

## Walter Benjamin: The Art of Critical Thought

*Art is a refuge for mimetic behaviour. In art the subject, depending on how much autonomy it has, takes up varying positions vis-a-vis its objective other from which it is always different but never entirely separate. / Adorno*

*My life as well as my thought moves in extreme positions. / Benjamin*

Walter Benjamin's art survives in a series of critical texts, each embodying a poetic sensibility toward truth. It's the artistic quality of Benjamin's work that I am most interested in here, and my plan is to trace its movement throughout the ambivalent terrain of his critical thought. In so doing, I'll touch upon the question of *aura* and the mimetic and sensuous moment this quality implies.

Benjamin's work on *aura* signifies a privileged artistic domain within his thought as, through it, we enter the labyrinthine world of a mimesis that presents itself to us as a sensuous movement embodying the repressed moment of rational thought. By this I mean that Benjamin's work on *aura* speaks about mimesis while simultaneously performing as mimesis. The gesture enacted here is one of affinity, and one - I shall argue - central to Benjamin's critical enterprise. Benjamin the critic chooses not to divorce himself from Benjamin the artist, and nowhere is this more crucial to his own trajectory than in the performative space his thought on *aura* enacts. By thinking about his work on *aura* in mimetic terms, I hope to brush aside the claims that Benjamin's thought is weakened by the apparent inconsistency of his critical stance. If what I am suggesting is right, that Benjamin not only speaks *about* but *through* mimesis, then the grounds for such claims are quite playfully eroded.

### Mimesis as Movement

Before going on to talk about Benjamin's work on *aura*, I want to say something about mimesis and the movement it implies. This is important for, as I have suggested, the artistic quality of Benjamin's thought can best be appreciated by reading his work on *aura* as itself mimetic. The kind of mimesis that I'm most interested in surfaces as the repressed moment of a Platonic tradition intent on silencing its sensuous quality. The pre-history of Platonic mimesis reveals a mimesis more concerned with embodied performance than with mere imitation. The ecstatic movement of ritual and dance - conjuring a Dionysian return of Nietzschean proportions - serves to locate mimesis within the (shifting) domain of the sensual. As such, it is at odds with a rationality which detaches from embodied experience, in order to hallucinate itself within the transcendent realm of pure and non-sensuous thought.

At this point, it's probably useful to introduce the work of Theodor W. Adorno, for he alerts us to that moment (both historical and symbolic) when Western reason positions itself above the archaic movement of mimetic play. The "mimetic taboo" this inaugurates, signals the subordination of play to rational thought, a repression that leaves us with, at best, the barest

hint of reason's sensual past.<sup>1</sup> While much can be said about this playful mimesis, I'll focus on a few important characteristics, for it is these - I believe - that best help us to appreciate both what Benjamin has to say about aura and how he goes about saying it. Mimesis, as I have already suggested, is sensual. It is a practice involving the body in relation to its surrounding world. For Adorno, it signals an embodied identification with that world rather than a conceptual identification of it.<sup>2</sup> Mimesis involves a relation of affinity with the other, one that reaches toward the other, displacing the static distinction of subject and object typical of much rational (reifying) thought. This act of *reaching towards* highlights a further quality of mimesis, i.e. that it necessarily implies movement. The performative pre-history of mimesis in dance involves the repetition of sensuous ritual action.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the mimetic impulse survives in traces of movement, what Heidegger refers to as "the ecstatic play of the world".<sup>4</sup>

The movement implicit in mimetic play brings us closer - we could even say reaches toward - Benjamin's own critical gesture. For it suggests the dynamic trajectory of mimesis, the refusal to be tied to definitive and static conceptions of truth. What James Hans, in his book *The Play of the World* (1981), says about movement is instructive, so I'll detour, slightly, to say something about it here. Hans is concerned to chart the "back-and-forth" movement - the play - typical of work influenced by Nietzsche's idiosyncratic thought. From Husserl's phenomenological play between locations, Heidegger's hermeneutic circle, Gadamer's aesthetic of interpretation, through to Derrida's and Deleuze's mimetic play, Hans charts a legacy of Nietzschean movement, a "back-and-forth" gesture at once establishing and effacing the self in play.<sup>5</sup>

What's interesting about this, although Hans certainly doesn't say it in this way, is that the repressed sensuous bodily rhythm of mimesis surfaces momentarily in the (unconscious) eruptions or symptoms of Western thought. The pre-history of mimesis finds momentary and spontaneous expression in the Nietzschean brotherhood of Dionysian play. Benjamin affirms this disruptive moment, and perhaps nowhere better than in his work on aura. For it is here

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). See also: Mihai Spariosu (ed.) *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach: Vol. 1: The Literary and Philosophical Debate* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1984), pp.i-xxix. Also in the same volume: Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: T.W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique", pp.27-64, for a discussion of Adorno on the *mimetic taboo*, i.e. the inauguration of the disastrous dialectic of Reason and Myth in Western Thought.

