

Chapter 2:

The Politics of Aura and Imagination in Benjamin's Writings on Hashish

The immediate reality of the surrealist revolution is not so much to change anything in the physical and apparent order of things as to create a movement in men's minds.

Surrealists' Declaration of January 27, 1925¹

In a letter to Gershom Scholem written in July 1932, Benjamin recounts with disappointment a list of projects that – due to the prolonged precariousness of his financial situation – remain untouched or uncompleted. He writes that amongst the books which “mark off the real site of ruin or catastrophe” is “a truly exceptional book about hashish”. “Nobody”, he cautions Scholem, “knows about this [project], and for the time being it should remain between us”². However, while Benjamin's plans for a book on hashish appear concretely for the first time in this letter, as early as 1919 he had expressed an interest in exploring the psychological effects produced by hashish and opium. Inspired by Charles Baudelaire's writings on the topic in *Artificial Paradise* (which was written in

1. Quoted in Maurice Nadeau: *The History of Surrealism*, Middlesex: Penguin Books 1978, p. 114. Nadeau claims that this declaration, which was published as a tract in 1925, has not – to his knowledge – been reprinted. p. 112.

2. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem/Theodor W. Adorno, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press 1994, p. 396. Hereafter referred to as *Correspondence*.

the 1850s³) Benjamin's interest lay in examining what the effects of these drugs could "teach us philosophically"⁴.

It wasn't, however, until some eight years later (in December 1927) that Benjamin began the first of a series of experiments with hashish that continued sporadically over the next seven years. His first experiment (and several which followed) was undertaken under the supervision of Doctors Fritz Fränkel and Ernst Joël (both of whom Benjamin had known from his days in the Berlin Youth Movement⁵). In 1926, Fränkel and Joël (who jointly ran a clinic for drug addicts in Berlin) published an article on the psychopathological effects induced by hashish intoxication in *Klinische Wochenschrift*. The range of effects outlined in this article (which include a heightened perceptual acuity, the experience of an expansion of space, the "derangement of one's sense of time (*Zeitsinn*)", a return to the infantile, and the frequent activation of memory⁶ were to feature significantly, not only in Benjamin's own writings about the effects induced by the drug, but also in his delineation of auratic experience. As I will endeavour to show in this chapter, the contours of Benjamin's conception of auratic experience – and the important role it occupies in relation to his analysis of the significance of both mimetic perception and the impressions evoked by involuntary memory – grew out of his experiences while under the influence of hashish⁷, even though his analysis of the political significance of auratic experience wasn't developed in his writings until some years later.

While Benjamin did not transform or incorporate his writings on

3. Charles Baudelaire: *Artificial Paradise: On Hashish and Wine as Means of Expanding Individuality*, New York: Herder and Herder 1971. Hereafter referred to as *Artificial Paradise*.

4. See Benjamin's letter to Ernst Schoen of September 19, 1919, Correspondence, p. 148.

5. For Benjamin's comments on his reacquaintance with Fränkel and Joël, see his letter to Scholem of January 30, 1928, Correspondence, p. 323.

6. Fränkel, Fritz and Ernst Joël: "Der Haschisch-Rausch: Beiträge zu einer experimentellen Psychopathologie", *Klinische Wochenschrift*, 5, Nr.37 (1926), pp. 1707-1709. A long quote from this article appears at the beginning of Benjamin's "Hashish in Marseilles". See Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, ed. by Michael W. Jennings/Howard Eiland/Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 673-679.

7. This observation is confirmed by the editors of Benjamin's *Selected Writings*. See the "Chronology", in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 827.

hashish into a book length study, the protocols he wrote while under the influence of the drug, as well as a number of more formally constructed pieces, were published posthumously in 1972 under the title *Über Haschisch*.⁸ As Benjamin claims in a letter written to Scholem in January 1928: These writings “may well turn out to be a very worthwhile supplement to my philosophical observations, with which they are most intimately related, as are to a certain degree even my experiences while under the influence of the drug”.⁹ While the ideas explored in Benjamin’s writings on hashish (which were written between 1927 and 1934) are intermeshed with those developed in his childhood reminiscences, and in his essays on Marcel Proust and photography (which were also written during this period)¹⁰, the most significant influences shaping his conception of the radical experiential effects induced by hashish intoxication were *Artificial Paradise* and the writings of the Surrealists.

Benjamin’s “burning interest”¹¹ in Surrealism during this period was, as Peter Osborne has pointed out, fuelled by its “contribution to the expansion of the idea of political experience”¹² at a time when Benjamin was arguing that the capacity for experience had been significantly diminished. The extent of Benjamin’s interest in the writings of the

8. Benjamin: *Über Haschisch: Novellistisches, Berichte, Materialien*, ed. by Tillman Rexroth, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1972. A selection of Benjamin’s writings on hashish has been published in English translation in Vol. 2 of Benjamin’s Selected Writings. See “Main Features of my Second Impression of Hashish”, pp. 85-90, “Hashish, Beginning of March 1930”, pp. 327-330, “Myslowice-Braunschweig- Marseilles”, pp. 386-393, and “Hashish in Marseilles”, pp. 673-679. Not included in this volume are the “Crocknotizen” and most of the material from the “Protokolle”. See *Über Haschisch*, pp. 57-61 and 65-143 respectively.

