

# On Aura in Literary Work, Discretion for Reader and Mystery of Form on the Example of Siegfried Lenz's *A Minute's Silence* (2008): Between Bestseller and Poetology

ABSTRACT. Andrzej Denka, *On Aura in Literary Work, Discretion for Reader and Mystery of Form on the Example of Siegfried Lenz's A Minute's Silence (2008): Between Bestseller and Poetology*. "Przestrzenie Teorii" special issue. Poznań 2024, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, pp. 101–123. ISSN 1644-6763. <https://doi.org/10.14746/pt.2024.special.5>

Siegfried Lenz's novella (2008, English edition 2009) has not only been appreciated by literary critics, but also turned out to be a great bestseller. The novella is a frequent subject of research analysis, especially in terms of its location in the tradition of German and world novella writing. This diversity of reception is astonishing and presents an interesting phenomenon. The novella tells a banal love story, but through an intentional silence and a series of intertextual tropes it also creates mysteriousness. The analysis proposed here is based on Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura" in the 1930s. From today's point of view, this concept requires a few additions, primarily from the perspective of systems theory. As it turns out, this concept can be applied both to the content of the novella and to the strategy of literary criticism, as well as to explain the role of form and context in the personal perception of the text.

KEYWORDS: Siegfried Lenz, novella, *A Minute's Silence* (2008), Walter Benjamin, bestseller, aura, silence

## Aims and outline

Siegfried Lenz's *A Minute's Silence* (*Schweigeminute*, 2008, Polish edition – 2016) has been broadly discussed. The phenomenon of this novel concerns several different aspects, such as its commercial success, univocally positive, even enthusiastic critical-literary reception, as well as deep scholarly analyses that the book inspired. It is somewhat of a mystery why this novella is present in such different discourses. One explanation that stems from both the text and its reception is the notion of "aura" according to Walter Benjamin, which he presented mostly in the essay *The Work of*

*Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility*,<sup>1</sup> and – as we shall find out – can be the common ground for those different forms of reception, as well as for a slightly different way of reading this text.

## **Lenz’s bestseller and Benjamin’s aura. Methodological specifications**

Due to the fact that the novella was originally published in installments in “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,” it became famous before its book premiere. Volker Hage (a “Spiegel” reviewer) concluded: “Even before the book appeared on the market, its second edition was already being printed. Book market expectations are high, and it is not difficult to predict that a book by Siegfried Lenz, who thanks to the popularity of *The German Lesson* has become a millionaire, would become a huge commercial success.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in Germany Lenz was not only an esteemed author, a literary authority, but also an author who – in spite of his innate, genuine modesty – had already achieved commercial success, *The German Lesson* (1968, Polish edition – 1971) being his biggest triumph. Hage’s prediction was correct: only in 2008, the year it was published, 360,000 copies of *A Minute’s Silence* were sold, making it sixth on the prestigious list of “Spiegel’s” bestsellers, with the controversial, scandalous *Wetlands* by Charlotte Roche (*Feuchtgebiete*, Polish edition – 2009) at the top of the list, clearly a counterpoint for Lenz’s novella. A bestseller *sensu stricto* – Ken Follet’s *World without End* (English edition – 2007), a continuation of *Pillars of the Earth*, came second on the list.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past decade, the book has been popularized in many different ways: it became required reading for junior high school students<sup>4</sup> and served

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<sup>1</sup> W. Benjamin, *Dzieło sztuki w dobie reprodukcji technicznej*, trans. J. Sikorski, [in:] *Anioł historii: Eseje, szkice, fragmenty* [Angel of History: Essays, Drafts, Fragments], ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań 1996, pp. 201–239; W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version*, trans. E. Jephcott, H. Zohn, [in:] *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. M.W. Jennings, et al., Cambridge, Mass. 2008, pp. 19–56, [https://monoskop.org/images/6/6d/Benjamin\\_Walter\\_1936\\_2008\\_The\\_Work\\_of\\_Art\\_in\\_the\\_Age\\_of\\_Its\\_Technological\\_Reproducibility\\_Second\\_Version.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/6/6d/Benjamin_Walter_1936_2008_The_Work_of_Art_in_the_Age_of_Its_Technological_Reproducibility_Second_Version.pdf) (accessed: 9.04.2023).

<sup>2</sup> V. Hage, *Mit Stella auf der Insel*, “Der Spiegel” 2008, no. 19, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/mit-stella-auf-der-insel-a-b56ae2eb-0002-0001-0000-000056831330> (accessed: 16.07.2022). All citation translations (unless stated otherwise) by me – A.D. Translations into English (unless stated otherwise) by P. Zagórska.

<sup>3</sup> *Jahresbestseller 2008: Im Auftrag des SPIEGEL ermittelt vom Fachmagazin “buchreport”*, “Der Spiegel” 2009, no. 1, p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> S. Post, *Zeit zu lieben, Zeit zu lernen. Die Novelle ‘Schweigeminute’ von Siegfried Lenz: Professionsethik aus literaturdidaktischer Perspektive*, [in:] *Gegenwartsnovellen: Literatur-*

as a basis for Thorsten M. Schmidt's 2016 movie *Schweigeminute*. Moreover, the novella, i.e. a relatively short form only 130 pages long, has enjoyed a considerable amount of attention among scholars of German literature. Perhaps this conciseness is what intrigues scholars in a genre considered to be old-fashioned, which nonetheless is enjoying a renaissance in Germany.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this analysis is to show which elements represented German traditions, which belonged to the novella as a genre, and which were new, innovative, testifying to Lenz's talent and ability to modify the heavily formalized genre.<sup>6</sup> Those papers, as well as others, e.g. representative of the memory discourse methodology popularized since 1990s,<sup>7</sup> are somewhat unsatisfying. Despite the presence of *A Minute's Silence* in different contexts, based on what has been written and said<sup>8</sup> it is hard to explain its phenomenon. It remains a sensation, a mystery, a secret how the 82-year-old Lenz managed to create such an intriguing masterpiece, appreciated by readers and literary critics for its poetic character, subtlety, and discreet narrative; moreover, it inspired many scholars to investigate the genre produced via a sophisticated game with elements of novelist tradition and international literature (Faulkner, Orwell). Even though this unanimity testifies to multifaceted congeniality, and it is thought-provoking, there is not one concise, large-scale, exhaustive study explaining this unique novella. Although it is impossible to fully analyze what motivates readers to read, Lenz seems to have answered their need to deal with a literary masterpiece on higher levels than what typical commercial discourses have to offer in the times of total medialization – to cite Benjamin – *in the age of technological reproducibility*. Although Benjamin's diagnosis concerned media from more or less a century ago, in parts it remains relevant: "Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to repro-

