sociopolitical and artistic trends. Benjamin describes these ruins as admirable in their majesty. One can envision, from his descriptions, the ruins of an old castle appearing two times as grand on clear days when what is reflected by the windows takes on a magical significance as the clouds billow along overhead. The destruction that is part of the history of these ruins standing in opposition to the open sky only serves to reemphasize their timelessness.

It seems that there are a multiplicity of thematic interpretations for this particular aphorism. However, I will suggest one particular interpretation. It is as follows: an artistic representation is most authentic when it is presented in its original surroundings and when it contains its original imperfections, or, to analyze the ruins of the castle as an allegorical image, when it preserves its “battle scars” as such. That is, the ruins of the castle attain the special status of timelessness because there is no way that they can ever be reproduced.

Moreover, Benjamin articulates very specific points regarding the place of the writer with respect to the creative process in *One Way Street*. The following are five such points contained within an aphorism entitled, *Die Technik des Schriftstellers in dreizehn Thesen*:

VI. Mache deine Feder spröde gegen die Eingebung, und sie wird mit der Kraft

des Magneten sie an sich ziehen. Je besonnener du mit der Niederschrift eines Einfalls verziehst, desto reifer entfaltet wird er sich dir ausliefern. Die Rede erobert den Gedanken, aber die Schrift beherrscht ihn.

VII. Höre niemals mit Schreiben auf, weil dir nichts mehr einfällt. Es ist ein Gebot der literarischen Ehre, nur dann abzubrechen, wenn ein Termin (eine Mahlzeit, eine Verabredung) einzuhalten oder das Werk beendet ist.

XI. Den Abschluß des Werkes schreibe nicht im gewohnten Arbeitsraume nieder. Du würdest den Mut dazu in ihm nicht finden.

XII. Stufen der Abfassung: Gedanke—Stil—Schrift. Es ist der Sinn der Reinschrift, daß in ihrer Fixierung die Aufmerksamkeit nur mehr der Kalligraphie gilt. Der Gedanke tötet die Eingebung, der Stil fesselt den Gedanken, die Schrift entlohnt den Stil.

XIII. Das Werk ist die Totenmaske der Konzeption. (48-9)

The first point teaches us to express ourselves subtly and gently with respect to our literary intention, as though our words were breakable. Prudence in expression will generate purity of presentation. Benjamin reminds us that talk has the potential to conquer an idea, but that writing controls the idea. His second point is that the writing process should never be interrupted in the absence of a legitimate reason. This is a commandment that authors must follow—in the absence of a legitimate reason, the cessation of one's writing necessitates completion. The third point Benjamin details is that one should never attempt to write the conclusion of a literary work in the working space to which one is accustomed. This is because one is unlikely to find the courage to do so. This particular point hints at the fact that the environment in which an idea is

conceived influences its development and representation. The unfamiliar creates the distance the author needs to have the courage to conclude the work.

Benjamin's next point pertains to the steps taken during the writing process. He asserts that first comes the idea, then style, and then writing. He goes on to express that the idea kills the thought, the style binds itself to the idea, and the writing itself renumerates the style. The final point suggests that the work itself is the death mask of its conception. This is suggestive of the fact that each work should not merely be completed for the purposes of representation, but that it should unfold itself in the natural course of things and come to its rightful completion—and once it has, it should expire to give rise to a new interpretation.

The aforementioned notion of artistic truth functioning as more of a discovery than a creation relates to Benjamin's own philosophy regarding truth. Eli Friedlander writes about this topic in his, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*,

Truth is unapproachable insofar as there is no aiming at it, which means that it is not the object of any intention. To say that we cannot aim at or approach the truth also implies that the nature of such truth is to reveal itself. For Benjamin, knowledge is the correctness of our way of looking at the world, but truth is a unity of being recognized in reality *itself*. The former is a way of taking possession of the object in thought; the latter must take the form of a discovery in an act of recognition that we can only prepare for but not bring wholly voluntarily. (12)

