

# **(Hu)Man-Made Poetry: Thoughts on Aura and (Female) Authenticity of the Blog *Gedankenbühne***

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With the internet as an established medium for artistic, communicative and commercial work, blogs written by amateur authors make the newest addition to the World Wide Web. Within the ever-growing blogosphere covering topics from politics to sports, Isabelle Küster, a German arts student, posts weekly updates about outfits and lifestyle on her fashion blog *Moon Cult*. Literary texts like she publishes on her very personal side project *Gedankenbühne*, are a minority and haven been neglected by academic research. This article analyzes the form and content of *Gedankenbühne*, with a focus on the production process of Küster's art, using Walter Benjamin's and Simone de Beauvoir's critical theories. Their notions of *aura* and authenticity, female authorship and representation help interpret this poetry blog.

*Keywords: blogging, authorship, feminist theory, critical theory*

## **1 Introduction**

The three writers treated in this article have all lived and worked in Paris, one of Europe's capitals of artistic appreciation. Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris and became part of its philosophers' café scene, Walter Benjamin collected notes about the city for his Arcades Project, and Isabelle Küster stayed there as an arts student and independent musician. While the two significant theorists Benjamin and Beauvoir are well-known and belong to literary theory's canon, the amateur writer Küster is marked on the world wide map of the blogosphere, but thus far uncharted in academia. This article will introduce her work and use critical art and media theory, as well as feminist theory to reach a more profound insight into her blog poetry.

As the internet became an established social and artistic medium, the genre of blogging transformed from *web logging*, or the tracking of internet traffic on servers, to a form of chronological personal or professional expression. With this shift from a rather technical, practical device to a communicative or commercial tool, blogs changed their function from digesting web content to creating online discourse (Morrison 371). Küster's blogging activities comprise

those two aspects, since her fashion blog *Moon Cult* is a diary of her outfits and sponsored by clothing companies, and her literary side project *Gedankenbühne* features self-penned poems. However, only the latter is relevant for theoretical considerations about authorship and art, medium and content, role and representation of gender and for an analysis of the production and publishing process of poetry online.

The choice of theories is mostly based on their similarities, but also finds their disparities useful for an analysis of Küster's blog poetry. Both Benjamin and Beauvoir criticize a mass phenomenon, the former a human-made technical reproduction of works of art, the latter the man-made social and artistic dominance over women writers and the false representation of the female in their works. Both theorists defend what they esteem are values that are lost due to social structures: in Benjamin's case it is the concept of an authentic *aura*, which has been neglected, in Beauvoir's case it is the authorship of women, which has been suppressed. Finally, both thinkers demand a reevaluation and active emancipation of these phenomena.

They do, however, have different views on the task of literature and the duty of writers. Whereas Benjamin wants literature to estrange readers and stimulate contemplation, Beauvoir requests texts to help overcome the already existing alienation between people through communication. Even though the German philosopher refers to visual arts like painting, photography and film, his basic aesthetic assumption about the *aura* in "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1936/1977), and his reflections about "The Author as Producer" (1934/1999), are useful to analyze the making and estimating of blog poetry. And even if the French thinker concentrates on existentialist philosophy and the factual existence of females, her ideas of women's writing described in her 1979 lecture "My Experience as a Writer" and the myth of the other sex as explained in her work *The Second Sex* from 1949 are beneficial for an appraisal of the female blogger. Since both theories consider writing as professional work and constitute the poetic artist as a producer of literature, they complement each other by – in Benjamin's case – referring to and – in the case of Beauvoir – sceptically reviewing Marxist ideas of social, technical and cultural conditions of artistic work.

Both Küster's profitable fashion blog as well as her literary art blog are published via the commercial web service Blogger, which was founded in 1999 by Pyra Labs, who initially promoted and popularized the format of blogging. The service is now owned by Google, who crucially redesigned this content management based software application after migrating it to its servers (Morrison 374). On Blogger, authors publish their blogs with the URL *blogspot.com* by using the "pre-made technical templates" (Morrison *ibid.*) provided, into which

they can compose and arrange their content, like written text, images, videos, links or documents, and it appears online according to the given design codes. That means bloggers do not need knowledge in writing HTML, the text-based markup language for web browsers. They simply enter and edit their content of various forms via an interface; this “lowered the technical barrier to entry [for bloggers] [...], so that they could instead concentrate on the writing” (Morrison *ibid.*). Online authors can indeed use programming languages to customize their blog and thus change its look and layout, but some limitations by Google, like the size of pages and pictures, cannot be eluded, because there is restricted available cyberspace per user. The number of blog entries is unlimited, but they must have the obligatory time-stamp. Furthermore, a Google account is mandatory to sign up on Blogger, adding ads in the sidebar to generate revenue is optional. Public blogs like Küster’s are available to be read by all internet users, who can change the blog’s default view to some extent depending on the settings of their devices, but only readers with a Google account can comment on entries and participate in the feedback function. These followers of *Moon Cult* or *Gedankenbühne* automatically receive the newest entries when logging into their account profile.

