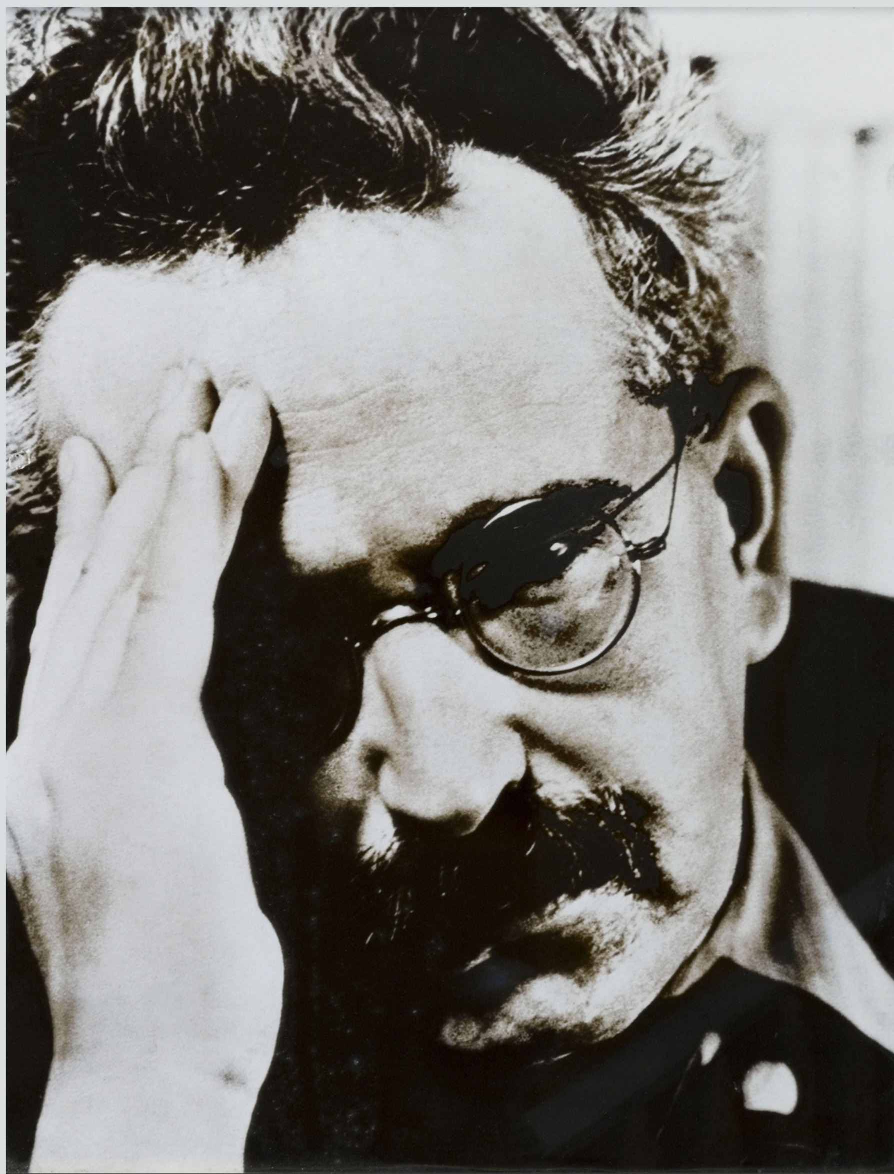

Carlo Salzani

Walter Benjamin and the Actuality of Critique

Essays on Violence and Experience

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By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Abbreviations

References to the work of Benjamin are made parenthetically in the text according to the following conventions.

All references to the *Arcades Project* are to the convolute number without further specification, for example (M5,9).

AP	*The Arcades Project.* Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
BA	Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. *Briefwechsel 1938-1940*. Edited by Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994.
BS	Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985.
C	*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940.* Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred R. Jakobson and Evelyn M. Jakobson. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
CA	Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1920-1940.* Edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
CS	*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem.* Edited by Gershom Scholem, translated by Gary Smith and André Lefevere. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
GB	*Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 volumes. Edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995-2000.
GS	*Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 volumes in 14 subvolumes. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974-1989.
OT	*The Origin of the German Tragic Drama.* Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.

SW	*Selected Writings*, 4 volumes. Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997-2003.
WuN	*Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 21 volumes. Edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz with the Walter Benjamin Archive. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2008ff.

Introduction

Actuality and Critique

1. The Task of the Critic

In April 1930, Benjamin signed a contract with his publisher Ernst Rowohlt for a volume of literary criticism (the working title was *Gesammelte Essays zur Literatur*) that was to collect his previously published essays on Gottfried Keller, Johan Peter Hebel, Franz Hessel, Marcel Proust, André Gide and Surrealism, plus planned essays on Karl Kraus (already begun in March 1930), storytelling and Jugendstil. The volume was to be opened by a programmatic essay titled "The Task of the Critic" and to be closed by the 1921 essay "The Task of the Translator." During the following months Benjamin worked intensely on the introduction, jotting down notes and a plan, now collected in volume VI of the *Gesammelte Schriften* under the title "Zur Literaturkritik" (*GS* VI: 161-84). This section collects however also notes and ideas relating to another, contemporary and cognate project, that of a journal to be titled *Krise und Kritik* that Benjamin discussed and concretized during the summer of the same year with Brecht and for which in September he managed to enlist again Rowohlt.[1] The financial collapse of Rowohlt the following year meant the demise of both projects (cf. Eiland and Jennings 2014, 342ff.; Steiner 2000, 516-17). In a letter to Scholem from July 26, 1932, Benjamin counted this as one of the bitterest failures of his life (*BS* 23/*CS* 14-15).

The never-written introduction can nonetheless be taken as emblematic, not only of a period of sustained reflection on the nature and essence of criticism,[2] but more in general of a well-defined and consistent "critical approach" that marked Benjamin's career as a whole. The scattered notes

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[1] For a "memorandum" about the journal see *GS* VI: 619-21.

[2] It is in this context that Benjamin famously wrote to Scholem, in French, on January 20, 1930, that the goal he had set for himself was "*d'être consideré comme le premier critique de la littérature allemande*," which implied the task to "recreate criticism as a genre" (*GB* 3:502/*C* 359).

contain *in nuce* the essence of what in the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin had called "philosophical criticism" (*GS* I/1:358/*OT* 182), that is, his own philosophy of *Kritik* (where the German term translates both the English "criticism" and "critique") or "criticism as philosophy" (Moran 2018, 7),[3] not limited to the criticism of literature and art but extended into a proper methodology of reading—the reading of books, art, movies, cities, and history. This critical approach, called here "*vollendete Kritik*" (accomplished, consummate critique), entails a sort of *Aufhebung* of polemic and commentary, where the strategic, political thrust of "polemic" merges with an immanent exegesis based on citation and gloss (*GS* VI: 162). Importantly, against "transcendent" criticism, oriented either towards the author or the audience, this "immanent" *Kritik* is *internal* (*innerlich*) to the work (*GS* VI: 166, 172): the cornerstone of Benjamin's philosophy of *Kritik* is in fact the tenet that *Kritik* is a "manifestation of the life of the work" (*eine Erscheinungsform des Lebens der Werke*) (*GS* VI: 171/*SW* 2:373) and "life" is its proper "medium"—whereby "life" becomes therefore also the operative term of this whole theory. *Kritik*, Benjamin writes, is "a pure function of the life, or rather afterlife [*Fortleben*] of the work" (*GS* VI: 170; cf. Kaulen 1990).

This terminology clearly refers back to the early Romantics' theorization of criticism that Benjamin had analyzed in his 1919 dissertation, but the vocabulary of *Leben* and *Fortleben* also strongly marks the 1921 "The Task of the Translator," and it is precisely to this text that Benjamin explicitly refers as paradigmatic also for the task of the critic (*GS* VI: 171/*SW* 2:373). It is thus not by chance that "The Task of the Translator" was to close the volume that "The Task of the Critic" should have opened. In the translation essay, Benjamin stresses that his use of the vocabulary of life and afterlife is completely "unmetaphorical": translation stands in a "vital" connection (*ein Zusammenhang des Lebens*) to the original insofar as it issues from its "afterlife" (*Überleben*) and marks its "continued life" (*Fortleben*) (*GS* IV/1: 10-11/*SW* 1:254). The work is not a static, self-contained entity, but rather a fundamentally *historical* one, and it is precisely history and not nature that determines the range of life.[4] The

[3] Heinrich Kaulen (1990, 319) refers in this respect to no. 44 of Schlegel's *Athenaeum* fragments, according to which "every philosophical review should be at the same time a philosophy of reviewing." Benjamin's sustained theorization of the "task" of the critic responds to this demand.

[4] The whole formulation reads: "The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by the standpoint of history rather than that of nature" (*GS* IV/1:11/*SW* 1:255).

concept of "task," as Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (2014, 109) remark, indicates precisely the "historical dialectic" between the work and the action of the translator/critic.[5] Just like translation, also *Kritik* belongs to the processual being of works, in a fashion that Benjamin, borrowing a terms from Adorno's musical writings, calls "shrinkage" (*Schrumpfung*): the action of time, which reduces the work to "ruins," is completed by the "deconstruction" (*Abmontieren*) operated by the critic, whose action therefore marks, and belongs to, the "survival" (*Fortleben*) of the work (*GS* VI: 174/*SW* 2: 415).

The critical scholarship of the past five decades has showed and thoroughly analyzed the consistency (and the slight variations) of this form of critical approach throughout Benjamin's career. Its roots can perhaps even be sought in the 1914-1915 essay on Hölderlin, but it was the dissertation on the concept of criticism in German Romanticism, completed in 1919 and published in 1920, that made explicit and systematized the philosophical idea of criticism and the critical methodology that was to constitute the bedrock of Benjamin's critical approach from then on. The first part of the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* further developed this methodology around the concepts of "truth content" and "material content," and the book on the German *Trauerspiel* systematized it into a "philosophical criticism" that, through the "mortification of the works," aims to "make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth" (*GS* I/1:358/*OT* 182). This methodology guided Benjamin's readings of literary figures, movements, and schools, but also became, in the 1930s, the cornerstone of his reading of history, and in particular of the "prehistory of modernity." A telling methodological entry of *The Arcades Project* in fact reads:

> Historical "understanding" is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife [*Nachleben*] of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the "afterlife [*Nachleben*] of works," in the analysis of "fame," is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general." (N2,3)

The "recognizability" and "readability" of the historical event that the materialist historian pursues are functions of its afterlife; the "historical index" that brings an event, a work, a situation to "legibility" is a function of their *Überleben, Fortleben*, *Nachleben*, and the task of the historian,

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[5] The task, *die Aufgabe*, is thus far from denoting an *aufgeben*, a "giving up" in the face of the endless and un-completable (but not for that *impossible*) work of translation/critique, as Paul de Man (1986) (in)famously argued.

just like that of the translator and of the critic, is thus to recognize their truth-content ("what was never written," as Benjamin quoted from Hofmannsthal[6]) and make it "present," "actual" (cf. e.g. K2,3; N2,2).[7]

The "durability" of a work (or an event) means therefore that the work lives on, but in a different form, with a life that comes after the "first" or "proper" life, a continued life that spells a processual afterness, a life after life. This also applies, with paradigmatic clarity, to Benjamin's *own* work. If Benjamin was not the melancholic outsider that a certain romanticizing fashion liked to imagine (and that recent biographical efforts have corrected), his "fame" (such a central notion in his theory of criticism) certainly belongs to his afterlife. The posthumous popularity of his work (and of his romanticized image) has gone through different phases, when different aspects of his oeuvre have come to "legibility," but has never waned and keeps returning in waves. The field of Benjamin studies could appear saturated, when so much (everything?) has already been said, analyzed, argued, and written, and what George Steiner named "Benjamin industry" (cf. Greenberg 2008a) does indeed show "signs of exhaustion" (Weidner 2015); however, new waves of interest and new publications keep reviving his "recognizability" in new fields and communities, so that his work survives in the endless work of the critics, it lives *after* the passing of fashions and trends, it "lives *forth*."

Throughout the history of Benjamin's reception, the question of the "actuality" of his thought kept popping up. The "actuality of Walter Benjamin" became a title for conferences, symposia, articles, and books, but up until at least the mid-1990s the insistence on this topic betrayed doubt and uncertainty rather than assertiveness: is Benjamin's thought, so embedded in modernist categories, so imbued with theological and messianic concepts, at times so obscure and ambiguous, still "actual" and "useful" for our times? In a sense it was Habermas (1979) who, by

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[6] I want to emphasize the issue of the "truth-content" that is indexed by this methodology of reading, since a certain (for a time quite popular) way of reading Benjamin interpreted instead the afterness of this continued life as a moving *away* from a notion of self-contained meaning or signification—from "Truth"—, as for example did Samuel Weber (2008, 92) in his reading of "The Task of the Translator." A critique of Weber (as paradigmatic of this way of reading Benjamin) will be carried out in the appendix of this volume.

[7] The vocabulary of "actualization" translates in this context *Vergegenwärtingung* and *gegenwärtig machen*, "presentification" and "make present." For a thorough analysis of Benjamin's theory of reading, see Wohlfarth (1992b); for an exploration of the concept of "afterlife" in Benjamin, see Weidner (2011). Gerard Richter (2011) devoted a whole book to the analysis of "afterness" in modern thought.

precisely questioning this "actuality" in a famous speech for Benjamin's eightieth anniversary in 1972, started a defensive movement within Benjamin scholarship, which almost felt compelled to justify and demonstrate his enduring relevance. But in so doing it was forced to adopt the terms of the prosecution and fell into the trap of actuality as "topicality" and "usefulness."[8] However, Benjamin's *Aktualität* (a term ultimately untranslatable and not reducible to topicality or contemporary relevance) is not to be sought in an instrumental usefulness for problems of current concern, but rather in his enduring afterlife, in the historical index that his work contains and that brings it to legibility—*even through, and perhaps precisely thanks to, a certain untimeliness and historical lag*—at a certain time. This concept of *Aktualität* and of *Kritik* is the task that Benjamin assigned to those approaching his work (cf. also Weidner 2010, 131-32; Khatib 2013, 29).

At the conclusion of "Literary History and the Study of Literature," a text published in April 1931 in *Die literarische Welt* and thus belonging to the period of intense reflection about criticism that failed to produce "The Task of the Critic," Benjamin writes:

> What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian. (*GS* III:290/*SW* 2:464)

This has been the spirit guiding my readings of Benjamin. The chapters of this volume, though they were written for different occasions, all strive to read Benjamin in a Benjaminian way, merging strategy and exegesis, resting on citation and glosses, eschewing the question of usefulness or topicality, and pursuing instead the "life" that becomes recognizable in Benjamin's work in the present time.

2. The Actuality of the Critique of Violence

If the issue of Benjamin's "actuality" is much less questioned today than in the last decades of the twentieth century, this is, importantly if not largely, due to a renewed interest in a particular text, the 1921 "Critique of Violence." Probably the only surviving part of a never-completed major

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[8] A paradigmatic example is the volume edited by Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead, published on the wake of the centenary of Benjamin's birth in 1992 and titled precisely *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin* (1998).

project on "Politics," this text was largely ignored during Benjamin's lifetime (though Agamben argues otherwise[9]) and, despite the fact that it opened the 1955 two-volume collection of Benjamin's *Schriften* edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno, it was mostly ignored also in the first wave of Benjamin's posthumous reception. It briefly came to "legibility" in Germany during the ferment and unrest of the radical student movement in the late 1960s: in 1965, for example, Herbert Marcuse published a slim volume of Benjamin's essay under the title *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, also penning a brief though influential afterword focusing on a "revolutionary" reading of the text (cf. also Bernstein 2013, 56-58), and in 1968 Oskar Negt used Benjamin's essay in a critical analysis of the current political unrest. However, the difficult and obscure language of the essay, steeped in religious metaphors and messianic concepts, and Habermas' disapproval in the early 1970s, soon re-marginalized it in the Benjamin renaissance that started in the1970s with the publication of first volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften*. Udi Greenberg (2008b, 325-26) names two important examples of this marginalization: the fact that one of the first major books on Benjamin in English, Richard Wolin's 1982 *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, devoted only three sentences to "Critique of Violence," and that Momme Brodersen's 1990 important biography of Benjamin further reduced the scope to one single sentence.

The "now of recognizability" of Benjamin's arduous text started when Derrida focused on it (albeit quite critically) in his famous 1989 paper on justice and deconstruction, "Force of Law," and its current popularity is also due to the substantial wave of deconstructionist readings that followed.[10] A second and no less important factor is the central role that Agamben assigned to "Critique of Violence" in his *Homo Sacer* project, begun in 1995 with the publication of the first volume of the series.[11] Since then, "Critique of Violence" has become an unavoidable focus in the contemporary political-philosophical debate. More generally, Simon Critchley (2012; cf. also Weigel 2010) argues that what characterizes our so-called "post-secular age" is an ominous entanglement of politics, religion, and violence, and that is why a text such as "Critique of Violence" results

[9] As it is well known, Agamben (2005, 52ff.) argues that this essay had a major (though unacknowledged) impact on Carl Schmitt, who supposedly wrote his *Political Theology* in response to and against Benjamin's "Critique of Violence."

[10] Beatrice Hanssen's argument that Derrida's text "pulled the essay out of relative obscurity" (2000, 8) is only a slight overstatement. But scholars generally agree on this point (cf. e.g. Weigel 2010, Eiland 2017).

[11] On Agamben's intensive relation with "Critique of Violence" see e.g. Moran and Salzani (2015).

so “actual”—thanks precisely to those features that made it “indigestible” only a few decades ago! The revival of political theology and of a critical engagement with the political theory of Carl Schmitt marks no doubt the “historical index” of Benjamin’s text and exponentially enhances its legibility.[12] Our epoch, Richard Bernstein (2013, 48) concurs, is no longer what Eric Hobsbawm named “the age of extremes” characterizing the “short” twentieth century, but rather a new “age of violence” marked by the bloody beginning of the twenty-first century, which obsessively pushes ever new readers to return to “Critique of violence” and to take a stand in regard to it. All these factors (and certainly many more) characterize the afterlife of Benjamin’s text and assure that it lives forth.

This obsessive focus also means, however, that “Critique of Violence” is, in Critchley’s words, “massively over-interpreted” (2012, 213; and he states that when proposing yet another interpretation). There is hardly a line, a statement or a concept in Benjamin’s text that has not been analyzed, scrutinized, criticized, and debated, with often contradictory and conflicting results. And the already-huge critical literature on it never stops growing. The three chapters composing the first part of this volume find their place in this massive critical wave, although they do not tackle Benjamin’s text frontally and in its entirety: they rather focus on some specific aspects that emerge from it and from a number of texts that chronologically and thematically belong to the context of the project generally known as “Politics.” In this sense they are thematically connected and consistent, though they do not build up a comprehensive interpretation. They do share a singular perspective insofar as they all pursue, in different ways, the question of what constitutes, for Benjamin, “true” or “proper” political action. And they do so with an eye on the *Aktualität* of the Benjaminian notions, which does not mean their “usefulness” in the analysis of current political concerns, but rather their legibility in a constellation of reading bringing together their—dated, out-of-time, “useless”—signification and our own time.

Chapter 1 focuses on the peculiar notion of violence that Benjamin’s text puts forward, in a comparative reading with that proposed by George Sorel. For both Benjamin and Sorel, a certain form of violence comes to identify “pure praxis,” pure political action, against a whole tradition that deems instead violence as merely instrumental, and as such non-political or anti-political, neither essential to, nor constitutive of, the *bios politikos*. Benjamin famously used Sorel’s conceptualization of the “proletarian

[12] Agamben (e.g. 1998, 2005) reads it precisely in contraposition to Schmitt’s concepts of sovereign violence and state of exception.

general strike" as a possible instance of this form of practice, where the identification of pure praxis with the strike, with a suspension of action and thus a non-action, problematizes the definition both of praxis and of violence. The two thinkers came from two different cultural and philosophical traditions, and ultimately produced two different discourses, which meet in Benjamin's use of Sorel but remain nonetheless distant. The two notions of praxis that they propose are nonetheless similar in many ways, and the chapter will pursue the commonalities and similarities, especially in the strong ethical emphasis both thinkers put on their concept of pure, political praxis. Commentators usually place the major difference between the two in their apparently opposed idea of "myth," whereby for Sorel myth is a form of heartening narrative aimed at inspiring true political praxis, whereas Benjamin links it to fate and guilt and identifies it with the (anti-political) realm of necessity. It is not however these terminological dissimilarities that truly distance their concepts of praxis: rather, whereas Benjamin identifies pure praxis with a suspension of action, with a "standstill," Sorel remains instead attached to a metaphysics of action, an exaltation of action for action's sake. This, the chapter argues, is the true difference between the two concepts of praxis which also makes alternative their two notions of violence.

Chapter 2 carries on with the focus on "pure praxis" by extending it to the notion of "purity" that marks not only the concepts of "pure means" and "pure violence" in "Critique of Violence," but also that of "pure language" in Benjamin's essays on language and also the notion of "expressionless" in his aesthetic writings. The chapter focuses in particular on three essays written around the crucial year 1921: "Critique of Violence," "The Task of the Translator," and "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*." I will argue, on the one hand, that the "purity" to be found there is one and the same concept, and, on the other, that it is strongly indebted to, if not a by-product of, Kant's theorization of the moral act and of the aesthetic judgement. In order to make this claim, the chapter analyses Benjamin's intense engagement with Kant's writings in the 1910s and early 1920s (also through the influence of Hermann Cohen): "purity" is a category strongly connoted within the philosophical tradition in which the young Benjamin moved his first steps, namely Kantian transcendental criticism. The argument is that the notion of purity in Benjamin, though deployed outside and often against Kant's theorization and that of his followers, and moreover influenced by different and diverse philosophical suggestions, retains a strong Kantian tone, especially in reference to its moral and ethical aspects. Whereas Benjamin rejects Kant's model of cognition based on the purity of the universal laws of reason, and thus also

Kant's theorization of purity as simply non empirical and a priori, he models nonetheless his politics and aesthetics around suggestions that arise directly from Kant's theorization of the moral act and of the sublime, and uses a very Kantian vocabulary of negative determinations construed with the privatives *-los* and *-frei* (*motiv-frei, zweck-los, gewalt-los, ausdrucks-los, intention-frei*, etc.). The chapter explores thus the connections that link "pure means," "pure language" and "pure violence" to one another and to the Kantian tradition.

Finally, Chapter 3 adds a further connotation to pure, political praxis: its thoroughly profane character. The focus of the chapter is the 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion," which is read in the context of Benjamin's *Politik*-project and thus with strong chronological, terminological, and conceptual links to "Critique of Violence." The core of Benjamin's important fragment is a critique of capitalism as a thoroughly religious phenomenon that belongs to the realm of myth and is thus characterized by fate and guilt. Reading "Capitalism as Religion" as part of the *Politik*-project allows to identify a strategy (or *the* strategy) to counter capitalism in what Benjamin in his correspondence names, in a Kantian fashion, "true politics": it is only *true*, i.e. pure, political praxis, that can allow to break out from the mythic order of capitalism, precisely as, in "Critique of Violence," this pure praxis is the only way out from the mythic order of law and retribution. And this praxis cannot be marked again by religion, but must be *profane*, that is, a politics that breaks with the religious logic *tout court*, and with the capitalist logic of guilt/debt in particular. The reading of this fragment also allows to put further stress on the question of Benjamin's *Aktualität* and thus on the task of the critic approaching his work: the differences between the capitalism Benjamin criticized in 1921 and the "late" capitalism of the early twenty-first century evidence a certain "untimeliness" of "Capitalism as Religion." But it is precisely this cultural and temporal lag that allows to construe a "constellation" between Benjamin's time and our own and enables his fragment to shatter the continuum of our temporal horizon and to open a way for thought. Benjamin's fragment, precisely thanks to this temporal and cultural lag, has come today to the moment of its "legibility," and it is our task to "recognize" and "actualize" it: this is what it means to attempt and think, today and for our time, the urgency of the *Umkehr* (reversal, inversion) that Benjamin's text calls for.

3. The Actuality of the Critique of Experience

The "actuality" of Benjamin's critique of experience is not as conspicuous as that of his critique of violence, and indeed the "buzz" about this topic is not nearly as intense as that about the violence text(s). However, the importance of this critique has marked every phase of Benjamin's reception and of his "renaissance" since the late 1960s and early 1970s, and can thus be said to constitute the solid bedrock on which rests Benjamin's afterlife. In fact, one of the main motors of Benjamin's posthumous fame in the first waves of his reception was the attention aroused in many different disciplines by his analyses of the media industry, the cinematic experience, the "impoverishment" and commodification of experience and the new "barbarism" brought about by the media revolution of the twentieth century, whereby his Artwork essay, among other texts, became an unavoidable reference in many syllabi and debates. Despite being strongly marked by his modernist context, Benjamin's take on media, aesthetics, art, and politics resulted much more "actual" and "legible" than, for example, Adorno's staunch opposition to and critique of the "culture industry." Benjamin's writings on technology, media, and industrial and metropolitan life knew a moment of high "legibility" in the heyday of postmodernism and post-structuralism, and this legibility lives on even after the digital revolution and the "virtualization" of experience.[13] His *Aktualität*, it can't be stressed enough, rests precisely on the temporal and cultural lag that allows for the shattering of the continuum of a homogeneous narrative in the "recognition" of a revolutionary intellectual moment.

What Benjamin identified as the "poverty" of experience caused by modernity with its many revolutions is still our poverty and is still our experience. The technological and cultural transformations that characterize our time were unthinkable in Benjamin's time (and even in later generations), but the trauma and revolution of experience they brought about—together also with new, perhaps revolutionary possibilities—are analogous to those Benjamin was already able to identify, and are thus still "legible" in a constellation with Benjamin's by-now outmoded readings. Importantly, unlike many other critics such as Adorno, Benjamin identified a potential for critical intervention even in all this poverty and

[13] The bibliography on the Artwork essay, on technology, media and the cinematic experience is too vast to be even hinted at through some examples. On the "actuality" of his work in the age of virtual reality one can take as paradigmatic the special issue that the journal *Transformations* devoted to "Walter Benjamin and the Virtual" and edited by John Grech (2007).

decay of experience, and thus his legibility is also a call to do the same in our times of hyper-digitalized, hyper-connected, virtualized, and disembodied experience. The task of the critic of this new experience is not (only) that of naming the loss it entails, but is (still) also that of seeking in its poverty, as Benjamin wrote in "Experience and Poverty," "a new, positive concept of barbarism" that could, perhaps, even "lead to something respectable" (*GS* II/1:215, 218/*SW* 2:732, 734).

A more recent focus on Benjamin's early writings emphasized how Benjamin's critique of experience essentially rests on a critique of Kant's limited concept of experience, but is at the same time also in a relation of dependence with the Kantian theorization, or at least with its "spirit" (cf. e.g., Quadrio 2003; Tagliacozzo 2018). The roots of the important critique developed in texts such as the Artwork essay, "Experience and Poverty" or "The Storyteller" are thus to be sought in Benjamin's critical engagement with Kant during the late 1910s and early 1920s, epitomized by "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy."[14] Attention to the Kantian (and Neo-Kantian) roots of Benjamin's critique of experience is important in order to fully understand his (mostly implicit) critique of Dilthey and his notion of *Erlebnis*, then developed by Husserl, to which Benjamin always counterposed his peculiar concept of *Erfahrung* (these terms will be defined and contextualized in the chapters of part II). This contraposition is essential for the construction of a constellation between Benjamin's critique of experience and our own poverty of experience and to gauge its potentiality and its *Aktualität*. The three chapters composing the second part of this volume focus on different aspects of Benjamin's critique of experience, but, as in the case of the chapters in the first part, come together in their consistent intention to assay the conditions of possibility for a meaningful praxis.

Chapter 4 relates Benjamin's critique of experience to his analysis of boredom, which he performed in a number of texts from the 1930s, and in particular in convolute "D" of the *Arcades Project* ("Boredom, Eternal Return"). This analysis extends to a number of related terms, such as ennui, spleen and melancholy, which Benjamin often fails to tell apart, and is in turn read in this chapter in a constellation with some contemporary literature on boredom, which in the past few decades has witnessed some important developments. Benjamin recognized that boredom is a fundamental component of modern life and of its phantasmagoria and

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[14] Already at the end of the 1970s, Agamben had analyzed and reworked this link in his *Infancy and History* (1993b, originally published in 1978), where Benjamin's "poverty" was upgraded to a proper "destruction" of experience and the link between experience and language was further developed.

planned to include its analysis in his work on the prehistory of modernity; this chapter of course was never written, and a consistent analysis of this modern mood is thus not to be found in his writings. Moreover, he never related his notes on boredom to his critique of experience, but I will argue that this connection is not only implicit but also constitutive of his analysis of boredom and of modernity. Boredom is what marks the "crisis of temporality" that characterizes modernity: it is the time of the metropolis and of the machine, the eternal return of the same that destroys any possibility of experience and also any chance of resistance. In particular in the notes for the Arcades Project and the Baudelaire book, boredom can be related to *Erlebnis*: it is the "malady" that accompanies the disintegration of the traditional forms of experience, which Benjamin called the "atrophy of experience." However, I will finally argue, thanks to its connection to allegory, boredom also plays a fundamental role in Benjamin's emancipatory project: the melancholy gaze of the allegorist reduces the historical event to ruins, showing its *facies hippocratica*, its "death mask," thus exposing the naked truth of the demise of experience. This is the dialectical potential of allegory and thus of boredom.

Chapter 5 links instead the critique of experience to Benjamin's lifelong interest for childhood, which produced a number of diverse and scattered but ultimately consistent writings. Since the time of Benjamin's involvement with the *Jugendbewegung* (where however the place of childhood is taken by youth), the question of the child accompanies, albeit often implicitly or in a minor tone, the critique of experience and can be said to stand for a concept of "truer" of "fuller" experience opposed to the hollowed-out experience of the modern bourgeois adult. In Benjamin's corpus, the child is therefore a figure of/for redemption and revolution. On the one hand, Benjamin absorbed from the early Romantics (who are responsible for the "invention" of childhood) an idea of childhood as prelapsarian innocence and wholeness that precedes the "fall" into lapsarian adulthood, and represents therefore an alternative and a possibility for a "different" form of experience; on the other, the influence of Freud's psychanalysis and other "anti-Romantic" suggestions lead Benjamin to associate at times the child with the "primitive" and the "barbarian," thus with a form of mechanized, non-innocent experience that, external and foreign to traditional, bourgeois, "poor" experience, can help shattering the modern phantasmagoria and re-found experience anew. These two levels are never explicitly defined and never clearly distinguished, so that, rather than a neat opposition, they constitute a dialectics that ultimately construes the child as a figure of anti-bourgeois redemption. Recovering the experience of childhood represents therefore simultaneously a dream of fullness and

innocence and an instance of discontinuity that does away with (the traditional concept of) experience as such and foreshadows a mechanical, technological scenario without innocence and wholeness.

As a development of this last possibility, finally, Chapter 6 opens the critique of experience to a number of related suggestions (the question of the body, of nature, the definition of the human, art and mechanical reproduction, etc.) through a reading of the figure of Mickey Mouse as defined and used in a number of Benjamin's texts and passages, from the 1931 fragment "Mickey Mouse" to "Experience and Poverty," an entry to the *Arcades Project* and a section of the Artwork essay. In the Disney figure the decay and loss of experience is not lamented as a crippling impoverishment but rather saluted as a liberating possibility that, disavowing and destroying the parameters and criteria of traditional, bourgeois, humanist experience, clears the way for a re-founding of experience itself. The visionary tone of these sparse references to Mickey Mouse is not devoid of ambiguity and Benjamin himself appeared ill at ease when pushed to develop these suggestions into a proper political vision, as in the case of the Artwork essay (where he finally deleted, among other things, also the reference to Mickey Mouse). Moreover, he was fully aware of the dangers that the destruction of experience entails, namely that of leading to the "wrong" kind of barbarism, which in his time took the nefarious form of fascism. The questions he raised through his readings of this figure, however, are still relevant for us and retain a high "legibility" when read in a constellation with our time: Benjamin's texts highlight for us the necessity of deactivating the normative boundaries separating the organic and the machine, the human and the animal, the male and the female; of "inventing" a different relationship between human beings, technology and nature; of breaking free from the teleology of "biological destiny"; and of reaching thereby a different social, economic and sexual organization.

4. Note on the Texts

Early versions of the chapters were published as follows.

- Chapter 1: "Violence as Pure Praxis: Benjamin and Sorel on Strike, Myth and Ethics." *Colloquy: text theory critique*, 16 (November 2008), special issue on *Critique of Violence: Benjamin and Derrida*, 18-48.
- Chapter 2: "Purity (Benjamin with Kant)." *History of European Ideas* 36 (2010), 438-47.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rhei20/current>.

- Chapter 3: (in Italian) "Politica profana, o, dell'attualità di 'Capitalismo come religione.'" Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Capitalismo come religione*, edited and translated by Carlo Salzani, 7-37. Genoa: Il nuovo melangolo, 2013.
  A much shorter and abridged translation was published in English as "False Religions and True Politics: Countering Capitalism as Religion." *JCRT: Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 19.3, special issue on Walter Benjamin and Religion, edited by Brian Britt (October 2020): 453-62.
- Chapter 4: "The Atrophy of Experience: Walter Benjamin and Boredom." In *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, edited by Barbara dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, 127-54. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.
- Chapter 5: "Experience and Play: Walter Benjamin and the Prelapsarian Child." In *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, edited by Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, 175-200. Seddon, VIC: re.press, 2009.
- Chapter 6: (in Italian) "Sopravvivere alla civiltà con Mickey Mouse e una risata." Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Mickey Mouse*, edited and translated by Carlo Salzani, 5-33. Genoa: Il nuovo melangolo, 2014.
  English translation: "Surviving Civilization with Mickey Mouse and a Laugh: A Posthuman Constellation." In *Thinking in Constellations: Walter Benjamin and the Humanities*, edited by Nassima Sahraoui and Caroline Sauter, 161-183. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.
- Appendix: "Virtuality, Actuality, (De-)*Konstruktion*: On Reading Walter Benjamin." Review essay of Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). *The Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, 7.1 (Fall 2008).
  <http://www.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/Fall2008/Benjamin%27s%20abilities.htm>.

All chapters have been reworked for the present publication, not only to engage with the most recent literature, but also to try and avoid unnecessary repetitions. However, since each chapter is a relatively self-contained unit, repetitions and the reiteration of certain themes, points or analyses are ultimately unavoidable.

PART I:

THE ACTUALITY OF THE CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE

CHAPTER ONE

VIOLENCE AS PURE PRAXIS: BENJAMIN AND SOREL

Though for the Western political tradition violence is usually deemed merely instrumental, and thus neither essential to, nor constitutive of, the *bios politikos*, Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (Reflections on Violence, 1908) constitute exceptions. In very different ways, both texts put forward a notion of violence which comes to coincide with pure praxis, that is, with pure political action, in sharp contrast to a political tradition that rather identifies in violence an a-political or anti-political form of action. In Benjamin's case, the ambiguity of the term *Gewalt* is not secondary to the argument: as it has by now become commonplace to point out, in German *Gewalt* can mean force, power, might and violence, depending on the context; it reunites thus *potestas* and *violentia* in a dialectics that Etienne Balibar (2002) values as positive and fructuous.[1] The French *violence*, on the contrary, presents a univocal connotation, though Sorel, as we will see, redefines it to his own purposes.[2] However, the explanation cannot be limited to the terminology, but must rather be pursued in their notion of praxis.

The history of the reception of the two texts is marked by this dissonance. *Réflexions sur la violence* is the work that made Sorel's name for posterity; it also earned him the title of apologist of violence, and the high esteem in which people like Charles Maurras or Benito Mussolini

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[1] Given this ambiguity, interpreters have increasingly decided to keep the term untranslated (cf. e.g., Jacobson 2003; Fenves 2011). Werner Hamacher (1991, 1133n2) argues, however, that in the context of Benjamin's text "there is no doubt that any translation other than *violence* runs the risk of euphemizing the problems in question here." In the translation of Benjamin's essays and fragments here quoted, the term is inconsistently rendered as *violence*, *force* or *power*; I will thus mostly retain the German term in order to emphasise it.

[2] *Violence* probably combines *vis* (force) and *latus*, the past participle of *ferre* (to carry), and has thus the sense of "to carry force at or toward something/someone."

held this work led to its branding as pseudo- or pre-fascist.[3] "Critique of Violence" on the other hand, is the only part that survives of a projected large-scale study on politics, which was never completed.[4] It is an extremely dense and esoteric text, relegated by the first wave of Benjamin scholarship to the juvenile, pre-Marxist (thus less "digestible") phase of his work.[5] Even for subsequent interpreters, though, this work sounded apparently out of tune with the Benjamin of the 1930s and its tone remains suspicious for "liberal" interpreters: if Habermas (1979) branded Benjamin's hermeneutics as "conservative-revolutionary,"[6] Derrida's famous reading of "Critique of Violence" in "Force of Law" (1990) approaches the text—especially the issue of a pure, divine violence—with suspicion, and in a more recent work Beatrice Hanssen places the essay squarely "in an antiliberal tradition that does not shun force to achieve its transformative socio-political agenda" (2000, 3).[7] The past forty years have seen, however, a reassessment of the two texts. A new interest in

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[3] The list of the literature on Sorel-as-apologist-of-violence—which very often focuses on the "Sorelians" rather than on Sorel's work—would be very long. For a few examples see Goisis (1983) and Roth (1980); a particularly venomous critique can be found in Lévy (1981).

[4] As emerges from the correspondence (cf. *GB* 2:54, 109, 119, 127, 177, and *GB* 3:9), the project was planned in three parts: 1) "Der wahre Politiker" ("The True Politician"); 2) "Die wahre Politik" ("The True Politics"), to be divided into a) "Der Abbau der Gewalt" ("The Decomposition of Violence," perhaps "Zur Kritik der Gewalt") and b) "Teleologie ohne Endzweck" ("Teleology without Final Purpose"); 3) a philosophical criticism of Paul Scheerbart's utopian novel *Lesabendio*. On the background and development of this project, see Steiner (2001). The genesis of this project will be analysed with some more details in chapter 3.

[5] If Theodor W. and Gretel Adorno inserted it as opening piece of the first, two-volume 1955 edition of Benjamin's *Schriften* and Herbert Marcuse republished it ten year later in a slim volume of Benjamin's writings (1965), telling is the fact that Hannah Arendt did not include it in the first English collection of Benjamin's writings, *Illumination* (1968), and did not even mention it in her own meditations *On Violence* (1970). The first English translation of "Critique of Violence" appeared only ten years later in *Reflections* (1978), a new collection of Benjamin's writings edited by Peter Demetz.

[6] In the 1980s, Habermas stepped up his criticism and even associated "Critique of Violence" to Carl Schmitt's aesthetic of violence, reducing it to "an essay on Sorel" (1989, 137). As Sigrid Weigel (2010, 232) shows, in fact, before Derrida's 1989 "Force of Law," the reception of "Critique of Violence" was dominated by his relation to Sorel. Cf. also Bernstein (2013, 52-58).

[7] These assessments of Benjamin's text are not all dismissive; they are examples, however, of the perduring "liberal" mistrust towards it.

Sorel, especially in France and Italy, led to a more "sober" re-evaluation of his work beyond the stigma of fascistic apologist of violence.[8] Derrida's essay assured new interest in "Critique of Violence" and the extensive use Giorgio Agamben makes of it in his work, together with a deeper understanding of Benjamin's early writings, produced a number of new interpretations.

The two texts, however, come from cultural and theoretical traditions which are very distant and produce two different discourses. They meet of course in Benjamin's "use" of the *Réflexions* in "Critique of Violence"; however, critical interpretations always underline the theoretical divide between them, wherein the literature on Benjamin rarely goes into an analysis of Sorel's text, and the literature on Sorel usually mentions Benjamin's reading as a footnote. Benjamin himself, while acknowledging his debt to Sorel, highlights the difference between the latter's "political" considerations and his own "purely theoretical"[9] analysis (*GS* II/1:193/*SW* 1:245). Exhaustive accounts of Benjamin's reading of Sorel do exist,[10] but none attempts a comparison between the two notions of pure praxis. Noteworthy in this direction are two essays: Hamacher's seminal "Afformative, Strike" (1991) on Benjamin's notion of strike, and Stathis Gourgouris' "The Concept of the Mythical" (1999; see also 1997), on Sorel's (and Schmitt's) concept of myth. Their perspectives, arguments and scopes are different, but both insist on the notion of pure praxis and its relation to violence.

The aim of the present chapter is to follow Hamacher's and Gourgouris' lead and attempt to explain how in the two authors violence comes to be equated to pure praxis. The hypothesis that guides and justifies a comparison is that Benjamin's lasting interest in the *Réflexions* testifies for a deeper understanding of a text often—and still—undervalued. Without trying to "Benjaminize" Sorel, this chapter will attempt a reading of his work in the light of some issues which guide Benjamin's approach to the question of violence. The analysis will focus on the philosophy (or philosophies) of history in which, in different ways, the related concepts of strike, myth and ethics receive their peculiar meanings. In the case of

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[8] The establishing of the Société d'Etudes Soréliennes in 1983 and the publication of the *Cahiers Georges Sorel* from the same year are signs among others. In 1989 the journal changed name and continued publication as *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*.

[9] It must be emphasized, with Uwe Steiner (2001, 46), that "politics is, for Benjamin, in the first order a philosophical problem, which remains a persistent foundation of his later political remarks and leads to frequent misunderstandings."

[10] See for example Kambas (1992) and Müller (2003).

Benjamin, I will use a number of texts and fragments on which Benjamin worked during—or slightly before and after—the preparation of "Critique of Violence"; not only the explicitly "political" texts, but those which help understanding his politics. The evident assonances to Benjamin's later works will not be pursued. As for Sorel, *Réflexions* is itself a collection of articles, published first in the Italian journal *Il Divenire sociale* between 1905 and 1906 and then re-elaborated for publication in book form in 1908. The book exposes the author's reflections on the subject of violence over an extended period of time; the analysis will thus be limited to this text.

1. Strike

1.1. The meaning of "strike" in Benjamin's and Sorel's texts has been thoroughly discussed and analyzed. The argument must be here briefly rehearsed in order to set the terms of our question. In the first pages of "Critique of Violence," the concession of the right to strike unveils an "objective contradiction in the legal situation" because it is the only case in which the application of *Gewalt* by a non-State power is permissible. When the right to strike is taken to its extreme consequences in the revolutionary general strike, it is declared illegal by the State ("the right to strike was not 'so intended'"). The State thus acknowledges a form of violence whose ends sometimes it regards with indifference (the improvement of work conditions or salary), but in different circumstances (the revolutionary general strike) confronts with violence. The contradiction and paradox here is that the exercise of a right, legally sanctioned by the law, can sometimes be considered as violent; or again, the strike as a fulfilment of a right contravenes, when it employs violence, the legal order that guarantees that right in the first place (*GS* II/1:183-84/*SW* 1:239-40). This contradiction opens up a space for the critique of State *Gewalt*.

The first important characterization of the strike is made here: it is defined as an "omission of actions" and thus essentially as "nonaction" (*ein Nicht-Handeln*). Non-action is deemed equivalent to non-violence, thus the strike is considered non-violent non-action. A nonaction is not considered as violence by the State power and thus its threat passes unperceived; or, better, when the omission of an action amounts to a "severing of relations," then it can be considered non-violent, or a "pure means." The right to strike conceded by the State power to the workers is intended merely as a "withdrawal" (*Abkehr*) or "estrangement" (*Entfremdung*) from a violence indirectly exercised by the employer. However, if the omission of action takes place with the readiness to resume work under

changed circumstances, then the omission includes a moment of violence in the form of "extortion." In this second case, the right to strike becomes just another means to an end, the right to use force in attaining certain ends (*GS* II/1:183-84/*SW* 1:239). In the case of the general strike, Benjamin writes, the strikers' conduct can be called "active" and the strike can be called *Gewalt*, as the strikers exercise their right to strike "in order to overthrow the legal system that has conferred it"; otherwise, the strikers' conduct is passive and the exercise of the right amounts merely to "extortion" (*GS* II/1:185/*SW* 1:240). This distinction will be later explored through Sorel's work.

The State thus concedes the right to strike against its interests and precisely "because it forestalls violent actions the State is afraid to oppose": denying such a right could produce reactive violence, but by conceding it the State eventually comes under a greater danger. "The fear of mutual disadvantages that threaten to arise from violent confrontation" can provide "pure" instead of violent means, that is, it can induce citizens "to reconcile their interests peacefully without involving the legal system" (*GS* II/1:192-93/*SW* 1:245). However, the revolutionary general strike provokes a contradiction that threatens the existence of law itself. What is important to note, for the moment, is that the strike is identified, under certain conditions, with a politics of pure means: means which are "pure" insofar as they are "beyond" the legal system, the violent order of the law.[11]

1.2. Sorel is credited by Benjamin for having first distinguished the two possible kinds of strike. As it is well known, these are the "political general strike" and the "proletarian general strike." The two strikes are "diametrically opposed to one another" (Sorel 1999, 148), and, Benjamin emphasizes, they are "antithetical in their relation to violence" (*GS* II/1:193/*SW* 1:245). The political general strike corresponds to that "passive" exercise of the right to strike which is based on the principle of "extortion": organized by the "politicians" and "intellectuals" of the class struggle, it merely aims at bringing down one political class in order to substitute it with another one. Sorel writes:

> The political general strike concentrates the whole of this conception into one easily understood picture: it shows how the State would lose nothing of its strength, how the transmission of power from one privileged class to

[11] The notion of "pure means" will be analysed in chapter 2.

> another would take place, and how the mass of producers would merely change masters. (1999, 171)[12]

Far from threatening the rule of law, the political general strike is a simple change of masters for the working class and its goal is the inversion of power-relations and the preservation—and strengthening—of State power.

In contrast to this, the proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of destroying State power, abolishing the State and the legal order maintained by it: "The general strike destroys all the theoretical consequences of every possible social policy; its supporters look upon even the most popular reforms as having a bourgeois character" (Sorel 1999, 126).[13] The syndicalists, Sorel argues, do not propose to reform the State, "they want to destroy it," because they want to realize Marx's idea that the socialist revolution "ought not to culminate in the replacement of one governing minority by another" (1999, 107). For Sorel, parliamentary socialists are but "offspring of the bourgeoisie," "who know nothing outside the ideology of the State"; they are therefore disoriented and bewildered by, and look with terror on, proletarian violence (1999, 18). They would understand "that the people may attempt an insurrection when they feel sufficiently well organized to take over the State," but violence with no such an aim "seems to them only folly and an odious caricature of revolt" (1999, 19-20). They thus merely replicate State force. Sorel, with some terminological funambulism, differentiates the terms force and violence, whereby "the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order" (1999, 165-66). Force aims at authority, whereas violence at the destruction of authority.

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[12] Another passage quoted by Benjamin reads: "The strengthening of the State is at the basis of all their conceptions; in the organizations which they at present control, the politicians are already preparing the framework of a strong, centralized and disciplined authority, which will not be hampered by the criticism of an opposition, which will be able to enforce silence and which will give currency to its lies" (1999, 162). *Réflexions sur la violence* will be translated into German only in 1928 with the title *Über die Gewalt*. Benjamin thus read it in the original and used his own translation in "Critique of Violence." It is interesting to note that, in the translation of these passages, he used *Staatsgewalt* for the French *État*, *Gewalt* for the French *pouvoir* (which in the English translation is rendered as "authority") and *Kraft* or *Macht* for the French *force* (*GS* II/1:193-94).

[13] And also: "This conception of the general strike manifests in the clearest manner its indifference to the material profits of conquest by affirming that it proposes to suppress the State" (Sorel 1999, 161).

Against the picture of progress put forward by reformist and parliamentary socialism, Sorel feels the need for socialism to uphold "the picture of the complete catastrophe furnished so perfectly by the general strike" (1999, 126). A catastrophe that will be "absolute and irrevocable" (1999, 155), will dispel all the reformist illusions about "the original rights of man" and "immanent justice," and will lead to the ruin of the institutions by which politicians and intellectuals live (1999, 18). The myth of the general strike "implies an absolute [*absolue*] revolution" (1999, 24).[14] As such, Sorel emphasizes, the proletarian general strike "contains within itself the whole of proletarian socialism" (1999, 150).