9. Correspondence, p. 323.

10. See “A Berlin Chronicle”, in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, pp. 595-637, “Berlin Childhood around 1900” (Final Version), in: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 2002, pp. 345-386, “The Image of Proust”, in: Benjamin: *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana Press 1992, pp. 197-210, and “Little History of Photography”, in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, pp. 507-530.

11. Gershom Scholem: *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America 1981, p. 134.

12. Peter Osborne: “Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of Time”, in: *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin/Peter Osborne, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 63.

group can be gauged from his 1935 letter to Theodor W. Adorno, in which he reflects upon the impact that Louis Aragon's 1926 Surrealist narrative *Paris Peasant* had had upon him when he first came upon the book in the late 1920's.¹³ "Evenings", Benjamin writes, "lying in bed, I could never read more than 2 or 3 pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down".¹⁴

Although Aragon's magical descriptions of the *Passage de l'Opera* in *Paris Peasant* are not explored by Benjamin in any detail in his 1929 essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia"¹⁵, it is nonetheless clear that Aragon's book had a significant impact, not only on the development of the radical conception of intoxication which emerges from this essay, but also on Benjamin's analysis of the political significance of the perceptual and experiential effects induced by hashish intoxication. "To win the energies of intoxication [*die Kräfte des Rausches*] for the revolution", Benjamin writes, "is the project on which Surrealism focuses in all its books and enterprises. This it may call its most particular task"¹⁶ – the significance of which can be traced to the manner in which the perceptual effects induced by hashish intoxication provide access to the "image space" that both Benjamin and the Surrealists associate with the activation of involuntary memory.

In the opening pages of *Paris Peasant*, the "image spaces" opened up by the intoxicated gaze of its narrator are revealed as he strolls through the wondrous "aquarium" into which the *Passage de l'Opera* has been transformed. Attracted by a sound emanating from a shop that sells walking canes, the narrator's attention is drawn to the "greenish, almost submarine light" radiating from the window display, the contents of

13. The first mention of Aragon in Benjamin's correspondence appears in a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal written in June, 1927. See Correspondence, p. 315.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 488. As Bernd Witte has pointed out, Benjamin also translated sections of *Paris Peasant* for publication in the *Literarische Welt* in 1928. See Bernd Witte: *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1997, p. 91.

15. Benjamin: "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia", in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, pp. 207-221. Hereafter referred to as "Surrealism".

16. *Ibid.*, p. 215, and "Der Sürrealismus: Die Letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz", in: *Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften (7 Vols.)*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann/Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991, Vol. II.1, p. 307.

which – under the gaze of the narrator – are transformed into images from his childhood. “It was”, he recounts, “the same kind of phosphorescence that, I remember, emanated from the fish I watched, as a child, from the jetty of Port Bail on the Cotentin peninsula”.¹⁷ The canes – which “possess[ed] the illuminating properties of creatures of the deep” – “floated gently like seaweed”.¹⁸ While some time later – as he gazes through the window of a beauty salon – the sight of a woman’s “remodelled coiffure” is promptly transformed into “a great maroon insect”.¹⁹ These experiences of contiguity – or similarity – across time are, however, not isolated incidents, but the mark of the renewal of the capacity for perception and imagination that, for both Aragon and Benjamin, are hallmarks of Surrealist experience.

In an important fragment in “One-Way Street” (in which the relationship between perceptual renewal and this rejuvenation in the capacity for imagination is rendered more clear) Benjamin argues that the significance of the latter rests upon the extent to which it “subverts the past”²⁰. The “faculty of imagination”, he writes, is

the gift of interpolating into the infinitely small, of inventing, for every intensity, an extensiveness to contain its new, compressed fullness – in short, of receiving each image as if it were that of the folded fan, which only in spreading draws breath and flourishes, in its new expanse, the beloved features within it.²¹

The experiences provoked by the impressions that emerge from the folded fan that is the image (which Aragon’s narrator finds manifested in objects and materials as diverse as telephone switchboards, drinking straws, lamps, and the wickerwork of armchairs²²) activates an experience of the past in the present that Benjamin describes as a “*profane illumination*”, that is, “a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson”.²³

17. Louis Aragon: *Paris Peasant*, London: Pan Books 1987, pp. 36-37.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

20. Benjamin: “My Second Impression of Hashish”, p. 89.

21. “One-Way Street”, in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. by Marcus Bullock/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1996, p. 466.

22. Aragon: *Paris Peasant*, p. 94.

23. “Surrealism”, p. 209.

