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Walter Benjamin's media theory and the tradition of the *media diaphana*¹

Antonio Somaini

1. *Medium and Apparat*

Die Stimme der Freiheit in deutscher Nacht—auf Welle 29.8 [*The Voice of Freedom in the German Night—on Radio Wave 29.8*] is the title of a photomontage published by John Heartfield on April 21st 1937 in *Die Volks-Illustrierte*: a German-language, weekly paper that was the continuation in exile of the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (*AIZ*), whose editorial staff had fled to Prague in 1933. John Heartfield had been publishing his political photomontages in the *AIZ* since 1930, attacking both Weimar capitalism (Thyssen, Krupp) and the rising National Socialist party through a use of photography »as a weapon,« as he had written in an announcement of one of his exhibitions published in 1929 in the *AIZ* with the title *Benütze Foto als Waffe!*²

In this article dedicated to an analysis of the concept of »Medium of perception« in Walter Benjamin's media theory, I would



Fig. 1: John Heartfield: *Die Stimme der Freiheit in deutscher Nacht—auf Welle 29.8*, 1937

¹ The research presented in this article has been developed during my stay as Senior Fellow at the IKKM in Weimar between September 2014 and February 2015. I thank again the two directors of the IKKM, Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert, as well as the other fellows during the same period, for their insightful remarks and suggestions on how to further develop this research. I also thank Michael Cuntz and Harun Maye for their invitation to publish this article in the *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*, and Tom Ullrich for his assistance in the publication process and his always useful comments.

² Cf. John Heartfield: *Photomontages politiques 1930–1938*, ed. by Emmanuel Guigon and Franck Knoery, Strasbourg 2006, p. 32.

like to suggest the possibility of interpreting John Heartfield's photomontage *Die Stimme der Freiheit in deutscher Nacht* as a sort of emblem or visual synthesis of such a theory. As we will see, one of the cornerstones of Benjamin's understanding of media is the idea that human experience is never unmediated, but rather always configured and organized by different forms of material and technical mediation that change through history. Benjamin was convinced, in particular, that sensory experience—the forms and rhythms of perception, the extension and the coordinates of the visible, the audible, the tactile, etc.—had a history, and that such a history was determined by the different ways in which a historically evolving set of technical and material *Apparate* was acting on the human »sensorium,«³ configuring and organizing what he calls, in the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (five versions, 1935–36), »the *Medium* of perception« [*Medium der Wahrnehmung*].⁴ If on the one hand the term *Apparat* (which becomes *Apparate* in the plural, and *Apparatur* if taken as a collective singular) indicates in Benjamin the various material and technical artifacts—such as architectural constructions, technical instruments and forms of representation, sound and optical devices, means of (mass) communication—that contribute, through their various operations, to the organization of the field in which sensory experience takes place, the term *Medium* (a term that I will always write with the German spelling, with the capital »M« and in italics, whenever I will be referring specifically to its meanings in Benjamin's writings and in German literature) indicates precisely such a field: the spatially extended environment, the *milieu*, the atmosphere, the *Umwelt* in which perception occurs. What we may consider as Benjamin's »media theory« is therefore the study of the interplay between the historically-evolving domain of the technical and material *Apparate*, and the »*Medium* of perception« in which they operate, determining different »articulations of the real«⁵.

John Heartfield's photomontage offers us a compelling, synthetic visualization of such an interplay, with all its different sensorial, epistemic, anthropological, and

³ The term *Sensorium* is used by Walter Benjamin in his essay: On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, in: *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, vol. 4 (1938–40), Cambridge, Mass. [u. a.] 2006, p. 328.

⁴ In commenting this well known and widely studied text, we will refer here both to the existing English translations (the so-called »second version« and »third version«, published, respectively, in the volumes 3 and 4 of Benjamin's *Selected Writings*, from now on indicated as SW3 and SW4), and to the new critical edition that was published by the German publisher Suhrkamp in 2012: a volume edited by Burkhardt Lindner which gathers all the textual materials related to this essay and introduces a previously unpublished, *erste Fassung* of the text (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner, Frankfurt am Main 2012).

⁵ On this notion, cf. Bernhard Siegert: *Cultural Techniques. Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of The Real*, New York, NY 2015.

political implications. What we see in *Die Stimme der Freiheit in der deutschen Nacht* is a raised arm and a clenched fist which have turned into a radio antenna or radio tower—two *Apparate* whose presence in the 1920s German mediascape had strongly increased, following the rapid development of radio as a mass medium. The antenna transmits circular waves that spread like lightning across a cloudy, stormy night sky. This sky can be considered as the »*Medium* of perception« which—even though it is already crossed by cloud formations, stormy winds, and electric currents—is further altered and transformed by the waves propagated by the radio antenna. The presence of such an *Apparat* changes this *Medium*, reconfiguring our perception in it. The raised arm and the clenched fist, a clear reference to the Communist salute that appears in other photomontages by Heartfield, reminds us that the interplay between the *Apparate* and the *Medium* always has a political dimension, while the fact that it is an arm that acts as an antenna points to the idea that technical *Apparate* may act like prostheses that are grafted onto the human sensory organs, according to that idea of »innervation« [*Innervation*] that plays a prominent role in Benjamin's understanding of media.