1.3. It is curious to note that Benjamin, while in the first mention of the strike calls *Gewalt* the "active" exercise of the right to strike (in Sorelian terms, the "proletarian general strike") and not the passive one ("political general strike"), when discussing Sorel's concepts he inverts the terms and states that, whereas the political general strike is *Gewalt*, "since it causes only an external modification of labour conditions," the proletarian general strike, as pure means, is *gewaltlos* (non-violent). And he explains:

> For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the State, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes [*veranlaßt*] as consummates [*vollzieht*]. (*GS* II/1:194/*SW* 1:246)

The contraposition between the verbs *veranlassen* (to cause) and *vollziehen* (to consummate) is important: where the former implies a forceful—one could say "violent"—causing (*lassen*), an "inducing" which can become a "forcing," the latter conveys a sense of "fulfilment" (*Vollziehung, Vollbringung, Vollendung*). *Veranlassen* belongs to the category of "extortion" and thus to a politics of means and ends, means to an extortion aimed at the redistribution of violent power, to the "violent" politics of the political general strike. A politics of pure means instead has its *Vollziehung*, its fulfilment, in itself, and thus "consummates" the strike as pure, absolute revolution. As belonging to the category of non-violent,

[14] The passage continues: "You know, as well as I, that all that is best in the modern mind is derived from the torment of the infinite" (1999, 24). Willy Gianinazzi (2006, 91) notes that Sorel prefers the term *absolu*, derived from both German Idealism and Bergson, to *pur*, which presents religious connotations; he thus explicitly emphasises the assonance, but also the difference, between Sorel's and Benjamin's notions of redemptive violence.

pure means, the proletarian general strike is a form or manifestation of that "pure, immediate" *Gewalt* Benjamin later in the essay names "divine violence": a violence that is "law destroying," that "boundlessly destroys boundaries," is "expiating" and "striking," and is "lethal without spilling blood" (*GS* II/1:199/*SW* 1:249).

Here we have the terms of the problem: on the one hand, strike as political praxis is considered active and thus *Gewalt*, lethal and annihilating, and its destructive character is exalted in its absoluteness and irrevocability; on the other, as "non-action," it is named *gewaltlos* (non-violent) and thus pure means, pure mediacy, and its fulfilment consists in an omission. To try to explain this ambiguity we need to situate strike within a "constellation" constituted by myth, ethics, and praxis in the two authors.

2. Myth

2.1. Divine violence is set by Benjamin against the mythic violence of the law; on the other hand, Sorel describes the proletarian general strike as the most powerful myth in the class struggle. The meaning of myth for the two thinkers must thus be explored and explained. Benjamin and Sorel propose two definitions of myth which are not alternative, and not properly in opposition either; they are rather heterogeneous and play different, non-comparable roles in their thought. To affirm therefore that Benjamin subsumes Sorel's notion of general strike minus myth, as, for example, Müller (2003, 469-70) does, is imprecise. The two notions of myth must rather be analyzed in relation to the notion of praxis as moral action, with which they constitute an inseparable complex.

Benjamin's notion of myth was strongly influenced by Hermann Cohen's philosophy.[15] This concept is strictly connected and inseparable from those of fate (*Schicksal*) and guilt (*Schuld*).[16] In "Fate and Character"

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[15] In various texts, and especially in *Ethics of Pure Will* (1907), Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) insisted on the connection between guilt, nature, and natural history (cf. also Hamacher [2002]). On Cohen's influence on Benjamin more in generally, see Deuber-Mankowsky (2000, 2004).

[16] It is certainly true, as some remarked (e.g., Lindner 1986, 38-40), that Benjamin lacked a coherent and consistent theory of myth, and that his encounter with Surrealism and Brechtian theatrical theory led him, as Gourgouris writes, to a "more dialectical understanding of myth" (1999, 1490-91). However, in the texts we are concerned with here, myth takes a precise and definite connotation, with a consistent and recurrent terminology. For an overview of the concept of myth in Benjamin, see Hartung (2000).

(1919), Benjamin relates fate to guilt, but not, he specifies, as it is intended in the ethical sphere; in fact there is no correlation between fate and the concept that in the ethical sphere accompanies guilt, namely innocence (*Unschuld*): "There is […] no relation of fate to innocence." Nor to happiness (*Glück*). Happiness is, rather, "what releases the fortunate man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate." "Insofar as something is fate," Benjamin concludes, "it is misfortune and guilt." The order of fate thus cannot be a religious order; it is rather identified by Benjamin as the order of law (*Rechts*), where "misfortune and guilt alone carry weight": "The laws of fate—misfortune and guilt—are elevated by law to measures of the person." The order of law mistakenly confuses itself "with the realm of justice," which rather belongs to a religious, or at least moral, order; it is in reality merely "a residue of the demonic stage of human existence […which] has preserved itself long past the time of the victory over the demons." Law as the realm of fate is thus the realm of a natural, "demonic" necessity, a remnant of the lower stages of human development. It was not in law, but in tragedy, Benjamin writes, that man breached demonic fate for the first time and understood the possibility of freedom. A "moral" freedom which consists in "rais[ing] himself and shaking that tormented world," the world of natural, demonic necessity (*GS* II/1:174-75/*SW* 1:203-204). The important corollary here, which will be repeated in "Critique of Violence," is that

> Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living—that semblance, not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part. (*GS* II/1:175/*SW* 1:204)

Every judgement by law thus blindly "dictate[s] fate," it imprisons man within the circle of a natural, demonic necessity, reinstating this necessity, striking the natural part in him/her, rather than raising man above the "demonic stage" and into the ethical sphere: "It is never man but only the mere life in him that it strikes—the part involved in natural guilt and misfortune by virtue of semblance." This is clear in the temporality of fate: "the guilt context is temporal in a totally inauthentic way, very different in its kind and measure from the time of redemption, or of music, or of truth." Unlike the time of redemption, or the time of truth, that is, a time of ethics and decision, the time of fate "is not an autonomous time," being parasitically dependent on the higher order of necessity, and thus "has no present […] and knows past and future only in curious variations" (*GS* II/1:175-76/*SW* 1:203-204). This is a temporality imprisoned in the a-

temporal straitjacket of necessity, what Hamacher (2002) calls "guilt history."

The complex myth-fate-guilt also informs the essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (written in 1919-1922, Published in two issues of the *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* in 1924-1925). Benjamin argues here that "the mythic is the real material content" (*Sachgehalt*) of Goethe's book: it consists in the exposition of a "fateful kind of existence, which encompasses living natures in a single nexus of guilt and expiation" (*GS* I/1:140, 138/*SW* 1:309, 307). This "mythic" is defined as the "incorporation of the totality of material things into life," that is, humanity's subjugation to "mythic nature" and its "daemonic forces" (*GS* I/1:139, 132, 151/*SW* 1:308, 303, 317). In the domain of myth, the "essence" (*das Wesen*) is *Dämon* and life coincides with fate (*GS* I/1:157/*SW* 1:322). Fate is thus defined: "fate unfolds inexorably in the culpable life. Fate is the nexus of guilt [*Schuldzusammenhang*] among the living" (*GS* I/1:138/*SW* 1:307). The "fateful" is described as "the guilt which is bequeathed through life" (*GS* I/1:138/*SW* 1:307). Again, Benjamin specifies that it is not a question of an ethical but rather of a "natural" guilt, "which befalls human beings not by decision and action but by negligence and celebration":

> When they turn their attention away from the human and succumb to the power of nature, then natural life, which in man preserves its innocence only so long as natural life binds itself to something higher, drags the human down. With the disappearance of supernatural life in man, his natural life turns into guilt, even without his committing an act contrary to ethics. For now it is in league with mere life, which manifests itself in man as guilt. He does not escape the misfortune that guilt conjures upon him, every one of his deeds will bring disaster upon him. (*GS* I/1:139/*SW* 1:308)

The "mythic" is the prison of a life reduced to "natural life," that is, "mere life," guilt and misfortune, which drag the human down and bring disaster upon them: the eternal recurrence of violence (Müller 2003, 469-70). The ethical sphere is envisaged as a breaking from the daemonic complex of myth-fate-guilt which is proper to natural life, a breaking into "something higher": supernatural life, a life properly human that would originate properly human history.

2.2. In "Critique of Violence," too, fate is described as the realm of necessity, the one and inviolable order to which "what exists, and in particular what threatens, belongs." It is in this realm of necessity that the "legal threat" (*Rechtsdrohung*, the threat of the law) originates: "violence crowned by fate [is] the origin of law." In law-as-threat, fate seems

imperiously to show itself (*GS* II/1:188/*SW* 1:242). "Fate," Benjamin writes, "in all cases underlies legal violence," and myth is where fate above all manifests itself, thus "mythic violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods." The Greek gods epitomize here natural history and their immediate violence "proves […] identical to lawmaking violence" and establishes power (*Macht*) as law: "Lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence. […] power [is] the principle of all mythic lawmaking" (*GS* II/1:197-98/*SW* 1:248). Power as the fateful manifestation of the mythic gods/nature is what guarantees all lawmaking violence, and is as such extraneous to justice, to the ethical sphere. Law does not condemn to punishment but to retribution, which befalls as fate the unwitting and unsuspecting victim. To remain in the realm of nature (and law) means to be subjected to a necessity that, ambiguously but with certainty, condemns us. Unlike the clarity and univocity of justice, fate and law present a "mythic ambiguity" that may not be infringed: this ambiguity is precisely what imprisons the human within the mythic cycle of guilt and retribution, not allowing any space of freedom, of moral action.

Law as a manifestation of the mythic thus condemns the human to remain imprisoned within natural life; it condemns them to the guilt of mere life (*bloßes Leben*), whose symbol is blood: "Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake" and "demands sacrifice" (*GS* II/1:200/*SW* 1:250). This is why mere life cannot be "sanctified": it is not only false, but even "ignoble" to raise existence (*Dasein*), that is, mere life, higher than a just existence, an existence that enters the ethical sphere and is thus properly human. There is no sacredness in the mere fact of being alive, because mere life is "the marked bearer of guilt," of an existence that is condemned to remain imprisoned within natural history (*GS* II/1:201-202/*SW* 1:251). If, therefore, "the mythic manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence," then its destruction becomes obligatory, and this poses the question of a "pure immediate violence" (*GS* II/1:199/*SW* 1:249), a violence that is purely destructive and annihilates the realm of necessity, that is, myth. The political question regarding violence is thus the question of a violence eliminating its own reproducibility, a violence that, qualitatively different from instrumental or mythic violence, would interrupt the natural, cyclic, and mimetic circle of violence as response to violence.

2.3. Sorel's perspective is, unlike Benjamin's, historical and socio-economical. What he names "myth" is not the realm of necessity but rather what allows for a breaking out of it. In his Marxist perspective, the realm of necessity is identified as an historical product, that is, a semblance of necessity, a fiction, which consists in considering natural, necessary, a-historical and immutable the result of a contingent historical process.[17] This alleged necessity is the fiction of the natural law: economists have asserted for a long time that "the relations created under the capitalist regime of competition were perfectly just, because they resulted from the natural course of things." Natural law is thus based on a tautology: "what is just is good and what is unjust is bad," the a-historicity of which accords perfectly with the philosophy of force (Sorel 1999, 15). Capitalist society sees itself as a fully organized body, a machine working automatically, naturally. This capitalist phantasmagoria (to use a Marxian/Benjaminian term that Sorel never used), wrapped in the semblance of naturalness, imprisons any desire of free, ethico-political praxis.[18] What can and must disrupt this phantasmagoria is pure revolutionary action, which Sorel identifies in the myth of the proletarian general strike.

Sorel's myth is thus envisioned as a sort of impetus to overcome this inertia: the necessary prerequisite for revolutionary political praxis is a feeling of certainty, hope and anticipation. Myth must inspire these feelings without recurring to the old utopianisms, historical scientism, and the optimism of progressive philosophies, it must provide "certainty without determinism" (Stanley 1981, 220-21), the necessary emotional impetus without proposing images of the future. The "catalytic power of mythic imagination" is what propels the undoing of State violence (Gourgouris 1997, 141). Thus the definition:

> Men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. I proposed to give the name of "myths" to these constructions. (Sorel 1999, 20)

These myths are described as "pure," they partake of an "infinite quality": not descriptions of things, but rather "expressions of a will to act," they are

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[17] Sorel's pages on this subject can be better compared with the analysis of the capitalist *phantasmagoria* in the later, more "Marxist" Benjamin.

[18] Sorel writes: "When we reach the last historical stage, the action of independent will disappears and the whole of society resembles an organized body, working automatically; observers can then establish an economic science which appears to them as exact as the sciences of physical nature" (1999, 168).

"identical to the convictions of a group," to the "activity, the sentiments and the ideas of the masses as they prepare themselves to enter on a decisive struggle," and thus "unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions."[19] Myths thus "should be taken as a whole, as historical forces" and "we should be especially careful not to make any comparison between the outcomes and the pictures people had formed for themselves before the action" (1999, 20). Myth is a figure, Gourgouris (1997, 142) notes, whose importance lies more in its potentiality and less in its eventuality. Ordinary language is insufficient to this task; therefore, myths congeal into

> collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestation of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. (Sorel 1999, 113)[20]

Therefore, the whole of socialism is concentrated in the "drama" of the general strike, a sort of theatrical representation where the Hegelian reconciliation of opposites has no place and "everything is clearly mapped

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[19] Gourgouris (1999, 1499-500) writes: "Anticipating the usual objections, Sorel quickly clarifies that myths are neither illusions nor facts. Myths are incommensurable to facts because they may exceed facts, much like revolutionary desire (or utopian vision) can never be exhausted in the fact/event of revolution. On the other hand, myths are not illusions, because myths are demonstrable historical forces—imagined alterities of society that make historical action possible. The main characteristic of myth, according to Sorel, is infinity, which is also said to include a sense of indefiniteness. Socialism, as a theory only, is ultimately reducible to its words […]. But praxis, exemplified for the anarcho-syndicalist Sorel, in the act of the general strike, […] is irreducible, indefinite, and infinite, both because it is irreducible to its parts (that is, singular), and also because it is interminably reproducible each time anew."

[20] With very similar words Sorel writes: "[the general strike is] the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, the deepest and the most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a coordinated picture and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum intensity; appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness. We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness—and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously" (1999, 118).

out, so that only one interpretation of socialism is possible" (1999, 113).[21] The Bergsonian tone of these statements is evident and Bergson's influence is repeatedly and explicitly acknowledged by Sorel.[22] Myth is assimilated to Bergson's "*connaissance totale*" ("integral knowledge"), a form of knowledge that is intense, instinctive, total, indivisible and instantaneous. A knowledge that acts on time, but not by engulfing it into a utopian projection of the past; rather, it forces on the future the instinctive hopes of a whole class. Myths must thus be considered as "a means of acting on the present" (Sorel 1999, 116). A passage summarizes this point:

> And yet we are unable to act without leaving the present, without considering the future, which seems forever condemned to escape our reason. Experience shows that the framing of the future in some indeterminate time may, when it is done in a certain way, be very effective and have few inconveniences; this happens when it is a question of myths, in which are found all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class, inclinations which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all the circumstances of life, and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action upon which the reform of the will is founded. (1999, 115)[23]

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[21] Sorel writes: "The professors of the *little science* are really difficult to satisfy. They assert very loudly that they will only admit into thought ideas that are clear and distinct—as a matter of fact, this is a rule which is insufficient for purposes of action, for we do nothing great without the help of warmly coloured and sharply defined images which absorb the whole of our attention;—now, is it possible to find anything more satisfying from their point of view that the general strike?" (1999, 140).

[22] Though Sorel's philosophy of violence is often assumed to be the application of Bergson's biological vitalism, Jeremy Jennings (1990, 109) points out that Sorel never used Bergson's key concept, the *élan vital*, and in fact published in *Le Mouvement socialiste* a critical review of Bergson's 1908 book *L'Evolution creatrice*, where he stated his opposition to Bergson's use of biological analogies to explain social phenomena. For criticisms of Sorel's Bergsonism, see, among others, Goisis (1983, 165-66) and Pastori (1980, 199n2).

[23] Richard Vernon (1973, 413) thus comments on this passage: "Sorel is most Bergsonian here, for Bergson, too, argued that what is often regarded as prediction of the future is really only a stretching forward of the present, a mental act which is appropriate to static physical systems but inappropriate to vital phenomena. Vital development is characterized by the emergence of genuine novelty which cannot be deduced from the patterns abstracted from past behaviour; similarly, Sorel held that historical development involved genuine novelty and that the future could never be assumed away."

The necessary precondition of pure revolutionary praxis is to "leave the present" and "construe" the future in a way that is not determined.[24]

Myth is thus a sort of narrative, composed of images, words, beliefs, shared by the individuals belonging to a certain group, collective convictions intuited as integral experience. Marco Gervasoni (1997, 303) compares thus Sorel's myth to a language, which at the same time enters a relation of use with, but also shapes the mentality of, the social actors. This is an important point: far from being a mere means to a (political) end, Gervasoni points out, Sorel's myth "configures a discourse"; it thus presents no teleology, neither instrumental nor eschatological, since the development of socialism described by myth should be continuously revised and modified. According to Gourgouris, the absence of a *telos* is completed by the absence of an *archē*: Sorel's myth has no singular core, it follows no principle, has no origin, it is a historical, but nevertheless pure, form. It is *pure praxis*. Sorel's politics is therefore, for Gourgouris, non-instrumentalist, "founded on a mediation of the epistemology of praxis as an anarchist act (i.e., an act without *archē* or *telos*)"; myth is the moment of ethical decision, the moment of *krisis* (Gourgouris 1999, 1500n3; 1997, 149).

If myth constitutes for Benjamin the daemonic cycle of natural history, which must be broken by the blast of the ethical, for Sorel it is instead that very human (that is, ethical) decision which disrupts the inertia of the present and inaugurates a new historical epoch. Both authors, however, identify this moment of rupture as pure, ethical praxis.

3. Ethics

3.1. Benjamin and Sorel, though from very different theoretical and ideological perspectives, and with a different terminology, both theorize as pure praxis a breaking from the constraints of a cycle of (mythic or phantasmagoric) necessity, a suspension of the continuum of *archē* and *telos* in the instantaneous and disrupting moment of the ethical. It is in this sense that their notion of pure praxis is essentially an-archic: unbound

[24] Bergson's philosophy, Gourgouris (1999, 1500-1) notes, provides the theoretical armature of Sorel's myth because it postulates the possibility of personal and social "catalytic moments" where "an imagined alterity is achieved by invoking the experience of the past—not in order to repeat it, but in order to peel off the accumulated inertia of culture on the way to a rejuvenated history. The general strike exemplifies a moment of imagined alterity, whether it will actually succeed or not."

from an *archē*, from an origin and a principle which determines it in advance.[25]

This an-archic praxis entails a rejection of utopia.[26] Benjamin puts the political general strike into the category of "law-positing" violence, whereas the proletarian general strike is defined as *anarchistisch* (*GS* II/1:194/*SW* 1:246). He thus embraces Sorel's rejection of utopia, of any kind of program, because programs are inherently law-positing, they impose a law on the future. Sorel argues that "true" Marxism "condemns every hypothesis about the future constructed by the utopians." As evidence that this was Marx's position, he mentions Lujo Brentano's story about a letter allegedly written by Marx in 1869 to his friend Edward Beesly, who had published an article on the future of the proletariat. Marx, Brentano relates, had looked upon Beesly as a revolutionary up until then, but, he wrote, henceforth he would look upon him as a reactionary because "whoever draws up a programme for the future is a reactionary."[27] There is no need for programmes of the future, "the programmes are already worked out in the workshop"; utopias are always "about the past and often about a very far-off past" (1999, 128-29, 128n).[28]

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[25] On this notion of *an-arché* see Benjamin (2013, 28ff.).

[26] The question of utopianism in Benjamin is a complex one and cannot be properly explored here; whereas some interpreters (cf. e.g. Szekely 2006; Traverso 2017) attribute to Benjamin a utopian *élan* (probably confusing his messianism with utopianism), others properly highlight the primacy of the present over the future, and thus the rejection of utopia, as a fundamental trait of his philosophy (especially Benjamin 2006; 2013).

[27] Lujo Brentano (1844-1931) was a German economist and socialist**;** Edward Spencer Beesly (1831-1915) was an English historian and positivist and a member of the First International. This letter is not included in Marx's and Engels' correspondence. There are references to a controversy surrounding Beesly's article, "The Social Future of the Working Class," in a letter from Marx dated 20 March 1869 and in Engels's reply dated the following day. See Marx and Engels (1988, 243-66).

[28] A utopia is for Sorel "an intellectual product": "it is the work of theorists who, after observing and discussing the facts, seek to establish a model to which they can compare existing societies in order to estimate the amount of good and evil they contain; it is a combination of imaginary institutions having sufficient analogies to real institutions for the jurist to be able to reason about them; it is a construction which can be broken into parts and of which certain pieces have been shaped in such a way that they can (with a few alterations) be fitted into future legislation. […] the effect of utopias has always been to direct men's minds towards reforms which can be brought about by patching up the system" (1999, 28-29)

Utopias, Gourgouris (1999, 1501-2) notes, are "projections" and are thus linked to the present by analogy: the present is their *archē* and they do not escape its conditioning. They are anything but pure praxis, or pure revolutionary action.[29] The socialist revolution must instead constitute "an irrevocable transformation," "an absolute separation between two historical eras, which "would permit of no turning back"; the "enormous element of the unknown" that it contains, "its terrifying nature," has always inspired fear and the utopians "have used all their literary art in the endeavour to lull anxiety by pictures of the future so enchanting that all fear might be banished." Politicians, including socialist reformers, have always embraced the utopian "*science bourgeoise*" in order to reassure the bourgeoisie and promise not to allow the people "to give themselves up entirely to their anarchical instincts"; the same politicians and intellectuals have always accused this anarchism "of having negative ideas only," and thus of nihilism (1999, 129, 204).[30]

3.2. Benjamin's rejection of programs and images of the future—a constant in his thought—comes from a different tradition, the Jewish *Bilderverbot*,[31] but leads however to the same definition of pure praxis as fundamentally an-archic, with neither *archē* nor *telos*. Benjamin's early anarchism, Uwe Steiner (2001, 69n84) notes, is a common topic.[32] A thorough examination would go beyond the scope of this study; however, this is a fundamental point for the exploration of Benjamin's early notions of ethics and politics and must be mentioned. A specification made in "Critique of Violence" is fundamental: anarchism is here mentioned not only in contraposition to lawmaking utopia, but also in an earlier and short discussion of pacifism. If pacifism as the critique of militarism limits itself to the refusal to acknowledge any constraint toward persons and by

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[29] Gianinazzi (2006, 90-91) notes the striking similitude between the oppositions *utopie*/*mythe* and *force*/*violence*: just as utopia, on an ideological level, atrophies the freedom to invent and create, so force, on a political level, creates that school of obedience which founds the State; myth and violence constitute their respective negations.

[30] This exaltation of an *action deprived of a project* marked the history of Sorel's reception: it lends itself easily to voluntaristic readings which exalt the revolutionary whim of privileging action for action's sake. See e.g., Goisis (1983, 125).

[31] A Jewish element is certainly also present in Marx's refusal of figuring the future.

[32] Michael Löwy (1983) devoted already an early study to Benjamin's anarchism—not only in his early phase but in his whole career. More recently, James Martel (e.g., 2011; 2013), among others, has consistently developed this line of inquiry.

declaring "What pleases is permitted,"[33] then it becomes a "childish anarchism," which "merely excludes reflection on the moral and historical spheres, and thereby on any meaning in action" (*GS* II/1:187/*SW* 1:241). Benjamin's anarchism cannot thus be taken as a naïf rejection of authority but must be placed in relation to the "meaning of action" in the "moral-historical sphere." In this sphere, which the philosophy of history must differentiate from the sphere of natural history, the moral meaning of action lies precisely in an an-archic form of praxis, a praxis that brakes from the mythic *archē* of natural history. This moral praxis must thus be a caesura, and here the relation to *Gewalt* is fundamental.[34]

In the fragment "The Right to Use Force" (1920), Benjamin emphasizes that "no contradiction in principle can be discerned between *Gewalt* and morality," whereas "a contradiction in principle is perceived between morality and the State [or the law]." An exposition of this standpoint is identified as one of "the tasks of my moral philosophy." In this context, anarchism

> may very well be used to describe a theory that denies a moral right not to force as such but to every human institution, community, or individuality that either claims a monopoly over it or in any way claims that right for itself from any point of view, even if only as a general principle, instead of respecting it in specific cases as a gift bestowed by a divine power, as perfection of power. (*GS* VI:106-7/*SW* 1:232-33, translation modified)

Mythic law is in principle in contradiction with morality, whereas *Gewalt* is not. The use of *Gewalt* cannot be made into a "general principle"[35]; rather, an an-archic moral philosophy would recognize and "respect" it as a divine (superhuman) "gift." How should we interpret this passage in relation to the meaning of action and the notion of praxis? We can compare it to a passage of the Elective Affinities essay, where Benjamin thus defines "decision"[36]:

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[33] The expression "*Erlaubt ist was gefällt*" is a quotation ("without quotation marks") from Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* (Act 2, scene 2, 99). I owe this information to the discussion in a webinar on the "Critique of Violence" organized in May 2020 be Stefano Marchesoni, Nassima Sahraoui, Sebastian Truskolaski and Tom Vandeputte.

[34] This is why Andrew Benjamin (2013) proposes to translate Benjamin's *Gewalt* in "Critique of Violence" as "operability," which he reads as a power to interrupt.

[35] Generalisation, Benjamin writes in "Critique of Violence," contradicts the nature of justice (*GS* II/1:196/*SW* 1:247). For more on this point see chapter 2.

[36] *Decision* is etymologically related to *caesura*: the English *decision* comes from the Latin *de-* (off) and *caedere* (to cut), the German *Entscheidung* is composed of

> For in the tragic words of the hero, the crest of decision is ascended, beneath which the guilt and innocence of the myth engulf each other as an abyss. On the far side of Guilt and Innocence is grounded the here-and-now of Good and Evil, attainable by the hero alone. (*GS* 1.1:176-77/*SW* 1:337)

The decision is here the tragic praxis which breaks from the daemonic abysses of myth into the ethical sphere. Ethics as the properly human is possible only when the natural cycle of guilt and retribution is broken in the unrepeatable, an-archic "here-and-now" (*Diesseits*) of the moral decision about good and evil. The meaning of this decision is, however, problematic. *Gewalt* as critical caesura cannot be claimed as a right, neither by human institutions or communities, nor by any individuality; it can only be respected as a gift in specific cases, a gift bestowed by a "divine power" as *Machtvollkommenheit*, a coming to perfection of a divine power. Individual agency is here limited to an act of respect.

The issue is in fact not human agency, but rather the unfolding of a messianic process. The fragment "World and Time" (1919-1920) attempts a definition of "politics" in relation to this process. "World" here identifies the natural, mythic condition, which "time," as the process of fulfilment in the revelation of the divine, brings to an end. The end of the world is precisely the destruction of, and liberation from, natural history. In the world to come, the world in which divine revelation has been fulfilled, "authentic divine power [*göttliche Gewalt*] can manifest itself other than destructively," but the breaking of the divine into the secular world "breathes destruction." In other words, "In this world, divine power [*göttliche Gewalt*] is higher than divine powerlessness; in the world to come, divine powerlessness is higher than divine power").[37] Divine *Gewalt* as the caesura that annihilates cannot be made into a general or supreme principle—in fact, into any principle (*archē*) at all, that constitutes the base of any organization. The "social" as the expression of

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ent- (off, from) and *scheiden* (to divide), and both echo the Greek *krisis*, from *krinein* (to separate).

[37] A similar fragment, "The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe" (1921), adds an important point: if the mythic logic of law is that of retribution (*Vergeltung*), in the moral universe (which is opposed to that of law) it is forgiveness (*Vergebung*) that comes out to meet the mythic world. It is time (to which retribution is indifferent) which constitutes the "tempestuous storm of forgiveness," a "purifying hurricane" which, in the process of obliterating the traces of guilt and misdeeds, "must lay waste to the world": "God's fury roars through history in the storm of forgiveness, in order to sweep away everything that would be consumed forever in the lightning bolts of divine wrath" (*GS* VI:97-98/*SW* 1:286-87).

these organizations is still bound to natural history because it is "a manifestation of spectral and demonic powers."[38] The divine in this world can manifest itself "only in revolutionary force" (*revolutionären Gewalt*), which is nevertheless identified not with "direct divine intervention," but rather with its "retreat." The "zone of politics, of the profane, of a bodily realm that is without law in a religious sense" is thus identified with a retreat, a zone in which nature/mythic law is suspended and thus constitutes the caesura of the ethical sphere, but also where human agency plays no part. "My definition of politics," Benjamin writes, is "the fulfilment of an unimproved humanity," the messianic end of the world and of natural history, which includes law and the "social" (*GS* VI:98-99/*SW* 1:226-27). The task of world politics, as identified in the "Theological-Political Fragment," is thus to strive for this fulfilment, which implies the "passing away of those stages of man that are nature," and whose method must therefore be called nihilism (*GS* II/1:204/*SW* 3:306).[39]

Divine *Gewalt* as the messianic caesura entails a nihilistic destruction as liberation from mythic natural history. However, this destruction is not, as Hamacher would say, "performative," but it is rather a "suspension." Hamacher points us to a passage in the Elective Affinities essay which elucidates this point. Thus Benjamin describes the expressionless [*Ausdrucklose*]:

> The expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum. In the expressionless, the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. (*GS* I/1:181/*SW* 1:340)

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[38] I find therefore ambiguous Hamacher's emphasis on strike/pure violence as the manifestation of sociality *tout court*, the "sheer mediacy of all social relations," "one which does not permit itself to become effective in any form other than as the bare minimum of its existence" (1991, 1149).

[39] As it is known, the dating of this fragment remains a puzzle: Scholem dates it from the early 1920s, and the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, Tiedemann and Schweppenhauser, sided with him; Adorno recalls that Benjamin read it to him in San Remo in late 1937 or early 1938, and dates it from this period; the editors of the English translation in the *Selected Writings* preferred Adorno's thesis. I use it here for the consonance of motifs and terminology with the other texts under scrutiny.

Sublime, critical *Gewalt* as the expressionless, the caesura in the artistic media—which Benjamin explains with the help of Hölderlin—is "the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture," in which expression comes to a halt, a "standstill" (*sich legt*) (*GS* I/1:181-82/*SW* 1:340-41). Likewise, divine, pure *Gewalt* is the annihilating interruption which brings natural history and mythic law to the standstill of their messianic fulfilment.[40]

We can read now the striking conclusion of "Critique of Violence": neither law-positing *Gewalt*, which Benjamin calls *die schaltende* (executive), nor law-preserving *Gewalt*, which he calls *die verwaltete* (administrative), but only divine *Gewalt* may be called *die waltende* (*GS* II/1:199, 202-203/*SW* 1:249-50, 252). Here the "fructuous" ambiguity of the verb *walten*—from which *Ge-walt* derives—makes the translation extremely problematic. If we translate *waltende* as "sovereign," as in the edition of the *Selected Writings*, we must keep in mind that here *walten* cannot be intended as its almost synonymous *herrschen* (to dominate, to govern), or *gebieten* (to command); better solutions could be *wirken* (to act) or *ausüben* (to wield, to exercise), or even *dasein*, which presents the advantage of losing any "performative" connotation. Pure *Walten* as pure praxis, the pure ethical sphere which disrupts myth and violence, with no *archē* or *telos* and which cannot be entrapped within the limits of representation, is to be read as the standstill of any *Walten*/praxis.

3.3. Sorel, too, puts a high moral emphasis on what he identifies as violence. On this point, however, Benjamin's and Sorel's thoughts are not only incommensurable, but properly antithetic. It is here, and not on the issue of myth, that their works really diverge. It is not only that their metaphysical premises are extremely distant, or that the arguments put forward in the *Réflexions* are fragmentary, confused, often inconsistent or even contradictory. These arguments finally amount, quite consistently, to a kind of metaphysics of action, which is not only heterogeneous, but properly antithetic to Benjamin's notion of pure praxis as "standstill." Sorel's profound humanism is necessarily antithetic to Benjamin's messianic anti-humanism.

In the *Réflexions*, violence is inextricably bound to virtue: thus its primary character is not instrumental but rather moral.[41] Sorel repeatedly states that the myth of the proletarian general strike "gives socialism such high moral value and such great honesty" (1999, 24) and emphasizes the

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[40] A study of this point can be found in Noor (2007).

[41] Cf. Goisis (1983, 31). Christopher Finlay (2006, 382) emphasises that, as such, violence is fundamental in the transformation, and thus construction, of a "revolutionary subjectivity."

"high educational value"(1999, 154) of proletarian violence.[42] The metaphor of war is central to this construction: proletarian struggle, and in particular the proletarian general strike, is compared to, and described as, a war in the proper sense. "The strike is a phenomenon of war" (1999, 279), Sorel writes, and recurs to many comparisons, especially with the Greek antiquity, "the wars of liberty" during the French Revolution, and what he calls "the Napoleonic battle."[43] War certainly not as the continuation of politics by other means, not as the deployment of State force, from which the general strike as moral praxis must be distinguished; rather, a war thus defined:

> Everything in war is carried out without hatred and without the spirit of revenge; in war the vanquished are not killed; non-combatants are not made to bear the consequences of the disappointments which the armies may have experienced on the field of battle; force is then displayed according to its own nature, without ever professing to borrow from the judicial proceedings which society sets up against criminals. (1999, 106)

This emphasis on the war metaphor, as commentators highlight, stems from the influence of Proudhon, whom Sorel greatly admired, and especially of his work *La Guerre et la paix* (*War and Peace*, 1861).[44] In

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[42] These values are set against what Sorel calls "bourgeois cowardice, which consists in always surrendering before the threat of violence": the bourgeoisie is condemned to death and disappearance because of its moral lassitude and decadence (1999, 62-63). This however constitutes a problem for the class struggle: the doctrine of the catastrophic revolution, conveyed by the proletarian general strike, is applicable only if the opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat is extreme and irreconcilable. This is why Sorel opposes reformism, humanitarianism and all doctrines of social peace, which have *abrutie* (stupefied) the European nations; he wants therefore a capitalist class that be energetic and "frankly and consistently reactionary" (1999, 178), so to re-gain "the warlike qualities it formerly possessed." Proletarian violence can force the decadent bourgeoisie to seek its former energy and thus reach its historical perfection (1999, 78). Sorel thus writes: "If a capitalist class is energetic, it is constantly affirming its determination to defend itself; its frank and consistently reactionary attitude contributes at least as greatly as proletarian violence towards keeping distinct that cleavage between the classes which is the basis of all socialism" (1999, 178).

[43] The great Napoleonic battle is "the one that will crush the vanquished definitively" (1999, 63), the critical and definitive caesura in history.

[44] Goisis (1983, 64-69) writes that, according to Guy-Grand, *La Guerre et la paix* was greatly admired in the syndicalist circles and was considered Proudhon's masterpiece. In it, the syndicalists saw the exaltation of agonism as lifestyle and shared the main premise, what they called the kernel of Proudhon's thought, the

turn, Proudhon's notion of the intrinsic morality of war carries a strong Hegelian mark. This morality consists of breaking the inertia of the world and being thus the motor of history. What interests Sorel is then not war as a fact, but rather a "warring spirit," the *esprit* of the warrior, which should form and inspire the striker.

The striker, like the soldier in the wars of liberty, considers himself "an individual having something of importance to do in the battle," and especially a "free man"; he resembles thus a Homeric or Napoleonic hero. Battles are described as "collections of heroic exploits accomplished by individuals who drew the motives of their conduct from their enthusiasm," 1999, 240-41).[45] The emphasis on heroic and passionate individualism is very strong: the general strike, like the wars of liberty, "is the most striking manifestation of individualistic force in the rebellious masses" (1999, 243). However, this brand-new ethics, which represents "the highest moral ideal ever conceived by man," is also said to consist of "what have always been regarded as the highest virtues" (1999, 228).[46] It can be reduced to "an entirely epic state of mind" (1999, 250), or, in a sentence: "The striving towards excellence, which exists in the absence of any personal, immediate or proportional reward, constitutes the secret virtue that assures the continued progress of the world" (1999, 248). It is evident that this ethos is strongly informed by a notion of the sublime. In the end, the morality of praxis resides in an enthusiastic and disinterested *esprit dynamique*, in the exaltation of action for action's sake, action deprived of a project. It is true that this praxis is identified with strike, that is, an omission, a non-action, and exemplified in myth, an an-archic rupture in the continuum of representation, a purely destructive negation. However, this rupture does not consist, as for Benjamin, in bringing praxis to a "standstill"; its dynamis is rather antithetic to it, it is effort, striving; it remains, using Hamacher's terminology, highly "performative."

4. Conclusion: Politics

Pure praxis as a form of action with no *archē* and no *telos*, an-archic, is pure gesture. This pure gesture, however, must overcome a (natural or phantasmagorical) inertia, must break from a constrictive and immobilizing

discovery of a warring spirit.

[45] On the strike compared to war, cf. Sorel (1999, 159ff.)

[46] In this regard, Hannah Arendt (1970, 70) notes that "the new values turn out to be not very new. They are a sense of honour, desire for fame and glory, the spirit of fighting without hatred and 'without the spirit of revenge', and indifference to material advantages."

cycle, and is thus caesura, *Gewalt*, violence. And this is its ethico-political significance. On the other hand, the caesura consists precisely in a suspension: it is strike. The paths of Benjamin and Sorel diverge when Benjamin inserts this praxis into an anti-humanistic, messianic vision of redemption, whereby the rupture coincides with a retreat, and is thus standstill; whereas Sorel insists on a dynamic, performative, pure gestuality. In the case of Benjamin, this schema, stripped—though not excessively—of certain esoteric terminology and somewhat adapted to a Marxist language, will constitute the model for his later political and historiographical insights. To force this schema on Sorel might seem a dubious operation, insofar as it runs the risk of interpreting him from a Benjaminian perspective. However, Sorel's theories, though certainly confused and often inconsistent, offer nonetheless some ground for a re-evaluation and re-interpretation, a ground that Benjamin seized. His lasting interest in the *Réflexions* could testify for a deeper understanding of a text whose ambiguity marked the history of its reception.

A final issue remains to be touched, albeit only tangentially and in the form of a question left open: what kind of politics is established by violence as pure praxis? Benjamin's and Sorel's revolutionary thought is marked by a fundamentally pessimistic nihilism, which, as Jan-Werner Müller writes, goes "beyond intention and instrumentality, but also beyond any intersubjective understanding" (2003, 469-70). For the Benjamin of these years, the "social" is always and necessarily an instance of myth; though *Unterredung* (discussion, interlocution) is singled out, in "Critique of Violence," as a technique of civil agreement, language as non-violent because inaccessible to mythic violence, as Hamacher has shown, is never performative, never performs communication, but rather suspends it. Ethical, political praxis is not pointed outwards, towards a *Mitsein*; it is rather engulfed by a messianic process of redemption. Sorel widely uses the Marxian terminology of class, proletariat, collective subjects, and collective actions; however, the Bergsonian traits of his concept of myth—intuitive, indivisible, unquestionable—and the sublime individualism of his ethics of action, again exclude any form of confrontation or communication. Benjamin's messianic anti-humanism and Sorel's intuitive vitalism finally exclude politics as a plural event. For the Western (liberal) political tradition, based on the dual concept of praxis and lexis and established in various models of "communicative action" or "politics of friendship," Benjamin's and Sorel's revolutionary nihilism is ultimately anti-political.

CHAPTER TWO

PURITY (BENJAMIN WITH KANT)

Around 1921 Benjamin wrote three seminal essays: "Critique of Violence," commenced at the end of 1920, completed in January 1921 (cf. *GB* 2:131) and published in issue 3 (August 1921) of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*; "The Task of the Translator," written in Autumn 1921 and published in October 1923 as foreword to Benjamin's own translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*; and "Goethe's Elective Affinities," probably composed between Autumn 1921 and Summer 1922, and published in two issues of Hofmannsthal's *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (the first part in April 1924 and the second in January 1925). The three essays, though devoted to different subjects, present nonetheless a certain unity of tone and a sort of kinship in the recurrence of some fundamental themes of Benjamin's early theorization, such as myth, representation, morality, law, and language. One peculiar notion holds them together, not only because it constitutes, in a sense, the kernel of the respective analyses, but also insofar as the way this notion is theorized in each of the essays can help explain its significance for the other two: *purity* (*Reinheit*). In "Critique of Violence," it informs the politics of "pure means" (*reines Mittel*) construed around the notion of "pure violence" (*reine Gewalt*); in "The Task of the Translator," it is present in "pure language" (*reine Sprache*), a notion which informs also the Goethe essay, where purity does not explicitly appear, but is implicit in the form of the "expressionless" (*das Ausdruckslose*); in turn, the notion of the expressionless can be connected back to the essay on violence, since it is identified with "critical violence" (*kritische Gewalt*) and endowed with moral significance. It is noteworthy that the three essays were written within little more than a year, and the recurrence of "purity" in them cannot therefore be merely coincidental. In other words, it can be argued that the "purity" of pure means, pure language and pure violence is one and the same notion.

Purity is also, however, a category strongly connoted within the philosophical tradition in which Benjamin moved his first steps, namely Kantian transcendental criticism. It is my contention that the notion of

purity in Benjamin, though deployed outside and often against Kant's theorization and that of his followers, and moreover influenced by different and diverse philosophical suggestions, retains a strong Kantian tone, especially in reference to its moral and ethical aspects but also, structurally, to its aesthetic form. Whereas Benjamin rejects Kant's model of cognition based on the "purity" of the universal laws of reason, and thus also Kant's theorization of purity as simply *non empirical* and *a priori*, he models nonetheless his politics and aesthetics around suggestions that arise directly from Kant's theorization of the moral act, the aesthetic judgment and the sublime, and uses a very Kantian vocabulary of negative determinations construed with the privatives *–los* and *–frei* (*motiv-frei*, *zweck-los*, *gewalt-los*, *ausdrucks-los*, *intention-frei*, etc.). In what follows, I will attempt to illustrate the meaning of *purity* in Benjamin's three essays and to explore the connections that link them to one another and to the Kantian tradition.[1]

1. Pure Means

In "Critique of Violence" Benjamin proposes a politics of "pure means" that would interrupt the instrumental cycle of means-ends characteristic of Western moral and political thought. The first paragraph of the essay situates violence in the realm of means, but at the same time disavows any critique that seeks in a system of just ends its criterion of judgment, for it would merely constitute a criterion for the *uses* of violence, and not for violence itself *as a principle*. Rather, a critique of violence must seek its criterion "within the sphere of means themselves, without regard for the ends they serve" (*GS* II/1:179/*SW* 1:236). Benjamin proposes thus to separate means from their "natural," instrumental connection to ends, exclude the realm of ends and the question of justice from its critique, and explicitly limit the latter to the question of violence as means in its relation to morality.[2] "Pure means" are put forward, in this context, as the only possible non-violent instance of conflict resolution, one that would disengage violence from its law-making and law-preserving character and

[1] Here I will focus only on the question of purity in Benjamin's reception of Kant, and not on this reception in general. For some recent (though also partial) analyses of this reception, see e.g., Quadrio (2003); Fenves (2011, 152-225; 2019); Ng (2012); Ferber (2014).

[2] "The realm of ends, and therefore also the question of a criterion of justness, are excluded for the time being from this study. Instead, the central place is given to the question of the justification of certain means that constitute violence" (*GS* II/1:181/*SW* 1:237).

from law in general.[3] Their "subjective" preconditions are located in the "culture of the heart" (*Kultur des Herzens*), in "courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust," but their "objective" manifestation is restricted to "indirect resolution," to matters concerning objects: "The sphere of non-violent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts relating to goods," and this means that *Technik* is their proper sphere. As example of this technique Benjamin singles out the "conference" or "interlocution" (*die Unterredung*), and thus "language" as the sphere of human agreement absolutely inaccessible to violence (*GS* II/1:191-2/*SW* 1:244-5). Other examples are the proletarian general strike as described by Georges Sorel, educative power (*erzieherische Gewalt*), "which in its perfected form stands outside the law," and the task of diplomats, since, analogously to the agreement between private persons, they must proceed case by case and without contracts, and their actions is thus "beyond all legal systems and therefore beyond violence" (*GS* II/1:200, 193, 195/*SW* 1:250, 245, 247).

The notion of "pure means," of means "purified" of their ends, is, however, highly paradoxical. As Peter Fenves (1998, 46-47) notes, means are by definition dependent on the idea of end, they are such only if they serve certain ends; whereas the notion of "pure ends" inhabits the Western philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Kant, means cannot be easily made independent. "Pure ends," or, in Kant's definition, "ends-in-themselves," are those which are independent of means, which find their own "perfection" in themselves—as in Aristotle—and are therefore *im-mediate* and *ab-solute*, separated by the means necessary to achieve them. "Pure means" cannot, in this sense, be considered "means-in-themselves," since to be "in itself" means to be "as its own end." However, the traditional, "syllogistic" (Hanssen 2000, 20) relationship between means and ends, and specifically in the context of a critique of violence as a means, presents for Benjamin a constitutive "ambiguity": the formal freedom guaranteed by law remains indissolubly bound to the "guilt" to which the law inevitably sentences life (Figal 1979, 9-10). Moreover, the existence of the legal order (*das Recht*), the realm in which violence is deployed as a means to the higher ends of civil cohabitation, is sustained in fact "not by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving the law itself" (*GS* II/1:183/*SW* 1:239). This

[3] "All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favorable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself" (*GS* II/1:190/*SW* 1:243).

constitutive ambiguity of the law is called by Benjamin "mythic,"[4] the very same ambiguity that characterizes the pronouncements of "fate" and is the final reason for the "ultimate insolubility of all legal problems" (*GS* II/1:196/*SW* 1:247). To the contrary, the definition of morality must be free of any ambiguity, and from this derives the necessity of dissolving the mutual implication of means and ends (Figal 1979, 9-10).[5] By assigning to God alone the determination of the justness of ends, Benjamin dismantles the connection between the realm of just ends and the question of justified means, and thus of any possible law, whose "generalization" (*Verallgemeinerung*) contradicts the nature of justice (*GS* II/1:196/*SW* 1:247).

What characterizes then "pure means"? Günter Figal identifies three main traits: first, they are qualified as *non-violent*, as what interrupts the mythical cycle of violence and retribution that characterizes the legal order. "Purity" is thus an indicator of this absence, of this interruption, a "purification" *from*.[6] Second, they are not justified by any end or purpose, their "purity" is not derived from just ends, but by their absence. They reject thus the very notion of instrumentality and can be qualified as *non-instrumental* (Hanssen 2000, 21). Finally, they cannot be identified with any action that finds its origin in a subject and are thus *subject-less*, purified from the notion of subject itself: as *Technik* of indirect resolution, they relate rather to objects, and this means that their morality is independent—purified—from any determinable will. What morality they present must lie *in themselves*. These traits make for the *medial* character of pure means (Figal 1979, 11-12). The sphere of mediacy is therefore the realm of pure means: ends situated outside this sphere, and which would claim to be removed from, and superior to it, would only mask in their ambiguity the historicity of their determination. Hamacher (1991, 1140) emphasizes that mediacy as mediation, transition or transmittal, *precedes* in a certain sense the two extremes it links: as a "form of interpersonality," it "does not have as its initiator and its addressee already constituted

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[4] "Here appear, in a terribly primitive form, the mythic ambiguity of laws that may not be 'infringed'—the same ambiguity to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, 'Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges'" (*GS* II/1:198/*SW* 1:249).

[5] Alison Ross (2015) analyzes Benjamin's use of the concept of ambiguity, showing how it can be at times itself ambiguous.

[6] As Sami Khatib (2013, 390) shows, violence is violence only within a means-end relation, hence the interruption of this relation in pure means is by definition non-violent; in other words, non-violence and pure means coincide. Axel Honnet (2006, 204) restricts the meaning of "purity" mainly to this first trait.

subjects, but […] from the outset constitutes them as mediated." This mediacy, Hamacher continues (1991, 1141), is the condition of possibility of the transition between the two extremes, but at the same time is also its interruption: it works simultaneously as condition and caesura, as will become evident in the analysis of language as medium.

The rejection of the realm of just ends takes the Kantian ethics directly to task. Kant's moral philosophy is in fact structured on the circular relation between means and ends, upon which both natural and positive law are based: In the 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals*, ethics is defined as the "system of the *ends* of the pure practical reason" (1996, 146, emphasis in the original) and is based on the notion of "just ends." When Benjamin states that a critique of violence cannot be implied in a system of just ends, for it would only contain the criterion for cases of the use of violence and not for violence itself as a principle, he disavows the systematic construction of the Kantian ethics (*GS* II/1:179/*SW* 1:236; cf. Figal 1979, 6). Furthermore, by restricting to God alone the realm of just ends, Benjamin implicitly undermines the Kantian system based on the universality of reason, which constitutes the formal foundation of universal freedom (Figal 1979, 8-9): "For it is never *reason* that decides on the justification of means and the justness of ends: fate-imposed violence decides on the former, and God on the latter" (*GS* II/1:196/*SW* 1:247, emphasis added). The paragraph that follows constitutes also a critique of the first formulation of the categorical imperative in the 1785 *Groundworks of the Metaphysics of Morals—I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law* (1997, 15): generalization (*Verallgemeinerung*), which is the constitutive principle of law, "contradicts the nature of justice" (*GS* II/1:196/*SW* 1:247).[7] Explicitly, then, Benjamin attacks the program established with the categorical imperative as minimalist and insufficient: the second formulation of it—"act in such a way that at all times you use humanity both in your person and in the person of all others as an end, and never merely as a means"—is inadequate insofar as positive law too—"if conscious of its roots"—does claim to "acknowledge and promote the interest of mankind in the person of each individual" through the representation and preservation of the legal order. In seeking to recognize

[7] Martin Blumenthal-Barby (2009, 736-37) writes: "The singularity of justice is '*all*' (*omni-*), the law of human law, however, is '*verall-*'—and it is the '*ver*' wherein the instrumental force of every law-positing violence is located, a force that seeks to ensure the general validity of a specific law-positing moment for the most diverse situations and for all times, a force whose power is diametrically opposed to the ethics of the singular event."

the interest of humanity in every individual, therefore, the law merely preserves an "order imposed by fate" (*schicksalhaften Ordnung*). Moreover, Benjamin wonders whether this demand does not contain too little and whether "it is permissible to use, or allow to be used, oneself or another in any respect as a means." He claims that good grounds could be adduced in favor of this point, but, as often happens in his work, we are left to wonder what these might be (*GS* II/1:187/*SW* 1:241, 252).