The blogosphere, which is the interconnected community of blogs in the World Wide Web, has established a social network with “recursive self-referentiality” (Morrison 371) between writers and readers. It consists of several sub-communities that can be divided by genre: the largest group are non-personal blogs on news and politics, common personal blogging niches are food, health, science, music and especially fashion. Literary blogs rank rather low and can be located in “the vast and shifting middle ground” (Morrison 378) of the blogosphere.

## 2 Analysis

Küster has two blogs: *Moon Cult*, the successful and popular – considering the large readership and multiple sponsors – fashion blog written in English and updated weekly with posts about her outfits, fashion and lifestyle inspirations. The side project *Gedankenbühne* is where she publishes poems written in German, less regularly and with a smaller readership. Both blogs are public, allow reader comments and are linked via Küster’s Blogger profile, where she provides her name, gender and personal interests.

All entries are posted by “Isabelle,” so presumably written by Küster herself; there are just some cases where she openly quotes and incorporates other poems or song lyrics into her own texts. Her poems are not so much lyrical, since they are without stanzas or rhyme, but rather narrative in their structure, describing personal impressions and every-day moments as well as special

situations of heartbreak or happiness reminiscent of streams of consciousness. The language is highly poetic when it comes to sound and imagery: alliterations, onomatopoeic words, parataxis, metaphors and metonymies. The two most striking aspects are the use of the first person singular perspective and thus a strong speaker in the poems, and the application of complex neologisms and customized idioms that create a very certain tone of the blog.

Looking at one poem in particular, the following text not only exemplifies the characteristic centered format and use of lower case letters, but also the typical speaker situation and noun compositions Küster uses on *Gedankenbühne*:

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2011

verbrennen wir uns die finger an der kuscheltierhaftigkeit.  
 alles ist zu sehr und zu viel und vollkommen perfekt in der weite der weichheit  
 mit bettwärmetopfteetassenklauglühweintränelglück.  
 rascheln durchs lavalaub und immer wieder entgehen wir der endzeit.  
 wir kenne [sic] verstecke und worte und immer liegst du am ende auf mir und  
 leckst mir das meer vom gesicht.  
 das darf nie aufhören, hörst du, ich drehe am zahnrad der zeit und gehe auf dem  
 zahnfleisch dessen, was schon gewesen ist.  
 behutsam auftreten und gelegentlicher krawall.  
 zwischen uns steht nichts als rosige gegenwart und wir garnieren sie mit  
 zuckerworten und schleifchen.  
 verlust ist keine angst, sondern eine surrealität, der man sich nicht hingibt, weil  
 dann nur vergeblichkeit wartet.

POSTED BY ISABELLE AT 9:56 AM 1 COMMENT

Here, an “I” speaks to a “you” and about a “we,” which seems to be reciprocal at first sight, but turns out to be a hierarchic, asymmetric relationship of a bygone love affair, in which the speaker submits to the addressee, and begs passively and full of doubt. The minimal characterization of the personas, the context of the other poems and the blogger’s profile information, prompt the assumption that it is a female speaking to a male. The text also employs several neologisms, especially complex nouns like “lavalaub,” “kuscheltierhaftigkeit,” or “bettwärmetopfteetassenklauglühweintränelglück,” and creative reformulations of established metaphors and idioms like “zahnrad der zeit” or “rosige gegenwart.”

The two chosen theories help to critically analyze these first impressions of the poetry blog’s technical, formal and stylistic aspects as a literary work.

