

## “Augenmusik”, or synaesthesia as a technique in the early avant-garde

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In 1916 a book entitled *Expressionismus* written by the Austrian writer and literary critic Hermann Bahr appeared in Munich. The opening pages offer a reproduction of Franz Marc's *Tiger*, a painting which could not better characterize what Bahr drafts in his study concerning some novel methods of artistic creation promoted by the younger generation of artists. Marc is famous for his paintings of animals in natural settings which he depicts through abstract or close to geometrical forms liberated from representation, and yet what the beholder can see is a natural landscape animated with horses, deer, foxes etc. Like numerous other artists of the period, Marc challenges the question of what is truthful in art. In *Farbenlehre*, a fundamental inspiration to Bahr's study on expressionism, Goethe states: “Painting is for the eye truer than the real self. It depicts what an individual would like to and should see, not what he habitually sees” (1925, 648). It is exactly this moment – the discrepancy between the habitual and illusory – which entered into the scope of Bahr's interest; according to him an artist risks being ridiculed whenever he comes up with novel techniques or forms of presentation. However, as he further suggests, to become an illusionist seems to be unavoidable for an artist in search of the genuine nature of art: “Indeed, even a true art puritan could ascertain that those who express their absolutely internal must always to a certain extent ‘swindle,’” writes Bahr ([1916] 2010, 18). A swindler – indeed the most suitable title for an artist and a word that best expresses the genuine nature of art as I want to present it in this paper.

My objective is to draw attention to the concept of *Augenmusik* which Hermann Bahr proposes as playing a crucial role in his apprehension of expressionism. I want to argue that what Bahr means by *Expressionismus* with respect to *Augenmusik* is a phenomenon reaching further back in the history of art than the identically called artistic movement and that it might be traced back at least to Romanticism. I shall therefore distinguish between impressionism or expressionism as considered by Bahr in his study and Impressionism or Expressionism as two distinct artistic movements, in my article spelled with capital letters.<sup>1</sup> I also suggest that what Bahr means by expressionism is in its substance a technique contemplated in terms of a particular visuality, the nature of which is marked by the turn to internal, cognitive processes of artistic creation and that in principle such a technique is synaesthetic (as the morphological motivation of the term *Augenmusik* itself suggests).<sup>2</sup> However, discussing

synaesthesia with respect to the avant-garde seems to pose some considerable difficulties, as it manifests itself on several levels – physiological (neurological), textual (metaphoric), and medial – which in the texts covered by this article seem to overlap probably also due to the limited scholarly knowledge of issues concerning synaesthesia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a greater amount of speculation from the contemporaneous artists and authors. I therefore suggest that the interpretation of synaesthesia as proposed in my article be considered as a solution particular with respect to the discourse of the period. On the following pages I hope to summon arguments in favour of the idea that the main reason why the avant-garde authors started to contemplate synaesthesia was their yearning for an authentic experience, which in the context of this article might be translated as experiencing internally through affects and instincts.

### “AUGENMUSIK”: A NEW CONCEPTION OF ART

The central concept to Bahr's *Expressionismus*, and equally to this article, is Augemusik (or 'eye music'), the importance of which is underlined by the fact that an accordingly entitled chapter of his critical study originally appeared as a separate article published earlier in 1914.<sup>3</sup> Yet the expression Augemusik was not coined by Bahr himself; Bahr, who was also a connoisseur of visual arts and music, which he often addressed in his critical writings, borrowed the term from Renaissance and Baroque musicians. It was originally used to describe the symbolic notation of a musical piece, probably the most famous being Baude Cordier's *Belle, bonne, sage*, a chanson on love, the notation of which is accomplished in the shape of a heart. Concerning the original meaning of Augemusik, there seems to be an obvious effort to furnish music viewed as an immaterial medium with a visual, and therefore material, form.

Bahr nevertheless does not abide by the genre concept of Renaissance and Baroque composers; the primary focus of his study is to examine the anthropological quality of vision and visuality and to follow the implications of such an inquiry for artistic creation. By doing so, Bahr transforms the original meaning of the term – which was meant to supplement music with visual qualities – so that Augemusik newly describes a process within which visual perception is attributed musical qualities, temporality and affectivity in particular. Therefore it should not surprise us that the same term, with reference to Bahr's conception, was adopted by the Swiss author and critic Bernhard Diebold in several of his articles on film (or *moving pictures*).<sup>4</sup> Diebold, in a rather respectful remark, highlights Bahr's detailed knowledge of Goethe's complete works, which still does not serve to “clarify the expressionist imagery [...], but to explain expressionist thought, a new conception of art”. And he continues by outlining a distinctive feature of expressionism as opposed to impressionism: “This particular art does not concern impressions that we gain like beggars, miserable alms from our gracious Mother Nature, but it concerns *Ausdruck*, an expression of our mental experience” (Diebold [1916] 2012, 31). In brief, whatever Augemusik in Bahr's terms is, it should not be perceived as a facet pertaining to the content of an artwork; however, it should be regarded as something that enables the content to *happen*, a specific technique of staging the desired effect.