If anything, the paradoxical construction of pure means follows rather the pattern of the Kantian aesthetic judgement. Benjamin Morgan (2007, 48) shows that, in the context of the aesthetic judgement, objects that we judge to be beautiful have actually no end and yet do function as means. Morgan points thus to a passage of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*:

> nothing other than the subjective purposiveness in the representation of an object without any end (objective or subjective), consequently the mere form of purposiveness in the representation through which an object is given to us, insofar as we are conscious of it, can constitute the satisfaction that we judge, without a concept, to be universally communicable, and hence the determining ground of the judgment of taste. (Kant 2000, 106)

Here the purposiveness (the means to an end) is only subjective: "The aesthetic object is neither instrumental nor normative: it cannot be judged in its capacity as a means to an end or in its agreement with a preconceived concept of what it ought to be" (Morgan 2007, 48). And it is precisely this structure that Benjamin adopts for his definition of pure means. Agamben, who made pure means into a cornerstone of his soteriological proposal (cf. e.g. Agamben 2000), when relating Benjamin's "mediality without end" to Kant's "purposiveness without purpose," adds that, whereas the latter is "passive, because it maintains the void form of the end without being able to exhibit any determinate goal, on the contrary, mediality without end is in some way active, because in it the means shows itself as such in the very act in which it interrupts and suspends its relation to the end" (2018, 81-82). What remains of Kant is thus a "pure form," a structure purified from (and even opposed to) its proper content.

2. Pure Will

If Benjamin's politics of pure means sets itself explicitly against the formal structure of Kant's moral philosophy, its indebtedness to Kant's theorization must nonetheless be emphasized. This debt is usually

acknowledged in the literature on "Critique of Violence" and on Benjamin's early works more in general; however, the mention is too often limited to underline the fact that the essay starts off formally following the conventions of transcendental critique and finally opposes to Kant's Enlightenment rationalism a messianism deep-rooted in the Jewish tradition.[8] The early critical analysis of Günter Figal and Horst Folkers (1979) investigates, on the contrary, Benjamin's debt to the Kantian project, but has not enjoyed much echo. As Figal (1979, 2) points out, Benjamin's ethical construction in this early phase must be considered a modification of Kant's moral philosophy, and a look back at Kant's system becomes necessary in order to shed light on it. It is not only that Benjamin adopts Kant's fundamental distinction between morality and legality and disengages the morality of the act from the legal system; the relation is much deeper and fundamental. What particularly interests me here is the relation that links the notion of "pure means" to Kant's theorization of the moral act: in spite of Benjamin's rejection of the Kantian ethics and especially of its dependence of the means-ends instrumentality, as well as of its Enlightenment rationalism and legalist metaphors, the notion of "pure means" is strongly indebted to, if not a by-product of, Kant's theorization of the moral act.

The roots of the politics of pure means must be sought in Benjamin's intense engagement with Kant's work during the 1910s, which is testified by a series of fragments.[9] The most complete document is "The Moral Lesson" ("Der Moralunterricht"), published in July 1913 in Wyneken's *Die Freie Schulgemeinde*, in which Benjamin takes a strong Kantian approach to ethics in relation to "absolute" pedagogical demands. Important for my argument is the fact that he emphasizes a peculiar trait of Kant's distinction between legality and morality: the fundamental determination of the moral will (*sittliches Willen*) is that it must be *motivfrei*, free of any motivation, "only determined by the moral law, which commands: act well" (*GS* II/1:48). The goal of moral education is

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[8] Cf. for example Hanssen (1998, 130; and 2000, 3-4). Michael Mack (2001, 257) argues, against the usual assumption of the commentators, that the title "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*" harks back not to the Kantian model of critique, but rather to his friend Hugo Ball's *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (1918), which highly criticized Kant's theory of law. He acknowledges that Benjamin formally adopts Kant's methodology, but emphasizes how he radically undermines the latter's theory of law as secularized *Recht* issuing not from God, but from autonomous reason.

[9] To be found in the miscellanea of volume VI of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, especially the fragments of the section "Zur Moral und Anthropologie."

the creation of the moral will, Benjamin continues, but "nothing is more inaccessible than this moral will, since as such it is no psychological variable, which could be achieved through *means*" (*GS* II/1:49, emphasis added). The moral, *pure* will is as inaccessible to the educator as the pure and only valid moral law. In other words, the will is *pure*, and thus moral, as long as it is free of motivations and purposes, and so inaccessible to the means-ends logic—and to subjectivity. The inaccessibility of the pure will through means, Figal (1979, 4-5) points out, conversely implicates that the pure will cannot be conveyed or communicated (*vermittelt*). The center of Benjamin's ethics is therefore, for Figal, the quest for a moral act (*Gestaltgewinnung des Sittlichen*, "shaping of morality," in Benjamin's words) that would not be a mediation or instrumentality (*Vermittlung*). If the principle of morality is not communicable (*vermittelbar*), then the form of the moral act cannot be developed from the notion of means. The vocabulary of the politics of pure means is therefore already contained here in the play between the terms *Mittel* (means; literally, what stands in the middle and thus as middle point between two extremes) and *Vermittlung* (mediation, but also instrumentality), which will be echoed in the discussion of *Mitteilbarkeit* (communicability) in the language essays.

Before turning to this point, however, I want to dwell a bit longer on the structure of Kant's ethics. Howard Caygill underlines how the notion of "purity" in Kant is usually defined only negatively, that is, as *non-empirical* and, only as such, *autonomous* and *a priori*.[10] Already at the beginning of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant states: "Every cognition is called pure […] that is not mixed with anything foreign to it. But a cognition is called absolutely pure, in particular, in which no experience or sensation at all is mixed in, and that is thus fully *a priori*" (Kant 1998, 132). Likewise, pure will, as defined in the *Groundworks of the Metaphysics of Morals*, is "one that would be completely determined from a priori principles without any empirical motives," and the task of the

[10] "In Kant's philosophy pure is inevitably opposed to empirical, and both are aligned with a matrix of position which include form-matter, spontaneity-receptivity, autonomy-heteronomy, original-derived, condition-conditioned, prior-posterior, and a priori-a posteriori. […] Although it was widely used by Kant, the concept itself is rarely thematized"; "Pure is often used synonymously with terms such as a priori, form, condition, autonomy and original, but it is also used to qualify these same terms as in 'pure a priori' (*KU*, A 85=B 117). On some occasions a priori concepts and intuitions are pure because they are a priori; on others they are a priori because they are pure. One of the few points at which Kant approaches a self-sufficient definition of purity is in his equation of the pure and the original" (Caygill 1995, 341, 342).

metaphysics of morals is precisely that of examining the idea and the principles of this pure will (Kant 1997, 4). Independent of what it performs or effects, and, most importantly, of some proposed end, that is, "good, not perhaps as a means to other purposes," the good will must be good *in itself* (*an sich*) (1997, 10). Consequently, a moral act, which is moral only insofar it is done *from duty* (*aus Pflicht*),

> has its moral worth *not in the purpose* to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon, and therefore does not depend upon the realization of the object of the action but merely upon the *principle of volition* in accordance with which the action is done without regard for any object of the faculty of desire. (1997, 13, emphases in the original)

The foundation of the moral act is therefore always a self-foundation, it has no exterior and could not occur on the basis of anything external to it: it is pure only insofar as it arises from itself and is identical with the moral law. As such, it presents also no *temporal* exterior, that is, it must not be concerned with what comes after it and is beyond any criterion: it has no purpose outside itself and constitutes the only purpose of its own realization. The discussion of the imperatives clarifies this point: whereas the hypothetical imperative represents "the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will)," the categorical imperative represents "an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end" (1997, 25). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant emphasizes, then, that the necessity involved in the moral law is not of a physical type; rather, it can only consist in the "formal conditions of the possibility of a law in general" (2015, 30). The paradox of this pure formalism consists in the fact that "*the concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law (for which, as it would seem, this concept would have to be made the basis) but only (as was done here) after it and by means of it*" (2015, 53, emphasis in the original). What is essential in the moral worth of actions is thus "*that the moral law determine the will immediately*" (2015, 60, emphasis in the original).

These determinations resound not only in Benjamin's description of the purity of means, but also, as we will see, in his theorization of language as *medium* and in the moral value endowed to his notion of art criticism.[11] This point does not, however, cushion Benjamin's criticism to

[11] Andrew Benjamin argues that Benjamin's "pure" cannot be understood as the Kantian a priori: "Rather, the 'pure' starts from the recognition that, within

the Kantian system: Kant construes his moral philosophy around *pure reason* and its *tribunal* and *laws*, and uses a language which insists obsessively on juridical metaphors; moreover, his notion of law is characterized by *objective universality* and *necessity*, it belongs to the Enlightenment master narrative of universal emancipation and ends up, inevitably, with a justification of the existent power. The *Metaphysics of Morals* is not only based, both in the doctrine of right (*Rechtslehre*) and the doctrine of virtue (*Tugendlehre*), on the notion of "end" (*Zweck*), but finally legitimates the *status quo* (in the form of the unquestionability of law) and even authorizes the use of coercion.[12] Michael Mack (2001, 258ff.) argues that Kant's political agenda, which finally justifies and affirms the authority of the immanent ruler, is founded on, and is a necessary by-product of, the immanentist justification of autonomous reason. Morality is defined in relation to the laws of autonomous reason, in radical separation from the religious sphere; these laws are eternal, unquestionable, and static, and violence is only envisaged as a subversion of the rational order of things which the immanent law of the state must restrain. In the end, Mack writes, Kant's autonomous reason works as a justification of the bourgeois state founded on the rationalization of money and property: "The violence of the law that upholds such a bourgeois and 'rational' state of society must not be reasoned against," and thus law must preclude the revolutionary violence of those who rebel against it (2001, 265). Moreover, by founding power on the universal and eternal laws of reason, Kant "forbids any exploration into the origins of both state power and state law: the subjects of the state must not question the validity of the violence that enforces positive law; rather, they have to be aware of the debt they owe to the *Recht*'" (2001, 266). Benjamin, though formally adopting Kant's transcendental method and the main character of his moral philosophy, undermines the idea of autonomous reason and substitutes it for his intense messianism.

Mack's argument leads to a fundamental point in the discussion of Benjamin's politics of pure means: Benjamin takes issue with Kant's ethics because the cognitive model on which it is founded, construed around the autonomy of reason, necessarily undermines the purity of the

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modernity, that which provides experiences with its conditions of possibility are not simply external to the subject; they operate as 'fate' or 'law' and in so doing yield the positions occupied by subjects. The 'pure' is only linked to an a priori condition to the extent that experience itself is understood in terms of this modern 'transcendental aesthetic'" (2013, 121). This does not invalidate though the thesis of the Kantian origin of Benjamin's concept of purity.

[12] Cf. for example the "Introduction to the Doctrine of Right," §E.

act and reinserts it into the means-ends cycle. Already in the 1914 essay on Hölderlin, but more explicitly in the 1918 "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin labels Kant's (and the Neo-Kantian) epistemology as "mythical" because it is based on the traditional subject-object divide, "a conception that he was unable, ultimately, to overcome, despite all his attempts to do so" (*GS* II/1:161/*SW* 103). The task of future epistemology, he writes,

> is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities. (*GS* II/1:163/*SW* 1:104)

The Kantian foundational myth the new epistemology must overcome is precisely its methodological point of departure: subjectivity. It is this cognitive model that establishes the relation of instrumentality (*Vermittlung*) between the two metaphysical entities "subject" and "object," and finally leads to the mythical circularity of means and ends. The rational subject of the Kantian tradition is confined within this circularity and the attempt to construe the moral act on the self-founding, pure will of the subject fails insofar as it cannot overcome the divide. The great transformation and correction the coming philosophy should perform, Benjamin argues, "can be attained only by relating knowledge to language, as was attempted by Hamann during Kant's lifetime" (*GS* II/1:168/*SW* 1:108). The conclusion of the Kant's essay echoes, and refers to, the 1916 approach of the language essay and spells Benjamin's large-scale plan, in Hanssen words, "to exchange the reflection model of the philosophy of consciousness for the insight of a full-fledged philosophy of language" (1998, 30).

3. Pure Language

Benjamin's philosophy of language is fundamental for an understanding of his politics of pure means. Not only because language is singled out, in "Critique of Violence," as pure means, but also because of the figure of "pure language," which appears in both the 1916 "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" and the 1921 "The Task of the Translator."

Another important text, the famous letter Benjamin sent to Martin Buber on July 17, 1916, illustrates and emphasizes the political implications of his philosophy of language and helps relate it to "Critique of Violence." Benjamin writes to Buber in order to explain why he will not contribute to the journal *Der Jude* and centers his argument on the political

function of language. He rejects the common argument that the written word can influence the moral world and human action by providing motives for action because language is here considered "merely a means" (*nur ein Mittel*). Language as "mere means" (*bloßen Mittel*) is rendered powerless (*ohnmächtige*) and debased (*herabgewürdigte*); moreover, "each action founded in the expansive tendency of the word-to-word sequence appears to me dreadful and all the more disastrous where this whole relation of word and deed increasingly spreads, as in our country, as a mechanism for the realization of the right absolute." The real impact and agency (*Wirkung*) of language rests rather on its "secret," when it is considered "poetic prophetic factual" (*dichterisch prophetisch sachlich*), or, in a word which will recur in the language essay, "magic, that is, im-*mediate* and un-*mediated*' (*un-mittel-bar*). Effective (*wirksam*) is language "not through the transmission of contents but rather through the pure revelation of its majesty and true essence," which takes place through the "elimination of the ineffable": "This elimination of the ineffable appears to me as coinciding precisely with the properly factual of pure writing and as intimating the relation between knowledge and action right within the linguistic magic." Only in this sense is language properly political (*hochpolitisch*): not as means of an instrumental conception, but rather "as leading towards that which the word withholds." Benjamin insists on the term *Wirkung*: really effective is language when the word is intensely directed "in the kernel of inner silence." "Real," "effective" (*wirklich*) action is the word in its *purity* (*Reinheit*) (*GB* 1:325-27).[13]

This letter contains *in nuce* the fundamental trait of Benjamin's language philosophy, developed then in the essay written in the same year: the mediality of language, or language as medium. The 1916 language essay is construed around the play of a number of strictly related terms: *Mitteilung, mitteilen* and *mitteilbar* (communication, communicate and communicable), *unmittelbar* and *Unmittelbarkeit* (immediate and immediacy), *Mediale* and *Medium* (mediacy and medium). All communication of the contents of the mind, Benjamin states, is language; that is, language "communicates the mental being corresponding to it." However, "this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language." In this sense, language has no speaker, is not a means for a subject to transmit any content. Language, Benjamin continues, communicates the linguistic being of things, but it is at the same time the clearest manifestation of this being, that is, that which is communicable in a mental entity; therefore, "all language communicate itself" (*GS*

[13] For a reading of this letter, see the excellent essay by Samuel Weber (2006).

II/1:142/*SW* 1:63). Language is not something external to the mental being, not a means to its communication. Put differently:

> All language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense "medium" of the communication [*Mitteilung*]. Mediation, which is the *immedi*acy [Unmittel*barkeit*] of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. (*GS* II/1:142-43/*SW* 1:64, emphases in the original)

Mediation is *im-mediate*, it is, as Figal (1979, 12) puts it, identical with its presence. This notion of language as *immediate mediation* rejects its instrumentality: it "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication." There is no such a thing as a content of language: "*as communication, language communicates a mental entity—something communicable [*eine Mitteilbarkeit*] per se*" (*GS* II/1:145-46/*SW* 1:66, emphasis in the original). This means, as Hamacher writes, that it precedes any performative utterance as a form of mediacy, and thus as "sheer, preinstrumental technique." "Imparting" [*Mitteilung*], he continues, "is a means which has no need of positing and which may underline any established linguistic political, or legal institution at any time. Language in its mediacy is pre-positional, preperformative—and, in this sense, afformative." (1991, 1143).[14] Or, in Samuel Weber words, "*Unmittelbar* (immediate[ly]) means not just 'immediate[ly]' but also, more literally, without means or instrumentality. Language, in short, is to be understood not as a 'means' to some other goal, but as the immediate possibility of being imparted" (2008, 117). This possibility, then, is not to be intended as a Kantian formal condition of possibility, as Rodolphe Gasché notes (1988, 88), not as a subjective characteristic, but rather as a "real possibility (*dunamis*) of potency in language."[15] Weber acutely highlights

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[14] Hamacher goes on: "Even before and even during its performative effects, language does not initially lay the foundation for anything outside itself, but rather offers itself as the form of mediacy between speakers, as their mediacy in a third entity, in a talk, an *Unterredung*, an *inter* of their languages, without which they would not be language" (1991, 1144).

[15] Therefore, "rather than a category of possibility, communicability is constituted by things' yearning to relate to the origin of their creation in the Word. In language, in a verbal sense of their expression, things communicate that they are of divine origin. […] But such yearning, such intention in language, is not subjective. Not things yearn to be heard: only that part of them that is spiritual, already linguistic—the residue of the creative word—does so. Communicability is, thus, an *objective* (metaphysical) category that designates the difference that expression or

another fundamental trait of the medium: it is not a means, but cannot be considered the opposite of a means either, that is, an end in itself; rather, it retains one decisive aspect of the means, which is that “it is not self-contained, complete, perfect or perfectible. It is simply *there*, but as something that splits off from itself, takes leave of itself” (2008, 42).[16]

Language as medium is the name: “The name is that *through* which, and *in* which, language itself communicates itself absolutely. In the name, the mental entity that communicates itself is *language*” (*GS* II/1:144/*SW* 65). It is only after the Fall, when the name becomes “human word,” that language steps out of name-language and becomes a means: “The word must communicate *something* (other than itself),” but as such it loses the true knowledge of things and becomes “prattle” (*Gescwätz*). In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means and therefore also a mere sign. An important consequence is that it is only after the Fall that *judgement* (*das Gericht*) becomes possible: knowledge of good and evil is in itself nameless (*namenlos*), is a knowledge from outside, which abandons the name (*GS* II/1:152-53/*SW* 1:71). In the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the name and “fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle.” The very question of good and evil is in this sense “prattle”: “The Tree of Knowledge stood in the garden of God not in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgement over the questioner. This immense irony marks the mythic origin of law” (*GS* II/1:154/*SW* 1:72).

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language makes to the extent that as expression and language it communicates all by itself its difference” (Gasché 1988, 89).

[16] Weber continues, stretching Benjamin’s theory in a strongly deconstructionist direction: “What is ‘immediate’ is that which is defined by the potentiality of taking leave of itself, of its place and position, of altering itself. In thus being named, the language of names takes leave of itself, of its nominal character, not by actually becoming something else but by naming the structural potentiality of such leave-taking. In short, as medium, language *parts with itself* and can thus be said to constitute a medium of virtuality, a virtual medium that cannot be *measured* by the possibility of self-fulfilment but by its constitutive alterability” (2008, 42). Both Hamacher and Weber relate therefore language to the title of the second of the two sections which, according to a letter Benjamin sent to Scholem in December 1920, would have composed the second part of his *Politik*: *teleology without final purpose* (*Teleologie ohne Endzweck*) (cf. *GB* 2:109). This, Weber adds, “only insofar as the word ‘without’ defines a relation not of simple exclusion or negation, but of participation ‘with’ the ‘out’-side of an irreducible and yet constitutive exteriority” (2008, 197).

Language as pure mediality is therefore prior to the judgement on good and evil, it is pure means, and this is why, Benjamin notes in "Critique of Violence," fraud or deceit (*Betrug*) came only late under the sanction of law (cf. *GS* II/1:192/*SW* 1:145). As medium and articulation of mediacy, language precedes any distinction between "true" and "false" and is not subject to it (cf. Hamacher 1991, 1144). On the same basis Benjamin distinguishes between compromise, diplomatic transactions, and conference or interlocution (*Unterredung*): compromise remains embroiled within the means-ends logic and is therefore violent because, he quotes from Erich Unger, "the effort toward compromise is motivated not internally but from outside, by the opposing effort, because no compromise, however freely accepted, is conceivable without a compulsive character" (*GS* II/1:191/*SW* 1:244). As such, Figal points out, compromise presents a law-positing character, oriented towards the realization of a superordinate end: "compromise is a form of law-positing which has no law-preserving violence at disposition" (1979, 18-19). The work of diplomats lacks this law-positing character because "it is beyond all legal systems and therefore beyond violence" (*GS* II/1:195/*SW* 1:247). In *Unterredung*, finally, language as medium is not determined *von außen*, from outside, but rather it "wraps" and "envelops," in a way, the speaker; it is the speaker who is "referred to" by language, and not the other way round, and it is this "objectiveness" of language which constitutes it as *technè* (Hirsch 1996, 22). When Beatrice Hanssen (2000, 22) writes thus that in *Unterredung* Benjamin seemingly retained the legacy of liberalism, she misses the mark.

The notion of language as pure means relates to another fundamental notion: pure language. In the 1916 language essay Benjamin states that language itself constitutes the mental being of man, who therefore cannot communicate himself by it, but only *in* it: "The quintessence of this intensive totality of language as the mental being of man is the name. Man is the namer; by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks" (*GS* II/1:144/*SW* 1:65). Pure language is identified here with the name-language: "language, and in it a mental entity, only expresses itself purely where it speaks in name" (*GS* II/1:145/*SW* 1:65). This language as the "paradisiacal language" is one of perfect knowledge (*GS* II/1:144/*SW* 1:71). In the 1921 translation essay this notion takes a slightly different connotation: pure language is here defined as the "totality of their [all human languages] intentions supplementing one another" (*GS* IV/1:13/*SW* 1:257). The kinship of languages resides in the fact that "what is meant" (*das Gemeinte*) in all of them is the same; they only differ in "the way of meaning" (*die Art des Meinens*). *Das Gemeinte* is in a constant state of

flux (*Wandel*)—a historical flux which translation helps developing by transposing each time the language of the original into a "higher and purer linguistic air"—"until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning." Pure language corresponds therefore to the messianic end of the history of all historical languages, a "final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguistic creation" (*GS* IV/1:14/*SW* 1:257), a "tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives," the "language of truth" or the "true language" (*GS* IV/1:16/*SW* 1:259). It is at the same time present, as a nucleus, albeit hidden and fragmentary, in the life and transformation of historical languages, and thus also stands, Hanssen argues, simultaneously in a relation of immanence and transcendence to empirical languages.[17] Language, therefore, pure insofar as beyond its utilitarian and symbolic functions, that which is purely language, nothing but language (Gasché 1988, 92; Jacobs 1975, 760-61).[18] Neither a *Ursprache* nor a universal language, pure language signifies the messianic end (*telos* and not *Zweck*) of the historical movement of all languages, a teleological movement (but an "intentionless" one, without final purposes, *ohne Endzwecke*; cf. Dörr 1988, 119-20; Hirsch 2006, 614) of progressive "purification" towards a sort of cumulative totality which constitutes nevertheless the empty space of universal linguisticity.[19]

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[17] "Pure language, then, as the movement of language, was immanent to the diversity of empirical languages, yet it transcended them. At the risk of pressuring the limits of the German language, one could perhaps say that in Benjamin's essay the German term for translation (*Übersetzung*) no longer only denoted 'transfer' or 'transposition,' as it does etymologically, but also pointed to a transcendence, to a law (*Gesetz)* that transcends, that is *über*, above. Inasmuch as this transcendence manifested itself in translation, it was also at once immanent. As such, its ur-image (*Urbild*) was the interlinear version of the scriptures. Pure language as translation was that which inhabited and exceeded singular languages and idioms" (Hanssen 1998, 35).

[18] Morgan (2007, 55) writes that "pure language does to meaning what pure violence does to normativity: both are manifestations of the resistance to a means-ends logic that a theory of pure means is capable of mounting. Where divine violence destroys law's forceful application to life, pure language extinguishes the capacity of language to signify, to apply to the world."

[19] Weber (2008, 74-75) writes: "language that is pure of everything that is outside it is a language that would consist of pure signifying, something that is aporetical, to be sure, since signifying always entails a signified and hence cannot be entirely pure. But a relation to language in which syntax—the sequential arrangement of words—takes precedence over the time-and-space transcending rules of grammar and semantics; in which the ways of meaning, their distribution and relations, have

Hamacher interestingly relates the notion of pure language to Benjamin's critique of Kant: what in the 1918 Kant's essay Benjamin called "pure, epistemological [*erkenntnis-theoretischen*] (transcendental) consciousness" (*GS* II/1:162/*SW* 1:104), for which he advocated against subjectivism and the consequent subject-object divide, could also be called, Hamacher argues, a theory of a "pure transcendental language." In the same way that the pure transcendental consciousness would overcome the relation between subjects and objects, pure language overcomes that between languages and subjects, or languages and objects, and refers rather to relations internal to languages and between languages, to relations of communication, translation, "linguisticality" (*Sprachlichkeit*), in a word, to the medial character of language and thus to its *Wesen* (Hamacher 2012, 486-87). However, Hamacher also underlines an important commonality with Kant, especially in the notion of translatability: because it structurally transcends the limits of finite subjectivity, and is as such a possibility that does not need to refer to any actual reality, translatability presents the character of a demand (*Forderung*) analogous to the Kantian moral law. Like the moral law, translatability is not molded on the conditions of its fulfilment, but is a demand which arises from the essence (*Wesen*) of each work, and thus from language itself (2012, 489-90). A similar point is made by Figal when he argues that Benjamin is still strongly Kantian in his systematic determination of the morality in language on its "intensive totality" (1979, 15). We could stretch the argument to argue that the tension on which pure language is construed (like the politics of pure means, and finally also pure violence) still presents a strong affinity with Kant's formulation of the moral act.

Pure language is related to another fundamental notion: the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*). In the language essay the question of the "inexpressible" and the "unexpressed" (*das Unaussprechliches*, *das Unausgesprochene*) is connected to the concept of revelation (*Offenbarung*): revelation is the linguistic state where "the most expressed [*das Ausgesprochenste*] is at the same time the purely mental" (*GS* II/1:146/*SW* 1:67). This does not entail, however, a pure correspondence between language and communication: "For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol

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priority over what is meant—this would be a language that seems to approach what Benjamin 'means' by 'pure language.' This would be a language that performs by signifying without being absorbed or determined by entities that appear to exist independently of all signifying."

of the noncommunicable" (*GS* II/1:156/*SW* 1:74). This thought is developed in the translation essay precisely in relation to pure language:

> In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. (*GS* IV/1:19/*SW* 1:261)

Weber (2008, 77) points out that pure language is essentially described negatively, as meaning-less, intention-less, and expression-less. It is the messianic, transcendent *telos* in which all languages are destined to be extinguished—and this will be a fundamental point for the analysis of pure violence. At the same time, however, it is also the immanent unexpressed and inexpressible which inhabits all historical languages and as such disarranges and interrupts the continuum of signification. On this aspect Benjamin will found the power of critique.

4. Critical Violence

The years which separate the language essay and the translation essay saw Benjamin's intense engagement with Kant's work, an engagement which became critical contraposition and led him to attempt a peculiar *Aufhebung* of the Kantian critical project along the lines of the philosophy of language exposed in the language essay, combined with the criticism of art he found in the Early German Romantics.[20] The critical model elaborated in these crucial years will remain a constant in Benjamin's later work and will be

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[20] Benjamin's correspondence helps outlining this development: if in October 1917 he still harbored the idea of writing his doctoral dissertation at the university of Berne on Kant and history (*GB* 1:390-1), when he finally read Kant's relevant works on the subject, namely *Idea For a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784) and *Perpetual Peace* (1795), he was strongly disappointed. In December of the same year he wrote to Scholem: "The issue in Kant is not much history but certain historical constellations of ethical interest. In addition, precisely the ethical side of history as specific observation is made inaccessible and the postulate of an analytical mode proper to the natural sciences is established" (*GB* 1:408). He maintains the necessity of an engagement with the *letter* of Kant's philosophy (*GB* 1:402-3) and considers—and later discards—the hypothesis of a doctoral dissertation on the Kantian notion of *unendliche Aufgabe* (infinite task; cf. Tagliacozzo 2018). Kant remains the fundamental reference, but as "the great opponent," as Benjamin writes in a letter to Ernst Schoen in May 1918 (*GB* 1:455-6).

applied to the most diverse fields, from literature to history to politics; the cornerstones of this critical project are represented by the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and the book on the German *Trauerspiel* (written between May 1924 and April 1925). The former recasts pure language in the aesthetic field as the "expressionless" (*das Ausdruckslose*). The work of art, Benjamin writes, as form "enchants chaos momentarily into the world" and becomes "mere semblance" (*bloßer Schein*) in the forms of "mere beauty" and "mere harmony" (*bloße Schönheit* and *bloße Harmonie*) (*GS* I/1:181/*SW* 1:340). Semblance, Winfried Menninghaus (1992, 175) notes, endows beauty with the main trait of myth: ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*) (*GS* I/1:175/*SW* 1:335). What arrests this semblance and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless: it "compels the trembling harmony to stop and through its objection immortalizes its quivering." Benjamin defines the expressionless as "critical violence" (*kritische Gewalt*) insofar as it possesses violence "as a moral dictum" (*moralisches Wort*): it is only the moral word that can dispel the ambiguity of semblance and introduce what is presented as the characteristic of truth and justice: unequivocalness (*Eindeutigkeit*) (*GS* I/1:162, 174 /*SW* 1:326, 335).[21] This moral word appears as "sublime violence":

> In the expressionless, the sublime violence [*erhabne Gewalt*] of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. (*GS* 1.1:181/*SW* 1:340)[22]

A passage from Hölderlin's *Anmerkungen zum Ödipus* helps Benjamin clarify the concept: the expressionless emerges in the Hölderlin quotation as the "caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture," in which, along with harmony, "every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power [*ausdruckslosen Gewalt*] inside all artistic media" (*GS* 1.1:181-2/*SW* 1:340-1). The expressionless "shatters," "destroys" and reduces semblance—that semblance which is the aesthetic correlate of myth—to shards and fragments.[23] The

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[21] Cf. Menninghaus (1992, 175). "There is no truth, for there is no unequivocalness—and hence no error—in myth" (*GS* I/1:162/*SW* 1:326).

[22] This page is taken almost literarily from an early fragment written in 1919-1920, "On Semblance" ("*Über 'Schein'*"). Cf. *GS* I/3:832-33/*SW* 1:224-25.

[23] Thereby, Andrew Benjamin (2006, 8) argues, the expressionless also "completes" the work, it is an "interruption that yields completion."

violent caesura constituted by the "pure word" entails a moral force; or, better, the violence which constitutes the moral word is caesura, rupture, insofar as it introduces the unequivocalness of truth and justice—purity—into the ambiguity of appearance and myth. This moral word, Burkhardt Lindner writes, is no word and entails no signification; rather, it is interruption of the mythical unity of expression, semblance, and signification (2006, 489-90). Or, as Hamacher famously argued, the "purity" of this expressionless violence—"pure word" as immanent pure language, that which remains unexpressed and inexpressible—is "never positing, forming, or transforming, but afformative." As "objection" (*Einspruch*), it "is not itself a word, not a positing, but the interruption of propositional utterance by something which neither speaks nor posits"; "pure," wordless word, it does not belong to any spoken language, but, as pure language, it constitutes the very possibility of language and social life themselves (1991, 1153-54). This is perceptible in tragedy as "the falling silent of the hero" (*GS* 1.1:182/*SW* 1:341).[24]

The sublimity of the true word constitutes the "secret" (*Geheimnis*) at the core of the critique of beauty: the expressionless, though contrasting with the semblance, stands in a necessary relationship to it, and this makes for the unity of veil and veiled which constitutes beauty (*GS* I/1:195-96/*SW* 1:350-51). As it has been noted, Kantian suggestions are here very

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[24] The theme of "silence" can be traced back to Benjamin's early writings at the time of his involvement in the *Jugendbewegung*. In "The Conversation," the first part of the 1913 unpublished "Metaphysics of Youth," Benjamin writes that "conversation strives toward silence"; in silence, the listener holds "true language" (*die wahre Sprache*) in readiness and leads "the conversation to the edge of language, and the speaker creates the silence of a new language, he, its first auditor." "Silence is the internal frontier of conversation" and "greatness is the eternal silence after the conversation" (*GS* II/1:91-93/*SW* 1:6-7). This theme traverses, as a subterranean current, the following writings on language and aesthetics and finally re-emerges in the Goethe essay and, more powerfully, in the *Trauerspiel* book. Here tragic silence as "speechlessness" (*Sprachlosigkeit*) intensifies the condition of the tragic hero; Benjamin quotes from Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* (1921): "the tragic hero has only one language that is completely proper to him: silence" (*GS* I/1:286/*OT* 108). Silence represents the "sublimity of linguistic expression" (*GS* I/1:288/*OT* 109). As Menninghaus (1992, 174) notes, it is precisely the absence of words that represents the maximum of communication: "it is an articulation of the non-articulation." But more importantly, this silence is "sublime" (*erhabne*), just like the violence of truth which appears in the expressionless.

strong, and they are acknowledged by Benjamin himself.[25] As Uwe Steiner (2000, 509) writes, Kant's third critique is here revisited along the lines of Benjamin's philosophy of language, whereby the dialectics between expressionless and revelation takes on the traits of the third moment of the "Analytic of the Beautiful": the "purposiveness without any purpose" (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne allen Zweck*) (Kant 2000, 120), which for Kant expresses the agreement of the form with the subjective harmony of imagination and understanding, becomes the main trait of revelation as sublime disclosure (*Enthüllung*). The expressionless, then, presents evident traits of the "Analytic of the Sublime," especially in its negative character (cf. Kant 2000, 151-52), which Kant explicitly relates to the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, and in its symbolic analogy to morality in us (cf. 2000, 156).[26] More generally, Menninghaus (1992, 170) points out, *das Ausdruckslose* explicitly resonates with a number of aesthetic-theological concepts which sustain Kant's project and all end with the syllable *–los* (-less): *zwecklos* (purposeless), *interesselos* (disinterested), *begriffslos* (non-conceptual), and more importantly *bilderlos*, in the form of the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, of which it would play a series of variation. As in Kant, and strongly influenced by his work, purity stands in Benjamin as some form of sublime *–losigkeit* at the core of his philosophical project.

5. Pure Violence

Hamacher famously related the critical violence of the expressionless of the Goethe essay to the "pure violence" of "Critique of Violence." Using the terminology of speech-act theory, he called "afformative" the deposing (*Entsetzung*) which characterizes pure violence, since, like the expressionless, it does not "perform" any signification or positing (*Setzung*), but rather

[25] "Kant's doctrine, that the foundation of beauty is a relational character, accordingly carries through victoriously, in a much higher sphere than the psychological, its methodical tendencies. Like revelation, all beauty holds in itself the orders of the history of philosophy. For beauty makes visible not the idea but rather the latter's secret" (*GS* I/1:195-96/*SW* 1:351).

[26] "Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people felt in its civilized period for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples, or the pride that Mohammedanism inspired. The very same thing also holds of the representation of the moral law and the predisposition to morality in us" (Kant 2000, 156). Cf. Steiner (2000, 508).

interrupts it. As such, pure violence is non-violent and non-instrumental (it is what Judith Butler [2006, 202] defines with the paradox of a "nonviolent violence") and "may at any time—if not universally at any time—break through the cycle of laws and their decay" (Hamacher 1991, 1138-39).

The notion of pure violence arises as a response to the quest for "a different kind of violence […] that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to [just] ends but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way" (*GS* II/1:196/*SW* 1:247). It is the ultimate task of a politics of pure means to identify such "pure, immediate violence" (*reinen unmittelbaren Gewalt*) that might call a halt to the mythic violence of law. The language Benjamin uses to describe this pure violence became suspicious to many readers, notably to Derrida, who saw it haunted by the specter of radical destruction (1990, especially the "Post-scriptum," 1140-45): Benjamin speaks of "destruction" or "annihilation" (*Vernichtung*) of legal violence/power and describes pure violence non only as divine (*göttliche Gewalt*), but as law-destroying (*rechtsvernichtend*), striking (*schlagend*), "lethal without bloodshed" (*auf unblutige Weise letal*) and as not stopping short of annihilation (*GS* II/1:199/*SW* 1:249-50); moreover, this "revolutionary violence" is also said (provocatively?) to possibly manifest itself in a "true war" and in "the crowd's divine judgement on a criminal" and is not recognizable as such with certainty. Slavoj Žižek (2008, 202) conceives it thus as divine in the sense of the Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei*, pure, revolutionary outburst of violence which strikes out of nowhere and has no end in sight. The last sentence of the essay describes it as "the sign and seal but never the means of sacred dispatch" and calls it *die waltende*, translated by Edmund Jephcott as "the sovereign" (*GS* II/1:202-3/*SW* 1:252).[27] It is no means, and in this sense has no meaning: like language as medium, it does not signify anything, it is a "pure" sign.

The difficulty in interpreting this figure has led to the most diverse readings. Vittoria Borsò (2005, 64-65) speaks of an "ambivalence" of both pure violence and pure language, but this is a dangerous term, because it resonates with that "ambiguity" which rather characterizes, for Benjamin, law and myth. It is important thus to clarify this point. Agamben importantly calls the attention to a letter Benjamin wrote to Ernst Schoen

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[27] Khatib (2013, 395-96) remarks that *waltende Gewalt* is a tautology, since etymologically *Gewalt* comes precisely from *walten*; a *waltende Gewalt* is a *gewaltige Gewalt*, a violent violence, which however, paradoxically, in Benjamin's argument coincides with its opposite, the paradoxical *gewaltlose Gewalt*.

on January 29, 1919 and in which he gives a definition of "purity." Benjamin writes:

> The purity of a being is *never* unconditional, or absolute; it is always subjected to a condition. This condition varies depending on the being the purity of which is at issue; however, this condition is *never* to be found in the being itself. In other words, the purity of any (finite) being does not depend on itself. (*GB* 2:11-2, emphases in the original)

Agamben calls this conception of purity "relational" rather than substantial and argues therefore that the purity of pure violence "is not a substantial characteristic belonging to the violent action in itself"; in other words, "the difference between pure violence and mythico-juridical violence does not lie in the violence itself, but in its relation to something external," that is, in its relation to law. This relation, however, cannot be that of means and end, but only that of the mediality of the pure medium identified in the language essays. In fact, like many other interpreters, Agamben underlines the relation between pure violence and pure language: "pure violence is that which does not stand in a relation of means toward an end, but holds itself in relation to its own mediality." As such, he argues, pure violence is finally "attested to only as the exposure and deposition of the relation between violence and law" (2005, 61-62).[28] Pure violence, Agamben concludes, "exposes and severs the nexus between law and violence and can thus appear in the end not as violence that governs or executes (*die schaltende*) but as violence that purely acts and manifests (*die waltende*)" (2005, 62). The expression "purely acts" (*puramente agisce*) needs though a specification: "acts" cannot be read "performatively," as Hamacher would say, but as the afformative interruption of the expressionless pure language.[29]

Weber acutely notes, however, that if purity is not a substantial but a relational notion, then how can it consist in an action that manifests violence "itself" or "as such," as distinct from everything other than itself? Or, he continues, "is there a kind of manifestation, a kind of act that is defined precisely through just such a relation to something other than

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[28] Axel Honneth (2006, 204) seems to mean something similar when he writes that the function of pure violence is to prepare the terminology with which Benjamin will assess the relation between law and violence from the transcendental perspective of some future morality.

[29] A number of interpreters (cf. e.g. Kishik 2012, 98; Benjamin 2013, 96) relates pure violence to Arendt's concept of power (cf. Arendt 1970), but it appears difficult to reconcile the latter with the purely de-posing, afformative character of the former.

itself? What, in short, is involved in a violence that is *waltend* but not *schaltend*? Can the two be as clearly separated or distinguished as Agamben, following Benjamin, seems to believe?" (2008, 198).[30] Weber might have in mind the peculiar utilization of the verb *walten* in German: used alone, it can mean *to rule*, as in the expression "*über jemanden oder etwas walten*" (to rule over somebody or something); it is however used often in combination with the verb *lassen* (to let, allow, make), as in the expressions "*Vernunft walten lassen*" (to let reason prevail), "*Vorsicht/Milde walten lassen*" (to exercise caution/leniency), "*Gnade walten lassen*" (to show mercy), "*jemanden walten lassen*" (to let somebody have a free rein, to let somebody do as he pleases); as noun, it is used in expressions like "*das Walten der Naturgewalten/Gottes*" (the workings of the forces of nature/of God), and the expression "*das walte Gott*" means simply "amen," "so be it." It is interesting to note that *walten* is commonly used in combination with *schalten* in the idiomatic expression "*schalten und walten*" (to bustle around) and "*frei schalten und walten*" (to do what one wants, to have a free hand). The common usage, we could argue, testifies of the intimate relation of the two terms, precisely that relation which is at issue in the "purification" of violence.[31]

The perspective that must be adopted in finally assessing the "purity" of violence is that invoked by Benjamin at the beginning of the last paragraph of the essay:

> The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history—the "philosophy" of this history because only the idea of its development [*ihres Ausgangs*] makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach to its temporal data. (*GS* II/1:202/*SW* 1:251)

The pivotal term is here *Ausgang*, which Jephcott renders as "development," but which could also be translated as "outcome," "exit," "egress," or, in relation to a story or to history (both *Geschichte* in German), as "denouement" or "conclusion." The "idea" of this *Ausgang* is to be read neither as a Kantian "regulative idea" nor as the idea of the Platonic tradition, but rather as the idea as "constellation" of the *Trauerspiel* book, intimately related to the notion of *Ursprung*, origin.[32]

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[30] Weber explores the question further by reading Agamben reading Benjamin's analysis of Kafka and the relation between law and life, but this issue exceeds the scope of the present analysis.
[31] For an analysis of *schalten* and *walten* see Fenves (2011, 223ff).
[32] "The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of

Ursprung and *Ausgang*, in their correlation, define the philosophy of history which informs—and connects—both "Critique of Violence" and "The Task of the Translator." We can, therefore, recur again to the analogy with pure language: pure violence can be described as the messianic, transcendent *telos* in which, like pure language at the end of the history of languages, the connection between *schalten* and *walten*, and thus the mythic bound which unites law and violence, is destined to be extinguished. It is important, though, not to forget also the immanent side of pure language: at the same time, we must read pure violence as the immanent critical violence that, like the expressionless within every linguistic expression, disarranges and thus exposes the continuum of this connection; as pure language constitutes the potency of language as *dunamis*, insofar as it interrupts and dissolves the signification of every historical language, so pure violence constitutes the *dunamis* of the deposition of the *schalten-walten* connection and thus the messianic idea of a "new historical epoch" (*GS* II/1:202/*SW* 1:252).

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becoming and disappearance. […] That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete" (*GS* I/1:226/*OT* 45).

CHAPTER THREE

PROFANE POLITICS, OR ON THE ACTUALITY OF "CAPITALISM AS RELIGION"

1. Capitalism and Politics

Fragment 74, first published in 1985 in volume VI of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, is contained in sheets no. 26, 27 and 28 of the notebook numbered as "1." The first part, which fills the first two sheets, carries no title; the second part is on the back side of sheet 28 and carries the title "Capitalism as Religion," which the editors have extended to the whole fragment. The front side of sheet 28 contains the fragment "Geld und Wetter (Zur Lesabéndio-Kritik)" ("Money and Weather [on the Critique of Lesabéndio]") which the editors decided to publish separately in the critical apparatus of volume IV/2, as note to the aphorism "Steuerberatung" ("Tax Advice") of *One Way Street* (*GS* IV/2:139/SW 1:481).[1] The first part presents a quite structured development, though we

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[1] Uwe Steiner (2006, 167) considers this third fragment as integral part of a note that was in truth tripartite; it is thus worth citing it in full:

> Rain is the symbol of the misfortune of this world.
> The curtain before the drama of the end of the world
> The anxious waiting for the sun
> Peering through weather and money
> In neither of them there is movement in only one direction
> The utopian state of the world without weather
> The weather itself a limit for the relationship of human beings to the apocalyptic state of the world (bad weather), bliss (without weather, cloudless), money denotes another, still unknown term. Rain, storm: parade of the end of the world. They behave towards it like a cold towards death.
> Money belongs with rain, certainly not with the sun.
> The space without weather of the pure planetary occurrence before this:

should always keep in mind that these are personal work notes for an essay that will never be written, and thus that explanations, elaboration and logical steps are missing; the second part consists instead of much less elaborated notes and of bibliographical references. On the basis of the date of publication of the works here cited (the most recent, Erich Unger's *Politik und Metaphysik*, appeared in January 1921) and on the list of books Benjamin read in that year, the editors dated the fragment to mid-1921 (see *GS* VI:690-91).

Michael Löwy (2009, 61) argues that Benjamin took the title "Capitalism as Religion" from Ernst Bloch's book *Thomas Münzer as Theologian of Revolution*, published precisely in 1921[2]: in the conclusion of the section entitled "Über Calvin und die Geld-Ideologie" ("On Calvin and the Money Ideology"), Bloch writes in fact that Calvinist reformation planted the seed of the destruction of Christianity and introduced "the elements of a new 'religion': that of capitalism as religion (*Kapitalismus als Religion*) and Mammon's Church" (1921, 170). Löwy quotes then a letter Benjamin sent to Scholem on November 27, 1921, in which he writes: "Recently [Bloch] gave me, during his first visit here, the complete proofs of his 'Münzer' and I've begun to read it" (*GB* 2:213). Löwy argues therefore that the date of composition of the fragment should be moved to the end of 1921. Werner Hamacher is however not so sure of it. Bloch and Benjamin first met in Switzerland, where both spent the most part of the war years, and had immediately engaged in an intense intellectual exchange. At the request of Bloch, Benjamin had already written a review (today lost) of his *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), of which he considered the book on Thomas Münzer a sort of "coda." Hamacher (2002, 89n6) argues therefore that also the opposite hypothesis could be plausible, that is, that Benjamin might have coined the formula and that Bloch used it then in his *Münzer* book.

> Weather is the veil.
> Money in Kubin's *The Other Side* exactly like weather.
> (*GS* IV/2:941).

The choice of the editors is also justified, since part of this fragment will end up in the *One Way Street* aphorism in the following paragraph: "Money and rain belong together. The weather itself is an index of the state of this world. Bliss is cloudless, knows no weather. There also comes a cloudless realm of perfect goods, on which no money falls" (*GS* IV/1:139/SW 1:481).

[2] The same hypothesis is also briefly supported by Joachim von Soosten (2003, 290n6).

Whatever the direction of the "debt," the reference to Bloch, together with that to *Lesabéndio*, allow to place the fragment specifically within the project to which Benjamin in these years referred as "*Politik*." It is possible that it was precisely the review of *The Spirit of Utopia*—but more in general the intellectual debate with Bloch—that led Benjamin to plan in the early 1920s an extensive study, which was never completed but the structure of which can be reconstructed from a number of allusions and observations to be found in Benjamin's correspondence, and in particular in the letters to Scholem. The first mention is however in a letter to Bernd Kampfmeyer from September 1920, in which Benjamin says that he is planning an essay on "The Demolition of Violence" ("Abbau der Gewalt"). In a famous letter to Scholem from September 1st, 1920 Benjamin describes the plan of the project and states that the third part of his *Politics* will consist of a philosophical critique of Paul Scheerbart's novel *Lesabéndio*,[3] whereas the second part would be titled "The True Politics" ("Die wahre Politik"), in turn divided into two sections, "The Demolition of Violence" and "Teleology Without Final End" ("Teleologie ohne Endzweck") (*GB* 2: 109). On December 29 he writes then that he has completed "The True Politician" ("Der wahre Politiker," also lost), which perhaps was to constitute the first part of the project (*GB* 2: 119). The section on "The Demotion of Violence" seems to coincide with the essay "Critique of Violence" ("Zur Kritik der Gewalt"), which Benjamin mentioned for the first time in January 1921 and which will be then published in August of the same year in n. 3 of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, the only part of the project to appear in print.[4]

2. The Religious Structure of Capitalism

The fragment takes as its springboard the famous thesis proposed by Max Weber in two bulky essays from 1904 and 1905 and then published together under the title *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, according to which the "spirit" of capitalism, that is, its emphasis on work as a value in itself, can be traced back to the ethics of Protestantism, and in

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[3] It was Scholem who in April 1917 offered Benjamin the novel as a wedding present (cf. Scholem 2012, 48) and provoked thus Benjamin's "conversion" to Scheerbart. On the novel there exist another fragment, "Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio" (*GS* II/2:618-20), most likely dating to 1919.