<sup>2</sup>Cahn, *ibid.* p.33. on Adorno.

<sup>3</sup>Joel Black, "Ideology: The Model in Artistic Practice and Critical Theory", in Spariosu, p.173.

<sup>4</sup>Spariosu, p.iii, also: the Pythagorean notion of *mimēstheī* as performance (dance/music).

<sup>5</sup>James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). We could include many others, e.g. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

that the stability and coherence of a certain rational logic is teased to its limits. There is an ambivalence on Benjamin's part, a playful movement signifying his refusal to be restrained by one position, one coherent and stable critical stance.

I'll return, now, to look at what Benjamin has to say about aura, what *positions* he adopts in so doing, and then go on to ask some questions about how this relates to sensuous mimetic movement. I'm going to begin by suggesting that - although he doesn't state it explicitly - aura is for Benjamin a kind of mimesis. The decline of aura in the modern world - an argument we are thoroughly familiar with in Benjamin's work - is echoed in the decline of what Benjamin calls the mimetic faculty of language. Now, what is interesting here is that if we read Benjamin's works on aura and technology alongside his works on the philosophy of language, we can discern a close affinity between aura and mimesis. We could say that each *reaches toward* the other.

Let's begin with what he has to say about aura and art. The auratic quality of the work of art - the distant or unapproachable halo effect - is intricately bound with art's early cult function, its embeddedness within the domain of ritual. In "The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction"<sup>6</sup> Benjamin writes:

*We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual - first magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. The ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. (pp.223-4).*

The auratic quality of art is thus a residue of its (early) location within the domain of ritual and magic, a domain enabling the translation of sensuous movement from the physicality of dance to what will later become autonomous art. As art moves beyond its early dependence on ritual - to become something other than cult - its auratic quality declines, and along with it, the sensuous imprint of its pre-rational origins. For Benjamin, this movement signifies a shift from ritual to the (utopian?) domain of politics, and it is (importantly) a movement tied to the emancipatory potential of mechanical reproduction:

*...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual...the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics. (p.224).*

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<sup>6</sup>"The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, Hanna Arendt ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp.217-51.

This movement from ritual to politics (one depicted by Andrew Benjamin as a shift from aesthetics to ethics),<sup>7</sup> is accompanied by an emancipatory severance of art from *cult* to *exhibition* value

*Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult. One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view... With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products... With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature. (pp.224-5).<sup>8</sup>*

The exhibited value taken on by de-ritualised art is intricately bound with, though not reducible to, the technological innovations of photography and film. Thus for Benjamin, technological reproducibility functions to sever art from its auratic quality. The decline of aura - attributable to such mechanistic changes - goes hand in hand with the decline of the immediate and sensuous quality of (ritual based) art.

The decline of the sensuous in art is a good point to momentarily disrupt my narrative. So far, Benjamin has been celebrating the decline of aura - primarily because it enables art to enter the domain of politics, indeed of everyday life. Now, "the Work of Art..." is usually characterised in these terms, i.e. as a celebration of the revolutionary potential of auratic decline, but I want to suggest that this text houses an ambivalence, an uncertain moment, where Benjamin gestures or reaches toward the less celebratory tone of the later essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire". The lamentation we clearly hear in this later work is present, albeit in embryonic form, in the first text. Benjamin, never content with the stasis of consistent thought, shifts imperceptibly from affirmation to critique, suspending his critical posture mid dialectical air. This moment of crisis emerges from Benjamin's discussion of the estrangement and alienation experienced by the actor before the camera's "gaze". Here he invokes Pirandello who speaks of the oppression, the "new anxiety" which overcomes the film actor divorced from *his* audience by the intervention of a "mechanical contrivance". For Pirandello, such an actor:

*...feels as if in exile - exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused*

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<sup>7</sup>Andrew Benjamin, "The Decline of Art: Benjamin's Aura" in *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a philosophy of difference* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.146f.