In the paragraphs that follow I intend to inspect Hermann Bahr's conception of Augenmusik in more detail. However, to attempt a single definition of the term would not be painless and it might lead to misrepresentations; I will therefore present Bahr's concept from three prominent aspects which will help characterize it as a whole. A substantial part of Bahr's text is dedicated to vision (*Sehen*) and eye, so the prevalence of the visual domain needs to be dealt with first; I further want to explore why Bahr regards expressionist works as unprecedented with an obvious intention to foreground their situatedness outside of historical time; and last but not least, if Augenmusik evokes synaesthesia, what is synaesthetic about expressionism?

### VISION, VISUALITY AND THE (IN)VISIBLE

Bahr lays the foundations of his theory in the chapter entitled "Vision" informed by *Strukturforschung* developed by the Vienna school, in particular art historian Alois Riegl.<sup>5</sup> Bahr attempts to distinguish two approaches to *vision* in arts – impressionism and expressionism, which he intends to present as two distinct techniques or approaches to artistic creation. Bahr outlines his perspective in the opening paragraph:

The whole history of painting is nothing but the history of vision. The technique alters as soon as our vision has altered. It only alters because the vision has altered. It alters in order to comply with the transformation of vision. However, vision only alters with how people relate to the world. How an individual relates to the world is how he sees it. The whole history of painting is therefore also the history of philosophy, the unwritten philosophy in particular ([1916] 2010, 37).

Considering that Bahr links vision to "unwritten philosophy" or the way "an individual relates to the world", a question arises whether what he calls vision should be termed so even today, in perspective of the current knowledge on seeing. In his *General Theory of Visual Culture*, Whitney Davis suggests distinguishing vision – meaning visual perception – from *visuality*, with *visuality* being an aspect and seeing pertaining to the domain of culture. In light of Davis's theory I want to argue that Hermann Bahr's Augenmusik, which he tries to define as a specific mode of vision, is in fact *visuality*, yet one of its aspects being its close affiliation to visual perception and aesthetics understood as *aisthesis*. The expressionist *visuality* arises through the invisible, i.e. the whole scale of sensual perceptions, including affects.

The urge to re-establish contact with sensory experience is anchored in the overall ambience of the period. According to Bahr, impressionist art is characterized by "the dissociation of humans from the spirit (*Geist*)" encouraged by technical progress, hence his metaphor describing an impressionist artist as "a man lowering himself to the gramophone of the outer world" (ibid, 78). Not only did humans in their perception become subject to vicariousness, but they also lost contact with nature in its natural self; "der Mensch ist entseelt, die Natur entmenschet," claims Bahr (ibid, 77); man has died in losing his soul and nature has become dehumanized. A loss of authentic experience means a loss of freedom and man finds himself in times of crisis unable to participate in life:

Never have the times been so shaken by fright, by such horror of death. Never was there such sepulchral silence in the world. Never was the man so small. Never was he so fearful.

Never was joy so distant and freedom so dead. Here screams the distress: the man cries out for his soul, the entire time becomes a single scream of distress. Also the art joins in screaming, into profound darkness, it cries out for help, it cries out for the spirit: this is expressionism. (ibid, 77)

As a consequence of this estrangement from the surrounding environment (or the outer world), expressionism calls for regaining access to authentic experience, which means approaching the internal sphere of an individual, his ability to empathize, and to mentally imagine and create.<sup>6</sup> This is what Bahr means when he emphasizes that the sense of sight can be stimulated not only from the outside, by light and colour, but also from the inside, “probably raised by blood flow in the brain” (ibid, 70). It is not the power of light that enchants the new generation of artists, but screaming “into profound darkness” of the invisible represented by the internal proceedings of our psyche; in literature, the fascination with the invisible (or unutterable) transforms into images of appearing and/or disappearing into the darkness – into metaphors of silence and nothingness.