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*wissenschaftliche und literaturdidaktische Perspektiven im 21. Jahrhundert*, eds. S. Kiefer, T. Mergen, Hannover 2021, p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> S. Kiefer, T. Mergen, *Einleitung. Gegenwartsnovellen. Anmerkungen zu einer zeitgemäßen Gattung im 21. Jahrhundert*, [in:] *Gegenwartsnovellen...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> M.J. Schweissinger, *Spiel mit der Tradition. Siegfried Lenz',Schweigeminute' im Kontext historischer Novellentheorien*, [in:] *Gegenwartsnovellen...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 173–198. See also A. Meier, *Novelle: Eine Einführung*, Berlin 2014, pp. 187–188; H. Aust, *Novelle*, 5th edition, Stuttgart and Weimar 2012, p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> J. Guo, *Erinnerung: Die unvergängliche Vergangenheit in der Novelle Schweigeminute von Siegfried Lenz*, "Focus on German Studies" 2016, no. 23, pp. 51–66, <https://journals.uc.edu/index.php/fogs/article/view/633> (accessed: 16.07.2022); C. Fiebach, *Struktur und Funktion von Erinnerung in Siegfried Lenz',Schweigeminute'*, "Meridian Critic" 2011, no. 1/18, pp. 149–156.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF), *Siegfried Lenz',Schweigeminute' im Literaturclub* [featuring H. Karasek, I. Radisch, G. v. Arnim, C. Caduff] 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PiFEvgBMBQ> (accessed: 18.08.2022).

duce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes.”<sup>9</sup> And even though Lenz was an author who specialized in modeling social situations, in *A Minute’s Silence*, set in a German post-war socio-cultural landscape and, simultaneously, the harsh, natural Baltic landscape, he managed to include and consistently observe the silence signaled in the title – a mystery of a mythical and metaphysical dimension.<sup>10</sup> Connecting Lenz with Benjamin makes even more sense here, as there is a certain dualism in the latter’s concepts: juxtaposition combined with explaining the social dimension of art through contemplating and affirming nature, dealing with natural objects. Intuitively, and anticipating subsequent sections, in Benjamin’s works, “aura” has a heuristic value, but also an essentially explanatory one, i.e. covering such mysteriousness and discretion (although we need to be careful in the semantics of association fields):

A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. [...] To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura’s present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to “get closer” to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness [...] by assimilating it as a reproduction. [...] And the reproduction, as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels, differs unmistakably from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely entwined in the latter as are transitoriness and repeatability in the former.<sup>11</sup>

And although in Benjamin aura has historical and social dimensions as well, referring to natural objects seems especially intriguing. Rilke’s 1924 poem *The Walk* serves as a reference in Benjamin’s definition and an example of a certain kind of “lyrical intuition.”<sup>12</sup> The fragment cited here is representative enough to contain a relatively constituted definition of “aura” (which Benjamin developed in his later texts), including Rilke’s lyr-

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<sup>9</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art...*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Schweissinger points out that even when he presents mysterious, untamed nature, Lenz prefers sociological models. “Siegfried Lenz is not an author who would look for reasons behind tragic events beyond human society.” M.J. Schweissinger, *Spiel mit der Tradition...*, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art...*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> B. Meyer-Sickendiek, *Lyrisches Gespür: Vom geheimen Sensorium moderner Poesie*, München 2012, p. 121.

ical motif mentioned and cited in his earlier *Little History of Photography*.<sup>13</sup> This definition is characterized by a noticeable (although perhaps apparent) anachronism of theses, especially those concerning the role of photography and film in the loss of aura in works of art. Formulated in 1920s and 1930s, those theses carried different weight than today, focusing on showing how photography and film, by distinguishing<sup>14</sup> objects (such as buildings<sup>15</sup>), but also people (e.g. actors), deprived them of the “authenticity” (“Echtheit”)<sup>16</sup> and truth provided by the original context:

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction **detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition**. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a **massive upheaval** in the domain of objects handed down from the past – a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.<sup>17</sup>

Of course there is some truth in the claim that aura is in crisis, but this crisis offers an opportunity to capture and thematize it in a novel way, or even to experience it in conditions changed by technicization and media:

Aura’s crisis does not correspond with a critical awareness of its ideological nature, but rather the experience of aura’s crisis. Moreover, this crisis allows to treat aura as something which becomes a subject of some experience, as has been shown by that story of experiencing aura in a summer afternoon [...].<sup>18</sup>

In fact, modernism is the *de facto* object of Benjamin’s diagnosis, understood as a trend in art and literature, a reaction to technicization and emergence of film and photography; modernism, for which the turn of the 20th century was both a culminating and crisis point. In a way, modern-

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<sup>13</sup> W. Benjamin, *Mala historia fotografii*, trans. J. Sikorski, [in:] *Aniol historii...* [Angel of History...], *op. cit.*, p. 117; *idem*, *Little History of Photography*, trans. E. Jephcott, K. Shorter, [in:] *Selected writings. 1931–1934*, eds. M.W. Jennings, et al., vol. 2, part 2, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, pp. 518–519, [https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Benjamin\\_Walter\\_1931\\_1999\\_Little\\_History\\_of\\_Photography.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Benjamin_Walter_1931_1999_Little_History_of_Photography.pdf) (accessed: 10.04.2023); Meyer-Sickendiek (*Lyrisches Gespür...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120–123) presents these various definitions in an interesting way, especially in terms of their applicability in interpreting different adequate examples of German poetry.

<sup>14</sup> W. Benjamin, *Dzieło sztuki...*, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205. See also B. Lindner’s *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, [in:] *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. B. Lindner, Stuttgart and Weimar 2006, pp. 236–237 for an interesting take on this notion.