Benjamin's principal idea is that the work of art has essentially always been reproducible ("Kunstwerk" 137), but that only the technical reproduction for reasons of profit impacts its *aura*. *Aura* means the here and now of the original ("Kunstwerk" 139), its material reality and authenticity. These aspects disappear with technical reproduction and result in the liquidation of the traditional value ("Kunstwerk" 141). The original uniqueness of a piece of art resides, according to Benjamin, mainly in its embeddedness into a traditional context ("Kunstwerk" 143) and is celebrated and worshipped in the cultic ritual. Mass reproduction of originals secularizes them, subduces their cult value and thus alters their autonomy. This is most notable when it comes to the reception of art, where increasing quantity decreases quality, and changes its social function. Instead of being received magically among insiders only, the piece of art is emancipated from the cult and exhibited openly for simultaneous, collective consumption by the public. Art is no longer the centre of a ritual, but becomes a mass-produced commodity. Recipients of cultic art only experience original objects from afar, but as consumers they can get physically close to a product they acquired – which demonstrates the idea of *aura* as an actual spatial distance (Benjamin, "Kunstwerk" 142). Uniqueness and permanence of an artwork are thus replaced by perishability and repeatability, wherefore it serves the audience rather as an amusing distraction and no longer as a means of contemplation ("Kunstwerk" 165f.).

All these processes eliminate a conventional distinction between artists and audience, because basically, as the philosopher quotes, "the reader is at all times ready to become a writer" (Benjamin, "Author" 771). Authorship becomes, according to Benjamin, more accessible with the technical reproduction of mass media, which benefits "the literarization of all the conditions of life" ("Author" 776), and causes "a mighty recasting of literary forms" ("Author" 771). Thus socially contextualized, writers must constantly cultivate the technical means they employ, not by simply providing content for the system, but by modifying the relations of production to ensure the artistic value of their work. So the German thinker mainly sees a change of function in the production of art, especially in the written genres. Hence, he focuses on the role of the work of art and how it is "insert[ed] [...] into the living social contexts" ("Author" 769), and even more on its author's "position in the process of production" ("Author" 780).

Many criteria that Benjamin states for newspaper journalism, which constitutes "the margins of literature" ("Author" 771) of his time, are valid for the activities on Küster's blogs: readers can become writers via the comment function, the genres of diary and poetry merge, and specialization in certain topics means that "writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth" (Benjamin, "Author" 771) – which is especially true for the fast moving fashion blog. Due to

the social function of journalism and blogging, *cliques* in the form of followers evolve. *Fashions* determine content and design of entries, and *agents* operate in the form of linkage. This “organizing function of a work” (Benjamin, “Author” 777) is desirable, but just an illusion in the Web 2.0 context, where users have to abide by Google’s laws. Benjamin quotes Bertolt Brecht, who diagnoses artists working as producers who lose control over the means of their work as “thinking that they are in possession of an apparatus that in reality possesses them” (“Author” 777). According to Benjamin’s thoughts, Küster rather resembles a “hack writer” [...] who abstains in principle from alienating the productive apparatus” (“Author” 774), because she provides content for Google, concentrates on the self and makes personal misery fashionable. She lacks the qualities of a writer “that transforms [...] from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer” (“Author” 780), who would not only determine the technical coding of the blog and thus change the internet machinery, but would also focus on humankind as a whole. Benjamin admits that making masterful art using mass media is difficult. Still, he demands that writers should at least create model pieces for other writers which exhibit an “exemplary character of production” (“Author” 777), or shock and distract the audience with a targeted destruction of the *aura* to avoid lazy contemplation (“Kunstwerk” 163ff.).

Blog reception only seems to be individually scattered, but is in fact happening in masses and simultaneously, due to the temporal-spatial aspects of the internet. Blogs can still have a cultic following as defined by Benjamin – but in Küster’s case this only exists for *Moon Cult* not for *Gedankenbühne*. With tools like telephones and tablets, Benjamin’s idea of art mobilizing the masses (“Kunstwerk” 167) is turned around, since mobile devices nowadays allow for the production and consumption of literary art anywhere and anytime, whether it is through writing or reading blogs. His questioning of the ability to enjoy a painting due to movie reception and a general customization to new media (“Kunstwerk” 160) brings into question if surfing blogs and reading poetry online decrease the will and skill to read a book properly, thus annihilating the *aura* of reception, too. After all, Küster’s poems show rather little authenticity in Benjamin’s sense, since they have no here and now and are reproduced everywhere all the time. She is an amateur writer who uses the technical platform of Blogger in a conformal way (layout), without social critique (self-absorbed poetic content), and for the pure reason of publishing. Finally, the possibility to create a fake account or to copy others’ work even allows the extreme thought that Küster might either not exist or not have written the poetry herself at all.

