

The Loss of the Aura and the New Sensuousness: Walter Benjamin on the Conditions for Sense Perception in the Age of Technology

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Benjamin's 'theory of art' or 'aesthetic theory' is a theory of *experience*. Thus, definitions of elements of a theory of the historical conditions of sense perception must be seen within the frame of a comprehensive theory of the historicity of experience. Or: aesthetics as a theory of *aisthesis*, perception, is placed within the frame of a theory of *historical experience*. An axiom in Benjamin's theory of historical experience is that experience has been 'devalued'.

It is experience 'in the strictest sense' that has been devalued. Benjamin uses this designation in order to distinguish genuine experience (*Erfahrung*) from the subjectivized and privatized experience (*Erlebnis*). "Where there is experience (*Erfahrung*) in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory (*Gedächtnis*) with material from the collective past."¹ In the early essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918), Benjamin defines experience as follows: "Experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge."² In other words, he identifies uniformity, continuity and multiplicity as signs of experience, signs that stand in contrast to that which characterizes 'the age of reproduction', that is, the fractured, the ruptured, the similar.³ In "Experience and Poverty" (1933) and in the essay "The Storyteller" (1928–35), Benjamin writes,

1 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, volume 4, trans. E. Jephcott and Others, eds. H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 316.

2 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, volume 2, trans. R. Livingstone and Others, eds. M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 108.

3 'The similar' ('das Gleichartige,') which is typical of 'the age of reproduction', differs from 'sameness' or 'correspondence' ('Ähnlichkeit'), which Benjamin connects with the mimetic and which is the object of investigation in the essays, "On the Mimetic Faculty" ("Über das mimetische Vermögen") and "Doctrine of the Similar" ("Lehre vom Ähnlichen"). See below, pp. 8, 10 and 20. While the mimetic is a sign of a 'homogenized' world, the 'similar' and 'similarity' are part of a 'heterogeneous' order of things.

It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.⁴

A focal point in Benjamin's discussion of the many different aspects of the loss of genuine experience and the transformation of the conditions of experience in the age of technology is that the question of experience is connected with the examination of its material impact, the experiential *space*, which Benjamin describes as 'image-space' (*Bildraum*) or 'body-space' (*Leibraum*). With his emphasis on the significance of historically altered conditions, he aims at gaining an understanding of how they contribute to understanding the relation to *materiality* in our existence. By emphasizing experience and examining the *places* in which it manifests itself, as in the examination of its image-space and body-space, Benjamin emphasizes the significance of thinking experience and materiality in an essentially different way than they are thought of in classical materialism and the equally simplified extension of it into Marxist-Leninist theory. Rather, Benjamin's thought is in keeping with the dogmatic theory's critical counterpart, as found in the 'anthropological materialism' of surrealism. In his essay on surrealism, it is precisely the image-space and body-space

4 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, trans. E. Jephcott, H. Eiland, and Others, eds. H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 143–144.