Here Friedlander is emphasizing that, for Benjamin, knowledge can be acquired and subsequently taken into possession in the form of thought, but that truth is a discovery and an act

of recognition for which one must be prepared. Ultimately, “truths” in the form of thoughts exist only to be pitted against one another, as all truths involve a conclusion, and as such, they can be regarded as “deaths.” This relates back to Benjamin's thirteenth thesis in the aphorism, *The Writer's Technique*—that the work is the death mask of its conception. This in and of itself suggests that the idea is killed in its representation, and each time something is represented, it stands against other representations. Consequentially, one must provide a literary forum for meanings to unfold themselves in the context of diverse representations. A literary representation that takes this approach might still contain within it individual “scenes” (in *One Way Street*, aphorisms) that may each amount to the “death” of a certain idea, but in representing a multiplicity of ideas in no logical, linear sequence, these ideas can be resurrected due to their very fluidity and resilience—albeit in a transformed state.

Noteworthy about the next set of aphorisms Benjamin chooses to write in the succession (just as though they were neighboring homes in a metropolis) is that they appear to serve as an answer to the preceding set of thirteen theses. It is as though he is depicting scenes in a film in which the creative process from the artist's perspective is presented first, and then the critic's point-of-view portrayed in the next. There is, however, a twist on this in that he incorporates another perspective in parentheses as an aside. The parentheses, in this case, create a distancing effect that causes the reader to think twice about what is being said, and this serves an educating function similar to Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Here Benjamin illustrates what would, in its cinematic expression, be accomplished more easily, and this is the absurdity of the art or literary critic's exaggerated criticisms. The irony here is that art critics must overexaggerate on paper in order to be heard at all, while any statement made by an artist—even the primitive

artistic statements made by a child—speak more loudly than the critic's, simply because of the medium in which they are being presented.

In order to highlight how Benjamin's structure and organization are presented in the text, I will return to the next set of thirteen theses that pertains to the snobbery of critics. This time, however, I will focus on only one of the points for the sake of outlining how they correspond with those in *The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses* and *The Critic's Technique in Thirteen Theses*. *Thirteen Theses Against Snobs* presents the following points (the column on the left corresponds with “the drawing of a child” and the one on the right with “a fetish”) :

XI. Inwiederholten Anblick steigert	Ein Dokument bewältigt
sich ein Kunstwerk.	nur durch Überraschung.

(50-1)

Perhaps it would be logical to ascertain how these theses regarding snobbery relate not to each other, but to the preceding set of thirteen theses regarding the process of authorship and the following set of thirteen theses pertaining to the process of criticism—in this sense we would be treating each aphorism as though it were a scene in a film that exists as a mediating point between past and future scenes. First we will conduct an analysis that is reflective of Benjamin's emphasis on historicity. Second, we will regard each point within the aphorism as part of a “scene” that means nothing in isolation, but rather, reveals itself (again, like Benjamin's observations regarding art and truth) in the context of the interrelationship between such “scenes.”

If we remember what was presented under points XI and XIII in *The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses*, then we will be able to see how they interact with the points presented above.

Point XI in the former articulates the following: “Den Abschluß des Werkes schreibe nicht im gewohnten Arbeitsraume nieder. Du würdest den Mut dazu in ihm nicht finden” (48). The latter expresses the following two points: “Inwiederholten Anblick steigert sich ein Kunstwerk” vs. “Ein Dokument bewältigt nur durch überraschung” (50). The first point suggests that it isn't advisable to write the conclusion of a piece in the working space one is accustomed to, as one wouldn't have the courage to do so in familiar surroundings. The second set of theses takes this rationale further as part of a process by pitting two ideas against one another: the first of which is that art work is enhanced through repetitive sight, while the second is that a “document” dominates only through the element of surprise. Assuming these three points to be interrelated, an interpretation might go as follows: there is a parallel between the representation of art as something to which one repetitively returns glances and the repetitive process that a writer engages in when he habitually writes in the same location. The process of repetition, however, is both beneficial and detrimental to the critic. It is beneficial in the sense that, through repeated observation, the critic may perceive something about the work of art that he missed the first time. On the other hand, it is detrimental to putting “the death mask on one's conception” (which is essentially the goal, but it is a paradox) because that calls for a distracting sensory impression or momentary intuition that can only be found in unfamiliar surroundings. A critic constantly feels the pressure to perform using the benchmarks of his colleagues as his guidelines, and as a result, he must resort to shock value to make his work appeal. This is significant, as it can undervalue the process of criticism when it isn't carried out beyond the superficiality it seems to entail. There is a bit of humor in this depiction, as it seems Benjamin, a literary critic himself, recognizes how banal criticism seems in comparison to the art itself. He exaggerates himself in

making this point by pitting the ideas in both columns against each other to demonstrate the combined shortcomings of each.