The political significance of this “inspiration” (which the Surrealists associated with dreams and practices such as automatic writing, hypnosis, and drug taking) is rendered more clear in André Breton’s analysis of the highly circumscribed character of modern existence in his 1924 “Manifesto of Surrealism”. Experience today, Breton writes,

paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge. It too leans for support on what is most immediately expedient, and it is protected by the sentinels of common sense. Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices.²⁴

For Breton, the most significant side-effect of the diminution in the quality of experience is the breakdown of the capacity for imagination and, with it, the waning of the ability to envision a different kind of existence. He argues that the capacity for imagination (which “knows no bounds” in the realm of children) is only exercised “in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility”. Because “it is incapable of assuming this inferior role” for a prolonged period, he claims that it “generally prefers to abandon man to his lusterless fate” in “the vicinity of [his] twentieth year”.²⁵ For Breton, this abandonment has dire consequences for those whose lives are characterised by emptiness and atrophy, because he argues that it is the “[i]magination alone” which “offers [...] some intimation of what *can be*”.²⁶

The role of Surrealism, in this context, is to rid the mind of the “cancer” which “consists of thinking all too sadly that certain things ‘are,’ while others, which well might be, ‘are not’”²⁷, through the rejuvenation of the imagination, and with it, the activation of an encounter with the unconscious. “For this”, Breton writes, “we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud”, on the basis of which the imagination is able to reassert itself.²⁸ Like Proust, Breton argues that it is only

24. André Breton: “Manifesto of Surrealism”, in: Breton: Manifestoes of Surrealism, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1972, p. 10.

25. Ibid., p. 4.

26. Ibid., p. 5.

27. André Breton: “Second Manifesto of Surrealism”, in: Manifestoes of Surrealism, p. 187.

28. Breton: “First Manifesto”, p. 10.

through the mobilisation of an individual's past and present²⁹ (through the "connection established under certain conditions between two things whose conjunction would not be permitted by common sense"³⁰) that the limitations of the conscious mind can be obliterated, opening up a space in which one's capacity for imagination can once again assert itself. As Benjamin stresses in both the preparatory notes for his essay on Surrealism, and the essay itself, the Surrealists are concerned "with experiences, not with theories" and "the showplace of [their] revelation is memory".³¹

In a similar vein to his analysis of Proust's delineation of the powers of involuntary memory, Benjamin claims that it is only in a heightened state of moodiness or intoxication that these experiences can become manifest. "Breton and Nadja", he writes in "Surrealism", "convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys [...], on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons[...], in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience [*Erfahrung*], if not action. They bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion".³² Similarly, Breton argues that just as the intensity and duration of a spark are enhanced in "rarefied gases", the "atmosphere" created by Surrealist practices is particularly conducive to the activation of involuntary memory.³³ "The mind", he writes, "which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood. [...] From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of *having gone astray*, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists".³⁴ Quoting Baudelaire, Breton claims that these explo-

29. André Breton: *Communicating Vessels*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1990, p. 122.

30. Breton quoted in Ruth Brandon: *Surreal Lives: The Surrealists, 1917-1945*, London: Papermac 2000, p. 449.

31. See "Surrealism", p. 208, and "Zum großen Aufsatz über Sürrealismus", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.3, p. 1021.

32. "Surrealism", p. 210. See also *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.1, p. 300.

33. "Manifesto of Surrealism", p. 37.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40. This passage, when read in full, bears a number of similarities to Benjamin's delineation of involuntary memory in "Aus einer kleinen Rede über Proust, an meinem vierzigsten Geburtstag gehalten", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.3, p. 1064. See also Theodor W. Adorno's account of the significance of the Surrealists' attempts to "uncover" childhood memories in "Looking

sions of memory cannot be willed, but rather “come to [man] spontaneously, despotically. He cannot chase them away; for the will is powerless now and no longer controls the faculties”.³⁵

Both the dissolution of the will – and its precipitation by a range of different factors – are the central features of Baudelaire’s analysis of the experiential effects induced by hashish intoxication in *Artificial Paradise*.³⁶ As in Joël and Fränkel’s study of the effects induced by the drug, Baudelaire argues that central among these factors is the derangement of perception ushered in by hashish, in which one’s experience of the dimensions of time and space is expanded to “monstrous” proportions³⁷. He argues that it is through this process of expansion that a heightened sensitivity becomes apparent in each of the senses: “One’s ear perceives near-imperceptible sounds in the very midst of the loudest tumult” and under the “magnifying mirror” of hashish, objects and spaces take on “strange appearances”.³⁸ In a passage which foreshadows Benjamin’s analysis of the “magical correspondences”³⁹ evoked by language in his essays on mimesis, Baudelaire claims that “[e]ven grammar – sterile grammar” is transformed by hashish into a form of “evocative witchcraft”: “[W]ords come to life, wrapped in flesh and bone – the noun, in all its substantive majesty; the adjective, transparent garb that dresses and colors it like glaze; and the verb, angel of motion, that sets the sentence moving.”⁴⁰

Back on Surrealism”, in: Adorno: Notes to Literature, Vol. 1, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, New York, Columbia University Press 1991, p. 88.

35. Breton: “Manifesto of Surrealism”, p. 36.

36. The roots of Baudelaire’s fascination with the drug can be traced back to his involvement in the 1840’s with the “Club des Hachichins”, a group of artists and writers (including Gérard de Nerval, Honoré de Balzac, Eugène Delacroix, and Dr. Jacques-Joseph Moreau) who would meet in Paris to take, and discuss the effects of the drug. See Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler: Baudelaire, London: Vintage 2002, pp. 128-129, and Sadie Plant: Writing on Drugs, London: Faber and Faber 2001, pp. 41-42. As Edouard Roditi argues in his introduction to Baudelaire’s *Artificial Paradise*, it is also likely that Baudelaire experimented with the drug as a young man. *Artificial Paradise*, p. xv.