As I will try to show in the following pages, Benjamin's understanding of the relation between the *Apparate* and the »*Medium* of perception« may be better understood if we approach it from three different perspectives: first, by analyzing the role played by this relation within the context of his general thesis that perception, sensory experience, has a history; then, by reconstructing some of the different meanings that Benjamin assigned to the concept of *Medium* in his writings of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, before using it in the artwork essay in 1935–36; finally, by considering Benjamin's concept of the »*Medium* of perception« within the context of the long, post-Aristotelian tradition of the so-called *media diaphana*: a tradition of texts that, beginning with Aristotle's *De anima*, focuses on the role played by material, intermediary, diaphanous substances such as air, vapour, smoke, clouds, water, crystal, and glass in configuring—with their different consistencies and their different degrees of transparency and opaqueness—the environment in which our sensory experience takes place. Traces of such a tradition, as we will see, can be found throughout Romantic literature and philosophy and during the first decades of the twentieth century, and I am convinced that Benjamin was influenced by this tradition in his use of the term *Medium*.

These three, interconnected perspectives will allow us, hopefully, to shed new light on a topic, Walter Benjamin's media theory, that, even though widely and often very effectively studied,⁶ has not been analysed, so far, taking as a starting

⁶ Cf., for example, the excellent anthology of Benjamin's essays on media edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, which underlines, since the very beginning, how one of the main goals of Benjamin's media theory was the analysis of

point a close analysis of *all* the passages in which Benjamin uses the term *Medium* in his writings.⁷

2. Media theory and the historicity of perception

The idea that perception has a history, and that such a history is determined by the way in which a steadily evolving set of technical and material *Apparate* keeps on reorganizing the »*Medium* of perception,« is at the center of Benjamin's artwork essay. In a passage that appears in all the versions of the text except for the first (the *erste Fassung*, not translated in English),⁸ Benjamin writes that »just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the *Medium* in which it occurs [*das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt*]—is conditioned not only by nature but by history.«⁹ The goal of the artwork essay, continues the same passage, is that of understanding »the changes in the medium of present-day perception« [*die Veränderungen im Medium der Wahrnehmung deren Zeitgenossen wir sind*], and in particular those produced by *Apparate* such as photography and cinema. Benjamin's media theory is therefore conceived as an »aesthetics« that

»technologies that produced changes in, and served as virtual or actual prostheses for, human perception« (Walter Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Essay on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, MS 2008, »Editors' introduction«, p. 1). A close analysis of the meanings Benjamin assigned to the terms *Medium* and *Apparat* served as a basis for the organization of the following Italian anthology of Benjamin's writings on media, which differs in several ways from the one edited by Jennings, Doherty, and Levin: Walter Benjamin: *Aura e choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media*, ed. by Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini, Torino 2012.

⁷ Among the few, important exceptions: Tobias Wilke: *Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses*, in: *Grey Room* 39 (2010), pp. 39–55; Markus Bauer: *Die Mitte der Mitteilung. Walter Benjamins Begriff des Mediums*, in: Christian Schulte (ed.): *Walter Benjamins Medientheorie*, Konstanz 2005, pp. 39–47; Samuel Weber: *Benjamin's –abilities*, Cambridge, MS/ London 2008 (in particular pp. 31–52 on language as medium). Some brief remarks on the meaning of the term *Medium* in Benjamin's writings can also be found in Miriam Bratu Hansen: *Cinema and Experience. Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London 2012, p. 108. On the role of media history in Benjamin's theory of culture, cf. Sigrid Weigel: *Detail, photographische und kinematographische Bilder. Zur Bedeutung der Mediengeschichte für Benjamin's Kulturtheorie*, in: Sigrid Weigel: *Walter Benjamin. Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder*, Frankfurt am Main 2008, pp. 297–332.

⁸ For the different versions of the text, cf. note 4.

⁹ Walter Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction: »second version«, SW3 p. 104, and »third version«, SW4 p. 255.*

studies the historical transformations of a sensory experience that is *always* somehow technically mediated. Cinema was for Benjamin »the most important subject matter, at present«, for such an »aesthetics,«¹⁰ since it showed in the clearest way how during the first decades of the twentieth century the »Medium of perception« had being entirely reorganized by a new generation of technical *Apparate*.¹¹

Two years later, the idea of the historicity of perception is mentioned again with great emphasis in the review of Dolf Sternberger's *Panorama, or Views of the Nineteenth Century* (1938), in which we read that »the question of whether people's visual impressions are determined only by natural constants, or additionally by historical variables, is at the very leading edge of research. To move an inch closer to an answer is a hard-won advance.«¹² »Light—adds Benjamin in the same text—impinges on human experience only in a manner permitted by the historical constellation,«¹³ and in the *Letter on Georges Salles' »Le Regard«* (1940), »the history of human perception« is presented as »not only one of our most subtle temptations, but also one of our most arduous attempts.«¹⁴

The artwork essay in its different versions, together with the fragments of the *Arcades Project* as well as the various texts concerning French nineteenth-century culture written by Benjamin between 1938 and 1940 in connection to the project of a book on Baudelaire, can be considered as a combined way of fulfilling this task. In them, Benjamin deals with the historicity of perception from a double perspective: on the one hand, by analysing the changes in perception caused by a series of technical *Apparate* that had become widespread during the first three decades of the twentieth century (besides photography and cinema, daily newspapers, street advertising, the telephone, the gramophone, the microphone, and the radio), while on the other, by searching for the first signs of these changes in the technical and material culture of the nineteenth century, choosing Paris as the main site of vast media-archaeological excavation.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., SW3, p. 120.