<sup>8</sup>And further: "This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art. In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. This much is certain: today photography and film are the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function." (p.225).

*by moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence...The projector will **play** with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to **play** before the camera.<sup>9</sup>*

Here play is ironically reduced to a mute, non-sensuous hollowness; an empty performance; a somewhat suspended animation, and Benjamin is only too aware of its critical import; "for the first time", he writes, "man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to presence; there can be no replica of it...the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays." (p.229). The actor as producer is alienated from his labour in that his audience - as market - is located beyond his sensuous immediacy: "This market, where he offers not only his labour but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory." (p.231).<sup>10</sup> The critical moment embodied in these insights exists in tension with the celebratory tone of the piece as a whole, and functions - I think - as a kind of shock to disrupt our too easy assimilation of the work.

Benjamin's work on aura becomes more interesting, (for our purposes), in the "Baudelaire" essay.<sup>11</sup> Here aura is elaborated within a framework of sensuous, mimetic proportions. Benjamin returns to the intricate elaboration of sensual perception and mechanical technique (taken up in the first essay) and suggests that a certain volitional, discursive memory is produced or encouraged (this is unclear) by mechanical reproduction. It is at this point that the critical moment of "The Work of Art..." is fully elaborated, and it is here that those fleeting insights are poetically expressed.

Benjamin's work of art is to tie his sensuous notion of aura to Proust's evocative *mémoire involontaire*. Aura becomes "the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception..." (p.186). *Mémoire volontaire*, on the other hand, stands in for the volitional, discursive memory that - in the age of mechanical reproduction - displaces the body-trace of auratic art:

*The techniques based on the use of the camera and of subsequent analogous mechanical devices extend the range of the **mémoire volontaire**... If the distinctive feature of the images that rise from the **mémoire involontaire** is seen in their aura, then photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of the "decline of aura". (pp.186, 187).*

*Mémoire involontaire* ties aura to the poetic, the sensual, and the material. It involves a

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<sup>9</sup>Luigi Pirandello, *Si Gira*, cited in Benjamin, *op.cit.*, p.229 (emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup>This *critical moment* is further elaborated in Benjamin's analogy of the magician/surgeon - painter/cameraman immediately following. Here the surgeon/cameraman is implicated in an instrumental rationality penetrating deep into the fabric of modern life.

<sup>11</sup>"On Some Motifs In Baudelaire", in *Illuminations*, pp.155-200.

relation with the (distant) past embedded in sensation, beyond the service of the intellect. It lies, and here Benjamin quotes Proust, "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us)..." (p.158). This embedded quality is important, as Benjamin continually stresses the manner in which the auratic work is situated or embedded within tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Benjamin momentarily displaces Proust's distinction between *mémoire involontaire* and *mémoire volontaire* with a mimetic gesture toward their mutual embeddedness in ritual experience:

*Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work) kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness. (pp.159-60).*

The links between *mémoire involontaire*, aura, and ritual are more clearly elaborated in the following passage, where Benjamin invokes the unique distance of each. In a parenthetical aside, he suggests that:

*(these data [of the **mémoire involontaire** ], incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that comprises the "unique manifestation of a distance." This designation has the advantages of clarifying the ceremonial character of the phenomenon. The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image). Proust's great familiarity with the problem of the aura requires no emphasis. (p.188).*

The "unique manifestation of distance", the movement beyond the will of conscious experience, is further explored by Benjamin in his brief discussion of Freud on the *memory trace*. Freud pits consciousness against the memory trace in a manner not dissimilar to Proust's distinction of voluntary and involuntary memory. Consciousness, Freud argues, effects no memory trace and functions quite independently of it. Consciousness "comes into being at the site of a memory trace," but is not reducible to it. For Freud "becoming conscious

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<sup>12</sup>The auratic "work" is originally *embedded* in ritual. Samuel Weber's work is instructive here. He talks about aura as a case (or case-like) structure in Benjamin's work; a packaging. See: *Coming to Pass: The Writings of Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993). Weber draws these observations from Benjamin's "Hashish in Marseilles" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp.137-45. Further on, in the "Baudelaire" essay, Benjamin uses the motif of the storyteller to convey this same notion of (sensual) embeddedness: "It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it **embeds** it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the story-teller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand." (p.159).

and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system."<sup>13</sup> Conscious experience thus lies outside the domain of the *mémoire involontaire*, and thus, by implication, the auratic trace. For Benjamin:

*...only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the **mémoire involontaire**. (pp.160-1).*

The constellation Benjamin draws around the term aura (the case-like structure aura is embedded within) thus reaches toward the sensuous movement of ritual, the involuntary memory of the past, and later the (unconscious) memory trace beyond conscious thought. Each, in their own way, is dependent upon an embodied, sensuous experience that shatters the illusory coherence of conscious, rational, volitional thought.