<sup>17</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> B. Lindner, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter...*, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

ism lives off crisis; it is a record of crisis *par excellence*, and as such it is not a style in art, but rather an “aesthetic ideology,” and moreover, it is a record of certain aesthetic strategies (such as e.g. “shock, distortion / alienation, atonality, abstraction” allowing to overcome this crisis in a work of art.<sup>19</sup> Of course, in modernism we are dealing with a serious distortion of previous forms of communicating through art, but nonetheless photography, approached by Benjamin with so much skepticism, and especially film, ultimately become ways of overcoming the crisis “as a complex cultural phenomenon of modernism [...] as its symbol.”<sup>20</sup> This is essentially due to them allowing aura to be experienced in those changed conditions. Benjamin is quite enigmatic about this issue, e.g. in *Little History of Photography* he expresses his delight with the Parisian works of E. Atget, a precursor of “surrealist photography,” at the same time writing about them: “he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography.”<sup>21</sup> This unique dialectics based on awe for old masterpieces and losing them due to *technological reproduction* on the one hand, and on the other – enchantment with deliberately depriving a work of art of its aura (e.g. Atget’s surrealist photography) can mean only one thing: that Benjamin sees a successful attempt at overcoming the crisis diagnosed by modernism (and himself) in those works. It is thus about aura-creating strategies, which paradoxically are supposed to reinforce this experience through marking the lack of aura, and thus make photography, film, but also poetry and other types of literature – all mass-reproduced – works of art. And the latter is indeed an example of mass reproducibility. Siegfried Lenz’s literary success is not an exception here, and it does not rule out perceiving and experiencing a work of art through the lens of aura. “Authenticity” (“Echtheit”) is a notion related to aura – not a “category of theory of perception,” but a “category of theory of discourse.”<sup>22</sup> Thus aura is not something that is attributed to a work of art forever, it is always a matter of the right communication and reception, something that takes

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<sup>19</sup> C. Klinger, *Modern / Moderne / Modernismus*, [in:] *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, eds. K. Barck, M. Fontius, D. Schlenstedt, B. Steinwachs, F. Wolfzettel, (*Medien – Populär*, Bd. 4.), Stuttgart 2010, pp. 150, 160. See H. Kiesel, *Geschichte der literarischen Moderne: Sprache, Ästhetik, Dichtung im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, 2nd edition, München 2016, pp. 198–236 for an interesting illustration of those theses on the basis of this discussion of aesthetic manifestos of e.g. representatives of the avant-garde, as well as the individual poetics of Hofmannsthal, Rilke, Benn.

<sup>20</sup> O. Bulgakowa, *Film/filmisch*, [in:] *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, eds. K. Barck, M. Fontius, D. Schlenstedt, B. Steinwachs, F. Wolfzettel (*Dekadent – Grotesk*, Bd. 2), Stuttgart 2001, p. 429.

<sup>21</sup> W. Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, *op. cit.*, p. 518.

<sup>22</sup> B. Lindner, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter...*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

place between a work of art (and possibly the author) and its recipient (reader, viewer). We know this today after decades of modernist aesthetics, but also after experiencing the postmodernist poetics of citation, which in a way is an aesthetic appreciation of *reproduction*, making mass kitsch a work of art, also knowing different strategies rejecting postmodernism. Thanks to those experiences, today we are able to better understand the nature of aura than it was possible in 1930s, i.e. when Benjamin presented his theses. From today's perspective, they are likely still relevant, but they would require updating.

### On discretion, story's magic, and "a unique phenomenon of a certain distance"

In order to capture a certain uniqueness (auracity?) of Lenz's novella, we cannot stop on the level of its plot, which at first glance seems rather typical for more trivial literature. The story takes place in Western Germany, by the Baltic Sea, mostly in a fictional town of Hirtshafen, probably in 1960s or 1970s. There are some doubts regarding the exact time: some elements, such as Volkswagen beetle, *Spanish Eyes*, Benny Goodman and Ray Charles on the radio indicate the 1960s–1970s. However, others suggest the 1990s (such as a Turkish family that has lived in Germany for three generations)<sup>23</sup> [MC, p. 114]). The story opens with a mourning ceremony in Lessing Junior High School for an English teacher, Stella Petersen, who has died in a yacht accident, hence the title. The ceremony leads the protagonist, Christian Voigt, an 18-year-old student who is also the first-person narrator, to contemplate the special bond he shared with the teacher, who was a few years his senior. They had a secret affair, about which we learn through retrospections intertwined with the ceremony and events that take place shortly after it. Stella, fascinated with Christian's unusual occupation – he is a "stone-fisher" (MC, p. 16, in German "Steinfischer"), collecting stones for reinforcing a local port's infrastructure – is uneasy about the growing intimacy between them; she might lose her job, so she is trying to keep her distance. People from Christian's circle (friends, the art teacher Mr Kugler, Principal Block) probably suspect that he is having an affair with Stella. His mother is worried after spotting a photograph of Christian and Stella on his desk, whereas – curiously – his father remains calm. This idyllic and

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<sup>23</sup> S. Lenz, *Minuta ciszy*, trans. M. Skalska, Słupsk 2016, p. 114. Although in some places I personally prefer different translations, I am using this version for the purpose of this paper (MC and page number), sometimes also providing words from the German original (S. Lenz, *Schweigeminute*, Hamburg 2008).

somewhat tense atmosphere is cut short by an accident: on her way back from a yacht cruise with friends, Stella is caught in a storm right outside Hirtshafen port. The yacht hits a stone breakwater, Stella is thrown in the water by a broken mast, right between the boat and the stone wall. Although Christian manages to pull her out, she never regains consciousness and dies after a few days in a local hospital.