¹¹ We may refer, here, to Lorenz Engell's idea according to which media theories are always influenced by the specific medium they choose as a reference or vantage point: in this perspective, the artwork essay can be considered as *a media theory formulated from the vantage point of cinema*. Cf. Lorenz Engell: Affinität, Eintrübung, Plastizität. Drei Figuren der Medialität aus der Sicht des Kinematographen, in: Stefan Münker and Alexander Roesler (eds.): Was ist ein Medium?, Frankfurt am Main 2008, pp. 185–210.

¹² Walter Benjamin: Review of Sternberger's *Panorama*, SW4, p. 146.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Une lettre de Walter Benjamin au sujet de *Le Regard* de Georges Salles [second version], in: Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften (from now on GS), ed. by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main 1974–89, vol. 3, p. 595.

¹⁵ An analysis of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in terms of media archaeology can be found in

This double approach was based on the observation that, beginning with the mid-nineteenth century and then increasingly during the first decades of the twentieth, the human »sensorium« [*Sensorium*] or »apparatus of perception« [*Wahrnehmungsapparat*]¹⁶ had been more and more exposed to the action of a whole new generation of technical *Apparate* which had reorganized completely the »Medium of perception.« The use of the term *Apparat* in order to indicate both the *sensory* and the *technical* apparatuses involved in the different forms of technically mediated experience—a use that can be found also in Freud, who in *A Note upon the »Mystic Writing Pad«* (1925) discusses the relations between our »perceptual apparatus« [*Wahrnehmungsapparat*] and »all the forms of auxiliary apparatuses [*Hilfsapparate*] we have invented for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions«, such as »spectacles, photographic cameras, ear-trumpets«, and, of course, the »mystic writing pad«¹⁷—seems to indicate a certain predisposition, by the human sensory organs, to the encounter with technology. Subjected to an endless series of »performances,« »tests,« and »tasks« that resembled the ones executed by athletes in sport competitions and by industry workers in a context heavily influenced by Taylorism, the modern individual had to undergo a particular form of »training« whose aims are described by Benjamin with terms related to physiology, psychology, and psychotechnics: »innervation« and »incorporation« of the technical *Apparate* onto the individual and the collective body, »adaptation« of the sensory organs to the new rhythms of perception and attention,¹⁸ »exercise« and »schooling« of a »sense perception altered by technology,«¹⁹ in order »to establish an equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus«²⁰ within the »Medium of perception.«

But how did Benjamin come to use this last expression? In order to properly understand the use of the term *Medium* that we find in the artwork essay, we need

Knut Ebeling: *Wilde Archäologien. Theorien materieller Kultur von Kant bis Kittler*, Berlin 2012.

¹⁶ On Benjamin's use of these two terms, cf. id.: On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, SW₄, p. 328, and *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, dritte Fassung, in: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter* (as note 14), p. 138.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud: *Notiz über den »Wunderblock«*. First published simultaneously in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* 11/1 (1925), and in *Ges. Schr.*, 6, 415; reprinted *Ges. W.*, 14, 3.

¹⁸ On »adaptation« and »innervation«, cf. note 10 of the »second version« of the artwork essay (SW₃, p. 124), and the fragment entitled »The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression«, in which Chaplin's »way of moving«, his »*Gestus*«, is described as »a series of minute innervations« (SW₃, p. 94).

¹⁹ Benjamin: *The Work of Art* (as note 6), »second version«, SW₃ p. 122; »third version«, SW₄, p. 270.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, »second version«, SW₃ p. 117.

to look back at how this same term was used by Benjamin in previous writings, beginning with the early writing on color of the mid-1910s.

3. *Aura as Medium*

Benjamin's idea that the »*Medium* of perception« is the spatially extended environment in which sensory experience takes place needs to be contextualised in relation to the various meanings that he assigns to the term *Medium* in his writings, spanning from the early texts of the 1910s to the late theses *On the Concept of History* (1940). In all these texts, the term *Medium* indicates a constellation of different *in-between entities and domains* within which different forms of mediation—be they material, technical, or discursive—take place. Such entities and domains include—in the chronological order of their appearances in Benjamin's writings—»color« (*The Rainbow: A Conversation About Imagination*, 1915) as a realm in constant transformation, a »homeland of clouds« (*The Soaked Magic Wand*, 1934) through which one enters another intermediary realm, the one of »imagination« [*Phantasie*];²¹ the pictorial »mark« [*Mal*], as opposed to the graphic »sign« [*Zeichen*] (*Painting, or Signs and Marks*, 1917);²² »language«, intended not as a »means« [*Mittel*] of »communication« [*Mitteilung*], but rather as the realm within which things are created through the act of naming (*On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, 1917);²³ the »criticism of art« [*Kunstkritik*] as a »*Medium* of reflection« [*Reflexionsmedium*], a vast realm of »mediation« [*Vermittlung*] within which thought may unfold the infinite »connections« [*Zusammenhänge*] that link every artwork to all other artworks (*The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, 1919)²⁴; the historically changing »*Medium* through which works of art continue to influence later ages« (in a fragment dated 1920), a *Medium* which is dense and opaque for those who are contemporary with a given work, and that becomes fainter and more transparent with the passing of time;²⁵ »aura« as a *Medium* in the sense of a diaphanous halo surrounding the human beings and the objects portrayed in early nineteenth-century photographs (*Little History of Photography*, 1931);²⁶ »memory« as »the *Medium* of that which is

21 Walter Benjamin: *The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination*, in: *Early Writings 1910–1917*, Cambridge, MS/ London 2011, pp. 214–223; Id.: *Der eingetunkte Zauberstab*, in: *GS III* p. 417.