37. *Artificial Paradise*, p. 70.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 43 and 54.

39. See Benjamin: “Doctrine of the Similar”, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 695.

40. *Artificial Paradise*, p. 69. See also Aragon’s discussion of the manner in which words can function as “mirrors” in *Paris Peasant*, p. 103.

Although Baudelaire refers to this intoxicated state as “hallucinatory”, he is careful to distinguish his use of the term from the manner in which it is employed by physicians. Hallucination in its strict sense, Baudelaire argues, is characterised by a sense of self-sufficiency, insofar as the experience it designates is sealed off from, and is therefore not influenced by, external conditions. Put simply, the person who hallucinates will see things and hear sounds which in reality do not exist, while the “hallucinations” induced by hashish intoxication are fuelled by the surroundings in which one finds oneself.⁴¹ In a passage which evokes Benjamin’s review of a book of plant photographs taken by Karl Blossfeldt⁴², Baudelaire claims that the hashish eater “endu[es] all the external world with an intensity of interest”: The “hue of a blade of grass”, the “shape of a trefoil”, the “gleaming of a dew-drop” and “the quivering of a leaf”⁴³ each take on the most striking appearance when viewed under the “magic glaze” of hashish.⁴⁴

As per the Surrealists, Baudelaire argues that concomitant with this increase in sensitivity comes the enhancement of one’s capacity to perceive similarities between things which would ordinarily be conceived of as disparate: “Sounds are clad in color, and colors contain a certain music”, “[m]usical notes become numbers”, and analogies (which “attack, pervade, and overcome the mind”) “assume an unaccustomed vivid-

41. In “Der Haschisch-Rausch: Beiträge zu einer experimentellen Psychopathologie”, Joël and Fränkel also make a distinction between the images induced by hashish and hallucinations proper. See p. 1708.

42. See Benjamin: “News about Flowers”, in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, pp. 155-157. This short piece is a review of Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst: Photographische Pflanzenbilder*, Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth 1928. It is interesting to note that this review was written in 1928 in the midst of Benjamin’s experiments with hashish.

43. *Artificial Paradise*, p. 65. Baudelaire is quoting Edgar Allan Poe here, although he does not cite the source.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 68. Blossfeldt’s photographs, Benjamin writes, “reveal an entire, unsuspected horde of analogies and forms in the existence of plants”. For example: “The oldest forms of columns pop up in horsetails; totem poles appear in chestnut and maple shoots enlarged ten times; and the shoots of a monk’s-hood unfold like the body of a gifted dancer. Leaping toward us from every calyx and every leaf are inner image-imperatives [*Bildnotwendigkeiten*], which have the last word in all phases and stages of things conceived of as metamorphoses”. “News about Flowers”, p. 156.

ness”.⁴⁵ It would however, as Benjamin states in “Convolute J” of *The Arcades Project*, be a mistake to conceive of these experiences as “a simple counterpart to certain experiments with synaesthesia”.⁴⁶ In keeping with his analysis of Proust’s delineation of the significance of the impressions evoked by involuntary memory, what is significant, for Benjamin, about these correspondences is not the sensory connections themselves, but the medium of memory through which these sense impressions become intermingled. In “Convolute J”, Benjamin argues that memory in Baudelaire’s writings is

possessed of unusual density. The corresponding sensory data correspond in it; they are teeming with memories, which run so thick that they seem to have arisen not from this life at all but from some more spacious *vie antérieure*.⁴⁷

It is the shards of this *vie antérieure* which the hashish eater glimpses in the images, thoughts, and experiences which – under his or her intoxicated gaze – “surge up and are projected with the ambitious energy and sudden flare of fireworks” which, “like the explosive powders and coloring chemicals of a pyrotechnic display, [...] blaze up and vanish in the darkness”.⁴⁸

2.1 Auratic Experience and Involuntary Memory

The political significance of Benjamin’s fascination with the “intermittent” “visitation[s]”⁴⁹ of memory evoked by hashish intoxication (and the practices of the Surrealists more generally) is rendered more clear when read alongside his analysis of the atrophy of modern experience in his 1939 essay “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”. Central to Benjamin’s analysis of the decline of the capacity for experience is his delineation of the destruction of the aura – the significance of which can be traced to the important role that Benjamin’s conception of auratic experience occupies in his analysis of the conditions that would lay the

45. Artificial Paradise, pp. 54-55.

46. Benjamin: [J79, 6], *The Arcades Project*, p. 367.

47. Ibid.

48. Artificial Paradise, p. 72.

49. Ibid., p. 34.

ground for the creation and sustenance of an “imaginative conception of a better nature [*der Phantasievorstellung von einer bessern Natur*]”.⁵⁰

In both “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” and “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, the concept of the aura emerges as the mark of an experience born of a non-reified relationship between man and nature. “We define the aura”, Benjamin writes in the former,

as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eyes – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura’s present decay.⁵¹

In “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, Benjamin argues that this experience of distance (which is of a temporal order) designates “the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of perception”.⁵² The act of looking at someone or something, he writes, “carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned”. “Where this expectation is met [...], there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent”.⁵³ Thus, to experience the aura of something

we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*. (These data, 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’.⁵⁴

50. In [J76,1] Benjamin claims that “[t]he decline of the aura and the waning of the imaginative conception of a better nature – this latter conditioned on its defensive position in the class struggle – are one and the same”. The Arcades Project, p. 362. Translation modified. See *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. V.1, p. 457.

51. Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (Third Version), in: Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 2003, p. 255. Hereafter referred to as “Work of Art”.

52. “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, in: Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso 1997, p. 145.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 148. In the final sentence, Benjamin is quoting himself from “The Work of Art” essay. See p. 255.

If the image of someone gazing at a mountain range on the horizon “makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura”, as Benjamin argues in his analysis of Baudelaire, it is because “the expectation roused by the look of the human eye” in this image is not fulfilled under the conditions of modernity.⁵⁵ In contrast to the mood of tranquillity which permeates this image, Benjamin argues that life in the modern city – from the structure of newspapers and crowds, to the organisation of production-line labour – is everywhere permeated by a sense of shock and collision. Influenced by Georg Simmel’s analysis of the psychological effects of urban living in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (the details of which will be discussed in the following chapter)⁵⁶, Benjamin argues that the proliferation of shock in the modern city produces a subject who “is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience [*Erfahrung*]”.⁵⁷

In “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, Benjamin argues that this decrease in the capacity for experience is bound with the role that consciousness plays as a “protective shield” which defends the organism from “excessive energies at work in the external world”.⁵⁸ Drawing on Freud’s analysis of the psychological effects produced by shock in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Benjamin argues that “[t]he greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it is so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one’s life (*Erlebnis*)”.⁵⁹

In “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, both the inability to assimilate data by way of one’s experience, and the decline in one’s capacity to *draw* on one’s experience, is exemplified in Benjamin’s description of the factory worker, whose relationship to both the product of his/her labour – and time more generally – allegorises the “perpetual present”⁶⁰ which de-

55. “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, p. 149.

56. Georg Simmel: “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, in: Simmel on Culture – Selected Writings, ed. by David Frisby/Mike Featherstone, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications 1997, pp. 174-185.

57. “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, p. 112. Benjamin’s analysis of the role that newspapers play in contributing to this inability will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

58. Benjamin quoting Freud, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, p. 115.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

60. I have borrowed this description from John McCole’s analysis of “Erleb-

finer Benjamin's conception of "*Erlebnis*". In contrast to the emphasis on "practice" which is central to the art of craftsmanship (in which the capacity to draw on one's experience is essential to the development of one's practice), Benjamin – drawing on Karl Marx's analysis of alienated labour practices in *Capital* - argues that the "drilling of the workers" in production-line labour makes "a speciality of the absence of all development".⁶¹ "The unskilled worker", he writes, "is the one most deeply degraded by the drill of the machines. His work has been sealed off from experience; practice counts for nothing there".⁶²

Expanding on this idea, Benjamin argues that the experiences of the factory worker can be compared to those of the gambler (a familiar figure in both *The Arcades Project* and Baudelaire's poetry⁶³). While production-line labour "lacks [the] touch of adventure" which is central to the appeal of gambling, Benjamin argues that gambling is nonetheless marked by the same sense of "emptiness" borne of an "inability to complete something which is inherent in the activity of a wage slave in a factory"⁶⁴. "The manipulation of the worker at the machine", he writes,

has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coup* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the labourer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. The work of both is equally devoid of substance.⁶⁵

This passage is significant for an understanding of Benjamin's delineation of the atrophy of modern experience because it allegorises the temporal structure of his conception of *Erlebnis*. In contrast to the experience of contiguity across time which is central to Benjamin's delineation of auratic experience (*Erfahrung*), *Erlebnis* designates the experience of a series of self-contained, finite moments; each of which is "screened off"

nis" in Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1993, p. 262.

61. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", p. 133.

62. Ibid.

63. See, for example, Baudelaire's poem "The Clock", in: Baudelaire: The Flowers of Evil, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1998, pp. 160-163.

64. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", p. 134.

65. Ibid., pp. 134-135.

from those which precede it by the process of “starting all over again” upon which the temporal structure of *Erlebnis* is based.⁶⁶

If Benjamin is drawn to Baudelaire’s poetry, then it is not only because of the manner in which he gives voice to this degeneration of the capacity for auratic experience⁶⁷, but because of the extent to which he invests these self-contained, finite moments with “the weight of an experience (*Erfahrung*)”⁶⁸ through his evocation – in the form of the “*correspondances*” – of an experience of time which exists outside of the “homogenous, empty time”⁶⁹ characteristic of *Erlebnis*. These “*correspondances*” (which emerge when the perception of something in the present evokes an impression of the past with which it is unconsciously associated) are, Benjamin writes, the “data of remembrance”⁷⁰. They are moments of “completing time” which are “not marked by any experience [*Erlebnis*]”.⁷¹

In Baudelaire’s poetry, these *correspondances* are associated with the evocation of the glimmer and density of certain colours, images of trees, masts, oarsmen, crashing waves, the flavour of fruit, dazzling sunlight, and the chant of boatmen. For Benjamin, however, their significance lies not in the particular content of the recollected memories (many of which would appear to derive from Baudelaire’s voyage across the Indian ocean at the age of 20⁷²). Rather, what is significant for Benjamin about these *correspondances* is the extent to which the opening up of time provoked by involuntary memory generates a space within which the remembering subject is able to envision the possibility of a different kind of relationship to his or her environment, and with it, the possibility of a different kind of existence. “In reality”, Benjamin writes in his notes for “On the Concept of History”, “there is not a moment that

66. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

67. See, for example, Baudelaire’s delineation of the experience of time characteristic of modernity in “The Clock”, and in his prose poem “The Double Room”, in: Baudelaire in English, ed. by Carol Clarke/Robert Sykes, London: Penguin 1997, pp. 237-239.