[4] Cf. also *GB* 2:148, 174, 360, 382, 385; *GB* 3:9. On the genesis and structure of the project see Steiner (2001).

particular of Calvinism.[5] Capitalism represents thus for Weber a secularization of protestant ethics. Benjamin right away distances himself from this thesis, stating that capitalism is not only a formation "conditioned" by capitalism, that is, it is not secularized religion, but is instead a religion in the strict sense, or better a "religious phenomenon" (*GS* VI:100/*SW* 1:288). Weber's paradigm of secularization is replaced in Benjamin by that of metamorphosis: "The Christianity of the Reformation period," he writes, "did not favor the growth of capitalism; instead it transformed itself into capitalism" (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:290). And yet, at the same time Benjamin refuses to give an explanation or a "proof" for this statement, because this would lead to an "endless universal polemic," and merely asserts that capitalism fulfills the same function of the "so-called" religions of the past, that is, that of allaying the "anxieties, torments, and disturbances" of the human being. An enigmatic sentence concludes the first paragraph: "We cannot draw closed the net in which we are caught. Later on, however, we shall be able to gain an overview of it" (*GS* VI:100/*SW* 1:288).

This incipit contains *in nuce* all the difficulties that the fragment presents to the reader: as a series of work notes, it is extremely dense and often obscure, and raises more questions than it provides answers. Just in the first paragraph, for example, it is not explained what are the "anxieties, torments, and disturbances" to which religions (including capitalism) provide a response, it is not clear why demonstrating that capitalism is a religion would lead to a universal polemic, or why engaging in this polemic would mean to take a false route; obscure are then the metaphor of a net in which, literally, we "stand" (the verb here used is *stehen*, and not, as we might expect, "to be caught"; cf. Weber 2008: 250-51), and the reference to a vague successive, later (*später*) moment in which it will be possible to gain an overview of the question.

The most interesting aspect of the fragment is however the identification of a specific structure of capitalism as religion, on which it is possible to make some precise and definite observations. Beginning precisely with the "anxieties, torments, and disturbances" to which capitalism would provide a response. Various commentators have linked this description of religion to the last paragraph of the fragment, where capitalism is compared to paganism, since, just like this latter, capitalism does not conceive religion as bound to "moral" or "superior" interests, but

[5] Weber's *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, was initially published in no. 20 (1904, pp. 1-54) and 21 (1905, pp. 1-110) of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, and then, in a revised version, as volume in 1920 (cf. Weber 1920, 1992).

rather to immediately "practical" ones. Capitalism, for Uwe Steiner (2006: 169), would thus constitute a "re-paganization" of religion, to which Benjamin would oppose in these years a truly "moral" or even "religious" attitude.[6] This conjecture can be confirmed, among other things, also by a passage from "Fate and Character," a text most likely written in 1919 but published precisely in 1921 in *Die Argonauten*. Here Benjamin, when describing the sphere of fate, characterizes it as extraneous to the concepts of happiness, bliss, and innocence, and concludes:

> But an order whose sole intrinsic concepts are misfortune and guilt, and within which there is no conceivable path of liberation (for insofar as something is fate, it is misfortune and guilt)—such an order cannot be religious, no matter how the misunderstood concept of guilt appears to suggest the contrary. (*GS* II/1:174/SW 1:203)[7]

Benjamin's critique is not aimed thus at religion as such (for example, as "opium of the people"), but rather at a certain structure, probably heathenish, which brings together capitalism and the "so-called" religions of the past.

This structure, Benjamin writes, presents three main characters, which will then become four (we must remember that these are work notes, and thus that Benjamin must have come up with the fourth trait when drafting the notes): 1. capitalism is a cultic religion, with no dogma and no theology, that is, pure ritual; 2. this cult is perpetual and knows no pauses; 3. it is a cult that does not offer redemption but instead produces *Schuld*, in its double signification of "guilt" and "debt"; 4. the God of this cult is involved in the guilt/debt and thus is kept hidden.

The first operative term of this characterization is undoubtedly "cult," from which in a certain sense the other three features derive. A cult that raises the earning of money to a religious rite, that needs no ideological legitimization (it has neither dogmatics nor theology) but justifies itself merely through its own functioning, and that actualizes itself in the form of a utilitarianism taking up a sacred connotation: everything takes on a meaning only, and immediately (*unmittelbar*), in relation to the utilitarian cult, which means that what is not deemed as "useful" takes on almost "sacrilegious" traits. Capitalism thus does not demand adhesion to a creed; it is the actions themselves, the everyday practice, that take on a cultic character. This trait reminds once again of paganism, just like the

[6] The same argument is also supported by Norbert Bolz (2003: 196).
[7] On the link between "Fate and Character" and "Capitalism as Religion" see Härle (2017).

"polytheist" iconography of capitalism. Capitalism has no theology but has nonetheless a number of saints: the images on the banknotes become sacred, holy images, and from their ornamentation speaks the spirit of capitalism. This idea reappears precisely in the aphorism "*Steuerberatung*" of *One Ways Street*, where the "solemn earnestness" displaying itself on the banknotes is described as "ornamenting the façade of hell" (*Fassadenarchitektur der Hölle*) (*GS* IV/1: 139/*SW* 1: 481).

From the capitalism's totalization of meaning derives the second character of this cultic religion, which makes up its apotheosis, that is, the permanent duration of the cult: there are no "weekdays," that is, days in which the cult is not celebrated, but every day demands the obsessive celebration of the rite. As noted, among others, by Burkhardt Lindner (2003, 202), this means that the difference between profane time and cultic time, between sacred and profane, is erased. At this point Benjamin used an enigmatic French expression, which the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (followed by English translators and the editors of the *Selected Writings*) have interpreted as "*sans rêve et sans merci*," without dream or mercy. Steiner (1998: 157) notes that this expression is not an idiomatic expression in French, and moreover it finds no context in Benjamin's vocabulary of these years (his fascination for dreams and their intrinsic and essential connection to capitalism date to the 1930s), and thus that this reading makes no sense. He proposes thus to read the expression as "*sans trêve et sans merci*," without truce or mercy. This is in fact an idiomatic expression which, as Chad Kautzer notes, dates at least to the medieval chivalry decalogue, which imposed to the knight to fight the infidels "*sans trêve ni merci.*"[8] According to Samuel Weber (2008, 255), Benjamin had certainly found this expression in one of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, "Le crépuscule du soir" ("Dusk"), which he was translating in these years. The translation was completed precisely in 1921 and would be then published in 1923 by the publisher Richard Weißbach with the famous introduction "The Task of the Translator." Baudelaire's poem in fact emphasizes how not even the evening brings rest and a "truce" to those who toiled all day long; since the evening is the time at which "corrupting demons" awake who, "like men of great affairs" (*comme de gens d'affaire*), fill the night with sorrow:

> *Et les voleurs, qui n'ont ni trêve ni merci,*
> *Vont bientôt commencer leur travail, eux aussi,*

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[8] Kautzer adds this in a note to his own translation of Benjamin's fragment, in Mendieta (2005, 262n2). Kautzer refers to the catalogue of chivalry composed by Léon Gautier (1891) in the nineteenth century.

Et forcer doucement les portes et les caisses
Pour vivre quelques jours et vêtir leur maîtresses.

Robbers who show no pity to their prey
Get ready for their nightly work-a-day
Of cracking safes and deftly forcing doors,
To live a few days more and dress their whores.
(Baudelaire 1993, 192-93)

As in Baudelaire’s poem, in capitalism there is neither truce nor mercy, the work/cult never stops, not even at the gates of night; the sacral pomp of the rite (work/consumption) is permanently displayed, with no limit in space and time. The time of capitalism, just like money (*time is money*), has become a universal equivalent, and thus absolutely uniform and indifferent. From this “quantified” time (which thereby loses all and every qualitative connotation) there is no way out.

3. Debt and Guilt

The third trait of the capitalist structure presents the central term of the fragment, *Schuld*, in all its “demonic ambiguity” (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:289): both “guilt” and “debt.”[9] The soteriology of the capitalist cult consists for Benjamin in implicating existence more and more into the fall (*Sturz*) of a guilt-making which is at the same time a debt-making (and vice versa), until the very God of the cult is implicated in this movement which is in itself inextinguishable (like guilt and debt) and is therefore not salvation but desperation and ruin.

The noun *Schuld*, Steiner (2003, 41-42) remarks, is a verbal abstraction of the modal verb *sollen* (shall). If initially it still carried the double meaning of “something that one should (do) or is due,” the modern use is

[9] This demonic ambiguity becomes a demonic difficulty for the translator: most translators chose (perhaps correctly) to emphasize the connotation of guilt, leaving the connotation of debt to Benjamin’s parenthetical explanation (cf. e.g. Rodney Livingstone in *SW* 1: 288-91; Chad Kautzer in Mendieta 2005, 259-62; Christophe Jouanlanne and Jean-François Poirier in Benjamin 2011, 110-14); Gianluca Solla (in Panattoni and Solla 2004, 19-22) is the only one who chooses the opposite option, translating *Schuld* simply as “debt” (*debito*); Samuel Weber (2008, 253) proposes to translate it as “debt-as-guilt” and Elettra Stimilli (2017, 113-34) resorts to the repetition of the two terms. In my own Italian translation (Benjamin 2013) I chose this last option, separating though, unlike Weber and Stimilli, the two terms with a slash and not with a hyphen or a comma, in order to preserve the sense of unity and coincidence.

restricted to the second case. The semantic passage to the meaning of "guilt" could derive from a contraction of the Germanic law institution of the *Wergeld*—one of the key words to be found in the second part of Benjamin's fragment, according to which a transgression (initially as physical violence) could be compensated with a payment of money (in order to avoid the blood revenge)—and the doctrine of the medieval Church, which for each sin demanded a *satisfactio operis*. This way was perhaps established the connection between *Schuld* and sin, and thus the semantic passage to the meaning of "guilt." However, this *satisfactio* (which can also be rendered in German as *Vergeltung*) retains a link to money (*Geld*, from *gelten*, to have value, but also to make good of something). The Romance languages do not present the "demonic ambiguity" of German: the Latin *culpa* derives perhaps from the stem **kalp*, "to bring about," "to arrange," which ended up taking only the negative meaning of "to bring about damage." *Debere* derives in turn from *de habere*, "to have *from* someone," even though, as Émile Benveniste (1969, 185-86) notes, also the present meaning of "debt" is quite recent, because initially the juridical designation of debt as "what is owed to someone as borrowed from them" was *aes alienum*. The prefix *de* of *debeo* does not connote the loan, but instead the fact of having "something that one owes to someone as it belongs to them." Here, too, it is then possible to speculate about a link to the *satisfactio* and thus a "demonic ambiguity."

Schuld is a term that frequently repeats in Benjamin's reflections of these years: strongly influenced by the philosophy of the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, Benjamin places *Schuld* in a constellation that includes the concept of "fate" (*Schicksal*) and the order of law, which both belong to the sphere of "myth."[10] Right after the passage from "Fate and Character" quoted above, Benjamin writes: "The laws of fate—misfortune and guilt—are elevated by law to measures of the person" (*GS* II/1:174/*SW* 1:201). This guilt is not however that of the ethical sphere, since there is no correlation between fate and the concept that in the ethical sphere associates with guilt, that is, innocence (*Unschuld*). The order of law is rather "a residue of the demonic stage of human existence" (*GS* II/1:174/*SW* 1:201). A corollary of this axiom is that "[l]aw condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context [*Schuldzusammenhang*] of the living" (*GS* II/1:175/*SW* 1:202). These

[10] In various works, but especially in *Ethik des reinen Willens* (*Ethics of Pure Will*, 1907), Hermann Cohen insists on the connection between *Schuld*, nature and natural history. On Cohen's influence on Benjamin, see Deuber-Mankowsky (2000).

theses will return in the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, written between 1919 and 1922, and in "Critique of Violence," where "mere life" is defined as "the marked bearer of guilt" (*die gezeichnete Träger der Verschuldung*) (*GS* II/1:202/*SW* 1:251). In these passages the connotation of *Schuld* is tipped no doubt towards the side of "guilt" (note also that in German *Schuld* as "debt" is in the plural, *Schulden*), but a fragment written some years before in Switzerland, in the Sommer of 1918, helps to relate the sphere of myth and *Schuld* with the religion of capitalism:

> Where there are pagan religions, there are concepts of natural guilt (*natürliche Schuldbegriffe*). Life is somehow always guilty, its punishment is death.
> A form of natural guilt is that of sexuality, for pleasure and the production of life
> Another is that of money, for the mere possibility to exist (*GS* VI:56)

The relationship between money and guilt within pagan religions already contains the "demonic ambiguity" of a guilt that is in itself always already debt. The capitalist cult, as guilt-inducing/debt-inducing, belongs to the sphere of pagan religions and, with its universalization of guilt/debt, drives back humanity into a "demonic stage"; it is therefore, as Joachim von Soosten (2003, 133-34) writes, a relapse into the sphere of myth.

Benjamin was however not the first to play with the ambiguity of the term *Schuld*. In the second essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (published in 1887), titled "'Guilt', 'bad conscience' and related matters," Nietzsche already states that "the main moral concept '*Schuld*' ('guilt') descends from the very material concept of '*Schulden*' ('debts')" (2007, 39), and genealogically traces back the origin of the moral concepts of guilt, conscience and duty to the sphere of the law of obligations. It is "the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the very conception of a 'legal subject,'" that is the basis of the normative construction of Western ethics, "and itself refers back to the basic forms of buying, selling, bartering, trade and traffic" (2007, 40). Guilt is therefore the condition of those who feel indebted. Moreover, Nietzsche relates the greatness of the concept of god and divinity to the "feeling of indebtedness [*Schulden*] towards a deity," to the point that "The advent of the Christian God as the maximal god yet achieved, thus also brought about the appearance of the greatest feeling of indebtedness [*Schuldgefühl*] on earth" (2007, 62).

But already twenty years earlier Marx had devoted an entire part of the first book of the *Capital* (1867)—the one on the "so-called primitive accumulation," which some appropriately define as *Schuldkapitel* (Hamacher

2002, 91; Stimilli 2017, 114)—to the centrality of the concept of *Schuld/Schulden* in capitalism, also playing with the ambiguity of the term. What makes money into "capital," that is, into money that utilizes itself and multiplies, is for Marx "national debt":

> National debts, i.e., the alienation of the state—whether despotic, constitutional or republican—marked with its stamp the capitalistic era. The only part of the so-called national wealth that actually enters into the collective possessions of modern peoples is—their national debt. Hence, as a necessary consequence, the modern doctrine that a nation becomes the richer the more deeply it is in debt [*sich verschuldet*]. Public credit becomes the *credo* of capital. And with the rise of national debtmaking [*Staatsverschuldung*], want of faith in the national debt takes the place of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which may not be forgiven. (2010, 742)

As Hamacher notes (2002, 92), with this structural metamorphosis from the secular-economic credit to a sacramental credo, Marx provides the diagnosis of the transformation of capitalism into a religious phenomenon.[11] Moreover, just like Nietzsche, and anticipating somehow Max Weber, Marx puts the Christian God at the center of this transformation: "Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man, more especially in its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, &c, is the most fitting form of religion" for a society based upon the production of commodities (Marx 2010, 90).[12]

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[11] Hamacher (2002, 92) relates then this passage to another passage from the chapter "The General Formula for Capital" on the concept of value: "instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, [value] enters now, so to say, into private relations with itself. It differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus value; as the father differentiates himself from himself *qua* the son, yet both are one and of one age: for only by the surplus value of £10 does the £100 originally advanced become capital, and so soon as this takes place, so soon as the son, and by the son, the father, is begotten, so soon does their difference vanish, and they again become one, £110" (2010, 165-66). The mechanism of surplus value, Hamacher notes, is already in itself a theogony of self-indebtment.

[12] To this genealogy of guilt/debt we must add Adam Müller (1779-1829), a Romantic writer who was catholic and conservative but anticapitalistic, whom Benjamin includes in the bibliographical list in the second part of the fragment (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:290). Stefano Franchini (Jorgen and Franchini 2011, 124-25n24) assumes that Benjamin read the 1920 edition of Müller's *Twelve Speeches on Eloquence* (Müller 1920). However, at page 56ff (those specified by Benjamin), there are no passages that can be related to the themes of the fragment. Franchini finds this passage at p. 53: "Since the diffusion of the art of typography, what is

It is conceivable that Benjamin knew these two sources, at least indirectly.[13] And yet, precisely Nietzsche and Marx, with the addition of Freud, are labelled in Benjamin's fragment as "high priests" of the capitalist cult. The choice of these three names is rather surprising, since they are precisely those whom Ricoeur (1970, 32) and Foucault (1998) will define, a few decades later, as "masters of suspicion" and in a certain sense fathers of modernity. For Benjamin, they are instead the high priests of capitalism because they begin, in all conscience, to realize it in its fullness; that is, their philosophies "mimetically" represent the capitalist religious structure and push its immanent logic (that of guilt/debt) to the extreme consequences (Steiner 2006, 171; Lindner 2003, 218). Here two terms, construed as mutually opposed, are fundamental: *Umkehr* and *Steigerung*. The former literally means "change of course," "turn" (*Kehre*), but presents also a strong religious connotation, since it also translated the Latin term *conversio* and the Hebrew *teshuvah*, "conversion." This fact led some commentators to read (and translate) it as *metanoia*, that is, (religious) conversion in the sense of repentance and atonement,[14] but this reading confines Benjamin's analysis to a religious debate and reduces his attack on capitalism to a polemics between true and false religions. I will show later why this reading points to the "folly [*Abweg*] of an endless universal polemic" (*GS* VI:100/*SW* 1:288) that Benjamin wants to avoid.

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ugly, false and insignificant no longer disappears, as it happened instead in the past as soon as it was uttered, and it no longer dissolves into the common air, element to which it belongs much more that to spirit: it remains, and advances in large battalions, growing at accelerated rates, as shown by the *libraries* of our time, on the march to the wretched posterity. The very same happens with economic misfortune, which in the past was only borne […] by the concerned generation and disappeared with its death, but has become, now that all action and behavior is expressed in gold, a heavier and heavier mass of debts [*Schuldmassen*] which weighs on the following generation." Löwy (2009, 65) and Hamacher (2002, 92) partially quote this passage without further comments.

[13] On the cultural *milieu* in which Benjamin moved in these years see Steiner (2001). A propos of Marx's passage from the part on the "so-called primitive accumulation," Steiner (1998, 161) notes that Benjamin could have read some references to it in Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, where this part is briefly analyzed—though without explicitly quoting this very passage—in the pages immediately preceding those Benjamin refers to in "Capitalism as Religion" (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:290). Cf. Sorel (1999, 167ff.)

[14] Cf. for example, the Italian translations by Gianfranco Bonola and Michele Ranchetti (Benjamin 1997, 284-87) and by Gianluca Solla (Panattoni and Solla 2004, 19-22), and the French translation by Jouanlanne e Poirier (Benjamin 2011, 110-14), where *Umkehr* is simply rendered as "conversion."

Hamacher (2002, 99) proposes thus to read *Umkehr* as "turning away," as radical caesura and total rupture with the logic of guild/debt, and Birgen Priddat (2003, 226) as *re-volutio* and *crisis*. *Steigerung* means instead increase, elevation, increment and thus enhancement, strengthening, intensification. Benjamin argues that the philosophies of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud enact an enhancement, strengthening and intensification of the capitalist logic of guilt/debt and do not represent at all an *Umkehr*, a rupture with it.

For Benjamin, the Nietzschean *Übermensch* does not expiate the guilt/debt but heroically takes it upon himself and, in this sense, in his tragic heroism, most radically fulfills the religious essence of capitalism. According to Löwy (2009, 69), this strengthening only intensifies the capitalist *hubris*, the cult of power and of infinite expansion. Precisely in opposition to this Nietzschean strengthening one must read the following definition in the more or less contemporary fragment "World and Time" (ca. 1919-1920): "My definition of politics: the fulfilment of an unimproved [*ungesteigerte*] humanity" (*GS* VI:99/*SW* 1:226). The logic of Marx's though is not dissimilar: to the contrary, the *Communist Manifesto* explicitly describes socialism as heir of capitalism. The bourgeois relations of production, write Marx and Engels, have become too narrow to accommodate the productive forces, they have in fact become a hindrance for them, hence these forces "rebel" to the old relationships: "The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself" (2008, 42). The logic of the capitalist productive forces remains unchanged; in fact, it is precisely this logic that demands a change. Moreover, the working class does not constitute an alternative to the capitalist bourgeoisie, but it is rather the product of it: "not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians" (2008, 42-43). Socialism is therefore the logic of capitalism without capitalism and only brings to the extreme consequences the logic of the "simple and compound interest" (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:289) which is none other than that of guilt/debt.[15]

As for Freud, Benjamin argues that the "repressed," that is, the foundation of psychoanalytic theory, equates, for an analogy that he does

[15] It is true that Benjamin in these years knew little and poorly of Marx's *oeuvre*, and that probably here he is modelling his criticisms on the anarcho-syndicalism of George Sorel and above all of Gustav Landauer. After reading, in 1924, Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* Benjamin will change his mind on Marx's theory, or at least on Marx's work, though this critique of socialism will transfer from then on onto social democracy.

not develop, to capital. This analogy is nonetheless related to the generating of interests in capital, in turn assimilated to the repression of the "idea of sin" (*GS* VI:101/*SW* 1:289). As it has been pointed out (Steiner 2003, 43-44; cf. also 1998, 2006), above all in *Totem and Taboo*, and more precisely in the myth of the primal horde that concludes the chapter "The Return of Totemism in Childhood," Freud places at the origin not only of religion, but of social organization *tout court*, the original guilt (*Urschuld*) for the murdering of the father. This is "the same great event with which civilization began and which, since it occurred, has not allowed mankind a moment's rest" (Freud 2001, 168), an event that organizes the social structure at all levels: "Society [is] now based on complicity in the common crime; religion [is] based on the sense of guilt [*Schuldgefühl*] and the remorse attaching to it; while morality [is] based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt" (2001, 170). This structure is, for Freud, ultimately a more or less rational way of managing the *Schuldgefühl*, which is and remains ineliminable. Also the Freudian diagnosis, therefore, is unable to free humanity from the logic of guilt and indebtedness, but rather reinforces it and places it as foundation of all social, religious and political systems, and thus absolutizes it.[16]

4. *Umkehr* and True Politics

If God himself is caught in the logic of guilt/debt (and therefore—fourth trait of the capitalist structure—he must be kept hidden; *GS* VI:101/*SW* 1:289), for Benjamin expiation (*Entsühnung*) cannot be found in the religion of capitalism. But neither in a reformation of it (which, Hamacher [2002: 95] notes, should be a reformation of the Reformation), since in this religion there exist no element that is free from the logic of guilt/debt and that is thus "reformable." And not even abjuration constitutes a way out, since abjuration remains in a relationship of dependency with the logic of the abjured structure; moreover, abjuration is only individual, not communal,

[16] On Benjamin and Weber see, e.g. Tagliacozzo (2018, 135-48). For an in-depth analysis of the theories of Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Max Weber in relation to Benjamin's fragment, see Stimilli (2017, 113ff.). Stimilli also analyses the broader question of guilt and debt for our neoliberal times in her following book (2018). Benjamin's critique of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud's "intensification" of the capitalist logic also undermines a recent vogue that theorizes an overcoming of capitalism through an "acceleration" that would allow to "traverse" it. Cf. e.g. Williams and Srnicek (2013, 2016), Asafu-Adjaye et al. (2015); for comments related on Benjamin's fragment, cf. Pellizoni (2017).

and does not stop therefore the god of capital from exercising his power on society (Hamacher 2002, 95; Löwy 2009, 68). The only way out should thus be sought in what Benjamin thrice defines as *Umkehr*. The fragment does not give hints about the nature of this *Umkehr*, but it is possible nonetheless to make some considerations about it.

If the hypothesis is correct that this fragment belongs to the major and unfinished project of the *Politik*, then we can propose to identify the *Umkehr* with politics itself: that is, only a "true" politics could constitute a radical rupture with the logic of guilt/debt, only a "true" politics could oppose the capitalist religion. Based on this hypothesis we can read again the obscure incipit of the fragment: according to Steiner (2003, 46), it is perhaps for this reason that Benjamin declines to provide the proof of the religious essence of capitalism and to enter an endless universal polemic, which would probably focus on the meaning/essence of religion or of the "true" religion, and would distract (it would be an *Abweg*, a "folly" in the sense of "wrong way") from the true, "political" task of the analysis. Capitalism as religion cannot be countered with another, maybe "true" religion, but only with the "true" politics. For Steiner (2006, 172) the fragmentary bibliographical notes of the second part of the fragment suggest that Benjamin's reflections did proceed precisely in this direction. If the texts of Max Weber, Bruno Archibald Fuchs, Ernst Troeltsch, Gustav von Schönberg (maybe) and Adam Müller can refer, in different ways, to the theme of the religious structure of capitalism, the three texts of Georges Sorel, Erich Unger and Gustav Landauer focus instead precisely on its overcoming. And in fact the first two texts listed, Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* and Unger's *Politics and Metaphysics*, are cited also in "Critique of Violence," the only part of the project that was finally published.

The reference to Sorel's book accompanies a note: "Capitalism and law. The heathen character of law" (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:290). The page of the book to which Benjamin refers (262) belongs to a central chapter of the *Reflections*, the section on "force and violence" (IV) of the chapter "The Political General Strike": in this page Sorel criticizes the "naturalization" of capitalist economy, by which an economic system resulting from a specific historical evolution, and as such contingent, is elevated to the rank of *natural law* and absolutized in a "science" which appears as "exact" as much as the sciences of physical nature.[17] In the

[17] The whole page reads as follows: "When we reach the last historical stage, the action of independent wills disappears and the whole of society resembles an organized body, running idle; observers can then establish an economic science which appears to them as exact as the sciences of physical nature. The error of

language of "Critique of Violence," capitalism, and the bourgeois law that supports it, are thus "mythic," that is, inscribed in a "demonic" necessity that belongs, as we have seen, to the sphere of fate and guilt. It is precisely this "mythic" connotation that makes capitalism and law "pagan" and excludes them from the ethico-moral order and from "true" politics. And yet, precisely in "Critique of Violence" (*GS* II/1:193-94/*SW* 1:245-46) Sorel's book is cited to provide an instance of a politics that breaks the mythic cycle of violence and retribution: the "political general strike" theorized by Sorel is, for Benjamin, what can bring "naturalized" capitalism to an insurmountable stalemate, it is what can bring about the catastrophic rupture, the caesura, or, in the language of "Capitalism as Religion," the *Umkehr*.

In "Critique of Violence" Unger's book is cited to criticize the character of "compromise" of liberal-democratic politics, but there is also a reference to a politics that takes into account "higher orders" and thus breaks away from the "mythic" circle of violence (*GS* II/1:191, 193/*SW* 1:244, 245). In "Capitalism as Religion" the reference to Unger is linked to the note "The overcoming of capitalism by migration" (*GS* VI:102/*SW* 1:290): the page of Unger's book that Benjamin's cites (44) emphasizes in fact how capitalism is able to adapt to, and integrate, any type of objection,

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many economists consisted in their ignorance of the fact that this system, which seemed natural and primitive to them, is the result of a series of transformations that might not have taken place, and which always remains a very unstable structure, for it could be destroyed by force, as it had been created by the intervention of force;—moreover, contemporary economic literature is full of complaints relating to the interventions of the State which upset *natural laws*.

Today economists are little disposed to believe that these *natural laws* are in reality laws of nature: they are well aware that the capitalist regime was reached slowly, but they consider that it was reached by a progress which should enchant the minds of all enlightened men. This progress, in fact, is demonstrated by three remarkable facts: it has become possible to set up a science of economics; law can be stated in the simplest, surest and most elegant formulas, since the law of contract dominates the whole of advanced capitalism; the caprices of the rulers of the State are no longer so apparent, and thus the path towards liberty is open. Any return to the past seems to them a crime against science, law and human dignity.

Socialism looks upon this evolution as being a history of bourgeois force and it sees only differences of degree where the economists imagine that they are discovering difference of kind: whether force manifests itself under the aspect of historical acts of coercion, or of fiscal oppression, or of conquest, or labour legislation, or whether it is wholly bound up with the economic system, it is always bourgeois force labouring, with more or less skill, to bring about the capitalist order" (Sorel 1999, 168-69).

conflict and reaction; the only possibility to "overcome" it is, for Unger, that of exiting its range, its "sphere of action."[18] The *Umkehr* takes up here spatial/territorial connotations and it is perhaps possible to glimpse some allusion to Zionism.[19] Also the citation from Gustav Landauer's *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* (*Call to Socialism*) focuses on the necessity of a transformation, which here is however understood in a spiritual sense: like Sorel, Landauer was an anarcho-syndicalist, and, like Sorel, he saw in contemporary capitalism a machine running idle, to which he counterpoises the need for a transformation of the spirit which will then lead to a social and material transformations.[20] As Steiner (2006, 173)

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[18] The central passage of this page is the following: "The aggression against the 'capitalist system' will always be in vain *in the place of its validity* [*am Orte seiner Geltung*]. Capitalism is the most powerful and profound of all systems and can integrate, *where it is in force* [*im Gebiet seines In-Kraft-seins*], any opposing objection. In order to organize something against capitalism it is above all essential to *exit its sphere of action* [*Wirkungsbereich*], since within it capitalism is able to absorb any reaction. The spatial abandonment of the capitalist domain zone is therefore an indispensable precept for all syntheses striving for a different form of material existence, and for those not yet striving for it, this solution would ultimately mean the liberation from a power that it is impossible either to eliminate or to live with" (Unger 1989, 48).

[19] On Unger's book in relation to Benjamin's fragment cf. Gentili (2017, 138-44) and Guerra (2017).

[20] I follow here Stefano Franchini (in Jorgen and Franchini 2011, 123n23), who argues that Benjamin is referring to the first edition of Landauer's book from 1911, so that at the page cited (144) we read: "*Also the abolition of property will ultimately be a transformation of the spirit*; from this rebirth will originate a massive redistribution of capital; and linked to this new distribution we will found the will, in future time, at determined or undetermined intervals, to distribute the land anew, to distribute it again and again.

Justice will always depend on the spirit presiding over humanity, and socialism is completely misunderstood by those who think that now it is necessary and possible a spirit crystallizing into such definitive configurations that nothing will be left to future evolutions. The spirit is always moving and creating; what it creates will always be insufficient and nowhere if not in the image or idea will perfection be an actual event. It would be a wasted and meaningless effort to want to create, once and for all, just institution which automatically exclude all possibilities of exploitation and usury. Our epoch showed us what happens when the place of the living spirit is taken by institutions running idle. Every generation should courageously and radically attend to what conforms with its spirit: also in the future there will exist reasons to make revolutions, which will indeed become necessary when a new spirit will have to turn against the stiffened remains of a vanished spirit."

points out, a few pages after the one cited by Benjamin, in Landauer's book we read this sentence "*Sozialismus ist Umkehr*" (1911, 150). The *Umkehr*, the change of course that is also conversion, radical caesura, new beginning, is thus the lynchpin around which revolve Benjamin's reflections on the "true" politics.[21]

In "Critique of Violence," this historical caesura (which is not named *Umkehr*) aims at founding "a new historical epoch" and revolves around the *de-position* (*Entsetzung*) of the mythic order of law through what Benjamin alternatively (and enigmatically) calls "pure violence," "divine violence" or "revolutionary violence," the function of which is nonetheless that of breaking the mythic cycle of violence (*GS* II/1:202/*SW* 1:251-52). But we can hypothesize a further determination of the *Umkehr* as "true politics" by resorting to the notes of a fragment perhaps contemporary to "Capitalism as Religion" (and therefore perhaps also belonging to the context of Benjamin's *Politik*), the famous "Theological-Political Fragment" (*GS* II/1:203-4/*SW* 3:305-6).[22] The fragment is extremely complex and articulated and rivers of ink have been consumed to interpret it, but what is interesting for the present argument is that in it Benjamin grounds "the task of world politics" on the construction of the "order of the

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Uwe Steiner (1998, 155n20) quotes instead the third edition of *Aufruf sum Sozialismus*, published in 1920, where at p. 144 we read: "Fritz Mauthner (*Dictionary of Philosophy*) has shown that the word '*Gott*' [god] is in origin identical with '*Götze*' [idol] and that both mean the '*Gegossene*' [molded]. God is a product created by human beings, which comes to life, draws to himself human life and finally becomes more powerful than the whole humanity.

The only '*Gegossene*', the only idol, the only god, to which humans have given corporeal form, is money. Money is artificial and it is alive, money generates money and money and money, money has all the power of the world.

Who cannot see today that money, that this god is none other than a spirit created by humans and that has become alive, has become a monster, that it is meaning of our life turned into meaninglessness? Money does not produce wealth, money is wealth; it is wealth for itself; there is no other wealth than money."

Most interpreters (including Löwy and Hamacher) follow this second hypothesis.

[21] On Benjamin and Landauer cf. e.g. Guerra (2017).

[22] The editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* dated the fragment to 1920-1921, following Scholem's conjecture (2012, 112) and against the initial idea of Adorno, who had given the fragment its title and, based on personal discussions with Benjamin, had dated it to 1938 (cf. Adorno 1990, 29). The editors of the *Selected Writing* have opted however to follow Adorno's conjecture. The reference to Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* in the first paragraph could seem to validate the first hypothesis. In the short interpretation that follows I will modify the English translation.

profane" (*Ordnung des Profanen*) and rejects any political significance of theocracy (making this point was for Benjamin the cardinal merit of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*). Stating that theocracy has no political but only religious significance, Benjamin separates the sphere of politics from that of religion and provides perhaps a hint on how to interpret the way out from capitalism as *Umkehr* and "true politics": the latter can only be a "profane politics," a politics, that is, that breaks with the religious logic *tout court*, and with the capitalist logic of guilt/debt in particular. Moreover, the order of the profane, the fragment continues, "should be erected on the idea of happiness" and stands thus in complete opposition to the capitalist cult, the movement of which is instead directed to "the point where the universe has been taken over by […] despair" [*Weltzustand der Verzweiflung*] (*GS* VI:101/*SW* 1:289). This profane politics remains however in relation with theology (that is also why it is called "profane")—indeed, as Andrew Benjamin argues (2013, 150 and passim), theology (here and elsewhere) should be understood as the cessation of religion, if religion, as in the case of capitalism, is inevitably marked by fate and guilt. The philosophy of history that supports this idea of politics is a messianic philosophy. "The profane order of the profane," Benjamin writes, is not a category of the messianic kingdom but remains in any case a "decisive category of its most unobtrusive approach": "For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in happiness is its downfall destined to find it." In other words, if the order of the profane cannot in itself establish a relation to the messianic, it nonetheless contributes to the coming of the messianic kingdom precisely in being secular and profane. The happiness upon which the order of the profane is erected is the "rhythm of messianic nature," that is, happiness allows for the fulfillment of historical time, since the messianic kingdom "is not the goal [*Ziel*] but the terminus [*Ende*]" of history. The task of world politics is to strive for a total, messianic passing into the *saeculum*, and its method, Benjamin concludes, must be called nihilism (*GS* II/1:203-4/*SW* 3:305-6).

A modern interpretation can be brought together with this reading of the *Umkehr* as "profane politics": Giorgio Agamben placed "Capitalism as Religion" as the center of one of his writings, "In Praise of Profanation," which, with no explicit reference to the "Theological-Political Fragment," names "profanation" the "political task of the coming generation" (2007, 92). Unlike secularization (the process described by Max Weber that led to the birth of capitalism, or that of Carl Schmitt's political theology, which deduces sovereignty from divine omnipotence), profanation, Agamben writes, is not limited to displacing a religious concept into a secular one, leaving its forces untouched, but it rather "neutralizes" what it profanes,

deactivating and returning it thereby to what he defines a new "use," which does not coincide with, but is in fact opposed to, the "consumption" ruling our societies (cf. Agamben 2007, 77). We cannot further secularize the capitalist religion, since it is already the result of a secularization, it is already *the* secular religion. The "true" politics as profane politics, instead, will have to deactivate the sacredness of this secular religion in order to return to the common use the world that this latter has seized.[23]

5. The Actuality of the Critique of Capitalism

The messianism permeating Benjamin's philosophy of history and thus also his politics is the part today less "digestible" of his critique of capitalism. Precisely in reference to "Capitalism as Religion," for example, Norbert Bolz (2003, 203ff) argues that Benjamin's description and diagnostic present no doubt great potential, but that the philosophical context to which they belong and above all the political-theological inspiration permeating them are "outdated." And in the introduction to a recent Italian collection of Benjamin's "political writings" (which includes "Capitalism as Religion"), Gabriele Pedullà (2011, 33-34), even if in the context of a necessary call to "re-politicize Benjamin," exhorts to make him, through criticism, "actual again: even at the cost of discovering that, beyond the lesser or greater success of some formulas […], a great part of his operative hypotheses are today useless." After all, as it is often pointed out (e.g. Bolz 2003; Priddat 2003, 209), the capitalism Benjamin described in 1921 is very different from our "late" capitalism, and his elegant but obscure and also somewhat vacuous formulas today are of little "use." This suspicion of "outdatedness" has accompanied the reception of Benjamin's work at least since the 1970s, that is, since the famous address delivered by Habermas (1979, originally published in 1972) for the eightieth anniversary of Benjamin's birth, the subtitle of which was precisely "The Contemporaneity [*Zur Aktualität*] of Walter Benjamin." Twenty years later, on the occasion of Benjamin's hundredth anniversary, Irving Wohlfarth (1993) somehow rehearsed Habermas' point in further calling to "re-actualize" Benjamin. It is precisely from these numerous efforts to demonstrate or discuss "the actuality of Walter Benjamin"—a nice title for conferences and volumes—that a shadow emerges,

[23] Benjamin's fragment is used as a springboard for another text by Agamben, also titled "Capitalism as Religion" (2019, 66-78). On Agamben's readings of the fragment, see e.g. Racy (2013), Pellizoni (2017). Daniel Bensaïd, a keen and profound reader of Benjamin, also uses the phrase "profane politics" as *fil rouge* (and title) in one of his books (2008) on the present political predicament.

demonstrating, with its insistence and recurrence, a fundamental uncertainty and even embarrassment.

Sure, Benjamin Studies have become by now a true industry, and "Capitalism as Religion" in particular has experiences in the past few years a renewed critical reception.[24] And yet, even those who find in it, like Burkhardt Lindner (2003, 214), "a fruitful and actualizable [*aktualisierungsfähig*] heuristic hypothesis" or, like Michael Löwy (2009, 60), consider that "[i]ts relevance for the present state of the world is arresting," risk, like Habermas, Wohlfarth and Pedullà, to conflate and confound "actuality" and "usefulness." This confusion is fully part of the logic of that "utilitarianism" that, for Benjamin, precisely in the capitalist cult receives its religious, sacred connotation and from which today not even literary or philosophical critique manages to escape. It is not here that the actuality of Benjamin and of "Capitalism as Religion" must be sought.

We must here recall the central tenet guiding all the readings of this volume. In the 1930s Benjamin developed a method for his unfinished work on the "prehistory of late modernity," the so-called *Arcades Project*. This method, which can be derived mostly from the fragmentary notes of convolute N, is based precisely on the concept of *actuality*, which for Benjamin has however a very particular meaning. The images upon which the research of the historian is founded, Benjamin writes, are characterized by a "historical index," which means that they come to "legibility" (*Lesbarkeit*) only at a given historical moment; their "recognizability" (*Erkennbarkeit*) is part of a temporal constellation, whereby the past undergoes a sort of "*teléscopage*" through the present and is therefore made "actual" (N3,1; N7a,3). To examine Benjamin's "actuality" means to adopt this method with respect to his own writings, it means to read him the way he wanted to read history, it means to adopt his hermeneutic "politics" towards his own texts. Certainly our capitalism is not exactly what Benjamin had before his eyes, and no doubt his thought does not entirely fit within the logic and the horizon of our time, and this is what

[24] Beside many articles and essays over the years, at least three entire volumes have been devoted to interpretations of the fragment: one in German edited by Dirk Baecker in 2003, one in Italian edited by Dario Gentili, Mauro Ponzi and Elettra Stimilli in 2014, and a third in German, edited again by Ponzi, Gentili and Stimilli plus Sarah Scheibenberger, which translates most of the 2014 Italian chapters adding new (or reprinted) interpretations, such as those by Uwe Steiner, Bernd Witte, Samuel Weber and Vittoria Borsò. But Benjamin's fragment was also a central reference for many discussions, especially in Germany, about neoliberalism and the recent economic crises (cf. e.g. Jongen 2007; Macho 2014; Sloterdijk and Macho 2014).

one can call his "outdatedness" and that of "Capitalism as Religion." But it is precisely this mis-fitting, this cultural and temporal *décalage*, that allows for his time and ours to form a "constellation" that enables his fragment to break the continuum of the horizon of our time and to open up a way for thought. Benjamin's fragment, precisely thanks to this *décalage*, has come today to its moment of legibility, and it is the task of our reading, of our act of interpretation, to "recognize" and "actualize" it: this is what it means being able to *think*, today, for our time, the necessity of the *Umkehr*.

Unlike in 1921, today there are no historical alternatives to capitalism. Since the disintegration of the socialist block and the transformation of the Chinese model into state capitalism, capitalism, as Franchini (in Jorgen and Franchini, 10-11) writes, is by now our "unquestionable, ultimate, closed, insurmountable horizon, transcending the real, since it is impossible to transcend even only in thought: vital homogenous *humus*, *milieu* without alterity, dominant order of the discourse, only remaining utopia that feeds on itself, exclusive object of veneration." It is our religion because in it our society "believes" (in the religious sense of the term), "believes that it is its own destiny. And believes that it is the only chance to shape and mold one's own destiny" (Baeker 2003, 7). The capitalist "cult" informs today every aspect of individual, social and political life; its rites, its sacred pomp, its idols (publicity, fashion, marketing, consumption) are the only promise of salvation that our society knows, a promise that only leads to an infinite and unavoidable frustration, and is therefore but desperation. The utilitarian dogma of a fully naturalized economy imposes itself in every field of production, of life, of knowledge. Moreover, the logic of the debt, by now untrammeled by the class connotations that it still presented in the twentieth century, has become *the* logic supporting and ruling the existence not only of individuals, families, entire social classes, but also of every economic and industrial organization, of sovereign States and supranational organizations, which, under the yoke of debt, default. The permanent crisis of the last years is a crisis of continuous and unquenchable indebtedness, but also a crisis of the ethical and moral categories that sees the former contamination between ethics and law be replaced by that between ethics and economy. Debt as guilt not only erases all political aspiration to "happiness," but in its unquenchability abolishes every future in which debt and guilt could be settled. As it has been often repeated, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (e.g. Jameson 1994, xii; Žižek 1994, 1; Fisher 2009, 2).

Today capitalism appears as unprofanable. The idea of an *Umkehr*, that is, of the ability to *think* a way out from the religious logic and horizon which determine us, of the ability to *think* a profane politics capable of profaning the capitalist religion, is, not the actual, but the absolutely necessary task of our time.

PART II

THE ACTUALITY OF THE CRITIQUE OF EXPERIENCE

CHAPTER FOUR

BOREDOM, THE ATROPHY OF EXPERIENCE

The past few decades have witnessed a new academic interest in a subject that until recently had been deemed unworthy of analysis: boredom. If melancholy and even *ennui* have traditionally enjoyed popularity among artists, intellectuals and academics, the more "democratic" and less dignified boredom was usually neglected, but in recent scholarship has become topical. Benjamin devoted a whole section of the *Arcades Project*—Convolute "D"—to the problem of boredom. He thus recognized that boredom is a fundamental component of modern life and of its phantasmagoria and planned to include its analysis in his work on the prehistory of modernity. However, this chapter of his work was never written and a systematic and coherent approach to boredom is thus absent from his corpus. Rather, in his work the analysis and uses of boredom are extremely inconsistent.

In his writings of the 1920s and 1930s Benjamin utilized a number of terms almost as synonyms—*Langeweile*, *ennui*, *taedium vitae*—often in connection to Baudelairean *spleen* and melancholy, often also contradictorily. He also used the term *acedia*, albeit very rarely and not in relation to boredom. As the recent literature on boredom explains, these terms are all connected, though took different connotations in the evolution of the concept: if the roots are in medieval *acedia*—almost equated with *melancholia* in the Renaissance—*ennui*, *Langeweile* and *boredom* took a very specific connotation after the industrial revolution.[1]

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[1] Academic interest in boredom has grown in the past forty years or so. If Reinhard Kuhn (1976) was a sort of initiator, his work failed to identify the change that modernity imposed on the concept of boredom, and the terminological differences that characterize the historical and national developments. The first part of Agamben's *Stanzas* (1993a, 3-30), originally published in 1977, also focuses on boredom, melancholy and cognate phenomena, without paying much attention to nuances and differences. More recent works tend rather to emphasize these differences. Cf. for example Healy (1984), Klapp (1986), Schwarz (1993), Meyer Spacks (1995), Raposa (1999), Krasko (2004), Svendsen (2005), Toohey (2011); the most thorough philosophical investigation to date is Goodstein (2005). The

These terms have been used in different ways and with different connotations in different contexts, and cannot be said simply to coincide. They certainly present national, cultural, social, and historical particularities that cannot be reduced to a unity. However, their relation can be taken as constitutive of a "discourse," what Elizabeth Goodstein (2005, 3n2) calls the "discourse on boredom." This discourse is related by Goodstein to the modern concept of experience: she thus defines modern boredom, with a Musilian wink, as "experience without qualities."

Though Benjamin never gave a clear definition of boredom and did not explicitly relate it to his analysis of experience, in his work the connection is evident. In this chapter I will thus construe an analysis of Benjamin's boredom through his concept of experience. I will highlight the distinction between pre-modern and modern boredom, and then connect the few notes on boredom to be found in Benjamin's writings to his analysis of modernity. The goal is not to find a monolithic and coherent definition of boredom, but rather to explore a discourse.

1. Erfahrung and Erlebnis

"Why is storytelling on the decline?," Benjamin asks in a short piece published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in November 1932 and titled "The Handkerchief." "This is a question I often asked myself when I sat with other guests around a table for an entire evening feeling bored." The answer is, he argues, that "people who are not bored cannot tell stories. *But there is no longer any place for boredom in our lives*" (*Die Langeweile aber hat in unserem Tun keine Stelle mehr*). Boredom is here associated with those pre-modern activities—"weave and spin, tinker and scrape"—which were "covertly and inwardly bound up with it" and are progressively disappearing from modern life. The decline of storytelling depends on the fact that the traditional rhythms of pre-modern life, with their relaxed and ancestral repetition, and which were accompanied by stories, are dying out. "If stories are to thrive," Benjamin concludes, "there must be work, order, and subordination" (*GS* IV/2:741/*SW* 2:658, emphasis added).

The same point is made four year later in "The Storyteller": "storytelling," Benjamin writes, "is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained." Stories are retained

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analysis of the differences between *taedium vitae*, *acedia*, *ennui*, *Langeweile*, *spleen*, and boredom goes beyond the scope of this chapter; however, these differences will be briefly and partially explored in the course of the analysis.

when they are integrated in the listener's own experience, which will lead him or her to repeat them one day. The process of assimilation requires "a state of relaxation" (*Entspannung*): "boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation," he states; "boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience" (*Erfahrung*) and this state is becoming "rarer and rarer." The activities intimately associated with this kind of boredom—"weaving and spinning"[2]—are already extinct in the city and are progressively disappearing from the traditional community. This means that, without boredom, "the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears."[3] "Wisdom," the "intelligence coming from afar" transmitted through storytelling, is dying out in modern life: the new form of communication is "information," which supplies "a handle for what is nearest" in space and time, and "lays claim to prompt verifiability" (*GS* II/2:446-47, 442-44/*SW* 3:149, 146-47). The boredom associated to the repetitive rhythms of the traditional world plays no role in this new experience: the state of mind of the newspaper reader is certainly not "mental relaxation," but rather "impatience" (*Ungeduld*) (*GS* II/2:628/*SW* 2:741).

The operative term in this passage from "The Storyteller" is *experience*. The essay is construed on the contraposition between modern and pre-modern experience, which is a key topic in Benjamin's work, though a problematic one. From his early writings for the student journal

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[2] Benjamin continues: "The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply what he listens to is impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is unravelling on every side after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship" (*GS* II/2:447/*SW* 3:149).

[3] Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995, 261) misinterprets this passage: she reads Benjamin as one of the "enthusiasts of boredom," who "find the state desirable for the lack of desire and—at least in fantasy—of tension it embodies. […] Such imagined boredom may imply a kind of suspended attention comparable to that of a listening psychoanalyst. It 'hatches the egg of experience' by allowing the semiconscious brooding that integrates and interprets past happenings. Avoiding distraction, it makes space for creativity. In Benjamin's view, it constitutes creativity's necessary precondition." What Meyer Spacks fails to notice is that Benjamin is here talking about a pre-modern experience and not that modern boredom, "the resentment-loaded endurance […], the tedium of required activity, of compulsory contact, of repetitive demand" which "generate the tension we associate with boredom in the negative construction of the condition, leaving no room for creativity." Benjamin's analysis of modern boredom will be different.