A similar principle can be observed in Alfred Kubin’s novel *Die andere Seite*, the following scene depicts the main protagonist’s arrival in the dream kingdom that comes into existence through the power of creative dreaming and imagination:

On the other side of the gate ruled *profound darkness*. The fog did not put pressure on our breast anymore, a tepid wind was blowing. We could hear hissing and jerky noise coming from nearby. Now we could also see a pair of red and green signal lights. We ran towards a low building. The man with a lantern explained: “It’s a railway station, it’s high time!” [...] After numerous vain retrials the engine managed to put the train in motion. The speed was very gentle, even gentler than the smoky glow of oil lamps in the car. Looking back I managed to catch a glimpse of a tall wall, its blackness projected itself in the night sky. “Like a rampart,” thought I and observed it with interest. It gradually *disappeared in the darkness* ([1909] 1962, 35; italics added by S. O.).

Albeit Kubin is not exactly a member of the young generation of artists which Bahr had in mind when writing his study on expressionism, the work of many Symbolist and Decadent authors already deploys the same principles, which only supports Bahr’s more general conception of expressionism in art.<sup>7</sup>

#### UNPRECEDENTED ART

“Where for the love of God have you seen anything alike?” asks Bahr in his study to illustrate the typical reaction of a stunned spectator in front of an expressionist painting – a statement which might be considered symptomatic of the whole conception of the new expressionist art. The answer is simple: nothing alike is ever to be seen – certainly nothing alike if we look for it in the external environment. “I can quite imagine that someone is able to see this way, yet certainly not being stimulated from the outside, but from the *inside*” reads the text in response to the provocative question (Bahr [1916] 2010, 66–67; italics added by S. O.). *Augenmusik* can thus be understood as a visual perception awakened by an internal stimulus. Scattered throughout the text are a number of other synonymic expressions which Bahr provides to link *Augenmusik* to the discourse of the period: “inneres Sehen”, “geistiges

Sehen”, “das Auge des Geistes”; or with more emphasis on the active eye we can find quotations of Goethe’s term “das Eigenleben des Auges” or Schopenhauer’s “Aktionen des Auges”.<sup>8</sup>

Bahr’s concept of inner vision is informed by Francis Galton, whom he mentions in the chapter on the mind’s eye (“Das Auge des Geistes”). Though Galton is more likely to be known in connection to eugenics, Bahr is especially interested in the chapter entitled “Mental Imagery” of his *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883); a chapter whose title might be paralleled with Bahr’s *inneres Sehen*.<sup>9</sup> What Galton means by mental imagery is “visual memory”, the ability to represent or reconstruct a scene in our mind’s eye. Yet Bahr brings the whole concept a bit further by calling expressionist art unprecedented, having no example in historical time.

In the chapter entitled “Augenmusik”, Bahr compares the art up to this point to a chain of causalities, an evolution or progress; we have become accustomed to the fact that “every extreme right again pushes to extremes, every ‘ultra’ is surpassed by yet another one, [we have accepted] to see every excess repeatedly exceeded by itself”. This towering of extremes was only possible because there had always been something to lean on, a support in the progressive flow of time; “there was after all still a common beginning somewhere, a beginning to which this end could refer”. Yet the new art seems to abandon the historical dynamics of progress: “Here, however, in these paintings of expressionists is nothing like it, since here in particular the progress, should it even lead to absurd, does not progress anymore, on the contrary, indeed it seems as if suddenly interrupted, as if the art of painting plunged into an abyss” (Bahr [1916] 2010, 66). As a consequence, entering the domain of the internal also means stepping out of historical time and space, as if a loop was created where time does not cease to operate but has its own pace. To paraphrase Schopenhauer, an absolutely crucial figure of the period, the world as we perceive it is the result of the work of our will and imagination.

The temporal discrepancy concerning an artwork is also relevant in Kubin’s literary text. One day an unexpected guest appears at the door of the main protagonist, who makes his living as a painter and illustrator. The guest introduces himself as Franz Gautsch, a person who speaks in the name of Klaus Patera, the creator of a new kingdom. When invited to join the newly founded empire, the surprised painter has plenty of questions to ask. One of them enquires about the issues concerning aesthetics. Gautsch answers:

We don’t have any specific museums, galleries or such like. Valuable artworks are not piled up, but you can spot quite many extraordinary pieces scattered individually. Everything is distributed, and as we say, in service. After all, I can’t remember a single case when a painting, a statue or any other artefact would be bought as new. [...] Generally understood, Patera is more likely an antiquities collector than an art collector. [...] Being endowed with a memory, which I personally consider incredible, he remembers every object in his kingdom. [...] With the same stubbornness he requests both valuable objects and apparently old trash (Kubin [1909] 1962, 17).