68. “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, p. 154.

69. “On the Concept of History”, in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, p. 395.

70. “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, p. 141.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 139, and *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I.2, p. 637.

72. See, for example, “Exotic Perfume”, “Head of Hair”, and “The Dancing Serpent”, in: *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 48-49, 50-53, and 56-59 respectively. For a detailed account of Baudelaire’s voyage, see Chapter 9 of Baudelaire, pp. 74-81.

would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance [...] the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem [*Aufgabe*].⁷³ It is precisely in these moments in which the “empty passage”⁷⁴ of time as *Erlebnis* is torn asunder by the experience of the past in the present that the political significance of Benjamin’s delineation of auratic experience manifests itself.

2.2 Imagination and Mimesis

If, as Benjamin suggests, the experience of the past in the present evoked by the *correspondances* is associated with a heightened sensitivity, then the emphasis that Benjamin and Baudelaire place on the increase in sensitivity to their surroundings induced by hashish intoxication takes on a greater significance. In “Hashish in Marseilles”, for example, Benjamin describes the extraordinary tenderness to his environment induced by the drug:

It was not far from the first café of the evening, in which, suddenly, the amorous joy dispensed by the contemplation of some fringes blown by the wind had convinced me that the hashish had begun its work.⁷⁵ Baudelaire, too, expresses a similar sentiment: “[A] new sharpness – a greater keenness – becomes apparent in all the senses. The senses of smell, sight, hearing and touch alike participate in this development⁷⁶.

What is significant about this increase in sensitivity described by both Benjamin and Baudelaire is the extent to which it is attributed to the freeing up of one’s experience of time induced by hashish intoxication. For the hashish eater, Baudelaire writes in *Artificial Paradise*, “the *dimension* of time” is “abolished”.⁷⁷ Similarly, in his “Protokoll des Haschischversuchs vom 11. Mai 1928”, Benjamin claims that a “complete disorientation of the sense of time [*Zeitsinn*]” characterises his experience – the significance of which he corroborates by quoting the observations of

73. “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”, in: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, p. 402.

74. See [J69,5], The Arcades Project, p. 351.

75. “Hashish in Marseilles”, p. 678.

76. *Artificial Paradise*, p. 54.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 61. See also p. 21, 22, 24, and 70.

Ernst Joël (with whom he undertook the experiment): “I have miscalculated the time. [...] My watch is going backwards”.⁷⁸

In a similar vein to his delineation of the significance of Baudelaire’s poetry, it is in the loosening up of one’s experience of time provoked by hashish intoxication that Benjamin locates the possibility for the rejuvenation of auratic experience. The connections between the perceptual and experiential capacities of the hashish eater and auratic experience are drawn most suggestively in Benjamin’s description – in “Hashish in Marseilles” – of the hashish eater as a “physiognomist”.⁷⁹

Although he is referring specifically, in this essay, to the hashish eater’s capacity for recognising – in a crowd of unfamiliar faces – facial characteristics reminiscent of friends and acquaintances, as revealed in his notes on the effects of the drug in *The Arcades Project*, this capacity is not limited to the observation of human faces, but extends to the manner in which the intoxicated gaze of the hashish eater animates face-like qualities inherent within objects and spaces. In “Convolute M”, Benjamin argues that, for the hashish eater, everything develops a face: “[E]ach thing”, he claims, “has the degree of bodily presence that allows it to be searched – as one searches a face – for such traits as appear. Under these conditions even a sentence (to say nothing of the single word) puts on a face”.⁸⁰

What is significant about these comments in the light of Benjamin’s analysis of the decline in the capacity for experience is the extent to which this perceptual capacity is rendered synonymous with the definition of a non-reified, auratic form of experience outlined in “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”. “Experience of the aura”, Benjamin writes, “rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the

78. “Walter Benjamin: Protokoll des Haschischversuchs vom 11. Mai 1928”, in: *Über Haschisch*, p. 84. The feeling that “the chronological order” has been freed up also features in Benjamin’s account of Ernst Bloch’s experiment with hashish in “Bloch’s Protokoll zum Versuch vom 14. Januar 1928”. See *Über Haschisch*, p. 78. See also Benjamin’s analysis of “the hashish eater’s demands on time and space” in “Hashish in Marseilles”, p. 674.

79. “Hashish in Marseilles”, p. 675.

80. [M1a,1], *The Arcades Project*, p. 418. In “Hashish in Marseilles”, Benjamin (quoting Karl Kraus) writes: “The more closely you look at a word, the more distantly it looks back’ – appears to extend to the optical”. p. 678. See also Benjamin’s comments about the manner in which his surroundings “wink” at him in “Main Features of My Second Impression of Hashish”, p. 88, and “First Sketches” in: *The Arcades Project*, p. 841.

