Weimar, Klaus. "Text-Critical Remarks et Alia." In Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich and Michael Marrinan, eds. *Mapping Benjamin: the Work of Art in the Digital Age*. Stanford University Press: Stanford.

KLAUS WEIMAR

Text-Critical Remarks et Alia

Years ago, when we read the *Artwork* essay for the first time in the volume of *Illuminationem* with the brown binding, it embodied a fascination and plausibility innate to discoveries, even if one did not want to surrender oneself unconditionally.[1] The small yellow volume from Suhrkamp Verlag changed that impression very little, if I remember correctly, nor did the publication of Benjamin's collected works. Today, when I reread the text after many years, it appears to me as if written by many hands, the last one being Walter Benjamin's, under whose name it circulates. And I inadvertently find myself in the somewhat uncomfortable position of a text critic, trying to differentiate between the layers of transmission in the present text. At the very least, when the last writer produced a definitive version from the much-retouched draft, one imagines a situation not unlike that assumed by the old text critic Johannes Clericus before an edition of the Torah: "And it is not only a few words which one could suspect of having slipped from the margin into the text."[2]

"Aura" is one such word. Perhaps I only notice it because for a number of years I read many medical texts. Aura is a word that could only have been written in the margin by a doctor, and which then somehow managed to slip into the text. Aura (breath of wind) is what one called the precursor of a major epileptic attack, "a curious sensation of a cool or a warm breeze (*aura epileptica*), which, starting from one end of the body, passes through the same, and ends in the head or the hollow of the heart."[3] The reception of a work of art would then be the attack [grand mal] that follows the aura, and "is often ushered in by a loud and piercing scream" and is, in any case, associated "with a

1. *Editors' Note:* Parenthetical references in the text of this essay are keyed to the edition listed in the Bibliography as: Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk" (*Gesammelte Schriften*). Translations have been approved by the author.

2. Le Clerc, *Sentimens de quelques théologiens de Hollande*, p. 125.

3. Brockhaus, *Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon*, VI, p. 207.

complete extinction of consciousness." I decided not to follow up this line of thought.

Seen from a text-critical point of view, we are dealing with a corrupt reading (*corruptela*), which was clearly occasioned by a passage that speaks of a mountain panorama and the branch of a tree on a summer afternoon: "that means, breathe the aura of these mountains, of this branch" (479). Here, and only here, the word "aura" (breath) fits better than any other, but elsewhere in the text it is strangely out of place: one cannot really speak of the "atrophy" (477), of the "decay" and "destruction" (479) of a breath of wind, nor of its "being around" someone (Macbeth, or an actor playing Macbeth) (489), and certainly not of its "shriveling up" (492).

A conjecture (*conjectura*) suggests itself. Instead of aura, one should read aureole—then the incompatibility with the other words largely disappears. One can quite well say of an aureole (a halo around an entire body) that it atrophies, decays, is around somebody, and shrivels up, or that it is destroyed when "the outer cover is peeled from an object" (479); nonetheless, to *inhale* an aureole would be a rather bold metaphor. In any case, the conjecture—one cannot demand more than that—makes the text more coherent, and the following passage further corroborates its justification: after art separated itself "from its cult basis, the appearance of its autonomy," its radiant aureole or—as it is later called—the "beautiful appearance," was "extinguished forever" (486). I do not wish to attempt to explain how the mix-up between aureole and aura came about, although the text itself proffers the psychoanalytic notion of "a slip of the tongue" (498).

Following this conjecture, and perhaps because of it, a question arises for which the text, in the state it has been passed down, provides only an answer filled with contradictions. Has the aureole now been extinguished "forever" (486), is the general process of its "atrophy" (477) and its "decay" still continuing (479), or is it shriveling in some places, while elsewhere remaining intact? Only the third part of the question seems to demand an affirmative reply: natural objects such as a branch or a range of mountains (479) apparently keep their aureole even now, as does Macbeth and the actor "who plays him" on the "stage" (489), whereas the aureole disappears as soon as something falls into the grasp of reproduction. Thus, speaking of a "decay" of the aureole retains some sort of intelligibility only as a statement of an average value, or as a reference to an increasingly prevalent tendency, and this, in turn, would further corroborate the fact that a "sense for

homogeneity in the world . . . makes itself noticeable in the realm of theory as the increasing importance of statistics" (480). In this view, Benjamin's theory becomes an exemplary instance of the tendency it wishes to describe, but this seems not to be a particularly satisfying reading.