22 Id.: *Painting, or Signs and Marks*, *SW1* pp. 83–86.

23 Id.: *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, *SW1*, pp. 62–74.

24 Id.: *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, *SW1*, pp. 116–200.

25 Id.: *The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages*, *SW1* p. 235.

26 Id.: *Little History of Photography*, *SW2.2*, pp. 507–530.

experienced [*Medium des Erlebten*], just as the earth is the *Medium* in which ancient cities lie buried« (*Excavation and Memory*, 1932)²⁷; »language« as »an archive of non-sensuous similarities«, »the *Medium* in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another« (*On the Mimetic Faculty and Doctrine of the Similar*, both 1933)²⁸; »fashion«, »the market«, and »the crowd« as different aspects of the *Medium* in which the urban experience of the inhabitants of nineteenth-century Paris took place²⁹; finally, »time«, which in the theses *On the Concept of History* (1940) is conceived not as an »empty *Medium*«, but rather as a »*Medium* filled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]«.³⁰

Since an in-depth analysis of all these meanings of the term *Medium* in Benjamin's writings is not possible in the context of this article,³¹ I will focus on the interpretation of *aura* as a *Medium* that we find in the *Little History of Photography* (1931), in order to show how such an interpretation can be connected to the interplay between *Apparate* and »*Medium* of perception« described above, as well as to the tradition of the so-called *media diaphana*.

The beginning of the *Little History of Photography* is strictly connected to what Benjamin writes in a fragment dated 1920, a fragment in which the *Medium* is presented as a sort of atmospheric halo that surrounds every work of art and that conditions its reception through its changing degrees of density and transparency: »The *Medium* through which works of art continue to influence later ages is always different from the one in which they affect their own age. Moreover, in those later times its impact on older works constantly changes, too. Nevertheless, this *Medium* is always relatively fainter than what influenced contemporaries at the time it was created.«³²

²⁷ The short essay was written by Benjamin in two different versions: one as an isolated, unpublished fragment entitled »Excavation and Memory« (SW2.2, p. 576), which was published in the *Gesammelte Schriften* as part of a series of short texts entitled *Denkbilder*, and one as part of *Berlin Chronicle* (Ibid., p. 611).

²⁸ Id.: *Doctrine of the Similar*, SW2.2 pp. 694–698; Id.: *On the Mimetic Faculty*, SW2.2 pp. 720–722.

²⁹ Id.: *The Arcades Project*, (from now on *AP*), Cambridge, MS/ London 1999, fragments B 1a, 2, p. 64; B3, 8, p. 70. Id.: *Central Park*, SW4, p. 168.

³⁰ The term *Medium* appears in section XII of the »Hannah Arendt Manuskript« of the *Theses on the Concept of History*: cf. Walter Benjamin: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, ed. by Gérard Raulet, Frankfurt am Main 2012, p. 25.

³¹ An analysis of each one of the passages in which Benjamin uses the term *Medium* will be presented in a longer version of this article forthcoming in the journal *Grey Room* with the title »Walter Benjamin's Media Theory: the *Medium* and the *Apparat*« (*Grey Room* 62, Winter 2016, pp. 6–41).

³² Walter Benjamin: *The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages*, SW1 p. 235.

Just as in a letter written in 1935 to Werner Kraft Benjamin will describe the artwork essay as a »*Teleskop*« through which one could try to penetrate the »blood fog« [*Blutnebel*] hovering over the culture of the nineteenth century,³³ in the opening lines of the *Little History of Photography* Benjamin mentions again the different densities of the »fog« [*Nebel*] that conditions the view a modern historian may have of the beginnings of technical *Apparate* such as photography or printing: »The fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which shrouds the early days of printing.«³⁴

The world of early photographs, Benjamin continues, is not only a world that can be accessed only by penetrating the »fog«, the *Medium*, that separates it from the gaze of a historian writing in the 1930s. It is also a realm characterized by a »*Medium* of perception« with its own specific density: a realm of auratic images wrapped up in protecting, envelopping materials, and recording a reality that seemed to be surrounded by a diaphanous, haloed atmosphere. Daguerreotypes were precious, »one of a kind« images, which were kept in »cases« in order to protect them.³⁵ The »countenance« of the human beings represented in the early photographs »had a silence about it in which the gaze rested.«³⁶ As Benjamin writes, »there was an aura about them, a *Medium* [*es war ein Aura um sie, ein Medium*] that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that *Medium*.«³⁷

In this very important passage, Benjamin considers the German terms *Aura* and *Medium* to be equivalent³⁸: they both indicate the specific density of the diaphanous halo, the atmosphere that surrounds the material world of the nineteenth century as it is represented through photography, and that conditions the possibility of the modern spectator to have access to it. According to Benjamin, such density had become visible thanks to the specific technical properties—and limitations—of early photographic techniques: in this case, there was a clear »technical determinedness of the auratic appearance«³⁹ which had in the long exposures demanded by the low sensitivity of early photographic plates the technical cause of the absorbed attitude of the represented subjects and the *sfumato* atmosphere (»the absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow«⁴⁰) that surrounded them.

³³ Letter to Werner Kraft, October 1935, quoted in Burkhardt Lindner: »Kommentar« to *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter* (as note 4), p. 323.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin: *Little History of Photography*, SW2.2, p. 507.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 515–517.