Literary critics stress the unusually poetic character of this seemingly banal love story, which perfectly harmonizes with the represented world, with what is unspoken, vague, or subtly communicated at best playing the key role. This already suggests that we will need to figure certain elements of the story out for ourselves, confront ourselves with a mystery. It seems that critics base their evaluative strategies not only on arguments referring to content and form, but also to their own emotions, which seem to reflect dealing with an auratic masterpiece (as Walter Benjamin put it). Marcel Reich-Ranicki, a Polish-Jewish critic from Włocławek who passed away in 2013, ‘the pope of German literary criticism’ famous for his uncompromising attitude, wrote about *A Minute’s Silence* in “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” (FAZ):

Respect, **discretion**, properness, tact: these are the words that come to my mind. Lenz respects his protagonists. He grants them the right to **discretion**, he does not leave anything out, he writes carefully, subtly, and tactfully. He is a well-mannered narrator. [...] We need to thank my friend Siegfried Lenz for this poetic book – perhaps his best to date.<sup>24</sup>

Heinrich Detering, a reviewer from the same magazine chimes with Ranicki, focusing on Lenz’s style:

If you believe that Lenz’s power lies in short and medium forms, his latest novel will reassure you in this conviction. It is a masterpiece in the most crafty sense, which is probably why at some point the amazing precision *pièce bien faite* [a well-made piece] can transform **into the magic** of storytelling. Old-fashioned? Modern? Old arguments of Lenz’s admirers and critics are pale in the face of this sovereign brevity. This is what is so amazing about this book: its simplicity.<sup>25</sup>

Detering mentions ‘magic’, and hence we should not be surprised by another, shorter review, this time from a Sunday issue of “FAZ” by Volker

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<sup>24</sup> M. Reich-Ranicki, *Bettgeschichten hatten für ihn nie Beweisqualität*, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, April 22, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> H. Detering, *Die Meerfrau und der Steinfischer*, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, June 21, 2008, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/schweigeminute-von-siegfried-lenz-die-meerfrau-und-der-steinfischer-1546299.html> (accessed: 5.07.2022).



Weidermann, who concludes: “This is a light, delicate, sad, and beautiful book about love – the likes of which we have not seen in a long time.”<sup>26</sup> The degree to which the critics agree with one another is unusual; even “Tag-zeitung,” a magazine that politically is on the opposite pole, and generally does not agree with “FAZ” in terms of literature, praises the novella in Dirk Knipphals’s review:

There is something incredibly moving in this story. It has already been noted in reviews that it has a “retro charm”. [...] It is absolutely lovely to read. And it does not matter at all that at no point do we believe this love story, that it seems somewhat too made up. We can delicately immerse ourselves in it. This novella is an invitation to a sentimental journey to the literature of the old Federal Republic. And we can rejoice that it is so perfect in terms of form.<sup>27</sup>

It sounds like this “immersion” in the past, evoked by the semantics of a “retro charm,” “sentimental journey,” etc., is also convergent with experiencing aura:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until **the moment or the hour become part of their appearance** – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.<sup>28</sup>

In reference to the peculiar temporal shift in reception (“until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance”), we should add how it is explained by one of Benjamin’s interpreters: we are not dealing with the experience of aura as an “atmospheric clash of perception,” or with an example of “landscape aesthetics,” but with something that “goes deep into space and time, and ties itself to certain constellations in which it appears,” and may even be considered a “holiness.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in reviews by critics and readers, apart from usual compliments (e.g. “unusually beautiful story” – Ina Hartwig, “Frankfurter Rundschau”<sup>30</sup>), we can also find such

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<sup>26</sup> V. Weidermann, *Zu Besuch bei Siegfried Lenz. So spricht die Liebe, wenn sie kommt*, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, May 6, 2008, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/zu-besuch-bei-siegfried-lenz-so-spricht-die-liebe-wenn-sie-kommt-1547068.html> (accessed: 17.07.2022).

<sup>27</sup> D. Knipphals, *Einladung zur Zeitreise*, “tageszeitung”, June 5, 2008, <https://taz.de/Einladung-zur-Zeitreise/!841857/> (accessed: 5.07.2022).

<sup>28</sup> W. Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, *op. cit.*, pp. 518–519.

<sup>29</sup> B. Lindner, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter...*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>30</sup> From the dust jacket of the German edition.

apparently-only-compliments which almost directly reach for metaphors used by Benjamin in his descriptions of aura, such as “photographs of a late summer, encased in language made of amber” (Andrea Seibel, “Die Welt”).<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, one scene in the novella contains the same metaphor. In this scene, there is a piece of amber in front of a photograph of Stella and Christian. Christian hands it to Sonja, who inspects it with a magnifying glass and discovers that there are two insects inside – a tiny beetle and mosquito. Christian says that they had got caught inside a drop of resin forever because they were not careful enough. However, Sonja is more interested in the photograph (MC, p. 101). Obviously, a review has a different significance than the source material, but the repeated elements (photography, amber) may not be a coincidence. The novella’s metaphor establishes an analogous relationship of entities encased in a drop of amber, as well as the two protagonists in the photo, who were brave enough to fall in love, and failed: one of them dies, the other one suffers the loss of his lover. Although it is difficult to claim that this is about some fate, punishment for defying social conventions, there have been careful attempts at interpretations based on some narrative incredibility, pointing out to the possibility that, in fact, Stella committed suicide,<sup>32</sup> or to supernatural powers, which are more characteristic of romanticist novellas (in the spirit of E.T.A. Hoffman).<sup>33</sup> The “here and now” of the protagonists is in a way preserved and shifted in time, “until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance” (see the quote from Benjamin above). Just as the two insects encased in amber are admired by the protagonists millions of years after they had been trapped, someday someone will listen to the discreetly told (or untold) story of the two lovers. It can be assumed that here this would be about the moment of the first-person narrator, possibly an old man,<sup>34</sup> telling an intimate story from his youth to his readers, revealing something that heretofore was a great, unspeakable mystery. Those evoked senses open an interesting interpretative field, although admittedly certain things are communicated ‘weakly.’<sup>35</sup> This also concerns the metaphorical plan created by photographs,

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<sup>31</sup> *Für den Urlaub: Lektüre-Empfehlungen von Andrea Seibel*, “Die Welt”, June 20, 2008, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article2126815/Lektuere-Empfehlungen-von-Andrea-Seibel.html?cid=search.product.onsitesearch> (accessed: 17.07.2022).

<sup>32</sup> J. Guo, *Erinnerung...*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> M.J. Schweissinger, *Spiel mit der Tradition...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>34</sup> This is how H. Karasek characterized the narrator in terms of age in SRF, *Siegfried Lenz ‘Schweigeminute’ im Literaturclub*, from c. 17 min. 50 s.