Patera is presented as the unquestionable chief designer of the dream kingdom who with full awareness chooses and keeps track of every single object that lies

within. His memory clearly has a different than historical function. Moreover, every single object in the dream kingdom is considered to be aesthetic regardless of the value assigned to it by the general consensus of art historians. In other words, Patera's dream kingdom itself is a work of art and as such is aesthetic because it arises through the intentional work of his senses, his "mental imagery", "inner vision" or whatever one might like to call it. At the moment of its existence the criteria of the outside world stop to matter, as if an artwork had a life of its own.

Worthy of our attention in this respect is Whitney Davis's remark concerning the role of culturality in drafting his general theory of visual culture:<sup>10</sup> "it assumes neither the established existence nor the eventual emergence of culture in the received sense of a socially shared matrix of meaning within which particular practices (including the seeing and the making of things) always make visual or other sense. The cultural succession [...] need not proceed at all. Some participants in the social group that sees and makes the relevant artefacts – the possible or potential items of visual culture – may not accede to it. Perhaps only one agent fully succeeds to (his own) visuality with regard to what he sees in his form of life – in its visual world of visible things – or with regard to what others have made to be seen there" (Davis 2011, 323). In other words, culturality unlike culture "need not be socially shared" (ibid, 335) or otherwise conditioned. Art does not necessarily need to be designed as socially shared, the communication model established in between an artwork and its author/recipient needs not succeed on the social level of communication. Its aspiration can be purely aesthetic looping in the inbetweenness of the medial process, though this condition can be only temporarily locked in the present moment of our perception. This is what expressionism in Bahr's terms strives for – to allow the subject to bypass any socially and culturally conditioned reality in order to reach the desired freedom consisting in the directness and authenticity of perception.

### THE MANY FORMS OF SYNAESTHESIA

As I have put forward in the introductory paragraph to this article, the nature of *Augenmusik* is primarily synaesthetic. However, I have also outlined that synaesthesia with respect to the avant-garde discourse is a complex phenomenon which can be approached from several angles.

First, synaesthesia is a neurological condition where two or more senses are combined to enrich our habitual perception by other sensations. One of the most common explanations is that there seems to be a cross-activation between areas in the brain each serving a distinct function, the other not usually being integrated in the particular cognitive process. This cross-talk thus creates an unusual sensory experience, probably the best known being the ability to associate numbers with colours.<sup>11</sup> The psychological and physiological functioning of synaesthesia began to be explored as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century; one of the first medical observations comes from Francis Galton.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the scientific studies and descriptions soon caught the interest of artists, and synaesthesia became a fashionable topic. The most famous examples of synaesthetic perception in literature are probably Charles Baudelaire's "Correspondences" and Arthur Rimbaud's "Les voyelles". In the case of Symbolist

authors, experimenting with synaesthesia remains on the textual level, in metaphorical imagery, yet it is exactly this imagery that can provide an insight into the rather labyrinthine theoretical texts of avant-garde authors.

Second, synaesthesia is a figure of speech, a metaphorical textual device where one sense is described by means of another; synaesthesia was already well known in ancient Greece, where poems were believed to be transferred in the sweet sound of the singing Muses. Yet synaesthesia and its literary use evolved and usually absorbed the intellectual ambience of the given period. Karl Heinz Bohrer identifies a very distinct use of synaesthesia in German Romanticism, where it was employed to metaphorically depict elimination of the duality of subject. However, “[w]e do not concern another delimitation of subjectivity here. Its body organ is not the reason anymore, but neither is it the heart. The duality of subject, head or heart, as we know it from the Enlightenment and even from the early Romanticism dissolves in favour of a unique anonymous disposition” (Bohrer 1998, 50–51). As Bohrer further explains, synaesthesia is used here in a new and more complex manner as compared to its employment up to the point, “the final occurrence [is depicted] as sort of an epiphany” (ibid). *I* is then felt as transcending *I*, it enters a condition which is metaphorically portrayed as entering into the realm of music, *I* demonstrates itself as musicality. This particular synaesthesia combines two domains: the domain of psyche usually depicted through the imagery of “music, nature, and night”, as opposed to the domain of intellect represented by the sphere of “word, society and daylight”. This model seems to be applicable also to Bahr’s conception of *Augenmusik*. As I have already demonstrated in the paragraph on vision and visuality and will demonstrate further, the language devices he employs to describe “inner vision” and how it operates fall within the realm of musicality as defined by Bohrer, as it appears from and disappears in the profound darkness of the internal.