³⁸ Miriam Bratu Hansen comments on this equivalence between »*Aura*« and »*Medium*« in this passage in her *Cinema and Experience* (as note 7), p. 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 517.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

An atmosphere which will later be intentionally enhanced by pictorialist photographers, who »saw as their task to simulate the aura using all the arts of retouching, and especially the so-called gum print.«⁴¹

The photographs of Eugène Atget, discovered and publicized at the end of the 1920s by Man Ray and then published by Berenice Abbott, opened the path for a radical break with the auratic atmosphere of pictorialist photography. Just as »an actor who, disgusted with the profession, wiped off the mask and then set about removing the makeup from reality too,« Atget is presented by Benjamin as a photographer who begins to »disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of the decline. He cleanses this atmosphere—indeed, he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography.«⁴² Atget's photographs, representing the empty, unadorned spaces of the streets and the squares of Paris without the typical *sfumato* of pictorialist photography, »suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship«⁴³: in this way, they contribute to »the peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura« which opens the path for a new political »education« of the gaze that will be further pursued by the Surrealists and by photographers such as August Sander, with his »training manual«—the actual term used by Benjamin is *Übungsatlas*—entitled *Antlitz der Zeit*.⁴⁴

What emerges from the fragment written in 1920 and the *Little History of Photography* is therefore an idea of the *Medium*—the »*Medium* of perception«—as a historically changing, atmospheric, sensorial environment which can be altered by different technical *Apparate* or by the different uses of a same *Apparat*: on the one hand, the low sensitivity of the photographic plates used in mid-nineteenth century photography and the *sfumato* aesthetics of pictorialism emphasize the density and the opaqueness of the *Medium*; on the other, Atget's photographs, followed later by the aesthetics of precision and detail developed by the *Neue Vision* of László Moholy-Nagy and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of Albert Renger-Patzsch, will instead use the photographic apparatus in a different way, emphasizing the transparency of the *Medium* in which visual experience takes place.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 518.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 520. On Benjamin's interpretation of Sander's project *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, part of which was published in 1929 in the volume *Antlitz der Zeit*, cf. Antonio Somaini: *Übungsatlas. The Picture Atlas and the Training of the Gaze in Benjamin and Sander*, in: Mira Fliescher, Fabian Goppelsröder and Dieter Mersch (eds.): *Sichtbarkeiten 4. Praktiken visuellen Denkens*, Zürich 2016.

4. Benjamin and the tradition of the *media diaphana*

As an analysis of the different meanings of the term *Medium* in Benjamin's writings clearly demonstrates, such a term never indicates neither a technical instrument, nor a form of representation, nor a means of communication, nor the vast domain that since the early 1920s has been defined with the English term »mass media«—radio, film, television, newspapers, the press. The term *Medium*, instead, indicates in Benjamin, first, a series of different realms (color, the pictorial mark, language, criticism, memory) in which some kind of material, cognitive, or discursive mediation occurs, and then, in the unpublished fragment of 1920, the *Little History of Photography*, and the artwork essay, the »*Medium* of perception«: the environment, the *milieu*, the atmosphere, the *Umwelt* in which perception is configured and organized by a series of steadily evolving technical and material *Apparate*.⁴⁵

Benjamin's understanding of *Medium* is similar to the way in which such term was used by other authors writing during the 1920s and 1930s, and differs sharply from the meaning the English term »medium« acquired, between the 1930s and the 1940s, in the writings of authors theorizing the *medium specificity* of art forms such as painting and cinema. If Rudolf Arnheim, in the English translation of his *Film als Kunst*, can develop his theory of film as an artistic form on the basis of an analysis of the »basic elements of the film medium,«⁴⁶ that are different from those of other »media« such as painting, music, literature, and dance, and if Clement Greenberg, in his *Towards a Newer Laocoön* (1940), can define »purity« in painting as »the willing acceptance of the limitations of the medium,«⁴⁷ it is because in both authors the English term »medium« is used in order to indicate the physical properties of a material support and the representational possibilities considered to be *specific* of that support and its related techniques. Authors such as László Moholy-Nagy and Béla Balázs, instead, never used the German term

⁴⁵ As Miriam Bratu Hansen writes, »Benjamin concept of medium [...] cannot be conflated with the post-McLuhan equation of the term with technological medium, let alone with a means of communication. Rather, it proceeds from an older philosophical usage (at least since Hegel and Herder) referring to an in-between substance or agency—such as language, writing, thinking, memory—that mediates and constitutes meaning; it resonates no less with esoteric and spiritualist connotations pivoting on an embodied medium's capacity of communing with the dead« (Cinema and Experience (as note 7), p. 108).

⁴⁶ Rudolf Arnheim: *Film as Art* [first translated in 1933 in a shorter version entitled *Film*], Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1957, p. 9 (significantly, the term »medium« does not appear in the German original, in which the phrase reads as such: »die elementare Materialeigenschaften des Filmbildes«; cf. id.: *Film als Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 24).

⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg: *Towards a Newer Laocoön* (1940), in: *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 voll., ed. by John O'Brian, Chicago/London 1986, vol. I (1939–1944), pp. 23–41.

Medium in order to indicate photography or cinema. These are named in their writings through terms such as *Apparat* (apparatus, device), *Mittel* (means), *Technik* (technique), or *Maschine* (machine), while *Medium* has the same spatial, environmental, atmospheric meaning that we find in Benjamin.