<sup>35</sup> Not in a colloquial sense, but as a specific poetic effect understood as “a wider range of weak implicatures”, D. Sperber, D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Oxford 1986, pp. 236–237.

which play a certain role in the outline of events (e.g. Colin's photo, Stella's photos during the funeral ceremony, etc.).<sup>36</sup> The last photograph – the one with the amber stone lying in front of it – is especially striking, as it directly points to one of the first Benjamin's mentions of aura:

Ornament, decorative surroundings in which an object or an entity is encased, distinguishes aura. Probably nothing gives such a good idea of genuine aura as Van Gogh's late paintings, in which one can say all objects are painted with aura.<sup>37</sup>

Is there anything more appealing than an amber stone encasing insects? Moreover, its typical yellow color resembles the intense yellow of Van Gogh's paintings. Considering those different ways of conceptualizing aura according to Benjamin, including simultaneous appearance of amber with other elements, such as a photograph of the protagonists, it is not unlikely that it is some sort of prefiguration.

## Eroticism – silence – taboo

As has been mentioned, critics notice something else, which certainly is a significant element of the novella's message. Ulrich Greiner from "Die Zeit" puts it in a concise and suggestive way: "Rarely does one read something as pristine and at the same time erotic. *A Minute's Silence*, a timeless gem, is a good example of this."<sup>38</sup> Others have noticed it as well: the ambivalence between the almost erotic tension, and actually observing social and cultural taboos. This is the discretion for readers and protagonists mentioned by Reich-Ranicki, the value of silence, which can be reduced to a rule observed in Lenz: "Bedroom stories never had any probative value for him."<sup>39</sup> Reich-Ranicki referred to reactions to the novel *Fundbüro* (2002, Polish edition 2006), when Lenz was provocatively asked why he avoided

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<sup>36</sup> For an interesting analysis of the role of photographs in a specific dialectics of fiction and reality in Lenz's novels, see M. Willand, *Funktionen des Faktischen im Fiktionalen. Die erzählten Fotografien in Lenz' 'Schweigeminute'*, [in:] *Faktualität und Fiktionalität*, ed. *idem*, Hannover 2017, pp. 109–126. Confronting those theses with Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* may also complete the notion of aura in interesting ways.

<sup>37</sup> From the rather controversially entitled notes *Erfahrungsprotokolle zum Haschichgebrauch*, see W. Benjamin, *Fragmente vermischten Inhalts. Autobiographische Schriften*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. R. Tiedmann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Bd. 6., Frankfurt am Main 1985, cited from Meyer-Sickendiek, *Lyrisches Gespür... , op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> U. Greiner, *Zeitlos: Siegfried Lenz ist abermals eine anrührende Erzählung geglückt*, "Die Zeit", May 8, 2008, <https://www.zeit.de/2008/20/Einleitung-Lenz> (accessed: 16.07.2022).

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 24.

presenting the physical side of love: the friendship between the main protagonist, a young Henry Neff, and an older woman, did not take them to bed.<sup>40</sup> In order to fully realize how (among other things) Lenz creates mysteriousness, secret, vagueness (aura) in his novels, which obviously fascinates critics and readers alike, one more aspect should be considered: the question of standing out according to *figure-ground*,<sup>41</sup> an important rule in perception psychology, contrasted with different literature, perhaps even the whole literary *mainstream*. Presenting eroticism and pornographic elements as proper and socially acceptable is of key importance here. If we were to trace this idea, both in German and international literature, we would not be surprised to discover that there is literature that transgresses certain norms, mostly in terms of sex, but also different types of obscenity. This is the line between morality regulated by law and evanescent taboos which belong to culture, and which have a culture-creating function (see e.g. S. Freud, C.L. Strauss, L. Kołakowski). Nowadays, political correctness has become such a regulator; it is generally believed to keep political and social taboos in line.<sup>42</sup> Over the past century a lot has changed in terms of what is socially acceptable, in everyday life and in art, literature and film (since this medium was popularized in the early 20th century). Liberal societies generally do not use censorship, although e.g. Henry Miller could not publish his *Tropic of Cancer* in the USA until the 1960s (despite its publication in France in 1934). Modernism, and even more so postmodernism, transformed attitudes to the question of showing not only eroticism, but also pornography in a work of art. Their aesthetic legitimization was sanctioned in art on specific conditions, for example, by combining them with violence under the label of transgression (G. Bataille), combining co-dependency with death (S. Sonntag) in the name of shortening the distance between high- and low-brow literature (L. Fiedler). Even in the 1960s the film *The Silence* by Ingmar Bergman was met with outrage in Germany, leading to

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<sup>40</sup> For a longer discussion, see my paper: A. Denka, *Poetyka 'gubienia' i 'odnajdywania' w powieści Siegfrieda Lenza Fundbüro jako forma przywołania wartości* [Poetics of 'Losing' and 'Finding' in *Fundbüro* by Siegfried Lenz as a Form of Evoking Values], [in:] *Antynomie wartości: Problematyka aksjologiczna w literaturze i dydaktyce* [Antinomies of Values: Axiological Issues in Literature and Pedagogy], eds. A. Morawiec, R. Jagodzińska, A. Klepaczko, Łódź 2006, pp. 241–254.

<sup>41</sup> D. Schwanitz, *Systemtheorie und Literatur: Ein neues Paradigma*, Opladen 1990, pp. 22–27. Non-literary examples, such as paintings by M.C. Escher, are an interesting introduction to solving literature's problems according to the systems theory.