The corresponding point in *The Critic's Technique in Thirteen Theses* is represented as follows: “XI. Kunstbegeisterung ist dem Kritiker fremd. Das Kunstwerk ist in seiner Hand die blanke Waffe in dem Kampfe der Geister” (52). If we take what we have already concluded regarding the process of authorship and the challenges of snobbery and apply it to the aforementioned point, then we must conclude that a critic must accept that his work involves a certain detachment from the artistic representation to prevent himself from becoming engrossed in it. Namely, art work is, to use an analogy, the critic's “blank canvas.” That is, the artistic object is a contentless weapon with which the critic is to formulate an assault. Depicted here is another instance of the dichotomy between proximity and distance, and perhaps Benjamin's own experience as a critic led him to conceive of the theme in this way, not to mention that the sequence of the three aphorisms containing Benjamin's theses likens itself to the stereoscopy detailed by Esther Leslie.

The paradox between distance and proximity, which is central to Benjamin's work as an author, critic, and philosopher, is strongly represented in *One Way Street*, and in “Auf Halbmast” in particular. It reads as follows,

Stirbt ein nahestehender Mensch uns dahin, so ist in den Entwicklungen der nächsten Monate etwas, wovon wir zu bemerken glauben, daß—so gern wir es mit ihm geteilt hätten—nur durch sein Fernsein es sich entfalten konnte. Wir grüßen ihn zuletzt in einer Sprache, die er schon nicht mehr versteht. (24)

This aphorism lends itself quite well to allegorical interpretation. Here a person close to us dies,

which means that in the months immediately following, we realize that there is so much we wanted to share with him that will forever remain unsaid. We ultimately greet the beloved individual in a language that he no longer understands. Perhaps this is because we hesitated—in our subjective involvement, we spend too much time formulating and reformulating our emotions, ideas, sentiments and ideologies to the point that the need to express them has expired. Perhaps we can resolve this issue if we allow our notions, our opinions, and our art to reveal itself in those brief moments in which we respond to external stimuli spontaneously. At times, brevity and urgency walk hand in hand, and this is a notion that is reflected through the modernization of art, society, and ultimately, literature.

If we take the dichotomy between closeness and proximity allegorically—as symbolic of the process of representation attributed to modernist art and literature—then we must understand it as a search for truth and meaning in a world that is perpetually reinventing itself. As I alluded to earlier in this essay, truth, according to Benjamin, is something that is not created or happened upon at will, but something that is discovered in an act of recognition. This recognition must not be affirmative of a specific truth, but simply acknowledge that its essence is part of our reality.

Conclusion

Clearly, there are times when we have prepared ourselves to articulate something of meaning within a given context, but that context has moved on without us—because of this, we must move on with the times, while simultaneously keeping one eye on the past. Just as art is a part of our immediate reality, perhaps more so in modern times than ever (in the form of the media, press, advertising billboards, the mass reproduction of artwork and music, etc.), it is simultaneously absent, because it is no longer presented to us in the style that tradition previously prescribed. The question becomes whether it is even feasible, or desirable, to define “tradition” in the context of modern society. Perhaps we must simply recognize that art and literature today should reflect a modernized world shaped by brief moments of subjectivized poignancy. Public and private performances and exhibits are increasingly becoming replaced by individualistic consumption. That is, art is no longer enjoyed collectively as a celebration of emotion, instinct, labor, and intent, but rather privately and individually as the indulgence of a fad. In this, the art that is closest to us in representation is farthest from its origins, but, positively, this affords us the possibility of viewing art and society through a lens that offers a multiplicity of perspectives. It is at this distance that it is logical, in keeping with Walter Benjamin's style, to conclude my analysis.

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