Der Anfang through to the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin developed a critique of experience which underlies his critique of modernity. However, this critique is locked into the antinomy between the yearning for a lost authenticity and the celebration of new revolutionary possibilities. In "The Storyteller," the Berlin *memoires* and the writings on Kafka, Proust and Baudelaire (especially "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 1939), Benjamin mourns the demise of the old concept of experience; in essays such as "Surrealism" (1929), "The Destructive Character" (1931), "Experience and Poverty" (1933) and the Artwork essay (1936), he celebrates instead the dawn of a new era. The question of boredom is interlocked with that of experience, which will thus constitute the *fil rouge* of the present analysis. In broad lines, the issue can be defined as follow: in pre-modern times, experience presented a connectedness and durability which implied a relation to memory and community. The term used by Benjamin to designate this experience is *Erfahrung*, which etymologically refers to the verb *fahren* (to go by a vehicle) and is related to *Gefahr* (danger), and is thus something learned from life and travels over an extended period of time and that can be narrated; it gives experience a sense of mobility, temporal continuity, repetition, habit and return, and at the same time also a sense of risk for the experiencing subject. Modern experience, for which Benjamin uses the term *Erlebnis* (a term introduced into the philosophical vocabulary by Dilthey and later adopted by Husserl), is instead broken, momentary, immediate, limited and disconnected from a wider context, from memory and community. Etymologically *Erlebnis* refers to the verb *leben* (to live), and hints thus as something "lived," sometimes with temporal and spatial limitations—"a single, noteworthy experience," explain the translators of the *Selected Writings* (*SW* 2:267n9).[4] Benjamin will always lend *Erlebnis* the negative sense of "impoverished experience" and will pursue the project of establishing or inventing a new type of *Erfahrung* for late-capitalist humanity. The argument of "The Storyteller" rests on this contraposition: the frenzy of modern existence has disrupted the millenarian rhythms of life and their monotonous (but relaxed) repetition, thus eliminating the conditions of possibility for storytelling.

[4] The connotation of *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* is not constant in Benjamin's writings and varies with the years and the contexts: *Erlebnis* presents usually a negative connotation, with a vitalistic and irrationalistic emphasis (in a polemic contraposition to the theories of Dilthey, Klages and Jung); *Erfahrung* in the early writings refers (with a negative connotation) to the Kantian and neo-Kantian science-based experience, but in the later works it designates a more authentic concept of experience (cf. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"). A thorough exposition of this concept can be found in Thomas Weber (2000).

By relating here boredom to *Erfahrung*, Benjamin is establishing a temporality of experience based on repetition and continuity. This connection is called "habit" (*Gewohnheit*).

The discussion of "habit" is fundamental both for the definition of experience and the question of boredom. It can be introduced by the analysis of "play." In "Toys and Play" (1928), Benjamin relates children play to the "basic rhythms" of life, the rhythms "in which we first gain possession of ourselves" and which are based on the "law of repetition." By repeating the same experience over and over again, the child learns how to "master frightening fundamental experiences": whereas the adult turns to storytelling as a way to relieve "his heart from its terrors" and to double happiness, "a child creates the entire event anew and starts again right from the beginning." The essence of play is thus the "transformation of a shattering experience into habit" and as such is the "mother of every habit" (*Wehmutter jeder Gewohnheit*) (*GS* III/1:131/*SW* 2:120).[5] Repetition in habit creates a web of connections which relates the child and the adult to their environment and to history. Therefore, Benjamin can write in the *Arcades Project* that "habits are the armature of connected experiences [*Erfahrungen*]. This armature is assailed by individual experiences [*Erlebnissen*]" (m4,5). This does not mean that there are no longer habits once *Erlebnis* has substituted *Erfahrung*: "even the distracted person can form habits," Benjamin writes in the Artwork essay; "what is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction first proves that their performance has become habitual" (*GS* VII/1:381/*SW* 3:120).[6] However, these new habits fail to build up an "armature," a structure that connects

[5] The passage continues: "Eating, sleeping, getting dressed, washing have to be instilled into the struggling little brat in a playful way, following the rhythm of nursery rhymes. Habit enters life as a game, and in habit, even in its most sclerotic forms, an element of play survives to the end. Habits are the forms of our first happiness and our first horror that have congealed and become deformed to the point of being unrecognizable" (*GS* III/1:131/*SW* 2:120).

[6] The whole passage reads: "Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. *For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit.* Even the distracted person can form habits. What is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction first proves that their performance has become habitual" (*GS* VII/1:381/*SW* 3:120, emphasis in the original).

experience to memory and community. Consequently, they fail to provide that mental relaxation which Benjamin defines in "The Storyteller" as boredom.

By arguing that "there is no longer any place for boredom in our lives," Benjamin is investing boredom with the positive aura of *Erfahrung*. However, this operation contrasts with the place he gives boredom in his analysis of the prehistory of modernity, especially in the *Arcades Project*. The same ambiguity also connotes his uses of "habit" and "repetition." The question of boredom needs thus to be explored through a redefinition of the vocabulary of modernity.

2. The Time of the Machine

1839 "*La France s'ennuie*"
Lamartine (D4a,3)

"The Storyteller" was published in *Orient und Occident* in October 1936. In the same years, Benjamin was writing that "boredom began to be experienced in epidemic proportions during the 1840s" (D3a,4). In the notes for the *Arcades Project* and the Baudelaire book, boredom is not related to *Erfahrung*, but rather to *Erlebnis*: it is the "malady" (*Leiden*) (D3a,4) that accompanies the disintegration of the traditional forms of experience.[7] Its temporality, as well as its relation to repetition and habit, must thus be redefined.

Benjamin's generation was strongly influenced by the analysis of metropolitan life made by Georg Simmel. "The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality," Simmel wrote in "The Metropolis and Mental Life," "consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" (1950, 409-10, emphasis in the original). The metropolis creates a psychological condition structured by the superabundance of sounds and images, the discontinuity in their reception and the unexpectedness of sudden impressions. The metropolitan man must develop a protection

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[7] "Lamartine is said to be the first to have given expression to the malady. It plays a role in a little story about the famous comic Deburau. A distinguished Paris neurologist was consulted one day by a patient whom he had not seen before. The patient complained of the typical illness of the times—weariness with life, deep depressions, boredom. 'There's nothing wrong with you,' said the doctor after a thorough examination. 'Just try to relax—find something to entertain you. Go see Deburau some evening, and life will look different to you.' 'Ah, dear sir,' answered the patient, 'I *am* Deburau'" (D3a,4).

against the psychological threats that this situation generates. Simmel calls this protection the "blasé attitude":

> [It] results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves. […] A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all. In the same way, through the rapidity and contradictoriness of their changes, more harmless impressions force such violent responses, tearing the nerves so brutally hither and thither that their last reserves of strength are spent; and if one remains in the same milieu they have no time to gather new strength. An incapacity thus emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy. This constitutes the blasé attitude. (1950, 414)

Consequently, the meaning and differing values of things are "experienced as insubstantial": to the blasé person everything appears "in an evenly flat and grey tone" (1950, 414). This greyness is the color of boredom, the unbearable uniformity that Benjamin will find in rain, fog, dust. The same defensive strategy is identified by Freud, wo in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* wrote:

> *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli. The protective shield is supplied with its own store of energy and must above all endeavour to preserve the special modes of transformation of energy operating in it against the effects threatened by the enormous energies at work in the external world—effects which tend towards a levelling out of them and hence towards destruction. (1955, 27; emphases in the original)

Benjamin quotes this passage in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" as a way of describing *Erlebnis* and its effects, especially *shock*. Shock is in fact the threat of the "enormous energies at work in the external world" and is what mainly characterizes *Erlebnis*; Freud describes it as a "breach in the shield against stimuli" (1955, 31). This overstimulation and the consequent defensive strategy of the conscience produce what Benjamin calls the "atrophy of experience" (*die Verkümmerung der Erfahrung*) (*GS* I/2:611/*SW* 4:316-17). It is this atrophy that destroyed that kind of boredom as mental relaxation which was a product of the pre-modern rhythms of life, but at the same time also produced a new form of boredom.[8]

[8] Benjamin writes in *A Berlin Chronicle*: "what kind of regimen cities keep over imagination, and why the city—where people make the most ruthless demands on

Overstimulation is only one among many factors which contribute to this new boredom. Repetition is another. Repetition, which in the child's play helps mastering fundamental experiences and construing the armature of *Erfahrung*, becomes in the new rhythms of city life the repetition of the machine. A repetition that still construes habits, but not as the *wieder-tun* of the child's play, a "doing again" which is active creation (*schaffen*) (*GS* III:131-32/*SW* 2:120). Rather, these new habits are a *Wieder-kehr*, a passively suffered *return* of the same as a numbing anesthetic. These new habits are subject to the temporality of the machine. In "Central Park," Benjamin notes that "boredom in the production process arises as the process accelerates (through machinery)" (*GS* I/2:679/*SW* 4:181). In the *Arcades Project* he quotes Engels' *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*:

> The miserable routine of endless drudgery and toil in which the same mechanical process is repeated over and over again is like the labor of Sisyphus. The burden of labor, like the rock, always keeps falling back on the worn-out laborer. (D2a,4)[9]

Unlike in "The Storyteller," here Benjamin recognizes that it is precisely the destruction of the traditional rhythms of life and the frantic, shock-producing acceleration of the production process that cause boredom. It is the meaningless and empty repetition of shocking *Erlebnisse* that numbs the senses into a miserable state of insupportable monotony. The "futility, emptiness" and "inability to complete something," he writes in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," characterize "the activity of a wage slave in a factory": "the hand movement of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding gesture for the very reason that it repeats that gesture exactly." The "shock experience" (*Chockerlebnis*) of the worker at his machine is devoid of any substance, is isolated and disconnected, and as such it is miserable routine and endless drudgery (*GS* I/2:632-33/*SW* 4:329-30).[10]

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one another, where appointments and telephone calls, sessions and visits, flirtations and the struggle for existence grant the individual not a single moment of contemplation—indemnifies itself in memory" (*GS* VI:490/*SW* 2:614).

[9] Benjamin also quotes Schlegel's accusation, in *Lucinde*, against Prometheus who "seduced mankind into working" and, chained to the rock, is a figure for the man chained to the machine, and will have "plenty of opportunity to be bored [*wird noch Langeweile genug haben*], and will never be free of his chains" (J87a,1).

[10] Simmel (1950, 422) also adds: "This discrepancy results essentially from the growing division of labour. For the division of labour demands from the individual an ever more one-sided accomplishment, and the greatest advance in a one-sided

The boredom at the machine is paralleled by the boredom of the bourgeois: "Factory labor," Benjamin argues, is the "economic infrastructure of the ideological boredom of the upper classes" (D2a,4). The mechanical repetition found in labor constitutes the "absolute qualitative invariance" which "generates exchange values" and as such it is the "greyish background against which the gaudy colors of sensation [*Sensation*] stand out" (J92,4). The temporality of the machine constitutes the temporality of modernity, in labor as much as in leisure, and the "gaudy colors" of the upper classes' leisure hours are simply a (futile) attempt to escape the drudgery through *Sensation*. Leisure provides merely an illusion of escape from the monotony of machine time. Moreover, leisure time is informed by the mechanical repetition of machine time, which thus constitutes its "qualitative invariance": leisure time and machine time are qualitatively identical.[11] *Sensation* constitutes appropriately the *raison d'être* of a specific kind of escapist literature, the detective and mystery story, which is precisely a product of the modern atrophy of experience: it provides the leisure classes with a narrative that transforms the city into a place of danger, adventure and heroic deeds, thereby phantasmagorically hiding the dullness of *Erlebnis* and the boredom of urban existence.[12]

A book published in 1903 by Emile Tardieu, *L'Ennui*, tries to justify, and thus epitomizes, this phantasmagoria. It is therefore for Benjamin "a sort of breviary for the twentieth century" (D2,8). Tardieu argues that "life is purposeless and groundless and that all striving after happiness and equanimity is futile" (D2,8): all human activity is shown in the book to be

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pursuit only too frequently means dearth to the personality of the individual. In any case, he can cope less and less with the overgrowth of objective culture. The individual is reduced to a negligible quantity, perhaps less in his consciousness than in his practice and in the totality of his obscure emotional states that are derived from this practice. The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life."

[11] This remark of course constitutes the negative side of the mechanization of modern life not explored in the Artwork essay and is very close to Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of the "Culture Industry" (1973).

[12] Graeme Gilloch (1996, 148) writes: "As an escape from the *ennui* of modern urban existence, the *tedium vitae* produced by the nothing-new of fashion and the faceless uniformity of the metropolitan crowd, the city was transformed by Poe, Dumas and Sue into a place of adventure. It was dressed up as a locus of unspoken dangers, menacing shadows, villainous figures stalking the city's streets and of evil lurking in every dimly lit alley-way." For an analysis of the detective story as phantasmagoria of modern life, cf. Salzani (2007).

a "vain attempt to escape from boredom," but, at the same time, "everything that was, is, and will be appears as the inexhaustible nourishment of that feeling." Far from investigating and explaining the reasons of modern boredom, Tardieu gives free rein to "his own spiritually barren, petty-bourgeois discontent" (D1,5) (Kº,21).[13] Romanticism is possibly to blame for this hypostatization of *ennui*, though Benjamin does not elaborate on this point.[14] What he finds in Tardieu's book, however, is the expression of the profound melancholy that characterizes bourgeois life. The coziness (*Gemütlichkeit*) of the bourgeois *intérieur*, he writes in "Moscow," is paid with melancholy (*GS* IV/1:328/*SW* 2:30). In spite of the intoxicating effects it has on the self-satisfied burgher, comparable to the effects of hashish, at the center of the *intérieur* tower "nothingness," the "petty" and the "banal," and the contentment it gives is "satanic" nihilism (I2,6). This nihilism is the major conveyor of melancholy and boredom and incarcerates its inhabitants—the self-deceived bourgeois, but most of all the child—in the embrace of nothingness. The child is a central figure in the analysis of experience and becomes thus fundamental in the analysis of boredom. In the bourgeois apartment the child is a "prisoner" (*GS* IV/1:287/*SW* 3:404): though it is also a figure of redemption, as it will be

[13] Goodstein (2005, 163-68) analyses in depth Tardieu's book. *L'Ennui*, she writes, "epitomizes the persistence of idealist assumptions within a disenchanted, scientific worldview." Strongly influenced by Schopenhauer, but also indebted to the scientific positivism of the time, it offers a taxonomy of the "innumerable" forms of ennui and sees it as the physiologically inevitable end result of the Enlightenment. It is "a paradigmatic example of the fin-de-siècle discourse on boredom," which, "despite his avowed commitment to the rational, scientific analysis of the phenomenon, […] circles back to a mythical vision of ennui as the thinking man's ailment."

[14] In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin quotes from an article by Roger Caillois: "Romanticism ends in a theory of boredom, the characteristically modern sentiment; that is, it ends in a theory of power, or at least of energy… Romanticism, in effect, marks the recognition by the individual of a bundle of instincts which society has a strong interest in repressing; but, for the most part, it manifests the abdication of the struggle… The Romantic writer…turns toward…a poetry of refuge and escape. The effort of Balzac and of Baudelaire is exactly the reverse of this and tends to integrate into life the postulates which the Romantics were resigned to working with only on the level of art… Their effort is thus linked to the myth according to which imagination plays an ever-increasing role in life" (D4a,2). Some recent literature on boredom tends to "blame" Romanticism for the modern "epidemic" of boredom: for Svendsen (2005, 25ff.), for example, it is only with Romanticisms that "the demand arises for life to be interesting, with the general claim that the self must realize itself," but as the traditional sources of meaning withdraw, life becomes boring. Cf. also Goodstein (2005, 107-140).

shown in the last section (and in the next chapter), its fundamental experience in the *intérieur* and in the city are loneliness and boredom. The *promesse de bonheur* that the modern metropolis puts forward, the excitement and adventure it promises, is broken at the end of the day: "the city promised me something new each day and by evening it was left wanting" (*GS* IV/I:291/*SW* 3:378, translation modified).[15] This melancholy has transformed the dream of the collective: "The dream has grown grey," Benjamin writes in "Dream Kitsch." "The grey coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality." Kitsch, as "the side worn through by habit and patched with cheap maxims" (*GS* II/2:620/*SW* 2:3), is its mark.

Modern life as *Erlebnis*, be it in the factory, among the city crowd or in the bourgeois *intérieur*, cannot escape boredom.

3. The Eternal Return of the Same

Erlebnis provokes a transformation in the sense of time, and thus in the temporality of modernity. This constitutes its fundamental connection with boredom. As the etymology of the German term *Lange-weile* implies, in boredom time slows down, "stagnates": "When yawning," Benjamin writes in "Central Park," "the human being himself opens like an abyss. He makes himself resemble the time stagnating around him" (*Er macht sich der langen Weile ähnlich, die ihn umgibt*) (*GS* I/2:682/*SW* 4:184). This stagnation is what causes the melancholy of the modern subject, epitomized by Baudelaire's *spleen*. In spleen, Benjamin writes in "On Some Motifs on Baudelaire," "time is *reified* [*verdinglicht*]: the minutes cover a man like snowflakes. This time is historyless [*geschichtlos*], like that of the *mémoire involontaire*. But in spleen the perception of time is supernaturally keen. Every second finds consciousness ready to intercept its shock." In the single and disconnected shocks of *Erlebnis*, the individual "loses his capacity for experiencing" and thus "feels as though he has been dropped from the calendar. The big-city dweller knows this feeling on Sundays" (*GS* I/2:642-43/*SW* 4:335-36). The eternal Sunday of *Erlebnis* excludes history, tradition, memory, and thus also any sense of *future*[16]: it entails a lack of memory and simultaneously a lack of

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[15] The child's melancholy is the melancholy of the city dweller, as Benjamin writes in "Marseille": "childhood is the divining rod of melancholy, and to know the mourning of such radiant, glorious cities one must have been a child in them" (*GS* IV/1:362/*SW* 2:234).

[16] Joe Moran (2003, 169) writes: "the capacity to assimilate, recollect and communicate experience to others is replaced by the sense of life as a series of

consequences (*Folgenlosigkeit*) (O12a,1). What is lost is thus the historical "force field" (*Kraftfeld*) which characterizes *Erfahrung* (m1a,4).[17] Outside the force field of history, time is merely repetition, the dull and meaningless recurrence of shock-moments without any connection, scope or aim. It is the eternal return of the same.[18] This is the necessary connection that Benjamin establishes in Convolute "D" between boredom and eternal return.[19]

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disconnected impressions with no common associations. The man who is denied the potential for *Erfahrung* is a hostage to boredom."

[17] The whole passage reads: "In place of the force field that is lost to humanity with the devaluation of experience, a new field of force opens up in the form of planning. The mass of unknown uniformities is mobilized against the confirmed multiplicity of the traditional. To 'plan' is henceforth possible only on a large scale. No longer on an individual scale—and this means neither *for* the individual nor *by* the individual" (m1a,4).

[18] The deformation of time and place experienced by the hashish eater presents similarities with *Erlebnis*, which can thus also be classified as a state of intoxication. Compare these passages: "The objects are only mannequins; even the great moments of world history are merely costumes beneath which they exchange understanding looks with nothingness, the base, and the commonplace. They reply to the ambiguous wink from Nirvana"; "The first serious sign of damage is probably the inability to deal with future time. When you look into this more closely, you realize how astonishing it is that we can exercise control over the night, or even individual nights—that is to say, over our usual dreams. It is very hard to control the dreams (or the trance) resulting from hashish" ("Main Features of My Second Impression of Hashish," *GS* VI:560-61, 563/*SW* 2:85-86, 87). "Now the hashish eater's demands on time and space come into force. As is known, these are absolutely regal. Versailles, for one who has taken hashish, is not too large, or eternity too long. Against the background of these immense dimensions of inner experience, of absolute duration and immeasurable space, a wonderful, beatific humor dwells all the more fondly on the contingencies of time and space" ("Hashish in Marseille," *GS* IV/1:410/*SW* 2:674). "Prostitution of space in hashish, where it serves all that has been (spleen)" ("Central Park" *GS* I/2:661/*SW* 4:165).

[19] *Erlebnis* and eternal return transform radically the concept of habit: "The idea of eternal recurrence transforms the historical event itself into a mass-produced article. But this conception also displays, in another respect—on its obverse side, one could say—a trace of the economic circumstances to which it owes its sudden topicality. This was manifest at the moment the security of the conditions of life was considerably diminished through an accelerated succession of crises. The idea of *eternal* recurrence derived its lustre from the fact that it was no longer possible, in all circumstances, to expect a recurrence of conditions across any interval of time shorter than that provided by eternity. The quotidian constellations very gradually began to be less quotidian. Very gradually their recurrence became a little less frequent, and there could arise, in consequence, the obscure presentiment

The melancholic temporality of eternal recurrence is paradoxically given by the "new": "Monotony feeds on the new," Benjamin quotes from Jean Vaudal (D5,6).[20] Eternal recurrence and the new constitute the dialectic of commodity production: the novelty of products constitutes the stimulus to demand, but at the same time mass production is "the eternal return of the same" (*Immerwiedergleiche*) (J56a,10). "What is 'always the same thing' [*immer wieder dasselbe*]," reads an early note, "is not the event but the newness of the event, the *shock* with which it eventuates" (Qº,23, emphasis added). Shock is the mark of *Erlebnis*: an experience disconnected from memory and history, *Erlebnis* is always new, but at the same time is always the same shock, and this shock of the new is fed by the "fata-morgana" logic of commodity production (D2a,8). The frenzy of novelty is *Schein*, deceptive semblance, and spells the fact that "there is nothing really new" (D5a,5). This *Schein*, Benjamin proposes in the 1935 exposé, is the key element to interpret modernity: "This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent. […] Just as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty" (*GS* V/1:55-56/*SW* 3:40-41).

"Fashion is the eternal recurrence of the new" (*die ewige Wiederkehr des Neuen*) (*GS* I/2:677/*SW* 4:179) and is thus a key topic in the analysis of modernity. The first epigraph for the Convolute dedicated to fashion, Convolute "B," is a line from Leopardi's "Dialogue between Fashion and Death": "Fashion: Madam Death! Madame Death!" The first entry is significantly a commentary on this epigraph, which relates fashion and boredom: "And boredom is the grating [*Gitterwerk*] before which the courtesan teases death. [Ennui]" (B1,1) (Fº,11). The deceptive teasing of death through the cult of novelty constitutes also the "tempo of news reporting" (B2,4) and is the powerful drug that intoxicates the dreaming collective.[21] The new, Benjamin quotes from Paul Valéry, is "one of those

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that henceforth one must rest content with cosmic constellations. Habit, in short, made ready to surrender some of its prerogatives. Nietzsche says, 'I love short-lived habits,' and Baudelaire already, throughout his life, was incapable of developing regular habits. Habits are the armature of long experience [*Erfahrung*], whereas they are decomposed by individual experiences [*Erlebnisse*]" (J62a,2).

[20] This is the reason for the importance of Baudelaire poetry: "Baudelaire's poetry reveals the new in the ever-selfsame, and the ever-selfsame in the new" ("Central Park," *GS* I/2:650/*SW* 4:175).

[21] "The dreaming collective knows no history," reads a very important entry in Convolute "S." "Events pass before it as always identical and always new. The sensation of the newest and most modern is, in fact, just as much a dream

poisonous stimulants" to which the modern subject becomes addicted "until they are fatal. […] It is a curious habit—growing thus attached to that perishable part of things in which precisely their novelty consists" (S10,6). But the only radical novelty—"and always the same one"—in a time dominated by the eternal recurrence of *Erlebnis*, is precisely death (*GS* I/2:668/*SW* 4:171). The second epigraph for Convolute "B" is a quotation from Balzac: "*Rien ne meurt, tout se transforme*." This epigraph unfolds for Benjamin "*the temporality of hell*": modernity in news reporting and fashion mocks death, but in so doing it flees history (B2,4).

The modern is "the new in the context of what has always already been there [*immer schon Dagewesen*]. The always new, always identical" (S1,4). As such, modernity is "the time of hell." The famous quotation from the *Arcades Project* reads:

> The punishments of hell are always the newest thing going in this domain. What is at issue is not that "the same thing happens over and over," and even less would it be a question here of eternal return. It is rather that precisely in that which is newest the face of the world never alters, that this newest remains, in every respect, the same.—This constitutes the eternity of hell. To determine the totality of traits by which the "modern" is defined would be to represent hell. (S1,5)[22]

In the time of hell, the new is always "the eternally selfsame" (S2a,3), and this constitutes the notion of history as "catastrophe": when the historical event, through the idea of eternal recurrence, is transformed into a "mass-produced article," then the notion of historical progress is reduced to obtuse repetition. "That things are 'status quo' *is* the catastrophe" (*GS* I/2:663, 683/*SW* 4:166, 184). The temporality of hell as eternal recurrence constitutes the mythic character of modernity: if "the essence of mythic happenings is recurrence" (*GS* I/3:1234/*SW* 4:404),[23] then "'eternal return'

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formation of events as 'the eternal return of the same.' The perception of space that corresponds to this perception of time is the interpenetrating and superposed transparency of the world of the flâneur. This feeling of space, this feeling of time, presided at the birth of modern feuilletonism [Dream Collective]" (S2,1).

[22] As Susan Buck-Morss (1989, 96) noted, the notion of modernity as the time of hell provides a counterimage to the myths of progress—the Golden Age—which intoxicated the nineteenth century. A note to the 1935 exposé reads: "Hell—Golden Age. Keywords for Hell: Boredom, Gambling, Pauperism. A canon of this dialectic: Fashion. The Golden Age as catastrophe" (*GS* V/2:1213).

[23] "The essence of the mythical event is return. […] (The hell of eternal damnation has perhaps impugned the ancient idea of eternal recurrence at its most formidable point, substituting an eternity of torments for the eternity of a cycle.)" (D10a,4).

is the *fundamental* form of the *urgeschichtlichen*, mythic consciousness. (Mythic because it does not reflect.)" (D10,3). Eternal recurrence constrains life within a magic circle and thus confines life and history to the auratic (D10a,1), to the experience of spleen Benjamin finds in the works of Blanqui and Baudelaire.[24] This also constitutes a critique of Nietzsche: the myth of progress cannot simply be replaced by an equally mythical notion of eternal recurrence, which constitutes the hellish repetition of the new in commodity society.

Erlebnis as the temporality of hell is epitomized by the figure of the gambler. Games of chance represent an escape route for the modern individual, constrained by the increased pressure of administrative norms and by the burden of having to wait (D10a,2).[25] In "Central Park" Benjamin notes: "Games of chance, flânerie, collecting—activities pitted against spleen" (*GS* I/2:668/*SW* 4:171). However, this momentary alleviation of boredom is deceptive: the temporality of gaming is in itself splenetic, gambling converts time "into a narcotic" (*GS* V/1:57/*SW* 3:42), and thus this temporality is "infernal."[26] In "On some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Erlebnis* is epitomized both by the temporality of factory labor and by the temporality of gambling: both activities are futile, empty, and in themselves do not lead to any completion:

> The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called *coup* in a game of chance. The hand movement of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding gesture for the very reason that it repeats that gesture exactly. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coup* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a

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[24] "The formula of *L'Eternité par les astres*—'The new is always old, and the old is always new'—corresponds most rigorously to the experience of spleen registered by Baudelaire" (J76,2); "The consciousness of someone prone to spleen furnishes a miniature model of the world spirit to which the idea of eternal recurrence would have to be ascribed" (S8a,4).

[25] "Why do anxious people have an irresistible tendency toward games of chance? Perhaps because their policy is to bury their heads in the sand, or because they are able to endure the prospect of the future only if it is grotesquely disguised" ("In Parallel with My Actual Diary," *GS* VI:191/*SW* 2:414).

[26] "The infernal time of gaming is something Baudelaire got to know less through the actual practice of gambling than through those seasons when he was prey to spleen" (J88a,3); "In the sixteenth section of Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris*, 'L'Horologe', we come upon a conception of time which can be compared to that of the gambler" (O9,7).

> counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. Both types of work are equally devoid of substance. (*GS* I/2:633/*SW* 4:330)

The gambler, like the factory worker, "cannot make much use of experience" (*GS* I/2:634/*SW* 4:331); therefore, his or her activity perfectly epitomizes "the lack of consequences that defines the character of *Erlebnis*" (O12a,1).[27]

The same temporality characterizes also the flâneur: his "ostentatious nonchalance" is a protest against the production process which causes boredom (*GS* I/2:679/*SW* 4:181). The arcades and the crowd are his refuge and provide him "with an unfailing remedy for the kind of boredom that easily arises under the baleful eye of a sated reactionary regime" (*GS* I/2:539/*SW* 4:19); they provide the excitement and novelty that (illusorily) break the monotony of the machine time.[28] His resistance to the tempo of the production process is heroic: what Baudelaire called the "heroism of modern life" consists "in the attempt, doomed to failure, to escape the ultimate terror of contemporary existence: namely, boredom" (Gilloch 1996, 151). However, this same heroism, played through pose and amusement, becomes itself tedious: "*Erfahrung*," Benjamin writes, "is the outcome of work; *Erlebnis* is the phantasmagoria of the idler" (m1a,3). The pursuit of excitement that is the goal of the flâneur is the pursuit of *Chockerlebnisse*, of the shock which constitutes *Erlebnis*. This shock is though always the same: excitement from shock is thus a phantasmagorical illusion, because *Erlebnis* can only result in boredom. The modern hero, incapable of escaping boredom, becomes a "profoundly melancholic figure" (Gilloch 1996, 151).[29]

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[27] Joe Moran (2003, 169-70) thus comments this passage: "In reality, of course, this frantic search for instant gratification is still under the spell of the commodity, and the spinning of the roulette wheel, while charged with dramatic possibilities for the gambler, is actually as repetitive and predictable as the movements of the factory worker. […] The leisure classes, though, are unable or unwilling to understand that their idleness is the result of specific historical conditions."

[28] Benjamin quotes from Baudelaire's *L'Art romantique*: "In the essay on Guys, the crowd appears as the supreme remedy for boredom: 'Any man,' he said one day, in the course of one of those conversations which he illumines with burning glance and evocative gesture, 'any man…who can yet be *bored in the heart of the multitude* is a blockhead! A blockhead! And I despise him!'" (D5,3).

[29] The boredom of the flâneur and of the blasé individual presents a peculiar connotation: in English, the French term *ennui* is often retained in order to designate this particular kind of boredom. *Ennui* presents intellectual, artistic, aristocratic, almost glamorous characters, in contrast to the dull boredom of the worker and the low classes. *Ennui*, Meyer Spacks (1995, 12, 27) writes, "belongs

The modern subject, isolated from community and detached from history, has one last resort: “there remains to the isolated subject in the grip of the *taedium vitae* one last thing—and that is empathy [*Einfühlung*]” (m4a,3). In order to while away time, the modern subject frantically seeks enjoyment, but the only enjoyment available in this society is the “empathy with commodities,” the identification with all the pleasures which connote commodity society (cf. “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” *GS* I/2:561/*SW* 4:34). Melancholy thus threatens every form of leisure and idleness (m5,3), and the melancholic subject, oppressed by boredom, is drawn towards the commodity: “Boredom and: the commodity’s wait to be sold” (Oº,45). Empathy with the commodity is thus the end result of the atrophy of experience. This empathy becomes, in the construction of history, empathy and identification with the victor, and, significantly, *acedia* is the motor of splenetic historicism (cf. “On the Concept of History,” *GS* I/2:696/*SW* 4:391).[30]

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to those with a sense of sublime potential, those who feel themselves superior to the environment”; she also blames Kuhn for limiting the focus of his book to ennui, rejecting “as beneath consideration the emotion of the bored housewife.” Cf. also Goodstein (2005, 33-68). An example of this intellectual ennui can be found in Siegfried Kracauer (1995, 331-34): to the “vulgar boredom of daily drudgery” which reduces the individual to be “merely one more object of boredom,” Kracauer counterposes a sort of sophisticated *ennui*, whereby “boredom becomes the only proper occupation” which guarantees that the individual is “so to speak, still in control of one’s own existence.” Embracing this glamorous version of leisure boredom, the “legitimate boredom” of the intellectual, the individual eventually “becomes content to do nothing more than be with oneself” and can even experience “a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly.”

[30] Michael Löwy (2005, 47-48) explains: “The origin of the empathy that identifies with the triumphal procession of the dominators is to be found, according to Benjamin, in *acedia*, a Latin term which denotes indolence of the heart, melancholia. Why? What is the relationship between *acedia* and *Einfühlung*? Thesis VII does not explain this in any way, but we can find the key to the problem in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925): *acedia* is the melancholy sense of the omnipotence of fate which removes all value from human activities. It leads, consequently, to total submission to the existing order of things. As profound, melancholy meditation, it feels attracted by the solemn majesty of the triumphal procession of the powerful. The melancholic, par excellence, dominated by indolence of the heart—*acedia*—is the courtier. Betrayal is his element, because his submission to destiny always makes him join the victor’s camp.” Benjamin uses the term *acedia* very few times: apart from the famous thesis VII of “On the Concept of History,” *acedia* is found in the *Trauerspiel* book to describe the melancholic prince (cf. *GS* I/1:331-33/*OT* 155-56), and in the *Arcades Project* in a quotation from Baudelaire (cf. J35a,8). Benjamin thus connects *acedia* to

4. Ennui, Spleen, Acedia

In Benjamin's "discourse on boredom," Baudelaire's work plays a fundamental role. The emptying out of experience in *Erlebnis* that characterizes modernity is expressed in his poetry as *spleen*. Spleen corresponds to "the utter void of time to which man is surrendered" (J69a,1) and pervades every representation in Baudelaire. It is the principal accent "the modern" takes in his poetry and is usually counterposed to ("it fractures") the *ideal* (*GS* V/1:55/*SW* 3:40). Spleen simultaneously disrupts the sense of history and community that was characteristic of *Erfahrung*, and is a "hollowing out of the inner life" which is caused by "self-estrangement" (J67a,4) (J67a,5). In Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire, spleen is ambiguously related to, and at times confused with, *ennui*: "One of the central motifs of this poetry," Benjamin quotes from François Porché, "is, in effect, boredom in the fog, ennui and indiscriminate haze (fog of the cities). In a word, it is spleen" (D1,4). Benjamin simply follows a fashion in the Baudelairean critique which treats spleen and ennui as synonyms: both are characterized by "dull, glib sadness" (D2,5), "weariness" (*Müdigkeit*) (J82,5) and "naked terror" (*GS* I/2:658/*SW* 4:162).[31]

Spleen and ennui, with their connection to allegory, play a fundamental role in Benjamin's revolutionary project. In Baudelaire, "modernity is always citing primal history" (*GS* V/1:55/*SW* 3:40). This is a central point.

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melancholy and spleen, and not to his analysis of boredom. The literature on boredom concords in considering *acedia* the forerunner of modern boredom, but also highlights their fundamental differences: the former was a moral concept, mostly circumscribed to the cast of monks, whereas the latter is a psychological state, in modernity experienced by everyone. Kierkegaard, in his analysis of boredom, is often dismissed as mixing the two concepts and giving a pre-modern reading of a modern phenomenon (cf. Goodstein 2005, 36). Benjamin transcribes few quotes from *Either/Or* (J62a,3 to J63,6), but does not comment on them.

[31] In the same way that the French word *ennui* was retained in English in order to connote a particular kind of boredom, so the English word *spleen* was introduced into French and made famous by Baudelaire. *Spleen* refers to the predominance in the organism of black bile, the Greek *melan-kole*, which was believed to be the physiological cause of the melancholic character. As Goodstein (2005, 235) writes, Baudelaire used spleen "to link historically distinct rhetorics of reflection on subjective experience—to represent the kaleidoscope in which ancient elements such as melancholy, *taedium vitae*, and acedia are refracted through modern, materialist interpretations of subjective malaise to form modern ennui." Together with *ennui*, *taedium vitae*, *acedia* and melancholy, it belongs to the "discourse on boredom" which was taking shape in the nineteenth century, and provides thus the *trait d'union* between boredom and melancholy for the present analysis.

For Baudelaire, "modernity is nothing other than the 'newest antiquity'," and this because "spleen lays down centuries between the present moment and the one just lived" (J59a,4); "it is spleen that tirelessly generates 'antiquity'" (*GS* I/2:661/*SW* 4:166). Baudelaire's spleen, like Baroque melancholy, is "the feeling that corresponds to catastrophe in permanence" (J66a,4), it is an allegorical mode of vision that makes obsolete every event and situation. As the melancholy allegory constituted the armature of the seventeenth century, so Baudelaire's allegorical mode of vision represents the armature of modernity (J59a,4). Allegory reduces the historical event to ruin, it shows the *facies hippocratica*, the death mask of history as decay, with the corpse as its epitome: "From the perspective of spleen, the buried man is the 'transcendental subject' of historical consciousness" (*GS* I/2:661/*SW* 4:165).[32]

This is the dialectical potential of allegory and thus of spleen: it destroys the *Schein*, the deceptive appearance of organic wholeness, and exposes the naked truth of the demise of experience. In its destructive "rage," in its "profound hatred,"[33] Baudelaire's spleen is "demonic" (*GS* I/2:671/*SW* 4:174), but it is precisely this devilish violence that "exposes the isolated experience [*Erlebnis*] in all its nakedness. To his horror, the melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature. No breath of prehistory surrounds it—no aura" (*GS* I/2:643-44/*SW* 4:336). *Erlebnis* is shown as primal history, that is, as devoid of history, and so are the economic circumstances to which the notion of eternal return owes its topicality (*GS* I/2:663/*SW* 4:166-67). The importance of the return of baroque allegory in Baudelaire is thus that, by melancholically petrifying and disrupting its object—history—it unveils and exposes the *Schein* of modern experience. "Melancholy," Benjamin wrote in the *Trauerspiel* book, "betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them" (*GS* I/1:334/*OT* 157).[34] Likewise, Baudelairean spleen

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[32] "The hopeless decrepitude of the big city is felt particularly keenly in the first stanza of 'Spleen I'" (J69,3); "The awareness of time's empty passage and the *taedium vitae* are the two weights that keep the wheels of melancholy going" (J69,5).

[33] "The rage [*Zorn*] explodes in time to the ticking of the seconds that enslaves the melancholy man" (*GS* I/2:642/*SW* 4:335); "On idleness: 'Imagine a perpetual idleness…with a profound hatred of that idleness.' …letter to his mother of Sat. Dec. 4 1847" (J87,6).

[34] Benjamin recognized the difference between Baroque and Baudelairean allegory: "Melanchthon's phrase 'Melancholia illa heroica' provides the most perfect definition of Baudelaire's genius. But melancholy in the nineteenth century

betrays the *Schein* of modern experience in order to redeem it from its atrophic decay.

Here the connection to the concept of "aura" must be developed. Benjamin writes that "Baudelaire's spleen is the suffering entailed by the decline of the aura" (J64,5), but also that "life within the magic circle of eternal return makes for an existence that never emerges from the auratic" (D10a,1). The contradiction here is due to the ambiguous use of the term "aura." Aura is defined in the Artwork essay as what produces the perception of "distance no matter how close [the object] is" (*GS* VII/1:355/*SW* 3:105). In the context of this essay, aura presents a negative connotation, since it perpetuates the authority of the tradition that hinders popular participation. To this connotation can be related the quotation from Convolute "D": the "magic circle of eternal return" can be read here as the perpetuation of the mythical authority of tradition, which thus is auratic. However, unlike in the Artwork essay, in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" aura has no negative connotation and is described as the association of memory and perception that cluster around an object. Here aura is the gaze that the inanimate or natural objects return to us, which builds a network of connections with the world around us, and thus corresponds to the positive connotation of *Erfahrung*. The modern decline of the aura is compared to the loss of the "ability to look," and in this sense we can read spleen as the suffering arising from the decline of *Erfahrung* (*GS* I/2:644-48/*SW* 4:337-39).[35]

However, in Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire this suffering cannot be related to *acedia*, to a melancholic passiveness which ends up in resignation and political quietism. "Spleen as a bulwark against pessimism" [*Spleen als Staudamm gegen den Pessimismus*], he writes in "Central Park" (*GS* I/2:658/*SW* 4:162). Rather, in his revolutionary project, Baudelaire's spleen becomes a corollary of that "revolutionary nihilism" Benjamin identifies as the most interesting trait of Surrealism (*GS* II/1:299/SW 2:210). The violent destruction of the *Schein* is the necessary step towards a revolutionary and constructive practice. This is no minor issue in Benjamin scholarship: the accounts and personal recollections of Theodor W. Adorno (1967, 1992), Gershom Scholem

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was different from what it had been in the seventeenth. The key figure in early allegory is the corpse. In late allegory, it is the 'souvenir' [*Andenken*]. The 'souvenir' is the schema of the commodity's transformation into an object for the collector. The *correspondances* are, objectively, the endlessly varied resonances between one souvenir and the others. 'J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans,'" (*GS* I/2:689/*SW* 4:190).

[35] For the question of aura cf. Stoessel (1983) and Fürnkäs (2000).

(1988) and Hannah Arendt (1968) all depict Benjamin as a melancholic, an "*accidioso*," and all link his thought to his Saturnian disposition in a mode that tends to be dismissive, or at least patronizing. These accounts were extremely influential for the posthumous reception of Benjamin's work and led to a trend in Benjamin scholarship culminating is Susan Sontag's essay "Under the Sign of Saturn" (1980, 109-36).[36] All these readings, diverse and heterogeneous as they are, strongly rely on the stereotype of the intellectual as melancholic which has its origin in Aristotle and dominates the history of Western culture.[37] What is important for the present analysis, however, is not whether Benjamin had or not a melancholic nature; he certainly did. The problem is rather the connection that has been established between his melancholic nature and the politics of his work. That is, we should focus not on melancholy as a trait of his character, but as a concept in his work. To emphasize melancholy as the key determinant of Benjamin's thought means to misread the role of melancholy and allegory in his work and the meaning of his revolutionary project as a whole. Recent scholarship has helped to correct this misinterpretation, though the "aura" of the sorrowful, clumsy, and unfortunate intellectual remains attached to any representation of Benjamin as a person. The new biography by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2014) has helped correcting the caricatural picture *à la* Sontag, and Max Pensky (1993) and Ilit Ferber (2013), among others, have shed light on the role and politics of melancholy and allegory in Benjamin's work.[38] It is also important to note that the melancholic

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[36] An unsympathetic analysis of their portraits of Benjamin can be found in Meltzer (1996). Despite the efforts of more recent scholarship, this image is so persistent that, in a recent book on boredom, Philipp Wüschner (2011) mentions Benjamin only in relation to melancholy and mourning, citing merely *en passant* an entry from the *Arcades Project*.

[37] Aristotle devoted an important section of the *Problemata Physica* (xxx, i) to the preponderance of black bile (*melan-kole*) in the melancholic nature, making it the mark of "all great men." Neo-Platonism in the Renaissance echoed and amplified this account construing the stereotype of the melancholic intellectual (cf. Kuhn 1976, 18-20; Goodstein 2005, 37-39). In "Agesilaus Santander," Benjamin wrote that he was born "under the sign of Saturn—the planet of slow revolution, the star of hesitation and delay" (*GS* VI:521/*SW* 2:713), acknowledging thus his melancholic nature—and also adhering to the classical stereotype.

[38] Eiland and Jennings (2014, 5), for example, open their biography stating that "to treat Walter Benjamin as a hopeless melancholic is to caricature and reduce him. For one thing, he was possessed of a delicate, if sometimes biting, sense of humor, and was capable of an owlish gaiety." Pensky (1993) and Ferber (2013), on the

intellectual was harshly attacked by Benjamin himself in the 1931 piece "Left-Wing Melancholy," in which the *acedia* of German left intellectuals is reduced to "decayed bourgeois mimicry of the proletariat," devoid of any political signification, and thus in the end only "tortured stupidity" (*GS* III:280-21/*SW* 2:424-25). Melancholy and spleen, with their connection to allegory, must be read as an opposition to this a-political despair. They are necessary steps in Benjamin's revolutionary project, but constitute merely its *pars destruens*, which must be complemented by a positive *pars construens*.

5. Convolute "D": Waiting and Awakening

Attendre c'est la vie
Victor Hugo (D10a,3)

This final section will attempt to outline the "constructive" potentiality that Benjamin found in boredom through a reading of Convolute "D."[39] Here the analysis of boredom departs from the "destructive" connection of *Erlebnis* with ennui and spleen/melancholy that characterizes the reading of Baudelaire. The emphasis is rather on a constructive aspect of boredom that opens up revolutionary possibilities. It is interesting to note that boredom is not precisely and clinically defined by Benjamin but is rather identified descriptively through images. The first is the weather: boredom is associated to images of dreary sky, fog, and rain. The cosmic forces have a "narcotizing effect" on the modern individual (D1,3). Dust then is singled out as imposing a grey uniformity on the arcades and the bourgeois *intérieur*; the modern city is grey in de Chirico's paintings (D1a,7). As Andrew Benjamin (2013, 212) notes, it is the grey *sameness* they impose on the world that makes rain, fog, and dust boring: "Rain makes everything more hidden, makes days not only grey but uniform" (D1a,9). The same entry makes though a fundamental statement: "Only someone who has grown up in the big city can appreciate its rainy weather, which altogether slyly sets one dreaming back to early childhood" (D1a,9). An early version of the same entry relates rainy weather and childhood to "dreams" (B°,5).[40] This relation is important because introduces two

other hand, bypass biographical trivia to propose a *philosophical* analysis of melancholy—in Benjamin and beyond.

[39] This reading of Convolute "D" and the revolutionary potentiality of boredom strongly relies on Andrew Benjamin's analysis (2013, 203-21).

[40] "Dreams vary according to where you are, what area and what street, but above all according to the time of the year and the weather. Rainy weather in the city, in

fundamental notions Benjamin connects to boredom: threshold and waiting.

As a prisoner of the bourgeois apartment, the child is a victim of the boredom of modern urbanization. However, this figure is extremely important in Benjamin's project for two reasons: first, it represents a condition preceding the Fall into bourgeois modernity, still immune to the phantasmagoria of the city and of the commodity, and is thus related to pre-modern *Erfahrung*; secondly, it epitomizes the state of *waiting*, which is for Benjamin the fundamental threshold into a revolution of experience. An important passage in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* reads:

> Among the caryatids and atlantes, the putti and pomonas, which in those days looked at me, I stood closest to those dust-shrouded specimens of the race of threshold dwellers—those who guard the entrance to life, or to a house. For they are versed in waiting [*sie verstanden sich aufs Warten*]. (*GS* IV/1:238/*SW* 3:354)

The child feels affinity with the race of threshold-dwellers because, like them, he lives in a state of waiting. The loggias and the "little rooms" of the bourgeois apartment which look out into the backyard, are "waiting-stations" (*Warteplätze*) where "time grew old" (*GS* IV/1:295/*SW* 3:345, 346). Benjamin credits his "passion for waiting" (*Leidenschaft des Wartens*) (*GS* VI:482/*SW* 2:608), "something that others call my patience,"[41] to the fact that as a child he was often sick:

> The predilection for seeing everything I care about approach me from a distance, the way the hours approached my sickbed. Thus, when I am travelling, I lose the best part of my pleasure if I cannot wait a long time in the station for my train. And this likewise explains why giving presents has become a passion with me: as the giver, I foresee long in advance what surprises the recipient. In fact, my need to look forward to what is coming—all the while sustained by a period of waiting, as a sick person is

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its thoroughly treacherous sweetness and its power to draw one back to the days of early childhood, can be appreciated only by someone who has grown up in the big city. It naturally evens out the day, and with rainy weather one can do the same thing day in, day out—play cards, read, or engage in argument—whereas sunshine, by contrast, shades the hours and is furthermore less friendly to the dreamer" (Bº,5).

[41] Scholem (1988, 73) writes that "Benjamin was the most patient human being I ever came to know, and the decisiveness and radicalism of his thinking stood in vehement contrast to his infinitely patient and only very slowly opening nature. And to deal with Benjamin one had to have the greatest patience oneself. Only very patient people could gain deeper contact with him."

> supported by pillows at his back—ensured that, later on, women appeared more beautiful to me the longer and more consolingly I had to wait for them. (*GS* IV/1:269-70/*SW* 3:362-63)

A specific place in the Tiergarten epitomizes waiting: the otter's enclosure. The young Benjamin spent endless hours peering into the "black and impenetrable depths" of the enclosure, hoping to catch sight of the animal in the oval basin with a background of grotto-shaped rock formations. But the most he could get of the otter was an instantaneous and fleeting glimpse, after which the animal would disappear again. However, he enjoyed "long, sweet days there," made even longer and even sweeter "when a fine- or thick-toothed drizzle slowly combed the animal for hours and minutes." The rain would "whisper to me of my future, as one sings a lullaby beside the cradle." The otter's enclosure "bore traces of what was to come" and thus possessed the virtue of conferring the power to see into the future (*GS* IV/1:256-57/*SW* 3:365-66).