Third, if we consider synaesthesia in the context of artistic creation, it opens a broad field for experimenting with sensual perception in terms of mediality. Synaesthesia can be thus understood as “a mode of staging, fusions and disruptions of senses” as proposed by the editors in the foreword of a book entitled *Media Synaesthetics*: “The concept of *Media Synaesthetics* denotes that perception always has a medial structure” (Filk and Lommel 2004, 10). To gain more knowledge about the medial functions of synaesthesia, we need to address these questions as dealt with in the theoretical writings of Wassily Kandinsky.

### ART AS A SYNAESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Kandinsky also evokes synaesthesia in several ways. In the chapter on colour in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he describes its effects, which can be double: physical and psychological. Both of them bear traits of synaesthesia as an actual neurological condition; however, they seem to differ in their intensity.

The physical, or physiological, effect of colour consists in overwhelming the eye with sensory perceptions: “The spectator experiences a feeling of satisfaction, of pleasure, like a gourmet who has a tasty morsel in his mouth. It can also be calmed or cooled again, as one’s finger when it touches ice. These are all physical sensations

and as such can only be of short duration,” writes Kandinsky ([1911] 1994, 156) to demonstrate his suggestion. The painter perceives physical sensations as temporal and fleeting and contrasts them with deeper, lasting sensations which he calls internal, i.e. mental or psychic. These are what Kandinsky summons under the psychological effect of colour; he compares the psychological effect of colour on our brain to a vibrating instrument. He speculates whether the effect can be achieved through association nearing the associative meaning of language.<sup>13</sup> Yet association does not seem to be satisfactory, because it is an indirect linguistic means, and Kandinsky strives for such an effect of colour that would impact our soul directly. He evokes neurological synaesthesia which seems to induce the desired effect; however, it is exactly at this point where the concept in relation to art is challenged. Neurological synaesthesia is a condition which only a few of us can encounter, yet Kandinsky attempts here for an effect which any spiritually developed individual could experience, an artificially stimulated condition: “One might perhaps assume another similar, and yet different, explanation; that in the case of such highly developed people the paths leading to the soul are so direct, and the impressions it receives are so quickly produced, that an effect immediately communicated to the soul via the medium of taste sets up vibrations along the corresponding paths leading away from the soul to the other sensory organs (in this case, the eye),” speculates Kandinsky (ibid., 158). This is a thought similar to Alfred Kubin’s contemplations on issues concerning aesthetics in the dream kingdom where Klaus Patera collects artefacts only to distribute them among people to be used. If on display in museums and galleries, art cannot be authentically experienced, on the contrary, it must be “in service”, available for immediate consumption. The question to be answered next is how the effect can actually be achieved.

Before I proceed to proposing an answer to this question, I would like to draw attention to the employment of synaesthesia in Symbolist writings. The following is an extract from Arthur Rimbaud’s “Alchimie du verbe” that appeared in his collection of poems *Une saison en enfer* in 1873:

I invented the colour of vowels! – A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. – I set out rules for the form and movement of every consonant, and with instinctive rhythms, I prided myself to be the inventor of a poetic word sooner or later accessible to all senses. I reserved its translation to myself. It began as an investigation. I expressed silences and nights in writing, I wrote down the inexpressible. I gave the vertiginous chaos a form ([1873] 2015, 30).

What synaesthesia enables is to express the inexpressible, or in other words, to provide a visible, material form to something so vertiginous as affects and instincts; in light of Bohrer’s observations concerning the use of synaesthesia in Romanticism, we can trace a similar tendency in Symbolism as well. What is crucial in terms of aesthetics is that Rimbaud here disposes of the dual nature of subject by internalizing the affective component of sensory perception, “silences and nights”, which for a long time was metaphorically externalized in the heart. To internalize here means to blend with the intellect, or the cognitive process, by means of synaesthetic devices where the intellect is metaphorically expressed through the visual or through the effort to bring it to light in terms of a visible form.