No, what is arguably interesting in the "Baudelaire" essay is that Benjamin goes on to elaborate the *reciprocity* involved in the experience of aura. The auratic, he tells us, is inexplicably bound with a "looking back", a reflection, a gaze returned. The auratic work of art is imbued with the power (or quality) to look back at us. In accordance with Valéry's understanding of the work of art, Benjamin writes: "the painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill." (p.187). Thus, to say a work of art has the quality of aura is to endow it with a kind of sensuality, or sensual pre-history; an embodied, reflective gaze. Art in this instance loudly proclaims its origins in a mimetic past. For Benjamin:

*... looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met (which, in the case of thought processes, can apply equally to the look of the eye of the mind and to a glance pure and simple), there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent. "Perceptibility", as Novalis puts it, "is a kind of attentiveness." The perceptibility he has in mind is none other than that of aura. **Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man.** The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. (p.188. emphasis added).*

Although Benjamin has already proclaimed the decline of aura through mechanical reproducibility, he does suggest that traces of this sensuous past exist in fleeting form. In "The Work of Art..." he tells us that the cult value of art (the ritualised pre-history of the work) does not decline without a certain resistance. Photographic technique shifts the work of art into the domain of exhibition value, but a residue remains - an excess of sensibility. "It is no accident", he writes,

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<sup>13</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), cited in "Baudelaire", op.cit. p.160.

*that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. (p.226).<sup>14</sup>*

And yet, this privileged moment passes; "as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value." Aura declines as the gaze is no longer returned. Mechanism displaces the sensuous reflectivity of art. In "Baudelaire" Benjamin writes "what was inevitably felt to be inhuman, one might even say deadly, in daguerreotype was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze." (pp.187-8).

The mechanistic gaze of the camera transposes itself onto the crowd and Benjamin finds in Baudelaire a poetic expression of this disintegrating world:

*The greater Baudelaire's insight into this phenomenon, the more unmistakably did the disintegration of the aura make itself felt in his lyrical poetry. This occurs in the form of a symbol which we encounter in the **Fleurs du mal** almost invariably whenever the look of the human eye is invoked... What is involved here is that the expectation roused by the look of the human eye is not fulfilled. **Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look.** (p.189. emphasis added).*

Aura recedes and with it the ability of the world to look back. Curiously, though, at the very moment when this decline seems total, Benjamin's thought shocks us with its flickering movement. The remote, lifeless gaze paradoxically harbours an auratic quality of its own. The distance of such eyes brings to mind the distant quality Benjamin earlier establishes for aura:

*The deeper the remoteness which a glance has to overcome, the stronger will be the spell that is apt to emanate from the gaze. In eyes that look at us with mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete. (p.190).<sup>15</sup>*

So aura declines, and yet perhaps paradoxically returns in disguised form. The auratic quality of art goes underground, only to return in a location beyond its traditional bed. The seed of aura discards its protective shell and in so doing germinates in some remote terrain. And where, we may well ask, might this be? It seems to me that the auratic quality of art - its sensuous pre-history - surfaces in language, and perhaps nowhere more so than in poetry. For Benjamin, the ability to look back, to return the gaze:

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<sup>14</sup>And further: "To have pinpointed this new stage constitutes the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets." (p.226).

<sup>15</sup>In "The Work of Art..." Benjamin writes: "We define aura...as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." (p.222. See also n.5, p.243).