In Béla Balázs' *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924), for example, cinema is presented as an *Apparat* (the *Kinoapparat*), a *Mittel*, a *Maschine*, an »art,« even a new »sense organ,« but never as a *Medium*. This term, instead, is used by Balázs in order to refer to those »atmospheres«, those »affective tonalities« (the untranslatable *Stimmungen*) or even that *Aura* that only cinema can record and reveal on the screen:

»Atmosphere is to be sure the soul of every art. It is the air and the aroma that pervade every work of art, and that lend distinctiveness to a medium [*Medium*] and a world. This atmosphere is like the nebulous primal matter that condenses into individual shapes. It is the substance common to the most disparate works, the ultimate reality of every art. Once atmosphere is present, specific defects in individual works cannot do fundamental damage. The question of the »origins« of this special atmosphere is thus always the question of the deep source of every art.«⁴⁸

We find a similar understanding of *Medium* and *Apparat* in the writings of László Moholy-Nagy. In *Malerei Fotografie Film* (1925, 1927) photography and film are presented as *Apparate* whose aim is that of configuring in different ways that essential »compositional means« or »factor« that is light, in order to produce different forms of »light composition« [*Lichtgestaltung*]. The term »medium« appears in a prominent position in an article published two years earlier, in English, in the journal *Broom*. The article is entitled *Light: A Medium of Plastic Expression* (1923), and in it Moholy-Nagy uses the term »apparatus« to mention the »photographic apparatus«—the series of material and technical elements (sensitive plate, lenses, mirror arrangements, etc.) that allow for the production of photographic images, with or without camera—while the term »medium« is used in order to indicate light as a »plastic medium« that can be moulded, configured, and recorded in different ways by the photographic apparatus. Even though Moholy-Nagy published this article in English and not in German, the distinction between »apparatus« and »medium« is clearly based on the same distinction between *Apparat* and *Medium* that we have found in Benjamin and Balázs, and light, a spatially extended, atmospheric entity, is here presented as a »medium of expression«, or »medium of composition,« that can be »filtered, reflected or refracted« through different materials

⁴⁸ Béla Balázs: *Der sichtbare Mensch, oder die Kultur des Films* (1924), Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 30.

such as »water, oil, acids, crystal, metal, glass, tissue, etc.«⁴⁹ In the later *Von Material zu Architektur* (1929), conceived as a presentation of Moholy-Nagy's teaching methods at the Bauhaus, light is presented as a material that can connect the surface of representation with the surrounding »atmosphere« [*atmosphäre*].⁵⁰

The use of *Medium* by authors such as Balázs, Moholy-Nagy and Benjamin is similar to the one we find in other German authors writing during the 1920s and 1930s about the nature of our sensory experience of space outside the field of photography, film, and art theory. We may mention here the biologist and zoologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll, who in his *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909, 1921) uses the term *Medium* in order to name the spatial configurations (material articulations, atmospheric densities, fluid currents) of the *Umwelt*, the living environment in which every animal perceives and acts;⁵¹ the philosopher and graphologist Ludwig Klages, who in his *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* writes about »the *Medium* of the perceptual space«;⁵² the neurologist, psychiatrist, and phenomenologist Erwin Straus, who in his *Vom Sinn der Sinne* (1935) uses the term *Medium* in order to distinguish the geometrically organized, »objective *Medium*« of »perception« from the loosely structured, lived space of »sensation«;⁵³ finally, the *Gestalt* psychologist Fritz Heider, who published in 1926 an essay entitled *Ding und Medium* [*Thing and Medium*] that plays a major role in this perspective.⁵⁴ In it, he uses the term *Medium* in order to explain how we identify causal relations in the world surrounding us by freely distinguishing between what we perceive as a *loosely structured* »ground«—the *Medium*—and the more *strictly structured* configurations that we consider as *Dinge*, »things.« In this constructivist approach to our perception of the world around us, light and sound waves, water, glass, fog, and air are indicated by Heider as examples of the different *mediating* substances that constitute the general *Medium*, the »sphere«⁵⁵ in which our experience takes place. According to Heider's perspective—which in many ways can be compared with Benjamin's—

⁴⁹ László Moholy-Nagy: *Light: A Medium of Plastic Expression*, in: Broom, New York, IV, no. 4, March 1923, pp. 283–284. cf. also the later id.: *Light: A New Medium of Expression*, in: *Architectural Forum*, Chicago, May 1939.

⁵⁰ Id.: *Von Material zu Architektur* (1929), ed. by Hans M. Wingler, Berlin 2001, p. 90 [English translation: *The New Vision* (1938), Mineola, NY 1975, p. 86].

⁵¹ Jakob Johann von Uexküll: *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1921), ed. by Florian Mildenerberger and Bernd Herrmann, Berlin/Heidelberg 2014, pp. 63 and 187. (I thank Birgit Schneider for having pointed out to me von Uexküll's use of *Medium*).

⁵² Ludwig Klages: *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, Leipzig 1922, pp. 633 and 1025.

⁵³ Erwin Straus: *Vom Sinn der Sinne* (1935), Berlin/Heidelberg 1956, pp. 332–335.

⁵⁴ Fritz Heider: *Ding und Medium*, Berlin 2005 (English translation *Thing and Medium*, in: *On Perception, Event, Structure, and Psychological Environment: Selected Papers*, Madison, CT 1959).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

the *Medium* is a dynamic, plastic *sensorium*, within which »things« appear and disappear according to the different viewpoints and the different intentions that structure our interaction with the material world.