Sigrid Weigel (1996, 48) calls the threshold the "prominent location of Benjamin's *Passagen* project," and gives it a "paradigmatic significance." The figure of the threshold recurs many times in Benjamin's work: the image of the putti and pomonas as *penates* and guardians of the urban rites of passage is found not only in *Berlin Childhood*, but also in the *Arcades Project* (I1a,4) (C2a,3) and "The Return of the Flâneur" (*GS* III:197/*SW* 2:264-65). In the Berlin memoires, the prostitute is associated to the threshold dweller: she ushers the (male) citizen into adulthood, but also represents a crossing of class boundaries (*GS* VI:471-72/*SW* 2:600). The flâneur stands on the threshold—of the metropolis as of the middle class (*GS* V/1:54/*SW* 3:39)—and the entrance of the arcades are thresholds, marked by an "expectant posture" reflecting the fact that, "altogether unknowingly, […] a decision lies ahead" (C3,6). Defining the threshold (*Schwelle*), Benjamin points out that it must be distinguished from the boundary (*Grenze*): a threshold is a "zone," and indeed a zone of "transition" (*eine Zone des Überganges*). It is "transformation, passage, flight," "wave action" (*Wandel, Übergang, Fliehen, Fluten*), which Benjamin etymologically relates to the verb *schwellen*, to swell (O2a,1).[42] "Out of the field of experience proper to the threshold evolved the gateway that transforms whoever passes under its arch" (Mº,26) (C2a,3). The atrophy of *Erfahrung* in modernity means that "we have grown very poor

[42] The English translators of the *Selected Writings* add a note to this passage: "*Schwelle*, cognate with the English word 'sill,' has the root sense of 'board,' 'structural support,' 'foundation beam.' According to current information, it is etymologically unrelated to *schwellen*" (*AP* 991n4).

in threshold experiences": in modern life, rites of passage for birth and death, puberty, marriage etc. have almost disappeared, "these transitions are becoming ever more unrecognizable and impossible to experience"; falling asleep and, importantly, waking up, are perhaps the only such experience that remain to us (O2a,1).[43] Boredom is defined in Convolute "D" as "the threshold to great deeds" (*die Schwelle zu großen Taten*) (D2,7).

The same entry gives what is the closest to a definition of boredom in Benjamin's work: "We are bored when we don't know what we are waiting for [*Langeweile haben wir, wenn wir nicht wissen, worauf wir warten*]. That we do know, or think we know, is nearly always the expression of our superficiality or inattention" (D2,7).[44] Boredom is thus a waiting without an object. In a sense, Benjamin specifies, waiting is "the lined interior of boredom" (*die ausgefütterte Innenseite der Langenweile*) (D9a,4). Boredom and waiting constitute a "complex" which needs its own metaphysics ("a metaphysics of waiting is indispensable" [Oº,26]). As Andrew Benjamin notes (2013, 215), awaiting thus transforms time. The time of the *Erlebnis* is a "passing" (*vertreiben*) or a "killing" (*austreiben*, *abschlagen*, literally "expelling" and "knocking off") of time. Such is the temporality of the gambler ("time spills from his every pore") and the flâneur ("To store time as a battery stores energy"). But the one who waits

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[43] According to Andrew Benjamin (2013, 211), the threshold is important because, precisely due to its *ambivalence*, it becomes a possibility: "Ambivalence is marked by a potentiality within which interruption will have conditions of possibility that resist the hold of eternal return."

[44] Andrew Benjamin (2013, 214, 216) thus comments this passage: "Benjamin provides a way into this formulation of the problem of time—the temporality of moods—in terms of what he describes as the temporality of awaiting. What is the time of awaiting? Benjamin's response to this question necessitates that this awaiting be distinguished from an awaiting in which the image of the future determines both what is to occur as well as its having occurred. What cannot be expected—even though it is too often expected—is victory to come through continuity. This recalls the passage cited earlier in which Benjamin dismisses as a form of binary opposition boredom linked to not knowing what is awaited as one pole, and the superficiality or lack of attention inherent in the claim that we can give a form to that which is awaited as the other." And also: "Boredom is an awaiting without an object. This cannot be countered by the presentation of images of the future. Boredom works as a threshold precisely because the move away from boredom is carried by it as a potentiality. The site of potentiality is the present. However, it is not a conception of the present that is reducible to the moment thought within the passage of chronological time. Rather, the present moment is the event happening as the 'now of recognizability.'"

(*der Wartende*) "invites in" time, "takes in the time and renders it up in altered form—that of expectation [*Erwartung*]" (D3,4).[45] The man who waits—"a type opposed to the flâneur" (Mº,15)—is not a victim to that intoxication of time, so similar to a hashish intoxication, which is the end result of *Erlebnis* and produces only doubt (*Zweifeln*) (M4a,1). This awaiting is a transformation—a threshold—of the experience of time: as Andrew Benjamin (2013, 215) writes, "awaiting and expectation" produce a transformation of time "in which the future becomes a condition of the present, rather than the present being a series of empty moments awaiting a future."

The temporality of the flâneur, as representative of the temporality of *Erlebnis*, is dream. An important entry reads:

> Boredom is a warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and grey within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? (D2a,1)[46]

The arcades are the space where life flows "without accent, like the events in dreams," and flânerie constitutes "the rhythmics of this slumber," which mimics the pace of the tortoise (D2a,1). Boredom appears as an "ornament," "a mark of distinction" to the flâneur and the dandy, because it "is always the external surface of unconscious events" (D2a,2). The dandy makes a show of it, Benjamin ventures, because it constitutes an "index to participation in the sleep of the collective" (D3,7). This is the importance of Surrealism for Benjamin: in focusing its interest on the "dream kitsch," on the banality of the everyday and "the grey coating of

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[45] An early version of this entry called the one who waits "the synthetic type" (*der synthetische Typ*): "takes in the energy 'time' and passes it on in altered form" (Oº,78). A similar entry calls it "the impassive thinker" (*der Kontemplative*) (M4a,1).

[46] An early entry relates dream and dust: "Boredom and dust. Dream a garment one cannot turn. On the outside, the grey boredom (of sleep). Sleep state, hypnotic, of the dusty figures in the Musée Grévin. A sleeper is not a good subject for wax. Boredom [*Langeweile*] is always the external surface of unconscious events. Therefore, it could appear to the great dandies as a mark of distinction. For it is precisely [?] the dandy who despises new clothing: whatever he wants must appear slightly frayed. As opposed to the theory of dreams that would reveal to us 'psyches,' the world that comes to seem pointless. What about it?" (Fº,8).

dust on things" ("Dream Kitsch," *GS* II/2:620/*SW* 2:3), it unveiled the dreamy state of modern life, and embraced the dream: "Life seemed worth living only where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away" ("Surrealism," *GS* II/1:296/*SW* 2:208). It is precisely in the dream—or better, in this *threshold* between dream and wake—that Surrealism found "revolutionary energies" and transformed the outmoded and the destitution of this dream into "revolutionary nihilism" (*GS* II/1:299/*SW* 2:210). However, the limit of the Surrealist project is that it chooses to persist "within the realm of dream," embracing the intoxication and mythology of modern life (N1,9). It therefore remains "inadequate" and "undialectical," disconnected from history and community (*GS* II/1:307/*SW* 2:216). Benjamin's project, to the contrary, is concerned "to find the constellation of awakening" (*die Konstellation des Erwachens*), to dissolve the modern mythology "into the space of history" (N1,9).

Awakening is the key term of the *Arcades Project*. Convolute "K" defines it at "the dialectical—the Copernican—turn of remembrance" (*der kopernikanischen Wendung des Eingedenkens*) (K1,1). Significantly, this awakening is related to the figure of the child: the "child's side" is defined as the sleep stage of every epoch, "a side turned toward dreams." The Copernican revolution in historical perception consists in the awakening from the childish dream—the arcades, the nineteenth-century childish dream of progress and consumerist plenty—into a stage of historical wakefulness. The "teleological moment in the context of dreams" is "waiting," because "the dream waits secretly for the awakening"; so, too, the dreaming collective waits for the second when it cunningly wrests itself from the clutches of dream (K1a,2). "The first tremors of awakening serve to deepen sleep" (K1a,9) and this is the revolutionary potentiality of boredom. Awakening has a "dialectical structure" (hº,4): boredom can be read as the "Trojan horse" through which "the imminent awakening steals into the dream" (Nº,5). When Benjamin thus asks: "what is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?" (D2,7), the answer is awakening, is revolutionary action.[47]

Benjamin recognizes that the kind of boredom connected to *Erlebnis*, to that atrophy of experience which arises from the reification and fragmentation of time and history into commodified, disconnected, always

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[47] Andrew Benjamin (2013, 215) writes: "the dialectical antithesis to boredom is experimentation; experimentation both as a mood and as act. […] Experimentation has to be thought in relation to its inherent fragility. Once again it is that very fragility that demands the affirmation of experimentation—an affirmation in the face of the inescapable possibility for its recuperation. That affirmation is the project of criticism. Equally, it is the project of politics."

identical unities, is a specific and defining product of modernity. However, he finds in its dialectical structure a redemptive potentiality that makes of it an instrument of revolution: as spleen, it destroys the *Schein* of the phantasmagoria of progress and capitalism; as *Langeweile*, it prepares the awakening from this phantasmagoria and a re-founding of time and experience.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHILDHOOD, EXPERIENCE, AND PLAY

> Genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will, childhood equipped now with man's physical means to express itself, and with the analytical mind that enables it to bring order into the sum of experience, involuntarily amassed.
> Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1972, 398)

> The gracefulness of children does exist, and it exists primarily as a kind of corrective to society; it is one of those "hints" we are vouchsafed of a "happiness as yet undisciplined."
> Benjamin to Adorno, 7 May 1940 (*BA* 439/*CA* 330-31)

In 1950 Adorno published *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, a thin volume of Benjamin's childhood memories; his first work to appear posthumously, it was a commercial failure (cf. *WuN* 11.2:48-49, 51). Today it is one of the most popular of his works with non-academic (and also academic) audiences, but probably for the wrong reason: it is generally considered a sophisticated and elegant collection of childhood memories, to be filed under the section "autobiography." It should instead be situated within a wider theoretical frame, that of a life-long interest in the figure of the child that produced a number of diverse and scattered but ultimately consistent writings, from texts about children books and toys and their cultural significance to radio plays and broadcasts for young people; from essays on radical pedagogy to his peculiar childhood memories. These texts were not systematically conceived and do not lead to a proper "theory" about

childhood, but certainly can be (and have been) read together as expression of a consistent project.[1]

The thesis of this chapter is that Benjamin's interest in the world of childhood belonged to a philosophical-political project to elaborate a concept of experience opposed to the hollowed-out experience of the modern bourgeois adult. In Benjamin's corpus, the child is therefore a figure of/for redemption and revolution. As we have seen, "experience" is a central concept in Benjamin, from his early writings for the student journal *Der Anfang* through to the *Arcades Project*, and the question of the child constantly accompanies it, albeit often implicitly or in a minor tone. Nevertheless, "experience" is also an ambiguous notion in Benjamin, locked into the antinomy between the yearning for a lost "authenticity" and the celebration of the dawn of a new era, an ambiguity best represented by the image of a Janus-faced Benjamin, looking simultaneously to the past and into the future. In this dialectic, the child usually stands for the fullness of experience of lost times, but there are also hints that connect it with the "fresh start" of a mechanized, *non-innocent* modernity. In this chapter, I will explore this dialectic, analyzing the figure of the child in Benjamin's work through the lens of the notion of experience.

1. Experience and Youth

The pillars upon which Benjamin's concepts of experience and childhood rest are his peculiar notions of perception, language and *physis*, and their origins are to be sought in the writings of his student years. Here the child itself does not appear, but the attributes that later make it a figure of redemption are nonetheless already defined. A few biographical facts are crucial: Benjamin's encounter, as a boarder in Hermann Lietz's school of Haubinda, with the educational reformer Gustav Wyneken; his first publications in the student journals *Der Anfang* and *Die freie Schulgemeinde* (the latter edited by Wyneken); his involvement in what is known as the *Jugendbewegung*, or student movement, including his participation in student organizations such as the *Freie Studentenschaft* (Free Students' Unions), the *Sprechsaal* (Speech-hall) and the *Abteilung für Schulreform* (Detachments for School Reform). These facts cannot be analyzed in depth here.[2] What is important for the present argument is that

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[1] The most comprehensive study to date is the recent work of Tyson Lewis (2020), which however focuses more specifically on education and on the educative potentiality of Benjamin's many writings on the child.

[2] For detailed accounts and analyses cf. e.g. Eiland and Jennings (2014, 32-116); Imai (1996); Wohlfarth (1992a).

in these years, and through the involvement with the *Jugendbewegung*, Benjamin shaped and defended an idea of youth (and experience) that Irving Wohlfarth (1992a, 164) defines as "the guiding 'idea' of his life": youth precedes the "Fall" into bourgeois adulthood, it is still idealistic and heroic, capable of spirituality and nobility, and is thus "the metaphysical age *par excellence*," in a sense, a "prelapsarian" age. The writings of these years are full of rhetoric and tacky idealism,[3] but their notion of a prelapsarian youth, modified, purified, and transformed, will remain at the core of Benjamin's interest in the child.

For example, in the short piece "Experience" (*Erfahrung*), published pseudonymously in *Der Anfang* in 1913, Benjamin counterposes to (bourgeois) adult experience understood as an "expressionless, impenetrable, and ever-the-same" mask devoid of any spirit, a "different experience" (*eine andere Erfahrung*), youth, which is "the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate because it can never be without spirit while we remain young." The adult "philistine" devalues the youth's experience, making it into a "time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture, before the long sobriety of serious life." But, where the philistine's experience is the anesthetized, comfortable "eternal one of spiritlessness," "the youth will experience [*erleben*] spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains greatness, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person" (*GS* II/1:54-56/*SW* 1:3-5). To refer to experience, this text uses both *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, where *Erfahrung* denotes the philistine mask of a science-based (Kantian or Neo-Kantian) experience, blind to the higher values of the spirit, which remain *unerfahrbar*, "unexperienceable."

The same notion is reiterated in the 1914-1915 fragment "The Life of Students": what distinguishes student life, Benjamin writes, "is the will to submit to a principle, to identify completely with an idea," whilst "the concept of 'science' or scholarly discipline [*Wissenschaft*] serves primarily to conceal a deep-rooted, bourgeois indifference" (*GS* II/1:76/*SW* 1:38). The need to establish a higher concept of experience, different from the merely scientific one of the Kant and the Neo-Kantian school, is central to the more mature 1918 "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." To take the principles of experience (*Erfahrung* is the term used throughout

[3] Cf. for example "Die Freie Schulgemeinde" (*GS* VII/1:9-15); "Lily Brauns Manifest an die Schuljugend" (*GS* III:9-11); "Die Schulreform, eine Kulturbewegung" (*GS* II/1:12-6); "Die Moralunterricht" (*GS* II/1:48-54); "Ziele und Wege der studentisch-pädagogischen Gruppen an reichsdeutschen Universitäten" (*GS* II/1:60-6); "Die Jugend schwieg" (*GS* II/1:66-7); "Studentische Autorenabende" (*GS* II/1:68-71); "Die religiöse Stellung der neuen Jugend" (*GS* II/1:72-4).

the fragment) from the sciences, Benjamin writes here, means to reduce it to "naked, primitive, self-evident experience" as the only kind possible (*GS* II/1:158/*SW* 1:101). Benjamin calls for a re-foundation of the concept of experience through a re-foundation of the conditions of knowledge, in order to overcome the pragmatist division of object and subject and achieve "the sphere of total neutrality" in regard to them. This will, in turn, lead to the discovery of an "autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities" (*GS* II/1:163/*SW* 1:104). Religious experience is important here because it transcends the subject/object dichotomy in the revelation of an ontological truth, and is thus the basis of a concept of experience that Martin Jay (1993, 197) argues "might justly be called noumenal or ontological." This can be achieved "only by relating knowledge to language," since "a concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize" (*GS* II/1:168/*SW* 1:108). This notion of experience rejects both the Kantian *Erfahrung*, the empirical experience of the scientific subject, and the Diltheyan *Erlebnis*, the inner experience of the contingent and pre-rational subject. Founded upon a knowledge autonomously beyond the subject-object terminology—Jay defines it as "mythical" (1993, 198)—this new experience is central for the child of the later writings, as also is the focus on language.

The 1916 fragment "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" is thus fundamental. Here, in a strongly anti-Saussurean argument, the "name" is identified as "the linguistic being of things" and therefore the true knowledge of the thing. The Adamite act of naming depends on how the language of things is communicated to the namer: it is thus not "creative," but "receptive," and in it "the word of God shines forth" (*GS* II/1:150/*SW* 1:69). What matters for the discussion of the child is the relationship between language and nature after the Fall. When God's word curses the ground, the "muteness" of nature begins, "which is what we mean by the 'deep sadness of nature.'" This muteness and profound melancholy derive from the fact of being named "not from the one blessed paradisiacal language […], but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered." Things no longer have "proper names" (*Eigennamen*), but rather, in the language of men, they are "overnamed" (*überbenannt*) (*GS* II/1:155/*SW* 1:73). Only the child, in the later writings, will be given access, through its prelapsarian condition, to the "secret password" (*geheime Losung*) of the language of nature (*GS* II/1:157/*SW* 1:74).

This conception of nature, which will remain a constant in Benjamin, is profoundly Romantic, preceding, and opposed to, the objectifying and exploitative attitude of scientific/productive observation. Romanticism was the greatest influence on Benjamin in these years and was never merely superseded by either Marxism or Baudelairean modernism. Rather, it will "merge" with them and persist, as a subterranean but powerful current, in the later writings.[4] The section of his doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919), entitled "The Early Romantic Theory of the Knowledge of Nature" is fundamental to the analysis of the child.[5] The knowledge of the object, according to this theory (based principally on Novalis), is "immediate [*unmittelbar*] in the same high degree as only perception can be; and the readiest grounding of the immediacy of perception likewise proceeds from a medium common to the perceiver and the perceived." That is, this immediacy presupposes a partial "interpenetration" (*Durchdringung*) of subject and object: knowledge proceeds from the self-knowledge of the object, which, through "observation," is called into "wakefulness" [*wachgerufen*] "by one center of reflection (the observer) in another (the thing) only insofar as the first, through repeated reflections, intensifies itself to the point of encompassing the second." Observation is thus the "evocation of self-consciousness and self-knowledge in the things observed. To observe a thing means only to arouse it to self-recognition" (*GS* I/1:58-59/*SW* 1:147). It has "magical" (also called "ironic") character, which consists in the observer's quality of

[4] On Benjamin and Romanticism cf. for example Bullock (1987); Hanssen and Benjamin (2002). Freud's influence on Benjamin is also important, but as far as the figure of the child is concerned, it seems that the Romantics' suggestions of childhood as mythical, prelapsarian innocence and wholeness are not touched by the Freudian notion of a "perverse" and "polymorphic" childhood. The concept of "innocence," which Freud dispels and is instead the core of the Romantics' "cult of childhood," will remain the central feature of Benjamin's child. On Freud's influence on Benjamin cf. for example Rickels (2002) and Cohen (1993). Nicola Gess (2010) reverses this interpretation, downplaying the Romantic influence and overemphasizing instead the Freudian influence, which leads her to read Benjamin's child *only* as "barbarian" and "primitive" (cf. partially also Giuriato 2006). Against the excessive emphases on either pole, this chapter attempts to construe a dialectic between them. Against Gess, however (and in line, for example, with Pearson [2004, 129]), ultimately I tend to interpret Benjamin's idealization of childhood as a cultural and social fantasy.

[5] A very Romantic notion of nature can also be found in the 1914-15 fragment "The Metaphysics of Youth," especially the section "The Diary." Cf. *GS* II/1:96-103/*SW* 1:10-16.

"getting nearer to the object and of finally drawing it into himself." Observation—and this is fundamental—*does not question nature*:

> instead, [it] fixes in its view only the self-knowledge nascent in the object; or rather it, the observation, is the nascent consciousness of the object itself. It can rightly be called ironic, therefore, because in its *not knowing* [*Nicht-Wissen*]—in its attending [*Zuschauen*]—observation *knows better*, being identical with the object. It would thus be permissible, if indeed not more correct, to leave this correlation generally out of play, and to speak of a *coincidence of the objective and the subjective side of knowledge*. Simultaneous with any cognition on an object is the actual coming-into-being [*Werden*] of this object itself. For knowledge, according to the basic principle of knowledge of objects, is a process that first makes what is to be known into that as which it is known. (*GS* I/1:60-1/*SW* 1:148, emphases added)

This mode of "attending" to the object without questioning it, this "not-knowing" that "knows better," the ability to listen to the "secret password" of the language of nature, will be named the "mimetic faculty" in Benjamin's later writings and will become the prerogative of the child.[6] Mimesis and prelapsarian language thus form the basis of the experience of the child and remain key concepts throughout Benjamin's work.

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[6] Where these questions receive a systematic treatment is in two important fragments of the 1930s: "Doctrine of the Similar" (January-February 1933) and "On the Mimetic Faculty" (April-September 1933). Similarity is here identified not only as a characteristic of nature, but also as a peculiar capacity of human beings, the "once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically," whose "school" is children's play: it is "everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train." The canon of what Benjamin calls "nonsensuous similarities" [*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeiten*] though, is to be individuated in language: Benjamin reiterates here his concept of language "not as an agreed-upon system of signs" but as fundamentally onomatopoeic, and thus imbued with a fundamental "magical aspect." Language is the "medium into which the earlier perceptual capacity for recognizing the similar had, without residue, entered to such an extent that language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another" (cf. *GS* II/1:204-10, 210-13/*SW* 2:694-98, 720-22). On these concepts cf. Opitz (2000).

2. On Books and Cities

The birth of his son Stefan in 1918 represented a turning point for Benjamin: he not only started a collection of children's books,[7] but also began to take an interest in the world of childhood and to consider it a topic for intellectual analysis.[8] His analysis starts from children books: a 1918-1921 short note for a planned study on the "Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children's Books" extends the observations of the 1914-1915 fragment "A Child's View of Color" into the analysis of colorful illustrations. The problem of perception is a focus for Benjamin's interest in these early years, and the child's perception interested him because it is not yet developed and structured into a system of correlations and reflections. The child's receptivity is therefore "pure" (*reinen Empfänglichkeit*), insofar as it is "directed at the world" (*GS* VI:111/*SW* 1:51), in the sense of observation theorized by the early Romantics. Colored illustrations awaken a sort of Platonic anamnesis in the child, "for whom picture books are paradise." "Children," Benjamin writes, "learn in the memory of their first intuition. And they learn from bright colors, because the fantastic play of color is the home of memory without yearning [*sehnsuchtlosen*], and it can be free of yearning because it is unalloyed" (*GS* VI:123-25/*SW* 1:264-65). This intuitive learning is the "secret password" adults have forgotten (in their yearning[9]) and that gives access to the lost paradise.[10]

The 1924 review essay of Karl Hobrecher's *Alte vergessene Kinderbücher* ("Old Forgotten Children's Books") and its 1926 companion piece, "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books," are both

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[7] As Scholem (2012, 66) writes, "the collection was really launched by Dora's enthusiasm for the genre. Dora also loved legends and fairy tales. She and Benjamin made each other birthday presents of illustrated children's books until at least 1923." When they finally divorced in 1930 Dora kept the collection. See also Eiland and Jennings (2014, 100ff.).

[8] From early on (cf. e.g. Schiavoni 1978), Benjamin's turn toward childhood has been interpreted as a *turning away* from the ideal (and ideological) "youth" he idealized in his student years as a new form of experience, and thus also from his engagement with the *Jugendbewegung*. Cf. also Pearson (2004, 130).

[9] "For adults, the yearning for paradise is the yearning of yearnings [*die Sehnsucht der Sehnsuchten*]. Not the yearning for fulfilment, but the yearning to be without yearning" (*GS* VI:124/*SW* 1:264).

[10] Maeve Pearson (2004, 133-34) interestingly relates Benjamin's analysis of the illustrations in children's books to Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," where "genius," as epitomized by Constantin Guys, is related to a regained childhood—as another proof that the idealization of childhood is an adult's fantasy.

important: in these two pieces Benjamin not only reiterates his ideas on color and perception (in almost exactly the same words), but also introduces some fundamental concepts that will remain central. First, he argues that, when reading books and most of all their images, children "inhabit" (*wohnen*) them: they annul the distance between the subject and the object, complete the books by filling them "with a poetry of their own"; they "*in*scribe [*beschriben*] the pictures with their own ideas" (*GS* III:20/*SW* 1:411). In the second piece, the child is described as penetrating (*eindringen*) "into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures"; s/he "overcomes the illusory barrier of the book's surface and passes through colored textures and brightly painted partitions to enter a stage on which fairy tales spring to life" (*GS* IV/2:609/*SW* 1:435). With a final reference to Goethe, Benjamin describes colors as "the intuition of fantasy, in contrast to the creative imagination," which "manifest themselves as a primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*]" (*GS* IV/2:613/*SW* 1:442).

The second important and recurrent motif is that children

> are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the *detritus* generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize *the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them*. In using these things, they do not so much *imitate* [*nachbilden*] the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds *in a new, intuitive relationship* [*in eine sprunghafte neue Beziehung*]. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. (*GS* III:16/*SW* 1:408, emphases added)

This passage will be reproduced word for word in *One-Way Street* under the title "Construction Site." It introduces the observation that children, unlike (bourgeois) adults, are not attracted by the world of the untouchable and fetishized commodity, but by *detritus* and *waste*: like the ragpicker, they collect the detritus and put them together in new relationships, that is, new *constellations*. Like the ragpicker, they thus redeem things from the fate of the commodity. But, unlike the ragpicker, in refuse they also gain true access to the world of things, which can communicate their divine "names" "directly and solely" to children.[11] Another important point is that children's activity, play, is not an "imitation" (*Nachbildung*, copy or replica) of the work of adults, but is rather distinct, autonomous, and

[11] Cf. Gilloch (1996, 86ff.) and Richter (2000, 212ff.). On the ragpicker as figure for the historian, cf. Wohlfarth (1986) and Salzani (2009, 187-213).

creative in its own terms. Finally, a recurrent motif is the accusation that bourgeois pedagogy is too "infatuated with psychology," reflecting adults' anxieties and fashions rather than pursuing a true fulfilment of childhood (*GS* III:16/*SW* 1:412). These intuitions come together in the radio talk "Children's Literature" (1929), one passage of which is especially important for this argument. The anti-cumulative notion of *Erfahrung*, aired in the juvenile "Experience," returns here with regard to reading: reading is compared to "nourishment" (*Ernährung*), which is not merely the cumulative act of eating, but a process of "absorption" (*Einverleibung*): "we do not read to increase our experiences," Benjamin writes, "we read to increase ourselves" (*GS* VII/1:257/*SW* 2:255).[12] This is the child's approach to reading, different from, and uncomprehended by, the psychologized bourgeois model of education.

The other important locus for the figure of the child in the writings of the 1920s are Benjamin's city portraits. Here the child is no more than an "extra," but the connections child-city-memory and child-city-experience, so important for the Berlin *memoires* of the 1930s, are established here. In "Naples" (1925), children do not live the "protected" bourgeois life of the German north, but "experience" the porosity of the city, the "interpenetration" (*ineinander übergehen*) of everything with everyone that forms new and ever-changing constellations: they wander the streets late at night, are acquainted with sex and almost "exchanged" among relatives and neighbors (*GS* IV/1:307-16/*SW* 1:414-21). "Moscow" (1927) is probably the most important of Benjamin's city portraits: the child is here connected with the newcomer or the stranger or, better, the stranger is *like* a child in the city. "The instant you arrive," Benjamin writes, "the childhood stage [*Kinderstadium*] begins. On the thick sheet ice of the streets, walking has to be relearned" (*GS* IV/1:318/*SW* 2:23). The experience of the city is for the newcomer as new and unbiased, that is, *unmediated*, by previous knowledge, as is that of the child.[13] In another passage, a further important distinction is made: now it is the Muscovite who is like a child, "closely mingled [*gemischt*] with people and things," whose gaze is a "tender, swift brushing along stones, people, and horses," whereas the Western European plays the role of the adult, whose gaze is "condescending" (*von oben*

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[12] For a detailed analysis of Benjamin's writings on children's literature, see for example Doderer (1996). For an analysis of Benjamin's radio talks, see Mehlman (1993).

[13] Thus, "the city turns into a labyrinth for the newcomer. […] The whole exciting sequence of topographical deceptions to which he falls prey could be shown only by a film: the city is on its guard against him, masks itself, flees, intrigues, lures him to wander its circles to the point of exhaustion" (*GS* IV/1:319/*SW* 2:24).

herab) and who enjoys "superiority" and "dominance" (*GS* IV/1:331/*SW* 2:33). These distinctions will remain a constant theme in Benjamin's later writings: whereas the adult's relationship with things is one of distant separation, condescension, superiority and dominance, the child is unpretentiously "mingled" with them in a tender acquaintance, which represents a higher level of knowledge and experience. That is why, as Benjamin writes in "Marseille" (1929) and repeats in "The Return of the Flâneur" (1929), to know cities "one must have been a child in them" (*GS* IV/1:362/*SW* 2:234). In order to achieve this redemptive level of experience the adult must become a stranger in the city and re-learn the "childhood stage."[14]

Books and cities come together in *One-Way Street* (1928), where strongly avant-gardist and Brechtian tones politicize the act of reading, in

[14] Gilloch particularly insists on this point, drawing from the observations put forward by Peter Szondi. Szondi (1988, 22ff.) emphasizes the category of "distance," which defamiliarizes the city and allows the newcomer to see it with the eyes of a child: the child sees the city "at first sight," unlike the adult whose gaze is laden with tedium, familiarity, and habit. In the Berlin *memoires*, Szondi continues, the distance is the one of time, and the defamiliarization aims at the recovery of the child's receptivity as redemptive. For Gilloch (1996, 43ff., 60ff.; 2002, 92ff.), Szondi's argument fails to conjugate distance with "proximity": he argues that remembrance enacts an interplay of distance and proximity which subjects the city to a process of "enlargement." Recalling the experiences of the child, for whom the city is unfamiliar, the adult does not make the city "smaller" and thus easier to describe, but rather makes himself small, like a child, and recaptures the child's mimetic "closeness" to the world of things. Szondi's "distance" must thus be included into a dialectic with proximity: the aim is the recovering of the child's "at first sight," a new understanding that is a "not-knowing" but as such is close to things and a critical tool to disrupt the bourgeois adult's sense of superiority. Neither Szondi nor Gilloch relate "distance" to the question of "aura," which produces the perception of "distance no matter how close [the object] is" (*GS* VII/1:355/*SW* 3:105). This is nonetheless an important point in the present argument because it is related to the question of perception: unlike in the Artwork essay, in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" aura has no negative connotation and is described as the association of memory and perception that cluster around an object. Here aura is the gaze that the inanimate or natural objects return to us, and is related by Benjamin to the *mémoire involontaire*, as in the early writings perception (or "pure" perception) was related to the Platonic anamnesis. Aura thus corresponds to the positive connotation of *Erfahrung*, and can here be related to the gaze of the child. The modern decline of the aura is compared to the loss of the "ability to look" (*GS* I/2:644-48/*SW* 4:337-39), that ability that still characterizes the child. For the question of aura, see Stoessel (1983) and Fürnkäs (2000).

the form of criticism, and make of it a semiotic experience of the city. *One-Way Street* is a collection of *Denkbilder*, which shun theory and argumentation and "present" or "stage" various problems and insights. No longer an "extra," the child here holds a central place, not only in "Construction Site," but also and especially in the sections titled "Enlargements," "Toys," "Stamp Shop" and other pieces. Here, the idea of the "penetration" of the book by the reading child is reiterated, and motifs merely hinted at in earlier writings are made explicit. First, the motif of a "closeness" between the child and the world of things, which annuls the *principium individuationis* and the separation subject/object. This closeness is "tactile," a knowledge of the object that does not proceed from detached observation through the sense of vision, but is sensorial and sensual, "passionate" (*leidenschaftlich*) like the embrace of a lover who penetrates the boudoir of the kitchen (*GS* IV/1:114/*SW* 1:464). It becomes interpenetration when the child plays hide-and-seek and an act of redemption of the object (a fundament motif in the 1930s) in the child's collection (*GS* IV/1:115-16, 134-37/*SW* 1:465, 478-80).[15] The important theme of the bourgeois apartment is introduced here: a "gloomy" space, it is the "rotten, dismal edifice in whose closets and crannies the most ignominious instincts are deposited" and where eroticism is neutralized and transformed into commodity fetishism, the fulcrum of the bourgeois *phantasmagoria*.[16] Through play, the child transforms this gloomy environment into an enchanted space, a place of mystery, exoticism and adventure; thus play is an enchanting, "mythic" activity, but one that *disenchants* the adults' myth through playful enchantment: "magical

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[15] The connection between child and collector is fundamental and is emphasized in many writings, from *One-Way Street* to the Berlin *memoires* to the *Arcades Project*. In the 1931 piece "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin dwells on the peculiar relationship with objects that both child and collector present: the child/collector "does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value [*Funktionswert*, *Nutzen*]—that is, their usefulness [*Brauchbarkeit*]—but studies and *loves* them as the scene, the stage, of their fate." This relationship has thus something "*magical*" and "*passionate*," so different from the utilitarian one of adults and/as bourgeois. As such, this relationship "saves" the object from the fate of the commodity, that is, from both usefulness and fetishism: child and collector "can accomplish the renewal of existence" of the object, for them "collecting is only a process of renewal." "To *renew the old world* [*die alte Welt erneuern*]," through tactility, renaming, acquisition—this is the task of childhood and collecting (*GS* IV/1:389-90/*SW* 2:487, emphases added). See Köhn (2000) and Gilloch (2002, 100ff.).

[16] In "Moscow," Benjamin had already described the "petty-bourgeois rooms" as "battlefields over which the attack of commodity capital has advanced victoriously; nothing human can flourish there again" (*GS* IV/1:327/*SW* 2:30).

experience [*magische Erfahrung*] becomes science [*Wissenschaft*]. As its engineer, the child disenchants [*entzaubert*] the gloomy parental apartment" (*GS* IV/1:116, 144/*SW* 1:465-66, 484).

Another fundamental motif is that of nature and *Technik*: bourgeois modernity is a "fallen" condition, in which nature is approached without respect and exploited "rapaciously," snatching "the fruit unripe from the trees in order to sell it most profitably": "through necessity and greed" bourgeois society has "denatured [*entartet*] itself" (*GS* IV/1:101/*SW* 1:455). The last text of *One Way Street*, "To the Planetarium," is here fundamental. For the ancients, Benjamin writes, human intercourse with nature and the cosmos was an "ecstatic trance" (*Rausch*), in which they were able to "gain a certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other." Bourgeois modernity betrayed Mother Earth in the attempt to dominate the cosmic powers. Technology was understood as "the mastery of nature," but ultimately rebelled against its masters, turning "the bridal bed into [the] bloodbath" of World War I. However, to consider technology the mastery of nature is for Benjamin the same as to trust a "cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education." Education, Benjamin argues, is rather "the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we have to use this term) of that relationship and not of children." Likewise, technology is the "mastery not of nature but of the relation between nature and man." It is the organization of human contact with the cosmos and, as such, is the "genuine cosmic experience" (*echter kosmischer Erfahrung*). The will to domination, the Enlightenment myth of cumulative progress, the estrangement of man from nature, ended in the rebellion of technology, a "frenzy of destruction" and annihilation (GS IV/1:146-48/*SW* 1:486-87). Only the child, in its prelapsarian, non-hierarchical relationship with nature, seeks harmony rather than mastery, and therefore has a "correct" approach to technology.[17] This question of

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[17] This point is emphasized in the important 1930 "Theories of German Fascism," a review of the collection of essays *War and Warrior* edited by Ernst Jünger. War is here again defined as the "slave revolt on the part of technology": although technology, as a new configuration of the *physis*, has the "power to give nature its voice," the "depraved" use of it made by humans gives "shape to the apocalyptic face of nature" and reduces it to silence. This depraved use is the "attempt to redeem, mystically and without mediation, *the secret of nature*, understood idealistically, through technology" and is a sign of the "incapacity of people to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology." Children's relationship, instead, "curious" but

technology will be especially important in the *Arcades Project*, whilst books, mimesis, play and language will constitute the kernel of the Berlin *memoires*. All these notions will receive a more exhaustive exposition in the writings of the 1930s, but they are already present and defined in the works of the 1920s.

3. Play and Pedagogy

Between 1928 and 1930 Benjamin published a number of important reviews and essays which deal with play, toys and pedagogy. Usually taken as *marginalia* in his oeuvre, they can be considered the core of his theory of the child: at its center lays the notion of play, which is what differentiates the child's experience from that of the (bourgeois) adult. The analysis of toys provides the starting point. In an article on a toy exhibition at the Märkisches Museum in Berlin ("Old Toys," 1928) and two reviews of Karl Gröber's *Kinderspielzeug aus alter Zeit: Eine Geschichte des Spielzeugs* ("The Cultural History of Toys" and "Toys and Play," 1928),[18] Benjamin argues that toys are constructed by adults and usually "tend to show what the adult understands [*sich vorstellt*] by toys rather than what the child demands [*verlangt*] from them" (*GS* IV.1:514/*SW* 2:101, translation modified). They are in a certain sense "imposed on [the child] as cult implements" and are thus a "site of conflict, less of the child with the adult than of the adult with the child" (*GS* III:128/*SW* 2:118). Toys are laden with the culture and the prejudices of their time, most of all with the idea of childhood of their time: adults use the needs of the child as a "pretext of satisfying their own childish needs" (*GS* III:128/*SW* 2:117). The image of the child has nevertheless changed enormously since the end of the eighteenth century, since it has finally been recognized that children are not just "men and women of a reduced scale" and, most of all, that play is not the "imitation [*Nachahmung*] of adults." The old notions of child and play determined a pedagogy in which the adult was "the ideal in whose image the educator aspired to mold [*bilden*] the child" (*GS* IV/1:514, 3:128, 129/*SW* 2:101, 118, 119). The recognition of the child's peculiarity produces different notions of toys and play. The former,

"sober" [*nüchtern*], "possess in technology not a fetish of doom but *a key to happiness*" [*einen Schlüssel zum Glück*]: only they can listen to the voice of nature, the "secret password," and thus shape technology mimetically and harmoniously (*GS* III:240, 247-50/*SW* 2:313, 319-21, emphases added).

[18] Cf. also "Russische Spielsachen" (1930, *GS* IV/2:623-25), "Berliner Spielzeugwanderung I" and "Berliner Spielzeugwanderung II" (1930, *GS* VII/1:98-105, 105-111).

Benjamin writes, become "toys" "only afterwards, partly through the child's power of imagination" (*Bildkraft*). They are not the work of adults, but "the result of children at play": "a child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with sand, and so he turns into a backer; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman." Thus the artefact is appropriated by the playing child, "mislaid, broken, and repaired," and only then does it become a toy. "Imitation," Benjamin concludes, "is at home in the playing, not in the plaything" (*GS* IV/1:515, III:128, 116, 117/*SW* 2:101, 115, 116, 118).[19]

Here the question returns of the relationship with the object: the child enjoys the "harmonious combinations of the most heterogeneous materials—stone, plasticine, wood and paper—" and is "chaste" (*keusch*) in their use; its world is a "microcosm" where "wood, bones, wickerwork, and clay are the most important materials, all of which were already used in patriarchal [that is, pre-bourgeois, and thus prelapsarian] times, when toys were still a part of the production process that found parents and children together." The available technology conditions the construction of the toy, but in its "chaste" use of the materials the child exemplifies the question of technology, that is, of a non-dominating and more harmonious relationship between humans and nature (*GS* III:115-16, 129-30/*SW* 2:115, 119). Another important point is the anti-individualist nature of play: in "Old Toys," Benjamin writes that, in play, "even the most princely doll becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children's play commune." In "Toys and Play," the "schematic individualism" and the picture of the child given by the "psychology of the individual" are each undermined by the child's play: the child's worldview demands to be seen as "collectivist" (*GS* IV/1:515, III:128/*SW* 2:101, 117-18). The child lives in a world that is not only prior to distance from the object, but also prior to bourgeois "possessive individualism." Here, Benjamin seems to identify the *principium individuationis* with bourgeois possessive individualism, and the child's absence of individualism with a revolutionary collectivist and proletarian ideal.

The conclusion of "Toys and Play" gives a positive definition of children's play as an experiment with objects and rhythms, based on "repetition," in which we "first gain possession of ourselves." "For a child repetition is the soul of play," Benjamin writes, "nothing gives him greater pleasure than to 'Do it again!'" Benjamin finds the explanation in Freud: "every profound experience [*tiefste Erfahrung*] longs to be insatiable, longs for return and repetition until the end of time, and for the

[19] Benjamin's child can thus be related to Lévi-Strauss (1966) *bricoleur*.

reinstatement of an original condition from which it sprang." Not only the mastery of "frightening fundamental experiences," but also and most of all the enjoyment of "one's victories and triumphs over and over again, with total intensity": a child "creates the entire event anew and starts again right from the beginning." Play as repetition is not a "doing as if" [*So-tun-als-ob*], but a "doing the same thing over and over again" [*Immer-wieder-tun*], the transformation of "shattering experience [*erschütterndsten Erfahrung*] into habit [*Gewohnheit*]" (*GS* III:131-32/*SW* 2:120). This is a difficult point in Benjamin: repetition will become in the 1930s the core of the phantasmagoria of modernity, the hellish "eternal return of the same" that is the *fundamental* form of "mythic consciousness" (D10,3); and habit, the anesthetic that numbs the senses and understanding of the bourgeois adult. Burkhardt Lindner (1986, 38-40) stresses that Benjamin lacked a coherent theory of myth, and this threatens to undermine his analysis of the child: here, myth, magic and animism are pitted against civilizing rationality (as its "disenchantment"[20]), but elsewhere rationality itself is denounced as the exacerbation of myth. Despite the force of Lindner's criticism, it can nevertheless be argued that repetition functions differently in play and in modern myth: in the former, it is a *wieder-tun*, a "doing" again, a "creating" (*schaffen*) the event anew, a starting again everything from the beginning, therefore an active stance; in the latter, a *Wieder-kehr*, a passively suffered *re-turn* of the same numbing specters, over and over again (cf. Andrew Benjamin 2013, 216-17). Repetition remains problematic for Benjamin because he cannot make up his mind and oscillates between these two mutually exclusive alternatives.

These concepts coagulate into a specific theory of pedagogy in two important essays, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre" (1929), written with Asja Lacis, and "A Communist Pedagogy" (1930). Benjamin's pedagogic writings of these years are strongly Brechtian in content and language: he met Brecht through the Latvian Asja Lacis in 1929, and the influence of both would be very strong thereafter.[21] The tone of these writings is strongly anti-bourgeois and revolutionary, their explicit context proletarian and communist Russia and its advances in the field of

[20] Gilloch (1996, 84-85) insists on this point: play is both mythic and demystifying insofar as "the 'magic' of the child's imagination" is disruptive and subversive, and as such it is the "antithesis of the mythology of the adult," which is fetishistic and reifying. Thus the child as a figure of redemption "unravel[s] the mythic from within" and disenchants the city through enchantment.

[21] While the Brechtian influence is widely acknowledged, that of Lacis is usually downplayed. For an analysis of the importance of Lacis for Benjamin's theory of pedagogy cf. e.g. Ingram (2002).

education. Although they betray a "faith" in the communist utopia, they are nonetheless a translation into Lacis' theatrical frame of Benjamin's own long-standing ideas on childhood. The referent of "A Communist Pedagogy" is in fact bourgeois education, communist pedagogy itself is defined merely *ex negativo*. The bourgeois system revolves around the two poles of "psychology" and "ethics": psychology establishes the "nature of the child" and ethics sets the "goal of education," the formation of the good citizen. It thus "hypostatizes an absolute childhood or adolescence" and "a no less absolute concept of adulthood and citizenship which it tricks out with the attributes of idealist philosophy." It is predicated on "abstract data" and its strategy is "insinuation and empathy"; it thus prolongs the capitalist separation of theory and practice and "colonizes" childhood with the demands of commodity society.[22] What the new communist ideal proposes is instead an education firmly anchored in concrete reality, and thus "nonhumanist and noncontemplative, but *active* and *practical* universally; it is the product of universal readiness [*Bereitsein*]" (*GS* III:206-9/*SW* 2:272-75, emphases added).

To the bourgeois "unsystematic system," Benjamin opposes in "Program" a revolutionary pedagogy, the system of which would be the "framework" (*Rahmen*) of theatre. This is a "framework" because it does not propose an abstract "idea" *towards* which education should lead, but an "objective space" *within* which it is allowed to develop. Theatre itself is feared by bourgeois educators because it "unleashes" (*aufruft*) in children "the most powerful energies of the future," when "reality and play *merge into one*" (*GS* II/2:764-65/*SW* 2:202, translation modified). This merging requires that, in proletarian theatre, the attitude of the adult be radically modified: the pedagogue must give up his or her domineering role and become a "leader" (*Leiter*), whose influence is merely "indirect" and "mediated by subject matter, tasks, and performances." The "moral personality" of the adult, the "superior standpoint" that leads to an attempt at direct influence, the "knowing better and wanting better" of bourgeois education, must be "neutralized." Only this neutralization allows for the release of the "true genius of education—namely, the power of observation" (*Beobachtung*).[23] Bourgeois pedagogical love is "sentimental and vain," it aims at imposing a set of values and behavioral patterns on the child; proletarian theatre is not concerned with contents, but with "tensions," that is, relationships and—one might extrapolate—"constellations," and in it the adult's love must be "unsentimental," that is, it must abandon the

[22] See also "Kolonialpädagogik" (*GS* III:272-74).
[23] Cf. the meaning of *Beobachtung* in the idea of nature of the early Romantics, *GS* I/1:58-61/*SW* 1:147-48.

attempt at influence and courageously embrace "mere observation" (*GS* II/2:765-66/*SW* 2:203).[24]

It is the adults, therefore, who learn in proletarian theatre, and what they learn are *signals*: "every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal," not of a psychoanalytic unconscious, but rather "a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands," from a world that is prelapsarian, and thus potentially redemptive and revolutionary. The task of the leader is to "release children's signals from the hazardous magical world of sheer fantasy and apply them to materials."[25] The fulcrum of this pedagogy is the child's *gesture*,[26] based on improvisation, where the "creative innervation is in an exact correspondence to receptive innervation." The child's mode of reception is, as in the Romantic theory of nature, "pure" and "unmediated," its improvisation thus "creative," "inventive" and tied to action (cf. Buck-Morss 1989, 264). And, unlike in bourgeois education, it is never the single child, but rather the "collective" that acts.[27] Gesture, improvisation and collectivity mark the scope of education: "childhood achievement is always aimed not at the 'eternity' of the products but at the 'moment' of the gesture. The theatre is the art form of the child because it is ephemeral" (*GS* II/2:766-67/*SW* 2:204, translation

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[24] The negative reference of this essay is not merely bourgeois education; in it, Benjamin also briefly settles his differences with the *Jugendbewegung*, in which he was active until ten years before. The *Jugendkultur* attempted to achieve a "hopeless compromise" with bourgeois society: it channeled the youth energies into a self-centered reflection, which "can never be activated in a political way." This "idealistic self-reflection" drains the enthusiasm of youth and gradually and imperceptibly replaces the former ideologies (German idealism) with bourgeois contents. The child's mind is, as in the bourgeois model, merely "subjugated," it remains apolitical and idealistically self-centered (*GS* II/2:768/*SW* 2:205).

[25] Hans-Thies Lehmann (1996, 189) relates the children's signals to Benjamin's theory of language: the signal is the "name," the language that speaks *in* the person: "The presubjective signalling of the child's gesture transfers the expression from the realm of subjectivity into the 'objective' collective realm of the body. In between *vouloir-dire*/meaning to say and the body, lies the realm of the gesture, an intermediate realm in which, unhampered by 'culture', that which is mute becomes eloquent."

[26] Gerhard Fischer (1996, 211) relates the gesture to both the "profane illuminations" of the Surrealism essay and the shock of the writings on Baudelaire and Paris, the *caesura* that interrupts the continuum of time and opens up the messianic.