*... is a wellspring of poetry. Wherever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature thus awakened dreams and pulls the poet after its dream. **Words, too, can have an aura of their own.***<sup>16</sup>

Now, I think that it is this shift - the movement he charts from ritual based in dance to art through to words - that marks Benjamin's discussion of aura as a kind of mimesis, while at the same time enacting a mimetic movement itself. This becomes a little clearer when we read the essays, already mentioned, in conjunction with his works on the philosophy of language. For example, in "Doctrine of the Similar"<sup>17</sup> Benjamin tells us that human beings possess an advanced faculty for mimetic behaviour, a faculty expressed in our inclination toward producing similarities:

*Indeed, there may not be a single one of the higher human functions which is not decisively co-determined by the mimetic faculty. This faculty, however, has a history, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. With respect to the latter, it is in many ways formed by play. (p.65).*

This mimetic faculty, however, is in decline. Just as aura seemingly disappears from the stage of human drama, so too does the mimetic. On the surface, then, aura and mimesis gradually disappear from the modern world, marking a retreat to the sensual pre-history of ritual and tradition. However, as we have already seen from Benjamin's discussion of aura, the picture is by no means so simple. The playful quality of the mimetic faculty doesn't disappear so much as it is transformed. And this is evidenced in its historical passage through time:

*Here one must recall that neither the mimetic forces nor their objects, i.e. the mimetic objects, have remained the same, unchanged over the course of time. In the course of the centuries of the mimetic force, and then with it the mimetic faculty of perception, has disappeared from certain areas, perhaps in order to pour forth into others... The perceived world (**Merkwelt**) of modern human beings seems to contain infinitely fewer of those magical **correspondences**<sup>18</sup> than the world of the ancient people or even of primitive peoples. Yet this is the question: is it the case that the mimetic faculty is dying out, or has perhaps a transformation taken place? (pp.65-6 emphasis added).*

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<sup>16</sup>"Baudelaire", *op.cit.* n.17, p.200, emphasis added. And further: "This is how Karl Kraus described it: 'the closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back'."

<sup>17</sup>"Doctrine of the Similar", trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique*, 17 Spring 1979, pp.65-69. (Originally written in 1933, and published in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauer eds. Vol. II, 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), pp.204-210. This is the first draft of a later paper entitled "On the Mimetic Faculty" in *Reflections*, *op.cit.* pp.333-36. Anson Rabinbach argues that "there are important differences of emphasis in the later text". See his "Introduction" to Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar", *op. cit.* p.60.

<sup>18</sup>correspondences

This transformation occurs as a translation from the domain of mimicry and ritual to the domain of words. Language becomes the repository of what Benjamin calls "non-sensuous similarity." The body-trace sensuality of the mimetic faculty surfaces in the word. And this is recognised, to some extent, by those who argue that *all* language is essentially onomatopoeic. For Benjamin, writing, along with language, becomes "an archive of non-sensuous similarities or non-sensuous correspondences." (p.68). This mimetic faculty "quite gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of non-sensuous similarity." (p.68).

Thus, imbued with a sensuous pre-history, language serves as the contemporary domain of a mimesis ever in movement - in flux:

*Language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty: a medium into which the earlier perceptive capabilities for recognizing the similar had entered without residue, so that it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into relationship with each other, no longer directly, as once in the mind of the augur or priest, but in their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata. (p.68).*

In an essay written seventeen years earlier, entitled "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man",<sup>19</sup> Benjamin sets out his initial thoughts on the mimetic quality of language. Here we see his ideas about language as the repository of a magical pre-history.<sup>20</sup> "The incomparable feature of language," he writes, "is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound." (p.321). This mimetic quality of language displaces an instrumental view, for Benjamin claims that man does not communicate himself by *using* language but rather *within* it. The sensual, embedded quality of the mimetic faculty is beautifully described by Benjamin, in this essay, in reference to what he calls the language of things:

*There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. (p.330).*

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<sup>19</sup>"On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in *Reflections, op.cit.* pp.314-32. (Originally published in *Angelus Novus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966).

<sup>20</sup>The magical, childlike renewal of existence that Benjamin speaks about in "Unpacking My Library" draws together the link between the sensuous and words. He talks of "the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names." In *Illuminations, op.cit.*, p.61.

So where does this leave us? It seems to me that Benjamin's thoughts on mimesis poetically mime his thoughts on aura. Words become the contemporary resting place for each term. So what Heidegger calls the "ecstatic play of the world" might usefully be re-phrased (in an attempt to capture something of this Benjaminian revolution) to "the ecstatic play of the word".