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 return". Thus, to recapitulate a point made earlier: "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*"⁸¹.

In a similar vein to Benjamin's analysis of the "image-spaces" opened up by the writings and practices of the Surrealists, the conception of involuntary memory that emerges from Benjamin's writings on hashish revolves around the involuntary production and recollection of images:

As this very evening proved, there can be an absolutely blizzard-like production of images, independently of whether our attention is directed toward anyone or anything else. Whereas in our normal state free-floating images to which we pay no heed simply remain in the unconscious, under the influence of hashish images present themselves to us seemingly without requiring our attention. Of course, this process may result in the production of images that are so extraordinary, so fleeting, and so rapidly generated that we can do nothing but gaze at them simply because of their beauty and singularity.⁸²

In "Convolute M", this increase in the activation of involuntary memory is associated with the enhancement of the hashish eater's capacity for recognising similarities – the significance of which is traced in the analysis of mimetic perception outlined in Benjamin's 1933 essays "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty"⁸³.

In "Doctrine of the Similar", Benjamin argues that "[i]nsight into the realms of the 'similar' is of fundamental significance for the illumination of major sectors of occult knowledge" – the importance of which is demonstrated, not in the content of the similarities themselves, but in the replication of the processes through which such similarities are manifested.⁸⁴ Benjamin claims that the capacity for recognising similarities (which is a "a weak rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically") has been significantly attenuated in modern times – resulting in a "perceptual world" which

81. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", p. 148.

82. "Hashish, Beginning of March 1930", pp. 328-329.

83. Both essays are contained in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2. See pp. 694-698, and pp. 720-722 respectively.

84. "Doctrine of the Similar", p. 694.

“contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples”.⁸⁵ These correspondences – which the ancients traced in the constellations of stars with which the “spirits and forces of life were shaped in accordance”⁸⁶ – extended significantly beyond the limited confines within which modern man is able to recognise similarity: “The similarities perceived consciously – for instance, in faces – are”, Benjamin writes, “compared to the countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all, like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg in comparison to the small tip one sees rising above the water”.⁸⁷

In “The Lamp” (which served as a preliminary draft for the ideas discussed in “Doctrine of the Similar”⁸⁸) Benjamin argues that one of the few realms within which what was “the natural heritage of mankind in its early stages” can be found today, is in the play of children.⁸⁹ “Children’s play”, he writes in “Doctrine of the Similar”, “is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another”. Particularly adept at both recognising and producing similarities, “[t]he child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train”⁹⁰ in a realm which is free from what Breton describes as the “imperative [of] practical necessity”.⁹¹ For Benjamin, it is by remaining loyal to that “animistic” relationship to the world of nature and things (which is both a mark of the life of the ancients and the hallmark of auratic experience) that the “liberating” dimension of childhood play manifests itself.⁹²

In “Convolute M”, Benjamin argues that the “category of similarity, which for the waking consciousness has only minimal relevance” also “attains unlimited relevance” for the person intoxicated by hashish.⁹³ In “Myslovice-Braunschweig-Marseilles”, for example, he recounts the story of a man, who – in a late night search for chocolate prompted by

85. See *Ibid.*, p. 698, and “On the Mimetic Faculty”, p. 721.

86. See “The Lamp”, p. 691, and “On Astrology”, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, pp. 684-685.

87. “Doctrine of the Similar”, p. 695.

88. See the translator’s notes to the “The Lamp”, p. 693.

89. “The Lamp”, p. 691.

90. See “Doctrine of the Similar”, p. 694, and “On the Mimetic Faculty”, p. 720.

91. “Manifesto of Surrealism”, p. 4.

92. See Benjamin: “Toys and Play”, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 100.

93. [M1a,1], *The Arcades Project*, p. 418.

the “pangs of hunger” occasioned by the drug – is beckoned by the contents of a barber shop which (under his intoxicated gaze) have been transformed into confectionary products: “Only now”, he writes, “did I realize that the hashish had begun to work, and if I had not been alerted by the way in which boxes of powder had changed into candy jars, nickel trays into chocolate bars, and wigs into cakes, my own loud laughter would have been warning enough”.⁹⁴ While in his experiment of May 11, Benjamin describes the “curious [...] mimetic anticipations” which dominate both his and Ernst Joël’s experience of the drug. Joël, for his part, transforms the corner of a writing table into a “naval base, coal station, something between Wittenberg and Jüterbog” – the significance of which, he notes, can be traced to a memory of his childhood.⁹⁵ While under Benjamin’s intoxicated gaze, an oven metamorphoses into a cat, a writing table into a fruit stall [*Fruchtbude*], and “the creases in [his] white beach trousers” into “the creases of a burnous”⁹⁶. When Joël takes a biscuit, Benjamin offers him a light, and while his cousin Egon Wissing is talking, Benjamin’s “apprehension of his words [is] instantly translated into the perception of colored, metallic sequins that coalesce [...] into patterns” (like “the beautiful colored knitting patterns” in the *Herzblättchens Zeitvertreib* Benjamin had loved as a child).⁹⁷

Although the “image spaces” opened up by hashish intoxication are, in Benjamin’s writings, often associated with memories of the hashish eater’s childhood, what is significant is not so much the particular content of the memories themselves, but rather the extent to which the experience of childhood in the present evoked by involuntary memory rejuvenates the capacity for perception and imagination that Benjamin, Baudelaire, and Breton each associate with childhood. Citing his own re-encounter as an adult with sounds such as the “dull pop with which the flame [lit] up the gas mantle” in his childhood home, and “the jangling of [his] mother’s keys in her basket” as examples, Benjamin

94. “Myslovice-Braunschweig-Marseilles”, p. 390.