A slightly revised conjecture promises a more satisfactory resolution of the difficulty: in those cases where one speaks of decay and so on, one might replace "aureole" with "concept of a work of art" (which contains the aureole as its essential determining factor). Everything said about alterations to the aureole can be applied to this traditional concept of a work of art and its supposed universal validity: it decays, it atrophies, it shrivels up to something of merely regional value. Moreover, it is destroyed by photography and film, and for those two media it dies "forever." According to Benjamin's text, in those cases that something is wearing, could wear, or has worn an aureole, the traditional concept of a work of art retains, at least for the moment, its validity—the word "aureole" need not be replaced. This is true for individual works of art—surely paintings above all—as well as "an antique statue of Venus" (480). It is also true for natural objects like a branch or range of mountains (479), for each person with "his entire living personage" (489), for the figure of Macbeth on stage as well as for the actor himself (489), for the artistic "production," and finally surely for human life as such, whose aureole is "gotten rid of" "in a new way" by chemical warfare (508). In any case, it makes good sense to define the aureole as a "unique appearance," as a visible mark of "the unique," of "uniqueness," of "singularity" (479). Indeed, the "ritual function" of the aureole is composed of this uniqueness, and that function remains "recognizable in the most profane forms of serving beauty as a secular ritual" (480): the aureole is the halo around the secular saint, around that which is simply unique, for which no equal can be found. The aureole is the visible component of uniqueness, which is worshipped in the profane cult as "ingenuity," "originality," or "authenticity" (476, 477, 482).

Our revised conjecture helps us to distinguish two processes from each other: one process is the advancement of multiplicity into the "world of art" (487), a domain that heretofore was (or seemed to be) reserved for uniqueness alone; the other process is a disintegration of the concept "work of art" as a consequence or corollary phenomenon of the first. The *Artwork* essay situates itself differently relative to each process: it is the description of the first (penetration of multiplicity), and the achievement (performance) of the second (disintegration of the concept).

That the essay achieves a disintegration of the concept of "work of art" without mentioning it constitutes a large part of its not inconsiderable difficulty. It would have been easier to understand if, in accordance with Brecht's suggestion, Benjamin had completely omitted the concept—or, more properly, the term—"work of art" (484). From a text-critical perspective, "art" and "work of art" are terms that have slipped from a marginal notation (no doubt from the nineteenth century) into the main text and, to top it off, have dragged along the wild antonyms of "reality" and "actuality" (495ff). In all fairness, the exact consequence of omitting these terms remains unclear; keep in mind, however, that Jan Mukarovsky (also in 1936) did not disintegrate the concept "work of art" but, nonetheless, maintained a distinction between "artifact" and an "aesthetic object."

The description of the first process—the advancement and penetration of multiplicity—forms a coherent thematic framework from which we must eliminate another foreign body by means of renewed conjecture. The word "reproduction" must also be a marginal note of the twentieth century that slipped into the text where the word "likeness" [*Abbild*] had stood since the eighteenth century. This slippage occurs in a hasty correction, "in the picture, rather in the likeness, in the reproduction" (479), and a later consequence is the absurd formulation: "[T]he demand raised by today's man of being reproduced" (494). Clearly, Benjamin does not mean gene-controlled replication, but has in mind only the demand of "being filmed" (493)—that is, to have one's likeness made. Strictly speaking, the word "reproduction" should only be used to signify replication of a product; everywhere else it ought be replaced with the words recovered by our conjecture: "likeness" [*Abbild*] or "to make a likeness" [*abbilden*].

Once relieved of this excess baggage, Benjamin's essay refers, in the first instance, to a process that continues today: what I have called the advancement of multiplicity or, what amounts to the same thing, the propagation of the industrial means of production. To the degree that multiplicity is propagated, it fosters an unexpected sensibility for uniqueness. Unique things—different from all others—are surely becoming increasingly rare in the industrialized countries of the Western world; yet they are still produced, each with its own proud price. To possess something unique—for example, a custom-made suit, antique furniture, or a genuine oil painting—has become a luxury that many

people can and want to acquire: who would not love to have an old spinning wheel next to the chimney, or a somewhat dilapidated wagon wheel lying in the garden? Today, a heightened sensibility discovers in places it never before existed, such as scarce remnants of industrially manufactured lines of stamps, stock shares, cars, typewriters, and so on. Many of us travel to great exhibitions where unique objects might at last be seen first-hand. In short, the aureole radiates more strongly and preciously than ever before, which is a development that Benjamin obviously had not foreseen. He also seems not to have noticed that he, with his heightened sensibility, discovered uniqueness—ironically in the "ingenious guidance of the lens" (499)—and that he played an active role in the installation of aureole around film. This is not a reproach, especially because there are more even important aspects to his *Artwork* essay.