### **The Art of Criticism: Thinking Poetically**

I would like to return, now, to the initial concern of this paper, the artistic quality of Benjamin's critical thought. As we have seen in his work on aura, Benjamin does not shy away from taking up multiple, and often contradictory positions in regard to the object (or objects) of his critical attention. I have argued that this ability to occupy conflictual terrain might be viewed as a kind of mimetic movement - a criticism enacting the gesture of sensuous bodily rhythm. If we think about Hans' "to-and-fro" movement, in this regard, it might be useful to say that Benjamin's mimetic trajectory actually displaces the stasis this implies. For such a "to-and-fro" gesture suggests a movement between two fixed positions - a terrain I feel we could never attribute to complexity of Benjamin's thought. Benjamin's critical thought might better be described (if this is indeed either possible or desirable) as a choreography, a spiralling movement miming the paradoxical trajectory of modernity itself. A choreography embodying the repressed sensuous moment of the critical enterprise; one which reinscribes the art of the immobilised body, silenced by the weight of reifying, instrumental thought.

Hannah Arendt captures Benjamin's art - albeit momentarily - when she calls our attention to his strangely paradoxical gift: "the gift of *thinking poetically*."<sup>21</sup> It is this poetic gesture of Benjamin's criticism that imbues his work on aura with an auratic quality of its own; the gift of looking back, of returning the reflected gaze of his own critical posture. Benjamin refuses the stasis of the fixed gaze, the stable coherence of a certain rational thought. For Benjamin, the role of the critic entails a performative gesture. The critic is immersed within an epistemology of performance,<sup>22</sup> a subversive mimesis<sup>23</sup> returning thought to its repressed sensuous moment.

Motifs of movement are littered throughout Benjamin's work and, just as in the case of aura, function in his texts not merely as concepts, but more significantly as textual strategies (*constellations*) mimetically inscribing their logics into the very grain of his thought. The purposeless strolling of the *flâneur* represents such an instance. For Benjamin, "the true picture of the past *flits* by" and, as Arendt reminds us:

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<sup>21</sup>Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940", Introduction to *Illuminations*, *op.cit.* p.50.

<sup>22</sup>For a discussion of this term see: Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays On Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster ed. (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), p.94f.

<sup>23</sup>This is the term Cahn *op.cit.* uses in relation to Adorno's work.

*It is to him, aimlessly strolling through the crowds in the big cities in studied contrast to their hurried, purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning. (p.12).*

Benjamin's criticism takes on (mimes?) this curious quality of purposeless strolling; this *flânerie* coupling thought with movement in defiance of logical progression.<sup>24</sup> As *flâneur*, Benjamin reinscribes sensuous bodily rhythms into the practice of criticism.

And yet, this focus on the movement of Benjamin's thought ironically reveals the moment of stasis it conceals. In his powerful image of the *Angelus Novus* we can discern a subversion of simple dialectical motion, a refusal of the teleology of much materialist thought. In "Theses On The Philosophy Of History"<sup>25</sup> Benjamin writes:

*His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (pp.257-8).*

The static quality of this image echoes Benjamin's stress on the power of the present, not as a transitional space, but rather as the moment "in which time stands still and has come to a stop;" the present in which Benjamin himself is writing. (p.262). There is a powerful coupling of this momentary stasis with what Benjamin sees as its revolutionary potential:

*Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystalizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (pp.262-3).*

The paradoxical movement of stasis present in Benjamin's thought represents one of the many qualities Adorno celebrates in his work. In his introduction to the *Schriften* (the first volume of Benjamin's collected works), Adorno writes: "To understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the conversion of extreme agitation into something static, indeed, the static notion of movement itself."<sup>26</sup> I should like to finish by suggesting that this

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<sup>24</sup>Arendt notes: "The extent to which this strolling determined the pace of his thinking was perhaps most clearly revealed in the peculiarities of his gait, which Max Rychner described as 'at once advancing and tarrying, a strange mixture of both.'" (pp.21-2).

<sup>25</sup>"Theses On The Philosophy Of History" in *Illuminations, op. cit.* pp.253-64. (Originally published in *Neue Rundschau*, 61 (3) 1950).

<sup>26</sup>Adorno's introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften, op.cit. Vol. I, p.xix.*

static moment can perhaps best be understood in mimetic terms. For mimicry carries with it the power to deceive. The power to feign death is perhaps at times the most crucial deception one can enact. Consequently, the moment when aura and the mimetic faculty both feign death (decline), is the moment of their most powerful deception; a moment marking their sensible reappearance on the stage of a reconciled world. When Benjamin's thought feigns the death of the static moment, it is never more alive, more artful. At this moment it not only traces an auratic path back to return its own gaze, but more significantly glances back at us as well. In death, Walter Benjamin looks up and returns our gaze.