<sup>42</sup> There are obviously clear examples of contradictions which often lead to conflict. For example, political correctness legitimizes new, liberal legal solutions for such issues as abortion or the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, thus making them unquestionable, whereas before the sexual revolution even mentioning them in a public debate would break the social taboo.

a debate about censorship and demands for “clean screen,”<sup>43</sup> although from today’s perspective such reactions to two or three erotic scenes seem rather hysterical. Meanwhile, viewers and readers have been confronted not only with almost open access to pornography (legal regulations mostly concern protecting minors), but also with masterpieces of high art appreciated by critics, such as films by Patrice Chéreau (*Intimacy*, 2001), and books by Elfriede Jelinek, Michele Houellebecq (*Platform*, 2001, Polish edition – 2004) or the already mentioned Charlotte Roche. Lenz knew Houellebecq’s books and he must have been aware of Charlotte Roche, his rival from the bestseller lists; however, the essence of those works is clearly not a source of inspiration, but at most a background against which *A Minute’s Silence* stands out (“a timeless gem” – see Greiner above). This leads us to Benjamin again: his thesis about the change of perception of a work of art caused by modernism (*age of technological reproducibility*), which was supposedly determined by the loss of traditionally understood aura, is illustrated by admiring an ancient statue of Venus, which is supposed to reflect a certain magic, religious ritual: “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual.”<sup>44</sup> If he is right, we would need to take a closer look at what such a ritual is in terms of showing sexuality, games with eroticism, or alternatively how they are dosed, which is convergent with the “unapproachability” demand.<sup>45</sup> This idea is suggested by Greiner, who characterizes Lenz’s novella in seemingly paradoxical terms: “something pristine (German *keusch*), and at the same time erotic” (see above). Another German author, Botho Strauß (born in 1944), valued novelist and playwright, who significantly differs from Lenz (different generation, themes, and aesthetics which does not refrain from radical political statements). Strauß criticized German morality of the 1980s and 1990s, pointing out to over-rationalization and desacralization. In his play *Kalldewey. Farce* (1982) – misquoting the title of Goya’s painting (“The sleep of love produces monsters”)<sup>46</sup> – he lists a number of pathologies in relationships resulting from the approach which only seems modern, such as solving problems through therapy or satisfying the need for intimacy with pornography. Strauß presented the psychophysical degradation of a man – in one of central scenes he is torn

<sup>43</sup> P. von Hugo, ‘Eine zeitgemäße Erregung’. *Der Skandal um Ingmar Bergmans Film, ‘Das Schweigen’ (1963) und die Aktion ‘Saubere Leinwand’*, “Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History” 2006, no. 3, pp. 210–220.

<sup>44</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art...*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> “Things which are significantly distant cannot be brought closer – ‘unapproachability’ is indeed the main value of a cult image.” W. Benjamin, *Dzieło sztuki...*, *op. cit.*, footnote 7, p. 210.

<sup>46</sup> B. Strauß, *Kalldewey. Farce*, München and Wien 1981.

to pieces by maenads in a wild ritual, and thrown into a washing machine. This unexpected reference to a myth (Greater Dionysia, a celebration of Dionysus) can be seen as a presentation of rituals and customs *ex negativo*; in the times of Christian dominance they were regulated in a completely different way, turned into taboo. Although Benjamin prefers theater with live staging,<sup>47</sup> which reinforces his definition of aura through references to sacred and ritualistic roots of theater, he believes that rituals should be conceptualized more broadly, as staging an object treated as a work of art each time. This should also concern poetry and other types of literature, although, for example, a poet reading their own poem can create a special kind of magic. Understood in this sense, Benjamin's theory obviously needs to be complemented and corrected, as traditionally understood aura may be disappearing, replaced by a new type of aura constructed by subtle communicative measures (auratic literature and film<sup>48</sup>). Stating that something is simultaneously "pristine" and "erotic" (Greiner) proves that an object displays a large degree of regulation. The essence of taboo lies in the fact that it is not observed on some conditions or in a certain way (e.g. killing in a war or a dispensation from fasting). Sex is also regulated by customs (such as being of age, avoiding a large age gap between lovers, refraining from intimacy in public), and presenting it in art is possible with specific legal and aesthetic limitations. The dialectic of closeness (or "approachability") which constitutes aura is typically convergent with what makes intimacy acceptable in art, or even aesthetically valuable.<sup>49</sup> It can also be said that audiences get used to some censorship (such as Hays Code), and that such censorship can be more attractive than freedom resembling lawlessness in the times of oppressive permissiveness, excessive eroticism and pornography in the media. And this is probably not just longing for the good old days, but an elementary anthropological need.

From this perspective, it could be said that Lenz showed more in *A Minute's Silence* than in his other works. Nonetheless, there are only two scenes showing intimacy between Christian and Stella. In the first, Christian pulls Stella towards him and kisses her, feeling her breasts

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<sup>47</sup> According to Benjamin, even the poorest provincial staging of *Faustus* is better than a film adaptation in that it is perfect competition for the Weimar premiere. W. Benjamin, *Dzieło sztuki...*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin observes – although he is clearly skeptical about it – that film is attributed with "cult elements." *Ibidem*, p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> W. Faulstich (*Grundkurs Filmanalyse*, München 2002, pp. 92, 155–156) points out to the function of an erotic scene in N. Roeg's *Don't look now* (1973), which is edited in a specific way: shots of a love scene are intertwined with shots of dressing up, which, on the one hand, makes the scene less provocative, and on the other, more focused on the good relationship between the spouses, which is not a basis for the crisis.

touch him. Stella walks over to a bed without saying anything, lies down, leaving space on the pillow for Christian to join her. This retrospection is followed by the mourning ceremony during a minute's silence (i.e. not speaking); the narrator describes how students react to this ritual, and then we return to the hotel room. The scene opens with the pillow showing only one trace rather than two; Christian reminisces that at one point their faces, turned towards each other, were so close that they left only one trace. He gets up when Stella is asleep (or so he thinks), taking her hand off his chest. Stella sighs, lifts her head, looks at him questioningly, smiling, and he tells her he needs to go. The erotic scene is almost cut out. We are taken to a different time and place via montage, a special type of darkening, a reflector. There are different kinds of enforced silence: to mourn Stella's tragic death, (by the main protagonist) to keep his love secret and thus protect it, and to show respect for the reader and protagonists. It is about avoiding voyeurism, which characterizes Lenz as a perfect author, i.e. one contained within the text, but also an author who defied mainstream; in a world where Charlotte Roche is a bestselling author, readers still long for stories "from a different time, a time when it was not common knowledge what a one-night stand is."<sup>50</sup> The second part of the love scene between Christian and Stella is just as brief: a short description of passion on the so-called bird island boils down to two sentences. In the scene the two lovers lie facing each other on a beach, Christian caressing Stella's thighs, looking into her eyes, they undress and make love next to pine trees. Those hoping for the 82-year-old Lenz to break the ethical literary norms which he had observed all his career, and express some sort of senile moral loosening, will be disappointed. Admittedly, the theme – a love affair between a teacher and a student (who is of age, but still a student) – provided some grounds for expecting a scandal.<sup>51</sup> There is no simple answer to the question of the extent to which Lenz resembles his first-person narrator, an elderly man who reminisces about a love affair from his youth. Some evidence might be provided by a short comment made by the narrator towards the end of the book; as he watches the damaged yacht being towed, he thinks to himself that he shall always remember not