Throughout his theoretical writings Kandinsky uses a similar visual-auditory lan-



guage. Even though he seemingly randomly uses the words spirit (*Geist*) and soul (*Seele*), he never fails to associate them with the appropriate sense. Thus *Geist* as the representative of intellect is something that can be perceived by sight (the form), while *Seele* that governs the psyche is something that can be discerned by hearing, because it is vibrant, resounding or musical (the content). What is then to be considered is the affective dimension of artistic creation, which is raised to the same level as the intellectual component, if not the main driving force of our creativity:<sup>14</sup> “the creating spirit (which one can call the abstract spirit) finds access to the [individual] soul, subsequently to [many] souls, and calls forth a longing, an inner compulsion” (Kandinsky [1912] 1994, 235). Kandinsky thus explicitly links creativity to the soul, whose inner compulsion for expression demonstrates itself through the spiritual; according to Kandinsky the synaesthetic metaphorical devices equally serve to suggest that the affective component plays an important role in our cognition.

Semir Zeki, a British neuroscientist and a founder of neuroaesthetics whose work concerning art mainly concentrates on vision and visuality, in an attempt to approach writings and other statements of the generation of avant-garde artists and its predecessors such as Paul Cézanne remarks: “Indeed philosophers and artists often spoke about art in terms that are extremely similar to the language that a modern neurobiologist of vision would use, except that he would substitute the word brain for the word artist” (Zeki 1998, 5). To illustrate what Zeki means, I will once again quote from Kubin’s novel *Die andere Seite*; the following is an extract included in the chapter called “Everyday life” (Der Alltag):

I could tell much more if I were certain that my reader understands the complicated relationships as I might wish. [...] I penetrated these relationships with even more intimacy, when my olfactory senses became miraculously acute. It occurred already half a year later. From then on my nose determined my likes and dislikes. [...] I was nearly like a dog; however, I could not clearly explain all of this, it concerned feelings so refined that words fail. First, there was this rather particular, unutterable smell that ran through the whole dream kingdom clinging to everything. At times it was stronger, at times hardly to be smelled. Where it was very concentrated, this strange odour might be described as a fine blend of flour and dried cod. But much more concrete were the particular smells of individual things. I made a keen analysis, which often filled me with strong aversion. I could develop a slight antipathy towards those people who in my sense smelled bad. Yet eventually all these creatures and seemingly lifeless things, despite being brought together by a swing of bizarre mood, allowed for a feeling of incomprehensible unity palpable through their diversity. ([1909] 1962, 52–53)

The labyrinthine world which Kubin describes in his novel cannot be clearly visualized. As he sets out on his journey to the dream kingdom, the painter informs us that “travelogues are accessible to the reader everywhere and are probably even more beautiful” (ibid, 24) than what he can provide. Thus the dream kingdom seems to be impossible to grasp from the position of a spectator; it must be “penetrated” with the help of other sensory perceptions. It is too changeable and unpredictable, or perhaps the visual experience is too immediate to be stabilized or depicted in any type of perspectivity; the possible explanation is that the main protagonist finds himself in the vertiginous chaos of Patera’s “mental imagery”, in his brain. Indeed, the profound dark-

ness, haziness and damp breeze, or the fine smell of “flour and dried cod” is nothing else but an authentic, sensory and unmediated experience from the inside of one’s brain.

The answer to our original question – how the synaesthetic affect can actually be achieved – lies in releasing the distance between an object of art and the subject, in turning an artwork into a medium which in terms of avant-garde art translates into all sorts of experiments with fragmentation of form and temporality, breaching perspectivity, etc. so that its visuality does not consist in observation anymore but in sensory perception. Thus the synaesthetic experience that so many artists of the period strived for is a direct, internal experience, or experience “in the flesh”; and it was particularly Expressionism with its corporeal and haptic imagery that advanced in this respect the furthest.

### CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF SYNAESTHETIC PERCEPTION IN ART

Inspiration by synaesthesia, the blending of the senses, and its use in art reach far before the avant-garde; it is metaphorical synaesthesia whose roots can be traced back the furthest. However, it was only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the advancements in the fields of medicine and psychology that synaesthesia entered the focus of artists in relation to perception and cognition. The main focus of my article was to analyse the concept of *Augenmusik* – a term employed by Hermann Bahr in his study *Expressionismus* published in 1916 to describe a novel approach to artistic creation adopted by the young generation of avant-garde artists which he titles as ‘expressionists’. Expressionism in Bahr’s terms should therefore not be understood as an artistic movement of the same name, but a particular visuality established by means of our mental capacities. This visuality is marked as synaesthetic because it relies on the whole palette of sensory perceptions; the synaesthetic quality is also employed in order to accentuate the fact that the “inner vision”, as it is often called, can be stimulated independently from the external visual input.