Beauvoir’s shares Benjamin’s concept of a productive, free, liberated and active writer. However, she considers the relationship between author and

audience to be even more meaningful, since the actual freedom of the writer should appeal to the pursuit of liberty in the reader (Tidd 86). In her theoretical approach, not the production but the intersubjective function of literary communication is in focus, where it is the task of a writer to transport the reader into the universe of texts, thus turning the process of reading into one of identification (Tidd 90). Identification in this sense is only successful when the author is able to verbalise her unique existence in the world and her life experience in a literary way that expresses a universal truth, which the reader can absorb and apprehend (Tidd 92). The other is reached via narration from a first-person perspective. The notion of authenticity in this feminist theory denotes the creation of genuine and original literature by describing personal situations in detail just to connect isolated individuals. According to Beauvoir, the ideal genre for this is the metaphysical novel as the literary result of existential philosophy, but basically any kind of autobiographical writing works similarly, since it portrays everyday life experiences (Tidd 92f.). As such, Küster's blog serves as a strong example by combining a public diary with poetically stylized language and personas, and roots fiction in life according to Beauvoir's concepts (Tidd 93).

The terms that Beauvoir uses to describe the relationship between author and audience are interesting for this analysis: a committed writer has many *links* to the world (Tidd 90) and *shares* her experience with readers (Tidd 94). These ideas are similar to typical web 2.0 characteristics, such as those functions on Blogger with which readers become *followers* with one click. Furthermore, her idea that writers and readers are separated by the same technique that also connects them (Tidd 94) corresponds to the functions of the internet, whose ability of global connection manifests the actual physical distance between interacting individuals in the first place. According to Beauvoir, such a linked human community develops by sharing trivial experience to shape a universal truth, by following each other's activities, and by mainly using the powerful medium of language (Tidd 91), which in the blogosphere consists of words and codes alike.

In Beauvoir's times, she finds that the social reality and artistic conditions for literary production, which determine the material and symbolic space of creativity as a construct, are lacking options for female writers to unfold their work expressively and thus fulfil themselves (Tidd 95). Compared to the era when the French philosopher developed her theories, the internet age provides relatively equal access to writing literature – but for literature bloggers it still seems to be mostly a hobby or side project to create art of their own, due to a lack of professional support, just like Beauvoir diagnosed it (Tidd 96). For these past and present reasons, she demands women to work even more transcendently in

describing their singular life details to create universal knowledge, feminize their language by writing with their bodies (Tidd 99), question the binary order of the world in their texts (Tidd 96), and present the feminine as the opposing force in the system (Tidd 100). Thus, women overcome their twofold enstrangement: as a member of society and as a female in patriarchy.

Such critical activities can hardly be found in Küster's blog. On the contrary, she accepts and supports the regime of Google by providing personal information on her profile and creative content with her poems, even though she has access to the quasi endless cyberspace, as well as symbolic space to acquire her own URL and design a unique blog for her poetic expression. But not only the production of *Gedankenbühne* is rather uncritical, the representation of the female in Küster's works also lacks engagement with the existing gender system and confirms Beauvoir's notion of the eternal feminine (Beauvoir 267). The patriarchal view of women as static, fixed and invariable is portrayed, e.g. in the analyzed poem from November 7<sup>th</sup> 2011, where the crying, pleading woman speaks in long, complexly composed words, but leaves actual decision-making and defining action to the male lover. Moreover, her noun constructions seem desperate to tie together something meaningful in the face of a broken relationship and her playful use of metaphors seems more like a plain conversion of commonplace catchword phrases; both are framed by a demand for things to never change and a question for reassurance: "das darf nie aufhören, hörst du." Finally, the speaker fights with typical female weapons: becoming an ocean of tears – water, a shapeable liquid – corresponds to the traditional dichotomy of the female as a natural and the male as a cultural element. After all, the speaker only seems to be active and in control at first sight, but truly just remains mirroring the binary system. Küster's poetry illustrates what Beauvoir deduced from her analysis of literature: while male writers fail to give a portrait of true femininity, even female writers consider themselves as a mysterious "sphinx" (Beauvoir 271). Representing communication problems between lovers like this, by using a strong speaker rather than a silent persona, mirrors even more how women writers are being defined and codified by the man-made myth (Beauvoir 271), how they are *festgeschrieben*.

So both the form and content of Küster's blog are an aligning instead of a liberating phenomenon, deriving from and repeating the construction of a woman as a marginal character, as an absolute other compared to the essential man. Even if *Gedankenbühne* features the author's own life experience and literally is a stage for her thoughts, she ends the analyzed poem and her entry with a statement using the generalizing pronoun "man," instead of feminizing her language, and remains in decorating her work with "zuckerworten und schleifchen." Those sugary words and little bows in the text match the doll-like layout and design of

the blog, with soft colours, feathers and flowers. As a writer and a blogger, Küster omits being pro-active and neglects exploiting her full potential as a creative woman and only touches on the blogosphere's intersubjective communicative capacity where it is technically implied, e.g. in the reader comments.