Examples like these show how in the German context—in a similar way to what was happening in the English one, if we consider the meaning of *medium* in the writings of authors such as T.S. Eliot, John Dewey and William James, who in his *The Meaning of Truth* (1914) defines the »medium« as the »experienceable environment [...] connecting knower with known«⁵⁶—the term *Medium* was still associated with a long, post-Aristotelian tradition that interpreted the Latin term *medium* as indicating both the intermediary realm in which our sensory experience takes place, and the different in-between substances that, with their various densities, textures, and degrees of transparency, constitute such a realm.⁵⁷

The history of this idea of *medium* begins with the notions of *diaphanes* and *metaxy* in Aristotle's treatise *De Anima*.⁵⁸ According to Aristotle, vision cannot happen in the void: in order for vision to be possible, there has to be an intermediary substance between the human body and the objects perceived, the *diaphanes*, which is colorless and not visible *per se*. Once the *diaphanes* passes from the state of potency to that of act, it moves from darkness to light, and it can be activated by color, transmitting then the action of color towards the human sensorium [*aistheterion*].⁵⁹ The *diaphanes* involved in the process of vision is just one of the several manifestations of the *metaxy*,⁶⁰ a term through which Aristotle names all

⁵⁶ On the meaning of *medium* in T.S. Eliot and William James, cf. David W. Trotter: Eliot and the Idea of »Media«, in: Francis Dickey and John Morgenstern (eds.): *The Edinburgh Companion to T.S. Eliot and the Arts*, forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press in 2016 (I thank David W. Trotter for the insightful suggestions on this subject).

⁵⁷ For the use of *Medium* in the German domain, cf. Albert Kümmel and Petra Löffler (ed.): *Medientheorie 1888–1933: Texte und Kommentare*, Frankfurt am Main 2002. In their introduction (p. 12), the editors confirm how the German concept of *Medium* was never used in the 1920s and 1930s in order to indicate what today we consider as »media«, so much so that for the period they analyze (1888–1933) one can only speak of »*Medientheorien avant la lettre*« (p. 16). Significantly, the definition of *Medium* given by the dictionary *Der Große Brockhaus* in 1932 does not mention media of communication, but only physical *Medien* such as »rays of light« and spiritist, and occultist *Medien* performing parapsychological activities.

⁵⁸ On the history of the concept of *Medium* up to the beginning of the 20th century, cf. Stefan Hoffmann: *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs*, Hamburg 2002; Id.: *Medienbegriff*, in: Jens Schröter (ed.): *Handbuch Medienwissenschaft*, Stuttgart/Weimar 2014, pp. 13–20.

⁵⁹ Aristotle: *De anima*, B 7, 418 b, 5–6, and 419 a, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 419 a, 20–21. For an analysis of the different »figures of mediality« in Aristotle (indicated by terms such as *mesotēs*, *meson*, and *metaxy* in the different fields of ethics, physics, biology, logic, and the theory of knowledge), cf. Emmanuel Alloa: *Metaxu*.

those necessary, intermediary entities that make sensory experience possible by transmitting the forms of external objects to the sensory organs: diaphanous substances like air and water, for example, can be a *metaxy* for seeing, hearing, and smelling; saliva and other liquids can be a *metaxy* for tasting, while the flesh of the human body is a *metaxy* for touching. The Greek term *metaxy* will be later translated in Latin with *medium* by Michael Scotus, in his translation, around 1225, of Averroes' *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima*: a treatise in which the *medium* becomes the condition of possibility not only of sensation, but also of thought. This passage is crucial, because the *medium* becomes now the realm in which *experience* in its entirety takes place.⁶¹

In Medieval and Modern optics, the Aristotelian theory of the *diaphanes* develops into the theory of the so-called *media diaphana*: the various diaphanous substances like air, clouds, smoke, water, fluids, glass, and crystals, that—with all their different states and their different degrees of transparency and consistency—condition our sensory perception. In the case of vision, the *media diaphana* allow the passage of the light rays entering the eye or projected out of the eye, according to the different theories of vision, but also influence their trajectory, giving place to the different phenomena of reflection and refraction. The *medium* is therefore not a neutral, intermediary realm, but rather a diversified and *active* spatial environment that configures in different ways our sensory experience. It is in this perspective, that in his *Opticks* (1704), Newton will distinguish between different types of »aethereal« or »ambient medium«—»transparent,« »pellucid,« »elastick,« »fluid,« »quiescent,« »vibrating,« »uniform,« »refracting« or »reflecting«—up to the point of identifying the »aethereal medium« as the »sensorium of God«.⁶²

Throughout the nineteenth century, traces of the idea of *media diaphana* can be found in authors writing in English, French, and German. In Germany in particular, authors writing within the context of Idealist philosophy and Romanticism use the term *Medium* in a sense that is particularly important in order to understand the meaning assigned to it by Benjamin. While Hegel develops his entire philosophical system around the idea that every historical or gnoseological process unfolds dialectically through some kind of »mediation«—the »sublation«, *Aufhebung*, is a form of »mediation«, *Vermittlung* –, in the writings of authors such

Figures de la médialité chez Aristote, in : *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 2/62 (2009), pp. 247–262.

⁶¹ I thank Emanuele Coccia for his insightful suggestions on this topic. For his understanding of the notion of »medium«, cf. in particular *La Vie sensible*, Paris 2010.