To my mind, the project of writing a twentieth-century sequel to the eighteenth-century's problem of the Laocoön (namely, expanding Lessing's comparison between painting and poetry to include photography and film), and of engaging social developments were central to the ambition of Benjamin's essay, and they are probably more important today than ever before. Unfortunately, rereading the text after so many years left me with an impression of how poorly that project was executed. The text-critical means at my disposal seem to be of little use, for I no longer know where to turn, and the comparison with Lessing breaks down from the very beginning. Consider Benjamin's use of the word "original" in his opening remarks, and the way he sets up the basic comparison between manual and technical reproduction (475–77): manual reproduction is a replica ("as a rule branded as a forgery"), its original the "genuine" work (a bronze, a manuscript); technical reproductions are photographs or phonograph records enjoyed in galleries or drawing rooms, whereas their originals—if you don't believe this, consult page 477—require the spaces of a cathedral, an auditorium, or the open air! The above-mentioned ambiguity around "reproduction" must be responsible for this disaster. Paradoxically, in the case of traditional hand-crafted arts, "reproduction" is used to mean "copy" [*Kopie*]; in the second case, that of modern technical arts, it is used to mean "likeness" [*Abbild*]. In light of such confusions, it is no wonder that text criticism is of little use.

Where Benjamin should have initiated the comparison becomes evident in several places: for example, with his observation of the "advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography" (481). But even this goes astray at the critical moment when he writes: "It is possible, for example, to make numerous prints from a photographic plate; the question of a genuine print makes no sense." We can grant this point, but it circumvents the decisive and obvious question—namely, the relationship of all the prints to the photographic plate, and the status of the plate itself. Moreover, Benjamin never raises the general form of this question, which concerns the specifics of materiality and media in the "arts" and is where the comparison could and should become concrete. Photography—and this is what is revolutionary about it—undermines the familiar and, in prior times, fundamental distinction between original and copy. The photographic plate (the expression "photograph" is much too vague) is neither a copy of some original nor an original itself, although many copies can be made from it. The photographic plate is a *technologically produced medium*: this is exactly the quality it shares with a phonograph record or a canister of film, and exactly what distinguishes it from a painting or a statue. The new media have systematically nullified distinctions between original and copy or, one might say, they have settled terminologically the original's disappearance: amid the countless replicas of films, videotapes, CDs, or floppy disks, one no longer speaks of originals but, at best, only master copies. Copies are no longer valued because they are identical with some nonexistent original, but because they can be used to generate a new copy, ad infinitum: a diskette lacks uniqueness, and *for this very reason* it is highly likely that an aureole will form around it.

What the media *mediate* (hence the name) is fundamentally different from a painting, and not only because some of them—for example, audio recordings at least since the time of electric phonographs—require two types of machines, a recording device and a play-back device. This type of mediation is referenced somewhat cryptically by the phrase "shooting a spoken film," which to an innocent bystander offers a view "such as has never been conceivable before," thanks to the unavoidable disintegration of illusion that results when one sees simultaneously the scene being enacted and the movie cameras. There is no standpoint from which the spectator can avoid noting this disintegration, "unless the position of his pupil should happen to correspond with that of the camera" (495)—of course, this is exactly the point of view one assumes when watching a movie. The standpoint of the "camera" *is* our own eye, whether viewing a film, a video on television, or a flight simulator. A visual medium always communicates a picture *and* a view of the picture at the same time. The standpoint we

assume before a mediated picture is identical to the one familiar to us from reading a text (a script is also a medium): both entail a *point of view*, as narratology has called it with unwitting appropriateness.

The visual materiality of virtual reality appeals to the only set of eyes we possess, thereby forcing us to merge an essentially textual "point of view" with our ordinary habits of seeing the world of everyday experience. By confining us to the point of view of the recording device, visual media shape a way of looking that is foreign to us, but so direct and immediate that we willingly accept it as our own. But we are not alone, for every other observer also appears to accept this coercion. Consequently, there emerges a collective fictionalization of seeing: individual acts of seeing are pushed to become identical copies of one another, each supposedly modeled upon an original that does not exist. If we are allowed to intervene interactively in the mediated picture, we resemble figures in a novel—where lives are governed by the narrative thread—because the progress and functionality of every intervention in "virtual reality" is completely accounted for by the program. Interactive, and thus behaving without responsibility, what is supposed to hold us back if—unexpectedly one day—we are not answerable to a program?

—Translated by Anne Smith