To summarize, *Augenmusik* as Bahr contemplates it bears three major traits: first, it evokes a specific mode of visuality which is defined as aspect seeing where not all of these aspects (if any) fall within the realm of the visible; second, it claims to be independent of historical time entering into the internalized (subjective) sphere of human perception; third, it calls for a synaesthetic perception and seeing in such a way as to establish a new mode of visuality in bypassing mimetic observation. It also tries to stage the synaesthetic effect in order to integrate affects into cognition, an objective of which is to induce “feelings so refined that words fail” as Kubin writes. Equally, Kandinsky expresses his dissatisfaction with “coarser emotions such as terror, joy, sorrow, etc.”; in relation to the potential success of their application in the new art, the artist “will strive to awaken as yet nameless feelings of a finer nature” ([1911] 1994, 128). Whether the realization of such a conception is possible or not remains questionable even today. The concept of *Augenmusik* was already doubted by some contemporaries. In 1925 Helmuth Plessner, a German philosopher and proponent of philosophical anthropology, wrote: “It is possible to say even today that the radical attempt of Expressionism to *invent* an *Augenmusik* [...] is and must be doomed to failure, since

it contradicts the essential principles of optical awareness” ([1925] 1982, 62; italics added by S. O.). I nevertheless point out that neither Plessner denies the fact that the attempts of Expressionists consist in inventing – in other words, that they are staged. In this respect we might also doubt whether it is appropriate to regard the attempts to integrate the affective component into visibility as being synaesthetic in nature, especially where synthetic might suffice. However, it fully complies with the discourse of the period where affects and instincts are handled as if simply being one more of the human senses whose exquisite value is derived from the fact that they originate in the internal and as such represent the purely absolute or abstract.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bahr speaks of the young generation of artists within which he counts Futurists, Cubists, and Expressionists alike; yet it is Wassily Kandinsky who seems to provide a significant amount of inspiration for drafting *Expressionismus*.
- <sup>2</sup> Bahr was obviously well informed about synaesthesia which seemed to be a trendy topic of the period. His article “Colour Music” published in *Die Zeit* already on August 10, 1895 shows detailed knowledge of the theme, ranging from observations in medicine to experimenting in art. He mentions Luigi Bertramo Castel’s *clavicembalo oculare* or more recent experiments of Wallace Remington to paint music but also writers such as E. T. A. Hoffmann. Also in this article, synaesthesia is linked to expressing emotions, even to experiencing ecstasy.
- <sup>3</sup> The article entitled “Augenmusik” appeared in three German language newspapers: *Ostsee-Zeitung Stettin*, May 28, 1914, *Prager Tagblatt*, May 31, 1914 and *Straßburger Post* May 31, 1914.
- <sup>4</sup> Diebold explicitly acknowledges Bahr’s influence in his article “Expressionismus und Kino” (originally published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14 September 1916). The subsequent article “Augenmusik des Films” (originally published in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 2 April 1921) applies the term *Augenmusik* in a looser manner, yet does not undermine its basic meaning as defined by Bahr, i.e. the intention to provide a new conception of art that utterly abandons representation.
- <sup>5</sup> Alois Riegl is an author of *Stilfragen* (1893), a monograph in which he distinguishes between the geometrical and ornamental styles. He claims that the geometrical style is prior and evolved without the necessity to copy the natural environment. The process in which a geometrical ornament comes to exist could be regarded as synaesthetic. As an example, Riegl describes the appearance of a zig-zag ornament. It is a visualized trajectory of a horizontal zig-zag movement which a weaver exercises while moving through vertically fixed threads of a cloth. This experience might be considered visual-haptic, haptic meaning not only tactile, but also kinetic.
- <sup>6</sup> The concept of dreaming, creative imagination and internal creativity should not be confused with the concepts provided by psychoanalysis. The authors concerned in this article often expressly distanced themselves from Freud’s ideas. They usually say that the mental processes can be both conscious and unconscious, but more likely purposefully encouraged.
- <sup>7</sup> Wassily Kandinsky mentions the importance of Kubin’s work in a footnote to his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: “Also among the first rank of these prophets of decay belongs Alfred Kubin. One is dragged by an irresistible force into the terrifying realm of the stony void. This force streams forth from Kubin’s drawings, just as it does from his novel *Die andere Seite*” (Kandinsky [1911] 1994, 146). Kubin also later became associated with the Expressionist *Der Blaue Reiter* group.
- <sup>8</sup> The English equivalents are as follows: “inner vision”, “spiritual vision”, or “eye of the spirit/mind’s eye”; and for Goethe’s and Schopenhauer’s terms, “independent existence of the eye” and “actions of the eye” respectively.
- <sup>9</sup> Why Bahr opts for such a translation of “mental imagery” is not clear from the text; however, the choice of adjectives *inner* or *geistig* might be influenced by Kandinsky and his concepts of *innere Notwendigkeit*, *innerer Klang* and other internal processes.