[27] The collective, Fischer (1996, 212) argues, emphasizes the difference from the abstract and hypostatized child of bourgeois education: it is a part of a group, product of specific sociocultural circumstances and with specific needs and priorities.

modified).[28] Performance as the "radical unleashing [*Entbindung*] of play" is aimed not at inculcating in children a system of values or notions, but at the "fulfilment" (*Erfüllung*) of their childhood. It is thus not a moment of notional learning, but rather a "great creative pause" in the process of upbringing, where the child's imagination is liberated and, as in the pagan carnival, roles are inverted and it is the adults who learn.[29] They learn from the child's gesture "the *secret signal* [*geheime Signal*] of what is to come," the password that allows them to become "truly revolutionary" subjects (*GS* II/2:768-69/*SW* 2:205-6).[30]

4. Experience and Memory

In Benjamin's 1930s writings the figure of the child appears above all in the Berlin *memoires*. The fragments of *A Berlin Chronicle* were written in the first half of 1932 in Ibiza, re-worked into a first version of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* between 1932 and 1934, and then further revised into a second version in 1938. As a project, they almost cover the whole decade and run parallel to the essays and notes flowing from and into the *Arcades Project*. In this section, I will attempt to analyze the Berlin *memoires* in relation to the question of experience. With Benjamin's interest focusing on the analysis of urban modernity, the question of experience becomes central, but also forks into two antinomian directions: not the ones that lead either to Berlin or to Paris, but, rather, the dialectical contradiction between an enthusiastic embracing of modernity as revolutionary and liberating and a melancholic yearning for the world that

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[28] This point is dangerously close to the vitalism and irrationalism of the *Lebensphilosophie* of Klages or Jung: the fact that, as Lehmann (1996, 189) puts it, "reflection and moral consideration, delay, planning ahead and thinking, spoil everything in a situation where the main point is child-like, playful, bodily innervation. *Decisive experiences are formed before or beyond intention, in interrupting it*." Nevertheless, Lehmann argues that Benjamin is concerned with "localizing non-conscious impulses and structures in the realm of practical expressive behavior, not with their ideological hypostatization. They have a concrete place, such as the theatre, the text, and the child's gesture. Benjamin attempts to give this de-subjectivation a political name when he describes the child itself, and not merely the community of children, as the 'child's collective' (*GS* II/2:766)."

[29] This notion can be fruitfully compared with Bakhtin concept of "carnevalesque." Cf. Bakhtin (1984, 122-37).

[30] Buck-Morss (1989, 265) in fact argues that the consequence—or the goal—of bourgeois education and socialization is "their defeat as revolutionary subjects." See also Zipes (2003).

had been lost. To the first attitude belong "The Destructive Character" (1931), "Experience and Poverty" (1933), "The Author as Producer" (1934) and the Artwork essay (1936); to the second, the Berlin *memoires*, "The Storyteller" (1936) and the writings on Kafka, Proust, and Baudelaire. When confronted with the experience of modernity and the loss of traditional experience, Benjamin cannot choose, or, better, he only ever makes strategic, temporary, and reversible choices.

"Experience [*Erfahrung*] has fallen in value," Benjamin writes in "Experience and Poverty": today no one knows precisely what it is, and even less how to communicate it. "A completely new poverty has descended on mankind," with the developments in technology that led to the horrors of World War I. But the "new barbarism" that constitutes the poverty of human experience is, for Benjamin, a "positive" development: it forces humanity to "start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right." The new barbarian is the "naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like *a newborn babe* in the dirty diapers of the present," a "de-humanized" being who rejects the "civilization" of old humanism, does not yearn for new experience, nor to free him- or herself from experience, but longs "for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty […] that will lead to something respectable." In this new world, "nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged" and the new barbarian is about to begin "anew and with few resources," prepared to "outlive culture, if need be" (*GS* II/1:213-19/*SW* 2:731-35). The same principle informs "The Destructive Character," who destroys the old world in order to make room for the new (*GS* IV/1:396-98/*SW* 2:543-444); or "The Author as Producer," where the revolutionary writer is urged to forsake his or her aura, adopt the technical and technological innovations and become an "operating" writer (*GS* II/2:683-701/*SW* 2:768-82); and especially the Artwork essay, where the cathartic and revolutionary power of technological reproducibility results in the "shattering of tradition" and the "liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage," which will allow the "renewal of humanity" (*GS* VII/1:353-54/*SW* 3:104).[31]

[31] The destruction of experience that constitutes this new barbarism entails a renunciation of the original innocence and wholeness that the prelapsarian child represents; the *newborn babe* which allegorizes this new barbarism is thus not the child of the 1920s writings, nor the one of the Berlin *memoires*, but rather what today is called the "posthuman," a *non-innocent* and *non-whole* mixture of "nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort," a fresh start that does away with all that the prelapsarian child represented. The antinomy that informs Benjamin's

The incipit of "Experience and Poverty" is recycled almost word for word in "The Storyteller," but thereafter the two essays proceed in opposite directions. In the latter, the loss of experience [*Erfahrung*] means the loss of the "lore of the past" and its "wisdom," the loss of memory and the transformation of experience into information (*GS* II/2:438-65/*SW* 3:143-66). The problem of modernity is thus the separation of experience and memory: this is the central issue in Benjamin's work throughout the 1930s, explicitly and most thoroughly analyzed in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." To "vitalistic" experience as *Erlebnis*—"inner lived experience," singular, individualistic, irrational and ultimately mythical (Dilthey, Klages, Jung)—Benjamin there counterposes *Erfahrung* as theorized by Bergson: an experience structurally grounded on memory (*Gedächtnis*), tradition and a collective and relational existence. The problem with Bergson's position, nonetheless, is that it is anti-historical: he excluded the "blinding" experience of "large-scale industrialism" from his concept of experience, so that in his theory *Erfahrung* can only be constructed as an "afterimage" (*Nachbild*) of the modern (*GS* I/2:608-9/*SW* 3:314). The Bergsonian insight is developed by Proust (a cousin of Bergson's wife), who would attempt to "produce *Erfahrung* […] in a synthetic way under today's social conditions." Thus Bergson's *mémoire pure* becomes Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, a form of recollection in which the past arises when put into constellation with an event in the present. The problem with Proust, however, is that this is entirely based on *chance*, and thus "part of the inventory of the individual who is isolated in various ways" (*GS* I/2:610-11/*SW* 3:315-16). The politics of such experience are endangered by its own structure; it needs to be historicized and, in order to achieve this, Benjamin enlists Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had written that the threatening and shocking stimuli of modern life leave traces in the unconscious: "if need be," the consciousness can be "trained" to cope with stimuli, and dreams and recollection (*Erinnerung*) are part of this training. Incorporated into conscious memory, the *Erlebnis* of modern life can thus be emancipated and transformed into Baudelaire's poetic *Erfahrung* (*GS* I/2:612-15/*SW* 3:317-18). Benjamin describes Baudelaire's *correspondances* as an "*Erfahrung* which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form." They are

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writings in the 1930s, his Janus-like looking melancholically backwards and, simultaneously, enthusiastically forward, can be represented by the opposite images of the prelapsarian child and the posthuman. However, whereas the prelapsarian child is the main focus of Benjamin's writing on this figure, the posthuman receives much less attention.

the "data of recollection" (*Eingedenken*),[32] in which the past "murmurs," and, importantly, they "*do not occur by chance*" (*GS* I/2:638-40/*SW* 3:333-34, emphasis added). What Benjamin attempted, by rejecting both the vitalistic *Erlebnis* of *Lebensphilosophie* and the overly rational *Erfahrung* of the Neo-Kantian tradition, was to construe a different type of experience that would be *dialectical*. This is "a learning process over time," Martin Jay (1993, 196) argues, "combining negations through unpleasant episodes as well as affirmations through positive ones to produce something akin to a wisdom that can be passed down via tradition through the generations."[33]

The argument of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" is complex and cannot be explored in detail here[34]; this long introduction, though, can provide a theoretical grid for the analysis of the Berlin *memoires*. *A Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* are usually read as Proustian texts, even though many elements suggest the presence of a more complex theoretical apparatus. These two texts, especially *Berlin Childhood*, repropose (sometimes in the same words), explore and represent themes and motifs that accompanied the figure of the child in the 1910s and 1920s: the mimetic relationship with things and nature, expressed in the passion for collecting[35]; a prelapsarian relationship with

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[32] *Gedächtnis*, *Erinnerung* and *Eingedenken* can be translated as memory, recollection, and remembrance, where the first presents a connotation of a gathering of unconscious data, the second of an isolated individual memory and the third is the term most recurrent in the *Arcades Project* for the construction of the dialectical image. In "The Storyteller" we read: "it is *remembrance* [*Eingedenken*], the muse-derived element of the novel, which is added to recollection [*Gedächtnis*], the muse-derived element of the story, the unity of their origin in memory [*Erinnerung*] having disappeared with the decline of the epic" (*GS* II/2:454/*SW* 3:154)

[33] On the "anti-Proustian" politics of Benjamin's memoires see e.g. Forrest (2007, 21-42).

[34] For an analysis of this essay in relation to the concept of experience, see e.g. Andrew Benjamin (1989); Jay (1993); Abbas (1989).

[35] See, for example, the "tactile" inhabiting of books (*GS* VI:514-15; VII/1:396-97/*SW* 2:631-2; 3:356); the passion of collection (*GS* VII/1:408-9/*SW* 3:367); tactility and the "sock" (*GS* VII/1:416-17/*SW* 3:374); "Hiding Places": identity and playing hide-and-seek (*GS* VII/1:418/*SW* 3:375-76); color and perception (*GS* VII/1:424/*SW* 3:380); tactility and the *principium individuationis* (*GS* IV/1:250/*SW* 3:389); collection and "tiding up" (*GS* IV/1:283-87/*SW* 3:401-4); "the lamp": objects and mimesis (*GS* VII/2:792-94/*SW* 2:690-93). Cf. Leslie (2002, 11ff.); Weidmann (1992, 95-105); Schweppenhäuser (1972).

language and name[36]; the bourgeois apartment as prison[37]; play as demystifying and thus redemptive.[38] I will not again explore these themes, which have been analyzed above, even though they are presented more systematically and with greater depth in these late writings.[39] What I want to explore here is rather the relationship of the child to experience and memory, which is the founding point underlying the other issues.

Memory (*Gedächtnis*), Benjamin writes in *A Berlin Chronic*, is

> not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre [*Schauplatz*]. It is the medium of past experience [*des Erlebten*], just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences [*echter Erinnungen*]. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is merely a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images [*Bilder*], severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the sober room of our later insights. True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding, as well. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and

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[36] See the episodes of Aunt Lehmann (*GS* VI:472; VII/1:398-400/*SW* 2:600-1; 3:358-59); *Markt-Halle* (*GS* VI:475; VII/1:402/*SW* 2:603; 3:360-62); Brauhausberg (*GS* VI:495/*SW* 2:617); the snowstorm "speaks" to the child (*GS* VII/1:396-97/*SW* 3:356); the Mummerehlen: words and mimesis (*GS* VII/1:417-18/*SW* 3:374). Cf. Gilloch (1996, 60ff.); Kahn (1998, 142ff.).

[37] Benjamin describes the child he was as a "prisoner" enclosed within the well-to-do "old and new West End," a "ghetto" and a "fiefdom" (*GS* VI:471; IV/1:287-88/*SW* 2:599-600; 3:404); see the humiliating shopping sprees with the mother (*GS* VI:499/*SW* 2:620); the interior as the dead reign of the immortal commodity (*GS* VI:500-2/*SW* 2:621-2); the courtyards as openings (*GS* VI:503/*SW* 2:623); poverty as an unknown, external experience (*GS* VI:518/*SW* 2:634); the child as "threshold dweller," waiting to cross the boundary (*GS* VI:461-62; VII/1:395/*SW* 2:600; 3:354). Cf. Gilloch (1996, 76ff.); Richter (2000, 214ff.).

[38] See "hiding places" (*GS* VII/1:418/*SW* 3:375-76). Cf. Gilloch (1996, 85ff.).

[39] Benjamin scholars, quite correctly, usually base the analysis of the child in Benjamin on these writings. The most thorough analysis of the Berlin *memoires* to date is Stüssi (1977).

> rhapsodic manner, essay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers. (*GS* VI:486-87/*SW* 2:611)

If read through the lens of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” this programmatic passage clarifies some important points: the project of the Berlin *memoires* as an archaeological excavation of the past is not simply a bite into the Proustian madeleine. The archaeologist proceeds with the determination to unbury the treasure, is not afraid of hard work or temporary failures, and most of all proceeds with a *plan*. It is true that chance has its play in the success of the research, that its fruits are torsos, fragments, and ruins, not a complete and organic narrative, but a fragmentary rhapsody.[40] Nevertheless, the voluntaristic tone of this passage is clear. The Berlin *memoires* cannot be read as merely a Proustian abandonment to the chances of the *mémoire involontaire*, as many commentators suggest.[41] They are not a collection of private and singular *Erlebnisse*, but rather an attempt to transform these into collective and relational *Erfahrungen*—they are, Burkhadt Lindner (1992, 245) writes, *Erfahrungsbilder*. Unlike Proust’s work, this is a project with a precise politics, that of a reconstitution of the relationship, lost in modernity, between experience and memory, so that the archaeology of the experience must be seen as its rescue. The interrelations of past and present, child and adult, memory and setting, thus superimpose Baudelaire’s *correspondances* and their political project over Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*.

This is why Benjamin refuses to define his project as autobiography[42]: the singular and irrational *Erlebnis*, the “substance that life is made of,” cannot be captured by commemoration, and in its singularity has no political value. By “spatializing” his reminiscences, Benjamin screens out

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[40] For the labyrinthine and city-like structure of memory see e.g. Szondi (1988, 22); Gilloch (1996, 66ff.); Richter (2000, 45ff.).

[41] Cf. e.g. Kahn (1998) and also Gilloch (1996, especially 57ff.). Both Kahn and Gilloch recognize a connection with Baudelaire’s *correspondances* and that the Berlin *memoires* are “exercises in critical historiography rather than wistful nostalgia” (Gilloch 1996, 60) and the nexus with the *Arcades Project*, but they remain anchored to the argument of the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*.

[42] The famous definition of *A Berlin Chronicle* reads: “for autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of commemoration [*des Eingedenkens*]. This strange form—it may be called fleeting or eternal—is in neither case the substance that life is made of” (*GS* VI:488/*SW* 2:612, translation modified).

the individuality of memory and transforms it into the communal *Erfahrung* of places, moments, and situations, of the relational experience of Berlin around 1900. The short preface to *Berlin Childhood* states that biographical features and the continuity of experience will recede in his project so as to give space to the *images* "in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class." While the experience of a country childhood could still present a (premodern) continuity, obedient to nature and its cycles, the metropolitan experience cannot be so "customized" (*geprägt*). Emancipation from loss of experience can rather be performed in metropolitan modernity by a political act of remembrance that becomes a true "historical experience" (*geschichtliche Erfahrung*) (*GS* VII/1:384/*SW* 3:344). The Berlin *memoires* are recollections of the city at a specific time, a precise historical (and not merely individual) experience the rescue of which is attempted. This is the connection between this project and the historical analysis of the prehistory of modernity in the *Arcades Project*.

5. Childhood and Awakening

In the *Arcades Project* the child occupies a secondary position: the critique of bourgeois modernity focuses on the bourgeois consumer, leaving the child's alternative form of experience only implicit. The figure appears in the critique neither of the bourgeois interior nor of commodity fetishism and is barely mentioned in the analysis of the collector. However, it does appear as central in three thematic areas: the question of technology, the analysis of labor, and the motif of awakening.

Technik was defined in "To the Planetarium" and also in the Surrealism essay as the human organization of *physis* (cf. *GS* II/1:310/*SW* 2:217), as mastery not of *physis*, but of the relationship between man and cosmos. Modernity can no longer master this relationship: the attempt to transform technology into the mastery of nature resulted in the horrors of the Great War; the aestheticization of technology, extreme examples of which include Italian Futurism and Jünger, ended in a "frenzy of annihilation." Mastery of the man/nature relationship entails the ability to understand it and thus to give it symbolic representation. This is what modernity cannot do and this is where the child is important: in its prelapsarian approach to nature, the child operates like ancient mythologies, producing a symbolic representation of its configuration. Technology as a new configuration of nature needs an ever-new symbolic representation: "by the interest it takes in technological phenomena," Benjamin writes, "by the curiosity it displays before any sort of invention

or machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old world of symbol" and thus achieves "something great and irreplaceable for humanity" (N2a1). The task of childhood is thus "to bring the new world into symbolic space," to do what grownups cannot, that is, "recognize the new once again" (*das Neue wiedererkennen*) (K1a,3). There is no antithesis, for Benjamin, between the symbol-space of nature and that of technology, as Klages argued, but rather the latter is simply a new configuration of *physis*: this new configuration needs new "images" and these are what the child discovers and incorporates "into the image stock of humanity" (K1a,3). The child's relationship to technology is thus informed not by the "aura of novelty," as in the adult (for which the artefact is "merely new"), but rather by the "aura of the habitual," by the same aura as in nature (N2a1). The technological artefact returns the gaze of the child not as the commodity returns that of the adult, but in the sense of the "pure perception" of the Romantics. It is thus a mimetic relation.[43]

Technology as the mastery of nature also pertains to the "inauthentic" discourse of labor as the "exploitation" (*Ausbeutung*) of nature, which treats nature merely as the booty (*Beute*) of human pillage. This discourse reinforces, and is in turn reinforced by, the practice of the exploitation of human labor. Labor, Benjamin argues, is characterized by the exploitation of nature by man and, when the order of production is founded on the exploitation of labor, then "raw materials" are given the "semblance [*Schein*] of 'value'" (J75,2). A relationship to nature not based on exploitation would result in human beings "authentically" unexploited, and vice versa. The child's mimetic relationship to nature becomes here the model of a new concept of labor: play as respectful and undemanding aims "not at the propagation of values but at the amelioration of nature" (J75,2). The question of labor and technology thus finds its resolution in play. Benjamin found this model in Fourier, a central reference for the *Arcades Project*: "to have instituted play as the canon of a labor no longer rooted in exploitation is one of the great merits of Fourier" (J75,2). The

[43] Benjamin does not connect this "bringing the new world into symbolic space" with the "poverty of experience" that characterizes this new world, thus an ambiguity hides here: the prelapsarian child produces a symbolic representation of a new world that brings about the end of the concepts of original innocence and wholeness that the child represents. Its mimetic relation with technology drags him or her away from the Romantic myth and towards the "shattering of tradition," the "liquidation" of its values and its myths, including the myth of original innocence and wholeness; thus towards a "renewal of humanity" (*GS* VII/1:353-54/*SW* 3:104) and the "newborn babe" that represents the "new barbarian" of "Experience and Poverty" (cf. *GS* II/1:213-19/*SW* 2:731-35).

travail passionné of the Harmonians in the phalanstery is based on children's play, where "all places are worked by humans, made useful and beautiful thereby" and action is the sister of dream (J75,2). Konvolut "W" is dedicated to Fourier and many other entries relate to children's role in the phalanstery.[44] It is significant that Fourier's descriptions read like the descriptions "of color illustrations in children books" (W16a,1): the anti-positivistic children's form of perception illustrates a relationship to the natural world (and technology) in which labor, as Benjamin writes in "On the Concept of History," "far from exploiting nature, would help her give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb" (*GS* I/2:699/*SW* 4:394). This form of labor is not, for Benjamin, a regression to pre-capitalist and pre-modern models of work, but "presupposes highly developed forces of production, such as only today stand at the disposal of humanity" (J75a).

Michael Hollington (1996, 124) writes that what appealed to Benjamin in Fourier was the vision of "human happiness as a kind of game" in which action is the sister of dream (J75,2). This statement, and thus the whole discussion of the child, requires qualification: that action and dream intertwine in play does not endorse a "return to childhood," nor entails that the modern adult take refuge from the loss of experience into a childish dream-state, into an *infantilization* of experience. Benjamin is not proposing a "politics of infancy." The polemic against Surrealism revolves precisely around this point: the Surrealists rediscovered myth and dream in the metropolis, but emphasized merely the moment of intoxication, which they strived to inhabit. Surrealism remained therefore politically "inadequate" and "undialectical" (*GS* II/1:307/*SW* 2:216): "Aragon persists within the realm of dream," reads an entry of the *Arcades Project*; "mythology" is his "impressionistic element." Benjamin's project, on the contrary, is concerned "to find the constellation of awakening [*Erwachen*]" and thus to "dissolve" "mythology into the space of history" (N1,9). A number of entries in Konvolut "K" relate the child to dreaming and awakening: the "historical configuration" of childhood is a "dream configuration"; "every epoch has such a side turned toward dreams, the child's side [*die Kinderseite*]" (K1,1). But what Benjamin's project seeks

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[44] In it, children's tastes and passions would be given free reins in order to discover their "vocation"; by organizing them in different hierarchies and "hordes" (W12,4, W12,6, from W14,1 to W14a3) and giving them tasks they enjoy (like the collection of garbage and the cleaning of slaughterhouses and latrines; W2,1, W12,1), Fourier includes the pleasure principle into education (and thus work). On Benjamin's child in relation to Fourier, see e.g. Hollington (1996, 118) and Pearson (2004).

is a "teleological moment in the context of dreams." This moment is "waiting" (*das Warten*), which is the figure of childhood: "the dream waits secretly for the awakening; the sleeper surrenders himself to death only provisionally, waits for the second when he will cunningly wrest himself from its clutches. So, too, the dreaming collective, whose children provide the happy occasion for its own awakening" (K1a,2).[45] The child is a figure of waiting, and thus a figure of awakening, a dream of the future and a figure of hope.

A passage from *One-Way Street* further elucidates this point: to be "still half in league with the dream world" is self-betrayal, a *childish* posture, as distinct from a dialectical valorization and use of childhood; "only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dream be addressed from the superior vantage of memory" (*GS* IV/1:86/*SW* 1:445). Only retrospectively, from the vantage point of adulthood, can childhood become a revolutionary model of experience: to paraphrase the Surrealist slogan, Benjamin wanted to win the energies of childhood for the revolution, not to dwell within it. For Benjamin, childhood *stands* for an alternative model of experience, which the retrospective gaze of the adult can win for the revolutionary project. The child must grow up, society must awaken from its child-like dreaming state, childhood must end and give way to true *maturity*. The bourgeois boasting pretension of maturity is thus itself a childish illusion: bourgeois modernity is *the* state of dreaming, of myth, of false consciousness, and is therefore a state of infancy. The bourgeois patronizing attitude toward childhood dismisses precisely those characteristics of the child's world which could deliver it from such infancy: it is a "sentimental fantasy" saturated with impotence (J63a,1).[46]

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[45] In relation to the "cunning" needed to wrest oneself from the clutches of dream, Andrew Benjamin refers to a note from the "Materials for the Exposé of 1935": "We construct an awakening theoretically—that is, we imitate, in the realm of language, the trick that is decisive physiologically in awakening, for awakening operates with cunning [*Erwachen operiert mit der List*]. Only with cunning, not without it, can we work free of the realm of dream" (*AP* 907/*GS* V/2:1213). For Andrew Benjamin (2006, ix-x), this emphasizes the voluntarist aspect of awakening, which necessitates action and is therefore a "directed activity."

[46] The whole passage reads: "The dream of having children is merely a beggarly stimulus when it is not imbued with the dream of a new nature of things in which these children might one day live, or for which they can struggle. Even the dream of a 'better humanity' in which our children would 'have a better life' is only a sentimental fantasy reminiscent of Spitzweg when it is not, at bottom, the dream of a better nature in which they would live. (Herein lies the inextinguishable claim of the Fourierist utopia, a claim which Marx had recognized [and which Russia had begun to act on].) The latter dream is the living source of the biological energy of

Benjamin proposes rather a "politics of childhood," a revolution of experience based on the recovery and re-use of those pre-bourgeois potentialities that the bourgeois model of education, socialization, production and consumption has stolen from the child, and therefore from the adult.

As with the question of myth, to which it is related, the question of dreaming and awakening remains opaque in Benjamin (cf. Lindner 1986, 41). The fusion of childhood with collective history, Buck-Morss (1986, 133) notes, is but an insight, although a puzzling one, and receives no analytical clarification. Recovering the dreams of the personal and collective *Kinderseite* can certainly be read as a salvaging of experience through the remembering of a "truer," pre-bourgeois and prelapsarian experience of childhood. But at the same time these dreams, the wish-images that populate childhood and child-like epochs, present a potential for disruption and discontinuity that does away with experience as such and foreshadows a mechanical, technological scenario in which the innocence and wholeness of the prelapsarian child have no meaning. Benjamin's work is torn between these two possibilities.

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humanity, whereas the former is only the muddy pond from which the stork draws children. Baudelaire's desperate thesis concerning children as the creatures closest to original sin is not a bad complement to this image" (J63a,1).

Chapter Six

Surviving Civilization with Mickey Mouse and a Laugh

1. Cinematic Fables

On January 17, 1930, the *Berliner Filmprüfstelle*, the authority in charge of supervising and censoring cinematographic works, approved the distribution by Südfilm AG of *The Barn Dance* (1928), the fourth Mickey Mouse short film and the first to be distributed in Germany.[1] The short film was classified with a *Jugendverbot*, that is, as suitable for adults only, and was shown the same evening at the *Berliner Universum Filmtheater* as a preshow to Johannes Guter's melodrama *Wenn du einmal dein Herz verschenkst* (1929). *The Barn Dance* was not enthusiastically greeted by the audience, due to its novelty as compared to the German cartoons of the time. However, thanks to the enthusiastic reception of Disney's mouse in the United Kingdom, Südfilm AG decided to organize a special show entitled *Micky und Silly*[2] at the *Berliner UFA-Marmorhaus-Filmtheater* at 5 pm on February 17, 1930. This show included the Mickey Mouse shorts *Steamboat Willie* (1928), *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), *The Jazz Fool*

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[1] The first Disney short film to be distributed in Germany, on July 12, 1927, was *Trolley Troubles* (with the German title *Oswald und die Straßenbahn*), the first successful short of the series *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* (cf. Storm and Dreßler 1991, 24; and Laqua 1992, 10). In 1928, when the film distributor Charles Mintz deceitfully stole the rights of Oswald from Disney, the latter, together with the cartoonist Ub Iwerks, was forced to invent a new character by slightly modifying Oswald, and so Mickey Mouse was born. The character was initially named Mortimer Mouse, but thanks to Walt Disney's wife, Lillian, it was then renamed Mickey.

[2] In German "Mickey Mouse" is Germanized (though less and less today) as "Micky Maus", and Benjamin too uses this spelling. "Silly" stands for *Silly Symphonies*, a series of short animated films produced by Disney between 1929 and 1939 (for a total of 75 animated subjects), which, unlike the contemporary Mickey Mouse series, did not use recurrent characters.

(1929) and *The Opry House* (1929), and the "Silly Symphonies" *The Skeleton Dance* (1929) and *Springtime* (1929). This time the reception of the press was very positive: on February 18, the magazine *Lichtbild-Bühne* came out with the title "Das Märchen lebt" (The fairy tale is alive) and welcomed the birth of a fable "different from that of our grandmothers, a modern fable, fit for our times, magnificently alive" (qtd. in Storm and Dreßler 1991, 29-30); *Film-Kurier* used instead the title "Kurzfilme, wie sie sein sollen" (Short films as they should be) and described Mickey as "an animal living to the rhythm of jazz. Each step is a dance step, each movement a syncopation. […] What a gift for the working masses! To forget everyday life in an hour of joy and serenity. All of this in a form up to the most subtle artistic demands" (qtd. in Laqua 1992, 18-19).

Thus, Südfilm AG started an unprecedented advertising campaign and, in order to lure also a younger audience, organized, on the morning of February 24, the first movie show explicitly aimed at children at the *Terra-Lichtspieltheater des Mozartsaales* in Berlin. On May 1st, 1930, the *Berliner Marmorhaus-Filmtheater* started the first program entirely dedicated to Mickey Mouse under the title *Micky Das Tonfilm-Wunder* (*Mickey, The Talkie-Wonder*): Mickey Mouse was thus upgraded from the status of sideshow to that of true main attraction. In a few weeks he became a "must" in almost all of Berlin's cinemas; at the same time, Mickey's image was used (often breaking copyright laws) to promote the most disparate products, and a true gadget industry arose. In a very short time, Germany was hit by a true "Mickey-hysteria," which lasted for years—with very few critical exceptions.

Among these exceptions was an article by Walther Schneider, published in the October issue of the liberal magazine *Querschnitt* under the title "Micky Maus ist geisteskrank" (Mickey Maus is mentally ill), which identified in Disney's mouse the symptoms of a maniac-paranoid mental illness: "a diagnosis of the thin-limbed, hydrocephalic, astigmatic and neurasthenic Mickey Mouse shows most of all disorders of the visual and hearing spheres (commonly 'sensorial illusions')" (qtd. in Storm and Dreßler 1991, 62; and Laqua 1992, 35-36). But more important, an article in the provincial Pomeranian journal of the Nazi party, *Die Diktatur*, reported on July 28, 1931, in *Film-Kurier*:

> The blond and liberal German youth led by the nose by Jewish high finance. Youth, where is your pride? Youth, where is your self-awareness? Mickey Mouse is the most sordid and miserable ideal ever invented. Mickey Mouse is a debasing cure of the Capital. The healthy feeling says in fact to every decent girl and to every honest boy that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the great vector of bacteria in the animal kingdom, cannot

> be made to an ideal animal type. Have we nothing better to do than adorning our clothes with filthy animals [the popular Mickey and Minnie pins], just because American business-Jews want to make a buck? Down with the Jewish stultification of the people! Down with the vermin! Down with Mickey Mouse, wear the swastika! (qtd. in Storm and Dreßler 1991, 61; and Laqua 1992, 34-35)[3]

Long before 1933, the Nazis opposed what they called the growing *Verniggerung* (*niggerization*)[4] of German show business, mainly through imported American films, and in particular they demoted Disney's mouse to a "rat," an animal with which Jews will always be associated.[5] This opposition to Mickey Mouse remained, however, always partial and minoritarian, and even after the Nazi seizure of power Disney's films, and in particular the Mickey Mouse shorts, continued to be imported and distributed.[6]

However, the cultural controversy opened by the Pomeranian Nazis must be evaluated within the wider contemporary debate about "Americanism," that is, about "a modernism predicated on industrial-capitalist rationalization, on Taylorized labor and a Fordist organization of production and consumption" (Hansen 1993, 33). Beginning with that first article in *Film-Kurier*, the figure of Mickey Mouse was associated with jazz, and not only in a literal sense—since one of the reasons of Disney's great success was the ability and intelligence with which he was able to synchronize the characters' movements with the rhythm of the music (which seldom was, properly speaking, jazz)—; but in the wider sense that, just like Charlie Chaplin's slapstick comedies and jazz music, cartoons were associated with the "revolutionary" side of American consumerism, which seemed to subvert economic rationalization through sprees of destruction, magic and parody. The little mouse presented that anarchic and ecstatic appeal that people expected from jazz (Hansen 1993,

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[3] In 1991, Art Spiegelman will use part of this quotation as the epigraph for the second volume of his graphic novel *Maus*.

[4] The first Mickey Mouse—as well as the rabbit Oswald, from which it descends—is indeed completely black, apart from the eyes, the pants, and the gloves (which he starts wearing only from its fifth short feature, *The Opry House*, 1929).

[5] The anti-Semite propaganda-film *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940) opens with images of rats and a voice-over commenting: "just as the rat is the lowest of animals, so the Jew is the lowest of human beings" (qtd. in Sax 2013, 149).

[6] Contrary to propagandist rumors spread by Disney himself, the Nazi party leaders and Hitler himself loved the character of Mickey Mouse. On this point see chapter 4 of Storm and Dreßler (1991) and chapter 5 of Laqua (1992).

33-35). And this holds not only for "popular" reception, but also for the intellectual elite.

If already government censorship deemed most of Disney's works as *künstlerisch wertvoll* (of artistic value) (Laqua 1992, 37), European intelligentsia welcomed them as true avant-garde works of art. Already in the 1920s the animated character Felix the Cat had become an icon of modernism, but the arrival of Mickey Mouse at the end of that decade eclipsed all other figures, to the point that the *Literary Digest*, a distinguished New York magazine, published in 1931 an article with the title "European Highbrows Hail Mickey Mouse" (North 2008, 20). Strange as it may seem today, at the beginning of the 1930s, Disney enjoyed in Europe the nearly unanimous—albeit short-lived—esteem of writers, artists and intellectuals, whose enthusiasm demonstrates how crucial modernism's relationship with the new media was. The most famous example is obviously Eisenstein, who, when he was invited to the US by Paramount Pictures in the spring of 1930, befriended Disney and, until his death in 1948, considered him a great artistic innovator and a paragon of cinematographic art.[7] For a short time Disney seemed almost to become an epitome of cinema *tout court*: in 1934, in his American exile, Erwin Panofsky gave a famous lecture at Princeton titled "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," which identified in Disney's films "a chemically pure distillation of cinematic possibilities."[8] And even from the opposite side of the political spectrum, Leni Riefenstahl, who in 1938 went to the US to find a distributor for her film *Olympia*, paid homage to Disney, who was one of the few to welcome her in Hollywood.

The great appeal the Disney's films in general and Mickey Mouse in particular exerted on European intellectuals was based on the fact that they became somehow emblematic of the contemporary debate about art, politics and technology. By presenting a world dominated by speed, fragmentation, grotesque perspective changes, an infinite metamorphosis, and the breakdown of the boundaries separating the living from the non-living and the machine from the animal, these films touched the fundamental questions of the dismantling of subjectivity, the crisis of tradition, and the domination of technology; they gave perhaps birth to new forms of imagination, expression and community, and were thus read and interpreted as "avant-garde," that is, anti-bourgeois and "modern."

[7] At the beginning of the 1940s, Eisenstein started to work on a chapter on Disney for his unfinished study on *Method*, only posthumously published; cf. Eisenstein (1988).

[8] This lecture was published first in issue 26 (1937) of the journal *Transition*; a second, revised version appeared in *Critique* in 1947 (here p. 23).

Moreover, in the context of a political situation dominated by the conflict between fascism, Stalinism and American Fordism, the analysis of mass culture took a highly political significance: how to face and come to terms with the new socio-cultural phenomena, simultaneously amazing and contradictory? Where to look for possibilities of change and revolution? How to reinterpret the relation between body and technology? And how to invent a different organization of the relation between humanity and nature? (Hansen 1993, 28).

2. Psycho-physiognomy of Modern Life

These questions lie at the heart of Benjamin's interests and analyses at least since the mid-1920s. It is therefore no surprise that he too was intrigued and fascinated by such a pervasive and global phenomenon as the explosive success of Mickey Mouse. The Walter Benjamin Archive in Berlin stores a series of newspaper clippings in French and German about Disney and Mickey Mouse, which Benjamin collected throughout the 1930s. These clippings show his careful attention towards the progressive development of what was at the time a true cultural "phenomenon." A distillation of these readings marks, even if impressionistically, some of his major works of the 1930s and deserves thus a careful analysis.

Already at the beginning of the Mickey Mouse "boom" in Germany, Benjamin identified in this figure a number of questions. A first 1931 fragment, "Zu Micky Maus" ("Mickey Mouse") which is but a series of extemporaneous notes, starts off by relating Disney's mouse to the question of the body within the context of capitalist modernity[9]: Mickey's body (and that of the other characters of his cartoons, as well as the "body" of inanimate objects) is dynamic, elastic, flexible, and consists of interchangeable parts which can be recombined almost at will.[10] Benjamin

[9] Benjamin's interest for the question of the body dates at least from the early 1920s. See for example the notes "Outline of the Psychophysical Problem" (1922-1923) (*GS* VI:78.87/*SW* 1:394-401).

[10] In *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), for example, Mickey throws his dentures to catch the cigarette in mid-air, which then settle back in his mouth, and then he lights the cigarette holding the match with his toes, which take the shape of a hand; when he dances with Minnie, their bodies twist and turn at will, and their prehensile tails extend to fetch a beer or to transform into a lasso or a spring; in *The Barn Dance* (1928), when he dances with Minnie, Mickey steps on one of her legs—with feet that become enormous—so much that this becomes disproportionally long, and in order to put things back in order Minnie ties a knot and cuts the superfluous part; in *Steamboat Willie* (1928), the cat Pete (forerunner of Peg Leg

sees here the *realistic*—but not *naturalistic*, as Esther Leslie clarifies (2004, 81)—expression of modern life circumstances: according to Benjamin, our body no longer belongs to us, it has been dismembered by the war, in which we lost some parts of it, or we have ourselves alienated it in exchange for money, and its unity gets lost in a continuous interchange with mechanical parts; its existence is like that of "a file in an office," that is, dismembered, mechanized, deprived of experience, labyrinthine and discontinuous, and no longer linear and continuous like the route taken by a "marathon runner" (*GS* VI:144-45/*SW* 2:545). Moreover, before the progressive anthropomorphization and normalization he will be subjected to throughout the 1930s, Mickey's body is a hybrid, it confounds and blurs the boundaries separating the organic and the mechanic, the animate and the inanimate, child and adult. And perhaps also the masculine and the feminine: as both Miriam Hansen (1993, 55n2) and Esther Leslie (2004, 308n4) note, in German *Maus* is feminine and Benjamin uses the feminine pronoun to refer to (masculine) Mickey; moreover, the falsetto voice that Walt Disney himself lent to his character from the first Mickey Mouse "talkie," *The Karnival Kid* (1929), onwards and until 1934, contributes to this gender ambiguity. The boundary that Mickey crosses and confounds more explicitly, however, is that between human and animal, and in this way he "disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind" (*GS* VI:144/*SW* 2:545) and is founded on anthropocentrism. His equivalent is thus the uncanny, *unheimlich* figure of the *Unmensch*, the "inhuman," a title that Benjamin gave to Karl Kraus the satirist in his essay of the same year: against the classical ideal of humanity, but also against Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, Benjamin's Kraus proposes a "materialist humanism" that would get rid of the traces of by-now obsolete cultural constructions (*GS* II/1:355/*SW* 2:448).[11]

What the hybrid and "inhuman" figure of Mickey Mouse disavows and destroys are the "eternal values" and the "false universalism" of bourgeois humanism, which Benjamin attacks in an article published in April 1931 in *Die literarische Welt*, "Literary History and the Study of Literature" (*GS* III:285-86/*SW* 2:460-61). This normative humanism is but ideology, and its values are perpetuated by "high" culture, such as Maeterlinck's

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Pete) pulls Mickey's neck, which extends out of proportion. In the same way, the bodies of the other animals and of the inanimate objects bend and twist at will.

[11] Edmund Jephcott's (correct) translation of *Unmensch* is "Monster." Cf. Leslie (2004, 81). This new and different materialism, linked precisely to a reconfiguration of the body, had been already proposed by Benjamin at the end of his 1929 essay on Surrealism (*GS* II/1:309-10/*SW* 2:217-18).

symbolism or the atmospheres full of "interiority" and pathos of Mary Wigman's ballets (*GS* VI:144-45/*SW* 2:545). If the Mickey Mouse shorts are "fairy tales," as from the very beginning the press had dubbed them, then they are so in the sense of the Brothers Grimm's fable "The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was," in which, in order to gain a new access to the world, one must abandon the "home" of bourgeois culture and confront monsters and ghosts to "learn what shuddering is" (Grimm 2013, 13). Mickey Mouse leaves this "home" just like the "destructive character" of Benjamin's sketch published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (again in November 1931): young and cheerful, he "clears away the traces of our own age, […] sees nothing permanent," and that's precisely why "he sees a way everywhere": "What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it" (*GS* IV/1:397-98/*SW* 2:541-42).

Bourgeois civilization is by now lifeless, and in it, life is no longer possible. Using an image that also appears in the contemporary essay on Kraus (*GS* II/1:355/*SW* 2:448), and that will return with a variant at the end of "Experience and Poverty" (1933), Benjamin argues that the Mickey Mouse films constitute a sort of "preparation" to "survive civilization" (*GS* VI:144/*SW* 2:245).[12] In the world that is presented *realistically* in these films, it is no longer "worthwhile to have experiences"; and yet, however dismembered, distorted, mechanized and robbed of all experience, the figure of Mickey Mouse, with a grin or a sneer at the end of every short film, proves that it is possible to survive this kind of existence.[13] The tone of these notes is intrinsically visionary: in Mickey, Benjamin glimpses the prefiguration of a transformed nature, of a nature freed from the anthropocentric, phallocentric and social oppositions and hierarchies, in which master and slave, work and play confront and erase each other.

3. Poverty of Experience and Barbarism

As we have already seen in the previous chapters, the problem of experience is one of the central themes traversing the whole of Benjamin's thought, from the early sketch "Experience" (1913) up to the notes for the

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[12] In his reading of Benjamin's Mickey Mouse, Stéphane Symons (2016) insists on seeing him as a figure of "survival," linking him to Prince Myshkin, the Tramp, Robert Walser's protagonists and Kafka's Assistants. Symons also insists, however, in identifying Mickey (and the other characters) with the figure of the "lost saint" and in linking him to Benjamin's theological reflections, in particular the "Theological-Political Fragment," which seems to me a bit of a stretch.

[13] All early Mickey Mouse shorts end with Mickey either grinning of sneering.

Baudelaire book at the end of the 1930s. Though not always in an unambiguous way, Benjamin pursues time and again the possibility of reconceptualizing knowledge and action in the face of the radical transformations of modernity, which emptied out from within the very conditions of possibility of experiencing, knowing, remembering, and thus also of acting. As we know, capitalist modernity, for Benjamin, reduced every *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*.

The event that most of all marked, for Benjamin's generation, the end of the nineteenth-century dreams of technology and progress and thus literally "destroyed" the experience of modernity, was World War I: the orgy of technology and mass destruction that marked the beginning of "the short twentieth century" played an emblematic role for the intellectuals of the brief Weimar period, because it dismantled the traditional and familiar coordinates of knowing, communicating and acting, and emptied the "eternal values" and the "false universalism" of bourgeois civilization and of the humanist idea of subject (cf. "To the Planetarium," the last piece of *One Way Street*). Bourgeois humanism will always remain inadequate and unable to understand and manage both the psychological trauma of the war and that of the catastrophic economic crisis that ensued. The Weimar Republic ended on January 30, 1933, with Hitler's appointment as *Reichskanzler*, and thus with a new, violent negation of the humanistic "eternal values." With it, a certain idea of the world and a "civilization" ends for good, and it is in this context that Benjamin, exiled to Paris since March 1933, composed a short but fundamental essay, which somehow takes stock of the situation and defines many of the ideas that inhabit his analyses in these years—and which already appear in the 1931 fragment "Mickey Mouse." Probably begun already during his long stay in Ibiza (April-October 1933), the essay was published on December 7, 1933, in *Die Welt im Wort*, the journal of the German intellectuals exiled in Prague, with the title "Erfahrung und Armut" ("Experience and Poverty"), to which the editors had changed Benjamin's original title, "Erfahrungsarmut," poverty of experience.[14]

The image of the war—World War I on one side, and the "shadow" of a future war on the other—opens and closes the essay, reflecting the dramatic predicament of the end of the Weimar "civilization" and of the intellectual in exile (Benjamin was then, and will remain until his death, also materially poor), while simultaneously giving a sense of threat and urgency. Before the immense technological destruction of World War I, and threatened again by the overwhelming fascist tsunami looming over

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[14] On the genesis of the essay see the editors' note in *GS* II/1: 960-61.

Europe, the recourse to humanistic culture is useless and ineffectual: this culture is no longer capable of connecting people with their cultural heritage through "experiences," which are by now nothing but simulations. The Weimar cultural "Renaissance," "in which so many people have placed their hopes," is but the "galvanization" of a carnivalesque jumble of old ideas through electric shocks which, however, cannot provoke more than some temporary convulsions in an already dead body (*GS* II/1:214-15/*SW* 2:732). The implicit but clear warning is the same that Benjamin will address a few years later to Hitler's opponents in "A German Institute for Independent Research": it is useless to counterpose to Hitler's destruction of culture the "*Süffisanz der Erbberechtigten*," the complacency of those who feel entitled to and legitimized by the cultural heritage (*GS* III:525/*SW* 3:312). The only way out consists in embracing the transformation, the poverty of experience, and in counterposing to the fascist "barbarism" a new concept of barbarism.

The notion of "barbarism" and its relationship to culture is extremely complex: who are the "barbarians" and, above all, from which perspective do we consider them as such? Perhaps the most famous and celebrated phrase in Benjamin's entire oeuvre is his attack against the concept of "cultural heritage" that first appears in the 1937 essay on Eduard Fuchs and returns then in the famous thesis VII of "On the Concept of History" (1940): "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (*GS* II/2:477/*SW* 3:267; *GS* I/2:696/*SW* 4:392). The "cultural heritage" is but the spoils of the victors and its lineage cannot be contemplated without horror. If culture itself is intrinsically filled with barbarism, then the only alternative to its moribund and deadly decline consists in overturning the current cultural standards and stealing the energies of transformation from the "wrong" barbarism, in order to invent "a new, positive concept of barbarism" (*GS* II/1:215/*SW* 2:732).[15] In "Experience and Poverty," Benjamin identifies the "new barbarians" in the great destructors/creators of modernism, who do not lament the impoverishment of experience but rather retransmit it by imitating the technological transformations at its origin and by formally incorporating them into their works: the Cubists and Paul Klee in painting, the Bauhaus, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier in architecture, Bertolt Brecht and, above all, Paul Scheerbart in literature. Their barbarism or anti-culture—the new "culture of glass," a culture with no "aura"—is the only means for an

[15] As Andrew Benjamin (2013, 181-81) notes, barbarism has thus here no moral connotation, but rather points to an interruption and a new beginning. On Benjamin and barbarism, see McLaughlin (2006) and the special issue of *Parallax* 24.2 (Stainforth, Mourenza and Calzati 2018).

attempt to elicit from this poverty of experience "something respectable" (*GS* II/1:218/*SW* 2:734).

The "popular cousin" of these new barbarians is Mickey Mouse, herald of an imagination not resting on experience (Hansen 1993, 40). Mickey Mouse embodies the dream that a humanity stuffed with experiences ("[t]hey have 'devoured' everything, both 'culture and people'" [*GS* II/1:218/*SW* 2:734]) and tired of everything projects against everyday sadness and dejection, in order to imagine a simple but marvelous existence. And it is a dream that, more than the works of modernist intellectuals, is accessible to the masses. In a variant of the first version of the essay "Experience and Poverty" one can read:

> We can tell them fairy tales again, in which the world is new and fresh as it is for children. Preferably film fairy tales. Who could have validated experiences as Mickey Mouse does in his films? A Mickey Mouse film today is perhaps still unintelligible for the individual, but not for an audience. And a Mickey Mouse film can rhythmically rule a whole audience. Only a few individuals can still orient themselves before the *Iliad* or the *Divine Comedy*. (*GS* II/1:962)

Mickey's popular appeal is perhaps due to the fact that, unlike the great modernist artworks, his films do not reproduce or imitate the forms and functions of technology, but rather exceed them oneirically, while simultaneously making fun of them: nature and technology, body and machine, the animate and the inanimate merge and become one, which installs something light, cheery, lively and, above all, self-sufficient. In a sense, therefore, Mickey Mouse even surpasses the modernist incorporation and exposition of technology, he represents perhaps its "aesthetic self-sublation" (Hansen 1993, 42), and points thereby towards the original promise of modernization, that of a redeemed existence beyond the stiff and disappointing outcome of practical domination (North 2008, 17-18).

Finally, it is important that the Mickey Mouse films are *comical*: the voice of nature rebelling against its muteness, of the machine incorporating itself into the organic, of the masses freeing themselves from domination, is a *laugh*. A barbaric and inhuman laughter, echoing, as Fabrizio Desideri (2012, xv) noted, the laugh of another barbaric and inhuman creature dear to Benjamin: Kafka's Odradek, who laughs with "the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it" (Kafka 1971, 428; cf. *GS* II/1:432/*SW* 2:811). It is with this laughter that "mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be" (*GS* II/1:219/*SW* 2:735).

4. The Cracking Open of Natural Teleology

In this respect, Miriam Hansen (1993, 41) notes that Mickey Mouse appears to be closer to the Surrealist fantasies than to the functional sobriety of the Bauhaus or the didactic rationalism of Brecht. Benjamin explicitly establishes this link between Disney and Surrealism in some notes for his great unfinished work on the prehistory of modernity, the so-called *Arcades Project*. Here he cites twice an article by Pierre Mac Orlan,[16] "Grandville le précursor" (1934), in which the author presents Grandville precisely as "a forerunner of Surrealism, particularly of surrealist film (Méliès, Walt Disney)" (K4,1).[17] However, unlike Grandville, Disney's humor is neither melancholic nor morbid and does not bear in itself the seeds of death, according to Mac Orlan (B4a,2). Benjamin's interest in Disney and Mickey Mouse can therefore be inscribed into the orbit of that project begun with the 1929 essay on Surrealism and centered on the task of "win[ning] the energies of intoxication [*Rausch*] for the revolution" (*GS* II/1:308/*SW* 2:216).

From this vantage point, however, it is fundamental to emphasize the importance of the medium (the "surrealist *film*"), which opens somehow a gap between Mickey Mouse and the modernist intellectuals mentioned in "Experience and Poverty." In an entry of the *Arcades Project* titled "On the political significance of film," Benjamin stresses that "[a]t no point in time, no matter how utopian, will anyone win the masses over to a higher art; they can be won over only to one nearer them"; and continues: "This will never happen with most of what is propagated by the avant-garde of the bourgeoisie" (useless, therefore, is the Surrealists' attempt to establish Picasso as a revolutionary) (K3a,1). If the masses require from a work of art "something that is warming," then only an art form that is able to dialectically subsume in itself the kitsch of mass culture will succeed in bringing itself near to the masses, and "[t]oday, perhaps, film alone is equal to this task—or, at any rate, more ready for it than any other art form." "Only film," Benjamin concludes, "can detonate the explosive stuff which the nineteenth century has accumulated in that strange and perhaps formerly unknown material which is kitsch" (K3a,1). These theses help us to better qualify the position of Disney's mouse within Benjamin's strategy: contrary to the "high" art of the new modernist barbarians,

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[16] Pseudonym of Pierre Dumarchey (1882-1970), a prolific French writer and *chansonnier* close to the Surrealist movement.