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<sup>50</sup> U. Greiner, *Zeitlos...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Probably there are some personal intentions of a different kind. Lenz started working on the novella shortly before the death of his wife, Liselotte, in 2006. Her death combined with Lenz's health issues must have interrupted his work. He finished the novella while in a new relationship with a woman named Ulla, to whom the book is dedicated, but in a 2014 interview he said that the book is a declaration of love for his wife *post mortem*. U. Berndt, *Zu Gast bei Siegfried Lenz*, [in:] *Gespräche unter Freunden*, ed. D. Kampa, Hamburg 2015, pp. 488–489.

the tug, but its image. However, it actually only suggests some temporal distance between the narrator and the events (the time when the story is told and the time when it is set); before, that distance seemed shorter. To recapitulate, also all those external circumstances (which surely must be some elements of the author's creation, although rather unconscious and not cynical) reinforce – through a number of ambiguities and omissions on the level of text, through a mystery, through “unapproachability” – an important element of aura as described by Benjamin.

## Form as mystery. Some theoretical-systemic considerations

Discussing aura and its fading in the *times of technological reproducibility*, Benjamin may have touched upon the issue of social transformations in modernism, especially concerning distinguishing an independent art system from other social systems in a functionally diverse society (a concept by Niklas Luhmann).<sup>52</sup> This problem should be considered from a different perspective. With modernism, the need to deal with the aura of a work of art, connection with the time and place of its existence, experiencing its authenticity<sup>53</sup> brings a number of phenomena, including literary ones, which are simultaneously an answer to modernity (i.e. industrialization, urbanization, rail, but also new media, such as photography and film). All *l'art pour l'art*<sup>54</sup> aesthetics, as well as the works and ways of functioning of literary groups such as George Kreis's, beatnik poetry (fifty years later and for different social reasons), such as A. Ginsberg, J. Kerouac, and R.D. Brinkmann in Germany, to some extent also the early works of P. Handke from the times of the student revolt, whose fan meetings were artistic happenings, up until present-day poetry slams – these can all be considered examples of anti-modernist trends. All those phenomena, or actually any cult surrounding literary works or attempts at establishing such cults by celebrating charismatic authors, either by fans or by auto-creation, seem convergent with how Benjamin understood aura. In modernity, aura becomes a construct (in fact, it was a construct before, but such tools for description were introduced

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<sup>52</sup> For an introduction to theoretical-systemic considerations in terms of literature, see A. Denka, *Literatura – społeczeństwo – system. Studia wokół niemieckojęzycznych autorów przełomu XX i XXI wieku (Peter Handke, Siegfried Lenz, Botho Strauß, Dietrich Schwanitz i Peter Turrini)* [Literature – Society – System: Studies on German-language Writers from the Late 20th Century and Early 21st Century (Peter Handke, Siegfried Lenz, Botho Strauß, Dietrich Schwanitz i Peter Turrini)], Poznań 2020.

<sup>53</sup> W. Benjamin, *Dzieło sztuki ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 204, 205.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin notes this moment as a kind of “negative theology” of a crisis, and at the same an opportunity for emancipation from “parasitic subservience to ritual”. *Ibidem*, p. 211.



later), so we can only talk about aura's transformation. Moreover, in terms of theoretical-systemic considerations, we would need to demonstrate that works of art are not elements of art:

Elements of social systems always include communication, and never objects, texts, etc. Works of art organize communications about incredible things, and at the same time they enable a consensus about them. They provoke esoteric, complex experiences, and at the same time they enable communication about them. They are communication programs.<sup>55</sup>

As with the autonomy rule contained in *l'art pour l'art*, Benjamin's aura is not a property of 'art' from the theoretical-systemic perspective; it characterizes neither works of art nor the system. The separation of other communications, systems such as 'law,' 'economy,' 'religion,' etc., to which the system of 'art' is the so-called external environment [Umwelt] is of key importance here. Hence aura is only a program, establishing how communications within a given work of art are supposed to be organized. Interestingly, only after it has been distinguished can the 'art' social system also regulate issues which are of importance to Benjamin, such as "authenticity" [Echtheit] (see footnote 16): "art is organized by the authenticity of the genius who produced it and in which the audience takes delight"<sup>56</sup> And it happens regardless of programs that concern e.g. establishing the proportions between heteronomy and autonomy in the structure of a work of art (without autonomy it is likely that the messages organized by that work of art will be classified as the communication of the 'politics' system, which obviously has specific consequences). But 'art' also organizes such issues as 'style,' which would be a type of bond between the elements of a work of art, i.e. between "form" and "context," the latter including "anything that concerns the horizons of a work of art and regulates its references, including references to other examples of art through citations, paradoxes, ironic inversions, etc."<sup>57</sup> To recapitulate, if we can find aura in today's film and literature, it is about inspiring specific "esoteric" experiences in the audience using a presented "form", but also about creating the right contextual references. What used to be magic and ritual *de facto* becomes a celebration of form which often boils down to following specific intertextual and genological tropes, communicated "weakly" through metaphors. Regarding

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<sup>55</sup> D. Schwanitz, *Systemtheorie und Literatur...*, *op. cit.*, p. 254. Actually, this is a fragment of a fictional conversation between Oscar Wilde and M. Teste, a character in P. Valéry's poems, in which they explain the social system of art according to N. Luhmann. It is striking that Benjamin used a quote from Valéry's *Pièces sur l'art* in the introduction to his text.