- <sup>10</sup> Culturality is Davis's own concept and does not fall within the realm of cultural studies; culturality is to culture similarly as visuality is to vision. Not everything that we conceive in terms of our culturality needs to succeed as culture and vice versa.
- <sup>11</sup> Cytowic and Eagleman describe the neurological nature of synaesthesia in the chapter "Inside a Synesthete's Brain" (2009, 199–233). "When trying to understand a new object, for example, you might look at it, turn it over in your hands, shake it, smell it, and so forth – combining different senses to wind up with an integrated impression of the object. The challenge for brains is to allow disparate regions to perform different tasks while also working together to share information. For synesthesia researchers, the question comes down to how and why this balance among networks is different in synesthetic brains" (ibid, 200). Based on the recent research it turns out that our perceptions are of a complex nature and we use a wide range of senses and cognitive processes to establish our knowledge about things; everyone is in fact latently synaesthetic. Being a synaesthete then only means having a "different balance among networks".
- <sup>12</sup> Francis Galton writes about synaesthesia in his *Inquiries*. The chapter on mental imagery, which was of particular interest to Bahr, is immediately followed by chapters "Number-Forms" and "Colour Associations" which in the contemporary language of a neuroscientist might be termed as number-form and grapheme-colour synaesthesia or chromaesthesia.
- <sup>13</sup> What Kandinsky intends by "association" might be classified as the associative meaning of words, the type of association that influences the metaphorical component of language. "The expression 'the scent of colors' is common usage. Finally, our hearing of colors is so precise that it would perhaps be impossible to find anyone who would try to represent his impression of bright yellow by means of the bottom register of the piano, or describe dark madder as being like a soprano voice" (Kandinsky [1911] 1994, 159).
- <sup>14</sup> French philosopher Michel Henry (*Seeing the Invisible on Kandinsky*, 2009) suggests the following equation: *interior = interiority = invisible = life = pathos = abstract*, and he adds: "In what way, then, can the Internal be revealed, if it is not in or as a world? It is revealed in the way of life. Life feels and experiences itself immediately such that it coincides with itself at each point of its being. Wholly immersed in itself and drawn from this feeling of itself, it is carried out as a pathos. Prior to and independently from every regard, affectivity is the 'way' in which the Internal is revealed to itself, in which life lives itself, in which the impression immediately imprints itself and in which feeling affects itself" (2009, 7).

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### **"Augenmusik": synaesthesia as a technique in the early avant-garde**

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Augenmusik. Avant-garde. Synaesthesia. Visuality. Affect. Cognition.

The article draws attention to a study entitled *Expressionismus* (1916) written by an Austrian author and literary critic Hermann Bahr. The main objective is to present and analyse its crucial concept of *Augenmusik* which Bahr suggests in connection to novel techniques of the young generation of avant-garde authors. As a substantial part of Bahr's text is dedicated to vision and eye, the prevalence of the visual domain is dealt with first; further explored is why Bahr regards expressionist works as unprecedented with an obvious intention to foreground their situatedness outside of historical time; the final part considers the synaesthetic aspect of *Augenmusik*. Inspiration by synaesthesia, the blending of senses, and its application in art reach far beyond the avant-garde, it was well-known already in ancient Greece where poems were believed to be transferred in the sweet sound of singing Muses. However, it was only in the late 19th century with the advancements in the field of medicine and psychology when synaesthesia came into focus of artists in relation to perception and cognition. Thus synaesthesia in theoretical writings of avant-garde authors demonstrates itself on several levels: neurological, textual (metaphoric), and medial. The article summons arguments in favour of the idea that the main reason why the avant-garde authors started to contemplate synaesthesia was their yearning for an authentic experience, which in the context of this article might be translated as experiencing internally through affects and instincts.

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