⁶² On the history of the notions of *medium*, *milieu*, and *ambiance*, and on Newton's *sensorium Dei*, cf. L. Spitzer: *Milieu and Ambiance. An Essay in Historical Semantics*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3/1 (September 1942), pp. 1–42; 3/2 (December 1942), pp. 169–218.

as Schiller, Herder, Novalis, Brentano, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Wieland, Ritter, Fichte, Schelling, Feuerbach, and Schleiermacher the term *Medium* appears in a series of expressions and metaphors that refer back to the tradition of *media diaphana* and describe the variability of the conditions in which perception takes place.⁶³ The *Medium* is here a substance analogous to clear air or fog, a smooth glass or a refracting prism, a deforming lens or a colored filter, a shining crystal or a viscous fluid, a chemical substance or an invisible (electro)-magnetic field. It may be either transparent or opaque, bright or dark, colored or colorless, pure or impure, but its nature is always somehow *active*: an instrument or a source of clarification or confusion, illumination or disruption, truth or falsehood.

To mention just a few examples, Herder, in his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91), revives the ancient theory of the »ether« and describes a world in which »the *Medium* of the air« [*das Medium der Luft*] is the space-filling »general vehicle of things« and of »spiritual forces«, so much so that human beings are, bodily and spiritually, »pupils of the air« who live in air as if it were »the organ of deity«, a notion that clearly refers to Newton's *sensorium Dei*.⁶⁴ A few years later Schelling, in his *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1797) theorizes an active nature moved by the forces of magnetism, electricity, and chemical processes, and postulates the existence of elastic and omnipresent »fluids« that carry such forces and are »the *Medium* in which we all live, that surrounds and penetrates everything, and that is everywhere present.«⁶⁵ A different, metaphorical use of *Medium* can be found in Clemens von Brentano's novel *Godwi* (1800), in which the metaphor of *media diaphana* is employed to define the essence of the »romantic,« a »mediated« attitude towards the world that can be compared to the function carried out by the lens of a binocular [*Perspectiv*] equipped with a »colored glass« that brings objects closer yet imbues them with its own color: »Everything that acts as a mediator [*Mittler*] between our gaze and a distant object, everything that brings the distant object closer while bestowing on it something that is his, is romantic. [...] Romantic is therefore the binocular, or even more the color of the glass, and the determination of the object through the form of the glass.«⁶⁶

⁶³ Cf. Stefan Hoffmann: *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs* (as note 58) pp. 56–107.

⁶⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder: *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in: id.: *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. by Martin Bollacher and Günter Arnold, vol. 6, Frankfurt/Main 1989, pp. 37–38 (quoted in Hoffmann: *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs*, pp. 74–75).

⁶⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling: *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, in: id.: *Werke*, vol. 5, *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Hans Michael Baumgartner, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 177 (quoted in Hoffmann: *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs* (as note 58) p. 78).

⁶⁶ C. Brentano: *Godwi*, in: *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by J. Behrens, vol. 16 (Stuttgart 1978), p. 314 (quoted in Hoffmann, *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs* (as note 58) p. 98).

Benjamin's concept of the »*Medium* of perception« needs therefore to be interpreted within the context of this centuries-long tradition of the *media diaphana*, a tradition which continues in the second half of the twentieth century, intertwining and overlapping in different ways with the theories that deal with media as technical instruments performing different operations (recording, storing, transmitting, etc.), or as means of (mass) communication. We find elements of this tradition in studies that emphasize the material, spatial, environmental, geological, meteorological, atmospheric, »aesthetic«⁶⁷ dimension of media: in Gilbert Simondon's idea of a »*milieu associé*«;⁶⁸ in Marshall McLuhan's understanding of »media« as an »environment« with different hot and cold temperatures, a vast realm in which human sensory organs are extended through a technical *sensorium*;⁶⁹ in Michel Foucault's idea, in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), that every field of knowledge is constituted by a set of discourses and techniques that produce some form of »*quadrillage*«, of »partitioning« of the perceptual field;⁷⁰ in Niklas Luhmann's distinction between *Medium* and *Form*, directly inspired by Fritz Heider;⁷¹ in Jacques Rancière's notion of *partage du sensible*⁷²; finally, in all the various, contemporary investigations on media environments, »media geology,« »media meteorology,« or »mediarology,«⁷³ a vast research field which appears to be in various ways connected to the same tradition of the *media diaphana* to which belongs Benjamin's concept of a »*Medium* of perception.«

⁶⁷ Both Stefan Hoffmann (*Medienbegriff und Geschichte des Medienbegriffs* (as note 58)) and Dieter Mersch (*Medientheorie. Zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2013) refer to the tradition of the *media diaphana* as to the tradition of an »aisthetischer Medienbegriff«.

⁶⁸ On Gilbert Simondon's idea of »*milieu associé*«, cf. id.: *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (1958), Paris 1989, in particular pp. 61–65 (»L'individuation technique«).

⁶⁹ Cf. Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (1964), critical edition ed. by W. Terrence Gordon, Berkeley, CA 2011; Id. and Quentin Fiore: *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), produced by Jerom Agel, Berkeley, CA 1996.

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault: *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris 1969, p. 50.

⁷¹ Niklas Luhmann: *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1995, pp. 165–214.

⁷² Jacques Rancière: *Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*, Paris 2000.

⁷³ On the role of *media environments* defining different forms of moving image viewing, cf. Francesco Casetti: *The Lumière Galaxy. 7 Keywords for the Cinema to Come*, New York, NY 2015. On *media geology*, cf. Jussi Parikka: *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis 2015; on *media meteorology* or »mediarology«, cf. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (eds.): *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, Chicago/London 2010, pp. vii–xxii (»Introduction«).