### 3 Conclusion

The analysis above shows, that Benjamin's concept of an authentic *aura* of a work of art can for the most part not be ascribed to Küster's blog or her poetry, since the medial form is determined by prewritten codes and templates and has not just been reproduced, but is a technical product from the origin – and even more, its originality is problematic due to the possibility of fake authorship. The writer hides behind an enigmatic profile and thus appears more as a persona than an author; similarly, her poetic texts do not clearly match a cultural embedding into a literary tradition – both ambiguities seem to result from the newness of the genre. The cultic following of readers only exists for the fashion blog *Moon Cult* that rather resembles commercial than creative work. However, the lack of recipients and reader comments is not as much an indicator for the artistic value of *Gedankenbühne* as its content and form are.

Beauvoir's idea of a productive connection between writer and reader via shared personal experience can indeed be attributed to the social functions of the blogosphere that *Gedankenbühne* is a part of. But instead of artistic aspects, the feedback in blogging again promotes profit, since more mutual comments and linkage mean more online traffic, and that means more advertising revenue for the author. Considering the representation of femininity and the role of a female writer, Küster rather confirms the established myths with her playful poetry from the perspective of a – as she refers to herself and her readers – “Modemädchen” that has many complex words but no clear voice. And as an author, she does not use the vast variety of freely available means and material for blogging on the World Wide Web in a self-determined and independent way, but remains within Google's preset designs and provided cyberspace.

Nevertheless, these critical conclusions follow from Benjamin's and Beauvoir's theories, which must be viewed critically themselves, since they are embedded in specific contexts of origin. Print newspapers, radio, television and cinema being the new revolutionary media in Benjamin's age (Gilloch 195; Ferris 97) explain his standards for contributions from pioneers who explore the potentials of new artistic channels (Gilloch 196). And Beauvoir's historical reality just after the first wave of feminism introducing women's liberation must clearly be considered as having an impact on her own experience and

expectations (Le Doeuff 23; 27) when comparing female writers back then to modern bloggers now.

Benjamin understands that art production and thus its reception are constantly changing processes (Snyder 158), but is found both arguing provocatively (164) as well as prognostically (Ferris 106) about a possible cultural decay of the *aura* of popular mass media products. For this analysis, his moderate stance that is neither naively celebrating new technologies nor harshly cancelling older forms of visual arts and literature is adequate, since bloggers face the challenge of publishing traditional forms of literature, like poetry, within a genre that is still establishing itself. This medial revolution profits from his demand for a redefinition and reconstruction of arts' functions (Snyder 158) and makes careful about omnipresent specialization and individual aesthetic judgment (Ferris 108). Beauvoir observes, explains and enlightens the role of women as writers and their representation in society and literature (Le Doeuff 28ff.), but is often accused of using non-philosophical statements (Le Doeuff 1ff.) or even fragmentary concepts (Bauer 6), which is mainly aimed at the translation of her theories (Moi 37ff.) which were also referenced in this article. But her analytical tools and terms actually seem to fit the topic of blogging, and are thus proof for the timelessness of the theory and its ability to adapt (Le Doeuff 23). Furthermore, her idea of the representational myth of women and their restricted use of creative space is confirmed by the fact that bloggers can have a female voice, but it does not necessarily imply female action – so the (artistic) emancipation of women might still not be completed yet (Le Doeuff 29).

Even though Morrison states that “the blogosphere is expanding at great pace” (372) by referring to blog search engine Technorati's statistic determining that one new blog is created every second (369), she attests a lack of academic attention, especially for personal blogging (377). Research can first of all keep up with the diverse developments and temporal, monetary as well as artistic currencies of internet blogging by slightly adapting its terminology for literary analysis, but doing this while still keeping its theoretical conceptualizations ensures proper evaluation of the relevance of blogging. There are, for example, literary blogs like Raphaëla Anouk's experimental and estranging montage of texts, scans and drawings, that seem to meet Benjamin's and Beauvoir's specific and strict criteria of *aura*, authenticity and female authorship. This blogger reflects on and reveals the ambiguities of both online as well as gendered writing with her disturbing self-portraits and piecemeal entries, employs individually coded designs, responds directly to reader comments, and posts personal poetry that is more profound and more pervasive than Küster's love lamentation. In her text “Todesliebe” posted in February 2013, Raphaëla Anouk writes rightly “Mein

Gedicht das lässt nicht locker” – and thus not only connects to the addressee within the poem and the recipients of her blog, but in a way also calls for further academic research on blogged literature.

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