<sup>56</sup> D. Schwanitz, *Systemtheorie und Literatur...*, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 255.

the form, certain aspects of Lenz's novella are communicated 'strongly', e.g. the genre is indicated: *Novelle*. It is a pity that it is left out in the Polish edition, as even 'unprofessional' readers, who only have high school knowledge of literature, may recognize references to the strong trend in Polish literature of positivism and modernism. Situating *A Minute's Silence* within a trend in European and global short-story writing would probably be too much for typical Polish and German readers alike. Although in the case of *A Minute's Silence* it would be understandable to contextually refer to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, i.e. the genre's roots, romanticist short-story writing (e.g. E.T.A. Hoffman) but also realist trends (e.g. T. Storm), such works as *Panchatantra* or *One Thousand and One Nights* likely belong only to the "horizon of the work of art" (Schwanitz, see above). Noticing the nuances of the strongly formalized genre, which "is more concise and structurally rigorous than a short story"<sup>58</sup> is a different issue. Moreover, it would be some challenge to confront the contents of *A Minute's Silence* with definitions of the novella present in German culture, such as that presented by Goethe in a conversation with Eckermann, Paul Heyse's *Falkentheorie*, Ludwig Tieck's turning point theory (well-known to Lenz, conceptualizing novella as a sister genre to drama), or Theodor Storm's novella theory (see footnote 6). In the light of the above, one may ask where the celebration of a form stops, and its analysis begins. Of course, there is a difference between the ruminations of a scholar and those of an admirer of Lenz's books, who may read them for various reasons, not necessarily concerned with genological and intertextual references. However, this does not mean that the reflections of the average reader only concern the level of reception of trivial literature. Saying that 360,000 fans of Lenz cannot be wrong (a paraphrase of the famous *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong* from 1959) indicates more than just usual, pop-cultural entertainment: it may mean celebrating form on a certain level, perhaps not fully realized, hidden, but also sophisticated. Then celebrating form presents itself as discovering a deeply hidden secret. At the same time, it is dealing with tradition understood as "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be" (footnote 28). A number of textual understatements facilitate this, like the suggestion contained in Mr Kugler's question that Stella may not have been killed by an unfortunate accident (footnotes 32 and 33). Signaling potential readings, such as giving Stella the qualities of a mythical nymph, nixie, or ondine, has a similar function; Stella is an excellent swimmer: during a school dance she is named Lady of the Sea by

<sup>58</sup> T. Cieřlikowska, *Nowela* [Novella], [in:] *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Types and Genres], eds. G. Gazda, S. Tynecka-Makowska, Kraków 2006, p. 464.

“Krakenman” (Octopus Lord), and an attendee of a fishing conference from Scotland draws her portrait with long hair and huge, dreamy eyes. This is simultaneously a nod towards a common literary motif present in different cultures, including German romanticist literature (Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Ondine*, 1811, which was later used for libretto in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s opera of the same title). The world from novels by W. Faulkner is another intertextual reference; Stella tells Christian about Faulkner’s books, she recommends to him *Light in August* (1932). The fatalist world of Faulkner’s novels and protagonists whose actions are driven by fate, which fascinated Lenz,<sup>59</sup> are surely an important element of the horizon of *A Minute’s Silence*. Other possible contexts include the genre’s openness to mystery, suspense and secrets, present not only in German romanticist novellas but also in Anglo-Saxon literature (E.A. Poe), for example. German readers should not have problems noticing analogies to a popular novella by T. Storm, *The Rider on the White Horse* (1888), in which pride (*hybris*) in the face of the power of nature can be considered the reason for the protagonist’s death; Hauke Haien constructs dykes, thus stealing land from the sea.<sup>60</sup> The symbolic layer in Lenz’s novella is actually not that complex in terms of reception. It is likely that ‘stones’ – not ‘an individual stone’, but ‘many stones’ – which refer to the work of Christian and his father, may be the subject symbol, the ‘falcon’ from Heyse’s theory. This work intrigues Stella, it is the reason why she boards their boat and asks Christian to show her the stone blocks. Interestingly, this situation is in a way signaled by the description of a minor accident: one piece of stone slips from the gripper and hits the deck, which sends the boat rocking moments before Stella boards it. This is the first turning point, and disaster seems almost inevitable. However, we have another one – in fact, the most important – in which stones play the main part: this is what the breakwater is made of, they are directly what kills Stella, as during the accident, she is thrown overboard and hits her head against the stone wall. The constant presence of ‘stones’ not only signals significant turning points in the narrative structure, but also opens the field for dealing with the symbolic layer, of which the reader may not be fully aware (or may be just partly aware), and what is more, the interpretation may be subject to very individual reception.<sup>61</sup> This is the basic characteristic of a symbol: “its ‘shimmering’ contents

<sup>59</sup> M.J. Schweissinger, *Spiel mit der Tradition...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–183.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 189–190. A comparison to the so-called fate novella using the example of *The Earthquake in Chile* by Kleist (1807) would be an interesting idea, see Polish edition (1960), pp. 190–193.

<sup>61</sup> One example would be Schweissinger’s conclusions (*Spiel mit der Tradition...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–187), in which he points to the symbolic role of stones as a basis for the useful and

cannot be transmitted in any other way, through some other paraphrase, as this would lead to the annihilation of the most characteristic feature of a symbol – its intentional mysteriousness.”<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

Aura is a notion which can be applied to modern literary works: both understood colloquially, implying mysteriousness, secrecy, inexplicable phenomena, and as presented by Benjamin, describing contextual transformations of art in modernism, *in the age of technological reproducibility*. It can be clearly traced using the example of Lenz’s novella. “Auratizing” strategies are observable in literary criticism which reflects the narrative consistently constructed around the silence discourse (through discretion, vagueness, etc.) and a number of subtle metaphors, which are also convergent with the metaphors used by Benjamin in his definition of aura. A number of intertextual references and a sophisticated game with the genealogical tradition may also become elements of an intuitive celebration of form for common readers, who do not have tools for scholarly analysis.

Aura did not disappear in modernism, nor in later periods – its correlates have survived. They can be described using theoretical-systemic notions (in reference to the art system) as a type of oscillating between form and context in its broadest sense. This context, understood as referring to certain literary traditions, but also as a need to experience traditionally understood norms, may prove attractive for modern readers and explain the phenomenon of unobvious bestsellers.

*Translated by Paulina Zagórska*

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later also profitable work of a “stone fisher.” In Christian’s projections, this would be thinking about the future together, and such work would to some extent symbolize his coming of age.

<sup>62</sup> *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Terms], eds. M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, 4th edition, Wrocław 2002, pp. 545–546.

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