95. “Protokoll des Haschischversuchs vom 11. Mai 1928”, pp. 83 and 86 respectively, and Ernst Joël: “Protokoll zu demselben Versuch”, in: *Über Haschisch*, p. 90.

96. See “Hauptzüge der ersten Haschisch-Impression”, in: *Über Haschisch*, p. 67, and “Myslovice-Braunschweig-Marseilles”, p. 392.

97. See “Protokoll des Haschischversuchs vom 11. Mai 1928”, p. 83, and “Hashish, Beginning of March 1930”, p. 328.

argues that it is through the recollection of childhood memories that one's capacity for mimetic perception can be reignited.⁹⁸

Central not only to Benjamin's, but also to Baudelaire's and Breton's analyses of the radicality of childhood perception and cognition is not only the child's heightened mimetic capacity for recognising and producing similarities, but the extent to which the child's capacity for imagination is not limited by what the adult world deems appropriate and/or possible. "Imagination", Baudelaire writes, "is not fantasy", but "a virtually divine faculty that apprehends immediately, by means lying outside philosophical methods, the intimate and secret relation of things, the correspondences and analogies."⁹⁹ To reiterate a point made earlier, Baudelaire argues that the significance of imagination lies in the extent to which it "decomposes all creation and with the raw materials accumulated [...] it creates a new world, it produces the sensation of newness".¹⁰⁰

In *Artificial Paradise*, Baudelaire argues that, "if we were wise", we would harness this "bubbling-over of imagination" occasioned by the effects of hashish in order to derive, not only "the certainty of a better life", but also "the hope of attaining it through daily exercise of our will".¹⁰¹ His concern, however, lies with the danger that the "image spaces" opened up by the drug could be experienced not as catalysts for action, but rather as spectacles conceived of as ends or "paradises" in themselves. For Baudelaire, it is the dissolution of the will occasioned by the drug which is responsible for this development. For while this dissolution opens up a space within which the imagination can flourish, he argues that it also guards against "the ability [of the hashish eater] to

98. "Modern man", Benjamin writes in "The Lamp", "is transported into this very force field [of mimesis] by memories of his childhood". p. 692.

99. Baudelaire: "Further Notes on Edgar Poe", in: Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature, ed. by P.E. Charvet, London: Penguin Books 1992, p. 199. Benjamin also quotes this passage in "Convolute J" of *The Arcades Project*. See [J31a,5], p. 285.

100. Baudelaire: "The Salon of 1859 – Letters to the Editor of the *Revue Française*", in: Baudelaire: *Art in Paris: 1845-1862, Salons and other Exhibitions*, ed. by Jonathan Mayne, Oxford: Phaidon 1981, p. 156. Benjamin also includes this passage in *The Arcades Project*. See [J34a,1], p. 290. See also Baudelaire's delineation of the radicality of childhood perception and cognition in "The Painter of Modern Life", in: Baudelaire: *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, p. 398, and Benjamin's analysis of the "renewal of existence" accomplished by children in "Unpacking my Library", in: *Illuminations*, p. 63.

101. *Artificial Paradise*, pp. 34 and 57.

profit by it”¹⁰². According to Baudelaire, “[i]f a man can instantly procure all wealth in heaven and earth by taking a teaspoon of jelly, then he will never seek to acquire the slightest fraction of it by working. And our most urgent need is to live and work! [...] Indeed, what point is there in working, toiling, writing, creating anything at all, when it is possible to obtain Paradise in a single swallow?”¹⁰³

For Benjamin, a similar shadow is cast upon the writings and practices of the Surrealists by what he describes as their “inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication”.¹⁰⁴ He argues that the “histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious”¹⁰⁵ (which reveals itself, at times, in the writings of the Surrealists) is not politically productive in itself. Rather, what *is* productive is the “fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the charmed space of intoxication”¹⁰⁶ by bringing the experience of the past in the present occasioned by Surrealist practices to bear on the exigencies of the present situation.¹⁰⁷ “The task”, Benjamin writes in “Surrealism”, is “to discover in the space of political action the one hundred percent image space”.¹⁰⁸ This space will not “be measured out by contemplation”¹⁰⁹, but is borne out of a rejuvenation of the capacity for auratic experience – the significance of which lies in the extent to which both the experience of the past in the present that it designates (and the renewal of the capacity for imagination with which it is associated) can serve as a catalyst for the creation and sustenance of a desire for a different kind of existence.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

104. “Surrealism”, p. 216.

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

107. “The point”, as John McCole has argued, “was not to revel in the ecstasy of a complementary world but to return with a sharpened sense for the realities of the world that lie [...] *this* side of the charmed circle”. McCole: Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, p. 226.

108. “Surrealism”, p. 217.

109. *Ibid.*