[17] Cf. also the entry B4a,2, 72. Actually Benjamin cites Mac Orlan's article three times (the third citation is the entry W4a,3, 627), but only the first two quotations mention Disney.

Mickey Mouse succeeds, thanks also to the cinematographic form, in performing that *Aufhebung* of popular kitsch that let it "detonate" and permit to co-opt its energies for the revolution.

This revolution is first of all anthropological, or better, ontological (though the interpreters mostly use the term "utopian") and inserts Mickey Mouse into a constellation with Charles Fourier: it is indeed in connection with Fourier that Mickey Mouse is cited, only once, in the notes for the *Arcades Project*. The importance of Fourier's utopia for Benjamin's unfinished project is such that both the 1935 and the 1939 *exposés* of the work open with a section on Fourier: and this because, as clearly appears in both texts, Fourier saw in the arcades the architectural canon for his phalanstery, and presents thus a sort of paradigm or "dialectical image" of their dissemination in the first half of the nineteenth century; but above all because the secret cue of his utopia is the advent of "machines" (*GS* V/1:47, 63/*AP* 5, 16). The second *exposé* adds a fundamental point: the technologization of the Fourierist utopia distances itself from the dominant idea of technology as exploitation and domination of nature: on the contrary, "in Fourier, technology appears as the spark that ignites the powder of nature" (*GS* V/1:64/*AP* 17). Just like the Surrealists—and like Marx[18]—, Benjamin was fascinated by the way in which Fourier's fantastic visions assigned to technology a ludic use in the *reorganization* of nature: not opposition and domination, but a merging of technological and natural, of mechanical and organic, which rebels against the double dictatorship of the organic and over the organic. Fourier's nature is a reformulated, enhanced, reinvented nature—oceans of lemonade, supplementary moons, anti-lions and anti-bears at the service of man—through and by means of its interpenetration with technology.

"For the purpose of elucidating the Fourierist extravagances," Benjamin thus writes, "we may adduce the figure of Mickey Mouse, in which we find carried out, entirely in the spirit of Fourier's conceptions, the moral mobilization of nature" (W8a,5). In other words, by confounding and reinventing the separations and boundaries between the human and the animal, the organic and the inorganic, the natural and the technological, Mickey Mouse cracks open "natural teleology," that is, the normative idea of natural fixity and finality, of a biological "destiny," and of a separation between human history and natural history. "Nature," or the "human", are historical, ideological constructions, which as such can and must be modified and reinvented. The "cracking open of natural

[18] In his notes Benjamin quotes a letter written by Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann on October 9, 1866, in which Marx saw in Fourier's utopia "the anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world" (W10a,2).

teleology proceeds in accordance with the plan of humor" (W8a,5): just like Fourierist utopia, Mickey Mouse is clownish, ridiculous, and no doubt kitsch, but it is the laughter he provokes in the audience that demolishes the cage of final causes, of humanist idealism, and calls upon politics to the task of reinventing itself and reinventing the relation between the human and nature.

5. The Work of Cartoons in the Age of Mass Psychoses

Another note from the convolute on Fourier of the *Arcades Project* links the act of cracking open natural teleology to an important feature:

> Fourier's conception of the propagation of the phalansteries through "explosions" may be compared to two articles of my "politics": the idea of revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective (analogy with the child who learns to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon), and the idea of the "cracking open of natural teleology." (W7,4)

Both the concept of "innervation of the technical organs of the collective"[19] and the image of the child trying to get hold of the moon reappear, again in reference to Fourier, in a footnote of the first versions of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,"[20] and this allows to date these notes to the years of composition of the essay. And it is precisely in this essay (or in some of its versions) that Benjamin's most famous reference to Mickey Mouse appears.

The history of the composition and publication of this essay is extremely complex and articulated, and here I can present only a brief recapitulation[21]: a first "draft" (not included in the *Gesammelte Schriften* and named in the new *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* as "first version") was written in September 1935; the first "finished" text ("first version" in *GS* and "second version" in *WuN* 16) was completed in October 1935, already divided into chapters with numbers and titles, but still without footnotes,

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[19] On the concept of *Innervation* and its importance in the first versions of the Artwork essay see Hansen (1993, 37-38), and also Hansen (1987; 1999; 2004).

[20] The footnote appears both in the first version with footnotes (named "second version" in the *Gesammelte Schriften* and the *Selected Writings*, and "third version" in the new *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*), and the French translation ("fourth version" in the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*); cf. *SW* 3:124n10; *GS* I/2:717-18; and *WuN* 16: 109, 174.

[21] For an articulated exposition of this history, see the "*Entstehungs- und Publikationsgeschichte*," in *WuN* 16:319-75.

and only at this point Benjamin started speaking about this text; to this first draft Benjamin added then a series of footnotes and some modifications, but deleted the chapters' titles and changed their numeration from Arab numbers to Roman numbers ("second version" in *GS* and "third version" in *WuN* 16)[22]; this text was translated into French by Pierre Klossowski with Benjamin's help, but was also "reworked" by Hans Klaus Brill, the Parisian secretary of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, following Max Horkheimer's instructions, and was finally published in this journal in May 1936 ("fourth version" in *WuN* 16): Benjamin kept working on the text (the *terminus ad quem* is 1939), finally producing a shortened and simplified version ("third version" in *GS* and "fifth version" in *WuN* 16), which will however become the "standard" version after its publication in 1955 in the two volumes of Benjamin's *Schriften* edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno. In the version with titles, section 16 is entitled "Micky-Maus."[23]

In the economy of the "second" and "third" versions, this section plays a fundamental role, insofar as it centers on the social function of film as paradigmatic art form in the age of its technological reproducibility. The primary and critical importance of film, so the section begins, consists in the fact that through it a new equilibrium is established between human beings and the apparatus. And this, as Norbert Bolz (1994, 11) emphasizes, is independent from its content: what matters are the techniques and the instruments through which human beings find new representations of themselves and of the world and learn new modalities of perception of space and time. Literally exploding the traditional framework of our perceptions "with the dynamite of the split second" (*GS* I/1:461/*WuN* 16:82/*SW* 3:117),[24] film not only allows a new understanding of the world,

[22] This version, initially considered lost, was found in the 1980s by Gary Smith in Horkheimer's archive and was published only in 1989 in volume VII/1 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*.

[23] The *Selected Writings* do not include this version, but section XVI of the "second version" (*GS*/*SW*) or "third version" (*WuN* 16), included in the *Selected Writings* (*SW* 3:117-18), corresponds almost literally to it, so I will quote here mainly from this text. Hereafter I will use, however, the new numeration established by *WuN* 16.

[24] This expression, as well as also the core of the whole argument, had already been used by Benjamin in 1927 in his reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz's ferocious criticism against Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), published in *Die literarische Welt*; cf. "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (*GS* II/2:751-55/*SW* 2:16-19).

but also opens up an entirely new "field of action" [*Spielraum*[25]], which in the essay on Surrealism Benjamin named as a space where image and body blend together (*Bild- und Leibraum*) (*GS* II/1:309/*SW* 2:217). Film techniques expand space and time and enable the perception of aspects of reality and of movement previously unimaginable: "clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye" (*GS* I/1:461/*WuN* 16:82/*SW* 3:117), it is a modified nature, embracing both the creaturely and the artificial, but which also goes beyond the purely physical to include in itself the anti-physical and the historic. In a passage taken almost literally from the 1931 "Little History of Photography" (*GS* II/1:371/*SW* 2:511-12), Benjamin argues that technology as "organ" of the collective opens to the perception of an "optical unconscious": not only does it clarify a perception that before was blurred or confused, but it also grants access to a perceptual zone previously entirely unknown (*GS* I/1:461/*WuN* 16:82/*SW* 3:117).[26]

However, the psychoanalytical analogy goes further: the camera, by enlarging the *normal* spectrum of sensory perception, opens it to the distortions and metamorphoses typical of psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. The collective perception can thus appropriate these *abnormal* perceptual modes through the creation of figures of "collective dream,"

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[25] As Esther Leslie (2004, 105) notes, the term *Spielraum* can mean in German both "space for play" [*Spiel*] and "room for maneuver," and perhaps this ambiguity or pun is here intentional. A note for the third version, later not used in the text, links the motif of play to Disney's films: "The vanishing of beautiful appearance [*Schein*] is identical to the vanishing of the aura. The two roots of the *Ur*-phenomenon of mimesis: appearance and play [*Spiel*]. Each develops at the expense of the other. On the radically different function of art based on appearance and of art based on play. In Disney, film deactivates for the first time the element of appearance in favor of that of play. The technological interests are solidary with those of play" (*WuN* 16:146).

[26] Esther Leslie (2004, 114) argues that, by naming after Mickey Mouse the section on the optical unconscious, Benjamin wanted to suggest that animation is the film form that has most legitimacy (cf. also Symons 2016). However, Michael North (2008, 59 and 207) points out not only that Benjamin never speaks about "animation" as a specific film form, but also that he rather tends to equate, quite vaguely and inaccurately, Mickey Mouse and Chaplin, animation and silent movies. The film "techniques" cited in this section (slow motion, etc.) cannot actually be attributed to a cartoon, which moreover tends, contrary to the fragmentation of *montage*, to create a "continuum" from scattered and artificial fragments.

such as Mickey Mouse.[27] If until now Benjamin's use of this figure was in line with the way he mentioned it in previous years, the next step adds a new feature: precisely because they break with the naturalism of melodrama films and forcibly develop the sadistic/masochistic fantasies or obsessions created in the masses by the revolutionary process of technologization, oneiric figures like Mickey Mouse can work as a "vaccine," a "psychic immunization" that could prevent their "natural and dangerous maturation" (*GS* I/1:462/*WuN* 16:83/*SW* 3:118). In a very Freudian fashion, Benjamin seems to propose a sort of *psychopathology of technologized life*: everyday life in depersonalized and technologized modernity has fallen prey to mass psychoses, which, if left to their *natural* development, would lead to dangerous results—and here Benjamin obviously means the war, whose ghost haunts all his contemporary writings. This development—the return of the repressed of modern civilization—can, however, be forced and controlled, as it happens in vaccinations: as Burkhardt Lindner (2004, 152) notes, vaccination does not merely mean to administer an antibiotic, but rather it provokes, in an artificial and dosed way, an infection in order to activate the natural immune system. Here the matter is thus not simply Aristotelian catharsis,[28] but rather an aesthetic, pre-emptive and medicalized outlet of mass psychoses, which the socio-cultural and political apparatuses—i.e. "civilization"—are no longer able to manage, and that, therefore, must be taken over by that kind of new sanatoria or nursing homes that cinemas have become.

The advanced and therapeutic outlet of mass psychoses, which would allow to "survive" our (psychotic) technological civilization, takes place in "collective laughter" (*GS* I/1:462/*WuN* 16:83/*SW* 3:118). As already emphasized above, comedy is, for Benjamin, an essential and indispensable feature granting figures like Mickey Mouse a revolutionary potential. Incidentally, this is true already before Mickey Mouse: in a short note on Chaplin ("Chaplin in Retrospect"), published in *Die literarische Welt* in February 1929, Benjamin already defined laughter as "the most international

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[27] Psychoanalytical readings of Mickey Mouse and of Disney's films already begun at the end of the 1930s: see for example Moellenhoff (1989, originally published in 1940). For a more recent psychoanalytical reading see Huang (2009).

[28] The "purification" (catharsis) through art that Aristotle proposed in his *Poetics* (1449b21-28) consists in a purgation of extreme emotions and excessive passions—especially pity and fear—when watching an extremely emotional representation on stage (mostly tragedy) and which results in renewal and restoration. It is therefore precisely the opposite of "vaccination," though both metaphors come from the medical vocabulary.

and the most revolutionary emotion [*Affekt*] of the masses" (*GS* III:159/*SW* 2:224). And in "The Author as Producer" (1934) he will repeat: "[T]here is no better starting point for thinking than laughter; in particular, shaking of the diaphragm generally offers better chances for thought than shaking of the soul" (*GS* II/2:699/ *SW* 2:779). In this sense, Benjamin is again consistent with Freud's theory of laughter as libidinal outlet or "liberation," which he mobilizes in a political perspective but never explicitly cites.[29] Unlike Freud, however, Benjamin seems to be interested in something that goes beyond the mere "funny" content of cartoons or slapstick comedies, and manages perhaps to identify a "comical" feature in technological reproducibility itself. Or at least this is Michael North's argument, who identifies in the mechanized gestures of Chaplin and of the cartoons a sort of mimetic incorporation of the mechanized production process: it is the process itself that produces its own kind of nonsense and crazy, Dadaistic humor, which can only arise from the machine. Perhaps, North speculates, "modernity itself is governed by a comic rhythm, even when it is not particularly amusing" (2008, 5). This is the same rhythm, "quick and syncopated, […] fiercely and unusually cheerful," that Fabrizio Desideri (2012, xv) sees animating Benjamin's essay itself, and to which perhaps modern civilization must resort in order to outlive itself.

And yet Benjamin is not blind to the dark turn that both mechanization and laughter can take and have in fact taken, and he seems unable to make a decision about their true revolutionary potential. Already in the above-quoted "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (1927), Benjamin wrote that the laughter provoked by slapstick comedies "hovers over an abyss of horror" (*GS* II/2:753/*SW* 2:17)[30]; and when adding the footnotes to the Artwork

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[29] See Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960), but also "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1955, 65-144). Freud's theory is in a sense opposed to the other twentieth-century great theory of the comic, namely that of Bergson, who sees instead laughter as expression of the natural hostility of the organic against the machine; see Bergson (1998). For a discussion of these texts in relation to Benjamin, see Lindner (2004), Symons (2016, 177n20), and above all the first chapter of North (2008).

[30] In a note written probably in August 1934, "Hitler's Diminished Masculinity," Benjamin writes that "Chaplin has become the greatest comic because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears [*die tiefste Grauen*, actually "horrors," "terrors"] of his contemporaries" (*GS* VI:103/*SW* 2:792). Brendan Moran (2018, 81) notes that Benjamin was interested also in Kafka's intertwining of horror and comedy and points to a 1934 note in which Benjamin muses that perhaps all horror has a "comic side," although not all "comedy" (*Komik*) necessarily has a "horrific side," even if comedy might also be won in some way from horror. In this

essay (the "third version"), he accompanies his positive assessment of Disney with a long footnote:

> Of course, a comprehensive analysis of these films should not overlook their double meaning. It should start from the ambiguity of situations which have both a comic and a horrifying effect. As the reactions of children show, comedy and horror are closely related. In the face of certain situations, why shouldn't we be allowed to ask which reaction is the more human? Some recent Mickey Mouse films offer situations in which such a question seems justified. (Their gloomy and sinister fire-magic, made technically possible by color film,[31] highlights a feature which up to now has been present only covertly, and shows how easily fascism takes over "revolutionary" innovations in this field too.) What is revealed in recent Disney films was latent in some of the earlier ones: the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence. This renews an old tradition which is far from reassuring—the tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in depictions of medieval pogroms, of whom the "riff-raff"[32] in Grimm's fairy tale of that title are a pale, indistinct rear-guard. (*GS* VII/1:377/*WuN* 16:132-33/*SW* 3:130n30)[33]

This footnote develops some notes taken for the third version: "The usability of Disney's method for fascism" (*GS* I/3:1045/*WuN* 16:146); in a variant of this notes Benjamin speaks of a "dialectical correlation" dominating the relationship between horror and humor (*GS* VII/2:689/*WuN* 16:161). Benjamin is forced to admit that the "barbarism" wiping out the old bourgeois world, and the laughter accompanying it, could be the *wrong* ones; that is, that the very same elements are suited, dialectically, for contrary and opposite uses. This way he acknowledges the (partial) legitimacy of a negative—and much more univocal—interpretation of mass culture, such as that proposed by Adorno.[34]

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relationship of comedy and horror, discovery of the comic side "devalues" the horrific, but discovery of the horrific does not devalue comedy (*GS* II/3:1220).

[31] The first "official" Mickey Mouse color short, *The Band Concert*, was released precisely on February 23, 1935, though Mickey had already appeared in a color short not officially belonging to the "Mickey Mouse" series, *Parade of the Award Nominees* (1932).

[32] Benjamin refers to the fairy tale *Das Lumpengesindel*, "The Pack of Ragamuffins"—sometimes translated as "Riff Raff" (Grimm 2013, 65-67).

[33]. The footnote appears, in a reduced form, also in the French translation (*GS* I/2:732/*WuN* 16, 191).

[34] In any case, Moran (2018, 86) argues, "laughter is never the answer": it can be useful and revolutionary in undermining the *idées reçues* and "acclaimed answers"

The heavy criticism Adorno directed at Benjamin's Artwork essay is well known: after Benjamin sent him the typescript (that is, the "third version") on February 27, 1936, Adorno replied, on March 18, with a long letter from London attacking many of the pivotal points of the essay. In particular, he wrote that "[t]he laughter of a cinema audience […] is anything but salutary and revolutionary; it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism instead." As for Mickey Mouse, he accused Benjamin of romanticizing this figure: its reproduction, he writes, rather belongs to the bourgeois "naïve realism" (*BA* 171-72/*CA* 130-31). These criticisms, also appearing in a short mention of Mickey Mouse in the "Oxford Postscript" to his Jazz essay,[35] will return with renewed force (and pushed perhaps to an extreme bordering the ridiculous) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), where however Donald Duck takes the place of Mickey Mouse:[36]

> To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110)

Whether it was because of Adorno's and Horkheimer's criticisms and requests, or because he could not solve the aporia he had encountered, the fact is that Benjamin will end up expunging from the new version of the essay (the "fifth version") all references to Disney and Mickey Mouse, together with those to the collective dream, the collective laughter, *Innervation* and play.[37] The burden and the blame for these transformations are usually placed on Adorno, but the explanation could be much simpler: the last version seems to want to propose itself as a "scientific" theory, and

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and in creating a break, but the moment of comedy must be transformed into something else, something properly constructive.

[35] Here Mickey Mouse is taken as an (obviously negative) paradigm of "jazz subjectivity"; see Adorno (1982, 105).

[36] According to Miriam Hansen (1993, 34), this change is due to the fact that Donald Duck fits the authoritarian profile more easily than Mickey Mouse; but it could also simply depend on the fact that, in the 1940s, Donald Duck became much more popular than Mickey Mouse.

[37] It makes no sense, however, to speak of a "drama of the footnotes", as Esther Leslie does (2004, 118), and to place the blame for Benjamin's hesitation with regard to Mickey Mouse on Adorno, as the majority of interpreters does, since the version Adorno received was the "third," that is, the one with footnotes—and thus also with the footnote quoted above.

expunges therefore the use of Surrealist-like concepts such as the dream-work or the fantasy nature of the optical unconscious; film and the camera are here proposed as "analytical" and "scientific" instruments, in a revolutionary perspective that, in Marxian fashion, counterposes "science" to "utopia." In this new structure, in which the presence of Brecht becomes more and more important, there was simply no longer a place for the oneiric figure of Mickey Mouse.

6. Posthuman Constellations

Esther Leslie (2004, 121) writes that, when he "abandons" Disney and Mickey Mouse, Benjamin actually rejects something that had already changed with respect to its avant-garde and "revolutionary" outset. By 1935 Mickey Mouse's "normalization" was almost complete: the hybrid features of the rodent had been progressively humanized and tamed, his maverick and even perverse attitudes and behaviors had been "defused" into innocent and harmless *plaisanteries*, his mechanized world had been brought back to the fold of work ethics, and every eccentricity in this fantasy world had been idealized and sentimentalized; in a word, Mickey Mouse had become "respectable." And yet, Miriam Hansen (1993, 50) wonders, even before this transformation, hadn't Benjamin's emotional investment in this figure been excessive? Certainly Benjamin's enthusiasm was based on some features of Mickey Mouse which also his contemporaries had perceived, but in him we find perhaps a "utopian overvaluation" that, according to Hansen, was in the end a reaction to the fear of finding, in the destruction of the subject and in the collective laughter, the *wrong* barbarism, that of bourgeois sadism or of Nazi pogroms.

The fact is that by 1935, not only had Mickey Mouse been "tamed," but Disney's whole vision had turned towards an ever-increasing "realism."[38] The decisive breaking point was 1934, when the first Disney full-length movie was conceived, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, then finally released on December 21, 1937, after more than three years of production. Beginning with this film, Disney's animations abandon the anarchic and irreverent world of Surrealist fantasy and become an animated imitation of realist cinema: most of the huge commercial success of *Snow White* is due in fact to the technique of "rotoscoping" (in which

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[38] This turn, clearly and painfully sought and pursued, would however contradict, according to Siegfried Kracauer (1974), the very principle of animation in general, and of that of the first Disney in particular: if "every art form must fulfil its own specific function, reserved to it in compliance with its specific means", then animation and realism contradict each other.

the images are retraced following a previously filmed scene) and to the "multiplane camera" (a camera filming different scenes in motion on different superposed planes, in order to create a three-dimensional illusion). In this way, the laws of perspective and gravity are restored, which brings Disney's animation completely back to the "naïve realism" Adorno had identified in it. To some extent, it is obvious that a full-length film cannot rest on a sequence of gags and on the avant-garde temporality of the interruption but needs instead a plot and a stable narrative diegesis, and therefore Disney's "realist" evolution when producing full-length films is a "natural" development. Moreover, *Snow White* is the first animated film to extensively use dialogues in order to define in depth also the personality of the characters, and to insistently seek to provoke "pathos," the most anti-modernist of emotions. Finally, from this film onwards, the illusion of reality is accompanied by the melodramatic values and the prude and virginal morality of the Hollywood of the Hays Code—which indeed was fully and strictly enforced precisely since 1934.[39]

At the end of the 1930s, Disney's reputation among artists and intellectuals (with a few exceptions, such as Eisenstein) collapses, and his *Studio* will progressively become that symbol of kitsch moralism, cultural imperialism and industrial mega-corporatism that it is to these days.[40] However, the questions raised by Benjamin by using the figure of Mickey Mouse are still relevant: the necessity of deactivating the normative boundaries separating the organic and the machine, the human and the animal, the male and the female; of "inventing" a different relationship between human beings, technology and nature; of breaking free from the teleology of "biological destiny"; and of reaching thereby a different social, economic and sexual organization. Benjamin's Mickey Mouse still raises for us, eight decades later, the question of the post-human.

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[39] The Motion Picture Production Code—popularly known as the Hays Code, after Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America from 1922 to 1945—was the set of industry moral guidelines that was applied to most films released by major studios from 1930 to 1968. It was adopted as early as 1930, but began to be strictly enforced in 1934, and spelled out what was acceptable and what was unacceptable content for motion pictures in the United States.

[40] Marxist critiques of Disney of course abound, one of their high points being Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's 1971 "classic," *How to Read Donald Duck* (2020). For a more recent example, see Schickel (1997), and for a (brief) Marxist-Benjaminian reading of Mickey Mouse, see Gomez-Mejia (2014).

APPENDIX

VIRTUALITY, ACTUALITY, (DE)*KONSTRUKTION*: ON READING BENJAMIN

1. Virtualizing Benjamin

As noted in the introduction, an important factor for the "actuality" and currency of Benjamin are the many deconstructive readings of (some of) his works, first and foremost Derrida's 1989 interpretation of "Critique of Violence" in "Force of Law." But even before "Force of Law," in the 1970s and early 1980s some of Benjamin's texts (in particular "The Task of the Translator") had been subject to deconstructive readings by renowned (mostly American) academics, such as Carol Jacobs (1975) and Paul de Man (1986, originally delivered in 1983), in a constant trend that has worked for years in ascribing Benjamin to the deconstructionist camp.[1] The highest point of this "school" is probably represented by Samuel Weber, beyond doubt one of the most acute and astute contemporary readers of Benjamin. His 2008 book *Benjamin's -abilities*[2] is certainly one of the most interesting and most original books on Benjamin published in English in recent years—and perhaps, Rolf Goebel (2008) muses, also the melancholic swansong for the deconstructive readings of Benjamin—and since its argument touches the theoretical and methodological core of the

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[1] Jacobs' text was included as a "classic" of deconstruction in the volume *Deconstruction: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (cf. Culler 2003, 190-203), as was Benjamin's own "Critique of Violence" in the volume *Deconstruction: A Reader* (in the section "avant la lettre"; cf. McQuillan 2001, 62-70). For a recent take testifying for the currency of this trend, see Balfour (2018). This deconstructive trend has in turn produced a counter-trend, opposing (more fiercely than not) this kind of reading. For some early examples, see Wohlfarth (1979); Eagleton (1981); San Juan (1991).

[2] The argument developed in the 2008 book had been proposed by Weber already in an article in 2000, "The Virtuality of the Media."

readings proposed in the present volume, some concluding remarks are in order.

Weber's book collects 20 essays which were written in the time span of 40 years and is divided in two parts: *I. Benjamin's –abilities*, and *II. Legibilities*. The second part collects essays on various aspects of Benjamin's work and which belong to different stages and times of Weber's reading of the German philosopher, whereas the essays constituting the first part were written more recently and constitute a sort of *organon*, an interpretive grid or pattern through which to read the essays in the second part and Benjamin's work in general. The approach is—brilliantly—"textual," the readings are extremely adherent to the text, to the analysis of single words but also of syntactical and even grammatical constructions; in particular they pay a minute attention to the German text and the problems and inconsistencies of the English translation. The focus is thus on *language*, on the language Benjamin deploys in his writings but also on Benjamin's theory of language, which is read—correctly—as the cornerstone of any interpretation of Benjamin.

What guides Weber's reading, as explained in the introductory chapter, is the observation that "throughout his life, Benjamin tended to formulate many of his most significant concepts by nominalizing verbs, not in the usual manner but by adding the suffix *–barkeit*" (Weber 2008, 4), which in English can be written as either –ibility or –ability. Examples of these –*abilities* are *Mitteilbarkeit* (communicability), *Kritisierbarkeit* (criticizability), *Übersetzbarkeit* (translatability), *Reproduzierbarkeit* (reproducibility), *Erkennbarkeit* (recognizability) and *Lesbarkeit* (legibility). Weber reads this widespread and persistent tendency to form concepts by recourse to this suffix not merely as a stylistic idiosyncrasy, but as sign of a deeper connection between the linguistic constructions and Benjamin's mode of philosophizing. He finds a sort of confirmation, or "second inspiration," in Derrida's—a source that for Weber "has always been profoundly related to Benjamin's writing" (2008, 4)—explanation of the term "iterability": "iterability" must not be confused with "iteration," but rather involves a very distinctive mode that cannot be situated in terms of the traditional opposition and hierarchy that subordinates "possibility" to "reality" or "actuality." Iterability is a possibility that is *necessarily* inscribed *as possibility* in the structure of the mark, thus a *structural possibility* which is the power or potentiality to repeat or be repeated, a potentiality "at work" even there where it seems factually not to have occurred.

Weber reads the same structure in Benjamin's penchant for forming key concepts in terms of their *–ability*, that is, as "structural potentiality," rather than in terms of their "actuality" as mere facts (2008, 6). This

process of nominalization is thus for Weber a mode of conceptualizing "virtualities": precisely by recurring to the nominalization of verbs—which in German are also named *Zeitwörter*, "time-words"—Benjamin inscribes a "virtual condition" in his conceptualization, "inseparable from time insofar as it involves an ongoing, ever-unfinished, and unpredictable process" (2008, 7). "Time" as virtual condition is connected to a second notion that is central for Weber, the "extreme": "virtual" conceptualization decomposes—*deconstructs*—phenomenal experience by departing from its traditional role of establishing sameness precisely by activating the "extreme," thereby marking "the point where a phenomenon is constitutively implicated in what it is not, in what is other and external, in what resists comprehension and containment" (2008, 8). The "extreme" as "virtual rearrangement" does not exclude, but rather presupposes, *repetition*, but as a movement of *differentiation*, of *variation*, of *alteration*: "By driving complex phenomena to their extremes, the concept reveals not what makes them like other phenomena, their common denominator, but rather what separates them, distinguishes them and makes them 'eimaling-extreme': incommensurably once-and-for-all" (2008, 8-9). The power of conceptualization is thus a power of "singularization," one that takes the phenomena to their ever-singular extreme thereby causing them "to *part company with themselves*, with their Self, not in order to dissolve them into some greater generality, but rather to reveal their distinctive, incommensurable spatial-temporal singularity as a measure of *change* and *alteration*" (2008. 9, emphases added). This conceptual rearrangement must remain "virtual," though it is simultaneously "necessary"; a "re-ordering" as an "order," a command or a challenge: what results can never be fully *self-present*, "for such a presence would reduce the *uniqueness*—*das Einmalige*—by treating it as though it were identically or essentially repeatable *as the same*" (2008, 9, emphases added). This "virtualization" is, according to Weber, accomplished by Benjamin's nominalization of verbs through the suffix *–barkeit*.

Weber's language—a language that is certainly not Benjaminian—is here clearly and unambiguously telling of the interpreting matrix with which he approaches Benjamin's texts. The task is thus to see whether this matrix really helps uncovering the "truth-content" of Benjamin's writing or rather imposes an extraneous—though acute, brilliant, and perhaps even compatible—"theory" onto his corpus. To this purpose, I will focus on certain aspects of Weber readings, since it is not possible to pay due

attention to the extreme complexity and articulation of all essays and their argumentations.[3]

2. Potentiality, Differentiation, Infinitude

The second chapter of Weber's book construes a sort of genealogy of the –*abilities*, referring them back to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Hölderlin's mode of poetizing. Kant, Weber writes, resorts at certain key points to conceptual formations which are similar to, and probably influenced, Benjamin's mode of conceptualizing, namely in two concepts: *Bestimmbarkeit* (determinability) and *Unmittelbarkeit* (immediacy). In the judgements of nature, which Kant names "reflecting judgements," *Bestimmbarkeit* must be distinguished from *Bestimmung*, determination, since "nothing in nature is effectively determined by the *ability to judge*. No objective concept is produced or invoked, nothing is cognized. Only an abstract principle is produced—purposiveness without purpose" (2008, 12). This however demonstrates its universal validity through its links to *Unmittelbarkeit* (immediacy) and *Mitteilbarkeit* (communicability, or, in Weber's own translation, "impart-ability"): in an aesthetic judgement the pleasure or displeasure called up is *immediately* attached to the judgement, without the mediation of concepts; this in turn is experienced as *determinable* only insofar as it is felt to be immediately and universally *communicable*. *Communicability* thus takes the place of the objective, conceptual universality that defines judgement, in the sense of the determination of a particular by the universal. Kant's *–abilities* thus designate a possibility not in the sense of a mode of *actualization*, but rather as an experience that is related to cognition—a singularity is apprehended in a way that renders it universalizable—but is nevertheless non-cognitive in the sense of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

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[3] Before the publication of Weber's book (but after the publication of his 2000 article), Kevin McLaughlin (2002; 2003) analyzed the use of the term "virtual" (*virtuell*) in Benjamin's aesthetic writing, from the conclusion of "The Task of the Translator" to the *Trauerspiel* book, the essays on Surrealism and Proust, and the *Arcades Project*, with no reference to Deleuze, Derrida or deconstruction, but singling out the "potentiality" inherent to the very concepts that Weber analyzes. Allen Meek, then, in a 2007 special issue of the journal *Transformations* devoted to "Walter Benjamin and the Virtual: Politics, Art, and Mediation in the Age of Global Culture," analyzed "virtuality" in Benjamin's writing on history in relation to Bergson and Freud. In both texts, the issue is one of "potentiality" and not of Derridean virtuality as opposed to actuality (though Meek's argument goes in the direction then taken by Weber).

Benjamin first deploys this conceptual structure in the 1914 essay "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," where the primary focus is no longer knowledge, as in Kant, but rather language, or better the potentialities of language which, "qua signifying process, entail *impossibility* no less than *possibility*" (2008, 14). This is precisely the "virtuality" of language, which, because it can never hope to be fully exhausted in any one realization, remains open to the future. As never fully *actualizable*, virtuality involves an "experience of *movement* and *alteration* rather than a reproduction of the same—or of the self" (2008, 15). This Weber reads in Benjamin's analysis of *das Gedichtete* (the poetized) in Hölderlin's poems: as the sphere of the poem's truth, distinguished from the poem itself, in *das Gedichtete* predominates the category of possibility as the "potential existence" of determinations that in the poem are actually present. The "potential determinability" of the poetized *virtualizes* the determinations present in the poem—and others as well—by reinscribing them in a text—the aesthetic commentary—that renders them "possible, potential, virtual perhaps" (2008, 18).

Chapter Three prolongs the analysis to the notion of *Kritisierbarkeit* as deployed in *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919). As it is well known, criticism for the Romantics—and as interpreted by Benjamin henceforth—is not primarily evaluative, but rather involves the "fulfilment" (*Vollendung*) of the individual work, a fulfilment which is at the same time a completion and a consummation, a consumption and a dissolution. Criticism for the Romantics dissolves the singular artwork by exposing its relations to all other works and finally to the "idea" of absolute reflection which constitutes the idea of art: "if the work is finite, criticism *infinitizes* it" (2008, 22). This absolute infinitude does not involve, for Weber, the progressive realization of a self-identical ideal, but rather the articulation of a medium, of which criticism as experiment constitutes an instance of "unfolding": "As individuation of the general medium of reflection, the individual work can fulfil its function only insofar as it is driven out of and beyond itself, and this is ultimately dissolved in—and into—the critical process. The 'value' of the work can thus be measured by the degree to which it allows this process—this criticism—to take place" (2008, 26). This is the concept of "criticizability." The individual work thus "survives" through criticism, but that means for Weber that it "survives" as a different kind of writing, as a writing—we have already guessed—of *difference* and *alteration* (2008, 28). Criticism is read here as a process of *recombination*: it stages the process of self-transformation of the work "in a movement that breaks with the vicious circle of self-reflection by generating something else. Out of the mise en

abyme of self-reflection emerges the uncanny recurrence of what is like but never the same" (2008, 30).

The following chapter is devoted to what is perhaps the central concept of this book: *Mitteilbarkeit*, which is usually translated as "communicability," but which Weber translates as "impart-ability." The analysis begins revealingly with the adoption by Weber of the definition of "virtual" he finds in Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. The virtual must above all be clearly distinguished from the "possible": whereas the latter's relation to the real is one which rests on similitude and identity, the former presents a relation to the actual which rests on *alteration* and *differentiation*. Whereas the possible is simply subordinate to the real, is expected to realize itself in the continuity of an entelechy, the virtual cannot be simply defined in opposition to the real, it possesses its distinctive and proper reality, defined as both *singular* and *differential*. The virtual becomes eventually *actual*, but only in *altering* itself; it realizes itself not in staying what it was but in becoming something *different* (2008, 32).[4]

This definition is applied to Benjamin's analysis of language in the 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," and in particular to the notion of *Mitteilbarkeit*. In this essay, *Mitteilung* is what defines the linguisticity of language: not intended as "communication" (*à la* Habermas), but rather, etymologically, as *mit-teilen*, "divide or part with," that is, a "partitioning with," a "sharing," a process constituted first of a division and then a sharing. Weber finds a similar connotation in the English verb "to impart" and translates thus *Mit-teil-barkeit* as "Impart-ability" (2008, 41). He notes that Benjamin plays with a term strictly related to it in the essay, *un-mittelbar*, immediate: the impart*able* (das Mitteil*bare*), Benjamin writes, is immediately (*unmittelbar*) language itself. The *impart-ability* that constitutes language as medium, Weber argues, is un-mediated, im-mediate: "not a means to an end, nor a middle between poles or periphery, but also not simply the opposite of means, which is to say, and end in itself" (2008, 42). Language retains one decisive aspect of the means, namely the fact that it is not self-contained, complete, perfect, or perfectible: "it is simply *there*, but as something that splits off from itself, takes leave of itself, parts with what it was to become something else" (2008, 42). *Unmittelbar* is thus that which is defined as the potentiality of taking leave of itself, of altering itself, of becoming something different; "as medium, language *parts with itself* and can thus

[4] As Matthew Charles (2009) notes, Weber's project is however not Deleuzian, since his Derridean-Lacanian positioning rejects any appeal to unity, wholeness, identity, self-presence, and Deleuze's vitalist terminology. But this point exceeds the scope of this brief appendix.

be said to constitute a medium of virtuality, a virtual medium that cannot be measured by the possibility of self-fulfillment but by its constitutive alterability" (2008, 42). An alterability that, however, never consummates or realizes itself fully: it does not *actually* become something else, but rather names the *structural potentiality* (Derrida) of its leave-taking.

This structure is used to interpret two central concepts in the *Arcades Project*, *Erkennbarkeit* (recognizability) and *Lesbarkeit* (legibility), through a reading of some entries in Convolute "N." Both relate to the "dialectical image," which, for Weber, is construed by Benjamin as both *disjunctive* and *medial* in its structure, "which is to say, as both *actual* and *virtual* at the same time" (2008, 49, emphases added). The exploded elements in the dialectical image "are never simply 'there', nor do they establish a new continuum. They remain *virtual*. Their *virtuality* expresses itself in *virtual* concepts, Benjamin's *–abilities*" (2008, 50, emphases added). The dialectical image is not readable, but becomes readable, recognizable, only at a critical point. What the dialectical tension, from which the dialectical image arises, implies is not, Weber writes, an act of reading, but the *virtuality* of the image becoming readable. Weber finally assigns also to *actuality* a function: "The fact that this movement of becoming-readable remains virtual does not prevent it from having its *specific actuality*" (2008, 50, emphasis added), but it is an actuality of which, as in Deleuze, one must emphasize the *divisive effects*, that is, the "ability" to penetrate a historical situation once it has been set apart into pre- and post-history. As such, Weber concludes, Benjamin's thought anticipates Derrida.

Chapters Five and Six focus on *Übersetzbarkeit* (translatability) as deployed in the 1921 essay "The Task of the Translator," and constitute the core of the entire analysis. Again, Weber recurs to Derrida's notion of "iterability" as "necessary possibility" in order to define Benjamin's *–abilities* as "quasi-transcendental, structuring possibilities": the aim is "to shift the emphasis from the ostensibly self-contained work to a relational dynamic that is precisely not self-identical but perpetually in the process of alteration, transformation, becoming other" (2008, 59). Translation is thus a central figure because it represents the relationship to, and transformations into, one another of languages and of language as such. Translatability is defined by Benjamin as an intrinsic trait of certain works themselves, and this means that these can no longer be considered self-sufficient, independent, autonomous, or self-contained: "the work can only be itself insofar as it is transported elsewhere, altered, transformed—in short, translated" (2008, 61). The original work can only be itself, and only survive, insofar as it is able to take leave of itself, go outside itself, be

transformed and become something else; it acquires significance only through what comes after it: "to signify is to be transformed." Again, Weber emphasizes that "what characterizes Benjamin's language […] is the critical movement of departure, of taking leave, a movement that moves outward and away" (2008, 66). The central concept of "afterlife" (*Nachleben* and *Fortleben*) is here defined not simply as what comes "after" life has gone, but rather as a life which is "'after' itself—that is, constantly in pursuit of what it will never be" (2008, 66). Works are translatable because they have an afterlife, but they have an afterlife because in their life they are always already departing and taking leave from themselves. Translation thus embodies the historical dynamic of languages, which drives each given state beyond itself and makes it something else. At this *difference* (which is also *différance*—though Weber never uses the Derridean term—that is, both structural and temporal) aims the intention of the translator: "at the difference between languages, not in general, but in their specifically different ways of meaning the same things. And this difference between languages is in turn related to an extra-linguistic differentiation, through which the work tends, as a temporal-historical event, to separate from the referents that initially made it meaning-full" (2008, 71).

A fundamental concept for Weber's discourse is then that of *Ursprung* (origin) as defined in the *Trauerspiel* book: not an absolute beginning, nor a passage from formlessness to form, nor a function of becoming or passing away, but rather the historical emerging of an event which involves both *singularity* and *repetition*:

> An "origin" is historical in that it seeks to repeat, restore, reinstate something anterior to it. In so doing, however, it never succeeds and therefore remains "incomplete, unfinished." Yet it is precisely such *incompleteness* that renders origin *historical*. Its historicality resides not in its ability to give rise to a progressive, teleological movement, but rather in its power to return incessantly to the past and through the rhythm of its ever-changing repetitions set the pace for the future. (2008, 89)

Translation is at work in this movement in which the original defines itself through the ever-incomplete attempt to restore and reinstate itself and is "caught up in a process of *repetition* that involves *alteration* and *transformation*, *dislocation* and *displacement*" (2008, 90, emphases added). Translatability is thus a property of the original work, but in the sense of a potentiality that can be realized and is related to the afterlife of the original as already irrevocably departed from itself. Translation thus does not "communicate" meaning, but rather signifies the movement of

symbolization, which moves between the original and its displacement in repetition and dislocation. "Translatability is the never-realizable potential of a meaning and as such constitutes a way—a way of signifying—rather than a what" (2008, 92).

The following chapter analyzes the "cit-ability" of "gesture" in Benjamin's writings on Brecht, especially "What is Epic Theatre?" in both the 1931 and 1939 versions. Gesture, for Weber, articulates the complex and conflictual relation of old and new, tradition and transformation, and its "citability" requires a new type of logic, in which—again—"*identity* and *difference*, *repetition* and *transformation* are not construed as mutually exclusive" (2008, 97, emphases added). The importance of the notion of citation, or "citability," for Benjamin is well known. Weber underlines its connection with the Brechtian gesture in order to emphasize the *dynamic* aspect of the two terms. Gesture involves not the fulfilment or realization of an intention or of an expectation, but rather its disruption and suspension: it interrupts the action or the plot and its structure is thus a peculiar kind of *fixation*. Gesture simultaneously interrupts and gives form, it breaks the ongoing sequence but also fixes it in a determined space and time, and this constitute its dialectical structure; Weber reads this dialectical structure as emphasizing the tension and suspension of the gesture, which interrupts an intention but retains at the same time its tension, and remains thus *ex-tended*: "gesture, insofar as it is citable, interrupts *itself*, and indeed only 'is' in its possibility of becoming other, of being transported elsewhere" (2008, 103). This possibility is however arrested, "fixed," in what Benjamin calls *Zustand*: Weber reads this term as a "stance" (*-stand*) marked by the prefix *zu-* as a "to or toward," that is, a stance-toward-something-else, or also a *di-stance*, which is to say, a "configuration that is not simply stable or self-contained but above all *relational*, determined by the *tension* of its *ex-tension*, by its relation to that which it has interrupted and from which it has separated itself" (2008, 103-104). In interrupting the action and impeding its progress, the *Zustand* initiates a different sort of movement, that of *Nachdenken*, or after-thought. The "after" defines the disjunctive gesture as a "tendency to always come too late, and yet at the same time never to arrive fully; it belongs to the future, never simply to the present or to the past" (2008, 105). The mode of being of the epic theatre is thus the possibility, to be read both as *potentiality* and as *alterity*, the possibility of becoming other than what is currently present or presented. The central category in this interpretation is again that of *repetition*, which is, as we already know, not the confirmation of an original identity, but rather its *transformation*: "it is this that endows the gesture with its singular *citability*. Gestures are

always citable, in principle because they are themselves the result of a repetition and a separation" (2008, 109). And, again, this is what constitutes the *virtuality* of the media, or the media as virtuality: "the medium is never simply actual, never simply real or present, much less 'the message' that it seems to convey. Rather, it consists in the suspension of all messaging and in the virtuality that ensues. Such virtuality makes its force felt as *intervention*: the media is what *comes between*, stretching apart everything that would be present to itself" (2008, 113).

Chapter Eight rehearses again the central argument of the book, the nominalization of verbs through the suffix *–barkeit* as a mark of possibility or potentiality as *virtuality*, this time in relation to the question of "style" and Benjamin's own peculiar style of writing. Finally, Chapter Nine concludes the first part with a short analysis of Derrida's *–abilities* and constitutes therefore the key to understand Weber's reading of Benjamin. Derrida is here defined as "the thinker who more than any other has taken up the legacy of Benjamin's *–abilities*" (2008, 122), or, better, the thinker who has made *explicit* "what had been largely *implicit* in Benjamin," namely "the convergence of what […] [Derrida] designates as 'structural possibility' with a no less structural, or rather destructuring, 'impossibility'" (2008, 123, emphasis added). The question we have to address is then the meaning of the term "implicit": was Benjamin a precursor of Derrida? Or, rather, has Benjamin been read here through a prefabricated interpretive matrix, a "theory," namely Derrida's deconstruction, which has been simply superimposed on the text?

3. Actuality and/as Construction

We should pause now in order to reflect on few points. The first is precisely the question of *language*, namely the language Weber uses in reading Benjamin. I want to question the need to use a discourse extraneous to Benjamin in order to interpret his work. It is not that the language of deconstruction or of Deleuzian repetition is not compatible with Benjamin's language and discourse; to the contrary, many interesting *correspondances* can be found and it is certainly valuable, from a purely Benjaminian perspective, to pursue these *correspondances* in order to "telescope the past through the present" (N7a,3), to uncover the truth-content of the text by undoing the material content, in short, to read Benjamin in a Benjaminian way. However, this is not what these readings do: they reframe the text by imposing a new, extraneous discourse, almost a transcendental master code, as if Benjamin's own language were insufficient for the task. Moreover, the substitution risks falling in the trap

Benjamin himself wanted to avoid: that of construing a "theory" through which to approach the text.

The major problem I find in Weber's reading, however, is with the category of *virtuality*, which he places at the center of Benjamin's philosophy. And here the issue is not merely one of terminological inappropriateness or imprecision, but rather one of *structural* importance: it is not only that the term "virtual" rarely appears in Benjamin's writings; rather, as Sigrid Weigel (1996), among others, has emphasized, the central place Weber assigns to it is occupied instead by the notion of *actuality* and *actualization*, which, as *Aktualität*, *Aktualisierung* and *Vergegenwärtigung*, literally crowd Benjamin's writings of the late 1920s and of the 1930s. *Aktualität* must be read in the *sui generis* Benjaminian way, in connection with *image* and *reading*: in short, the interpretive act, as implicitly or explicitly theorized by Benjamin at least from the figure of criticism in the book on German Romanticism, and then in the essay on translation, in the idea as constellation in the *Trauerspiel* book, in the "image" of Proust, and finally in the dialectical image, implies the *actualization* as *presentification*, the making present and actual, of an image of the past through its mirroring in the present. This is clearly explicit in the notion of *Darstellung* of the *Trauerspiel* book, in which truth is "made present [*vergegenwärtigt*] in the dance of represented ideas" (*GS* I/1:209/*OT* 29); in the notion of criticism as "completion [*Vollendung*] and consummation [*Ergänzerung*]" of the original work (*GS* I/1:78/*SW* 1:159); in the Proustian *mémoire involontaire* as "rejuvenating [*verjüngenden*] force" through which "what has been is reflected in the dewy fresh 'instant' [*Nu*]," and "a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more" (*GS* II/1:320/*SW* 2:224); in citation as theorized in the Kraus essay, and finally in the dialectical image, where *actualization* means the "polarization" of the presentation through the present, which becomes a "force field" where past and present "interpenetrate" (N7a,1). *Actualization* is precisely the process in which the image as constellation (be it in translation, criticism, quotation, montage, or dialectical image) becomes *readable*. Weber puts *virtuality* precisely in the place Benjamin assigns to *Aktualität*.

This is not the place to produce more textual evidence, but I believe it essential to insist on this point. *Actuality* as driving force of the interpretive act does not necessarily falsify Weber's argument, especially in relation to the endlessness and structural incompleteness of the process: *Bilder*, images, as constellations are constructions bound to the present, to their *Aktualität*, and thus always changing. The task of the reader—like that of the translator, the critic, the historian, the philosopher—is that of always renewing, of always "actualizing" the text and the original. Weber

is therefore absolutely correct in emphasizing the importance of the category of time. However, the insistence on the *virtuality* of the process, especially in connection to the Derridean structural "indeterminability" and "indecidability" (Weber 2008, 126), seems to project the long shadow of Paul de Man and his very influential 1983 reading of "The Task of the Translator": "virtuality" dangerously resonates with DeManian "impossibility"—impossibility to translate, to interpret, to read (cf. de Man 1986).

It is precisely in this context that the question of *correspondance* becomes important. It is indubitably a central issue in the whole of Benjamin's writings, from the early essays on language to the construction of the dialectical image, and "repetition," in the Deleuzian connotation used by Weber, presents indeed an interesting assonance or *correspondance*. In the evolution of Benjamin's writing, *similarity* becomes an important motif at least from the writings on childhood and education of the 1920s, it is explicitly theorized in the 1929 essay on Proust, in the two 1933 essays "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty," in the works on Baudelaire, and takes a central place as methodological cornerstone of the *Arcades Project*. In the essay on Proust, for example, resemblance is the mechanism that makes for the *mémoire involontaire*: the discrepant connection that puts together wakeful state and dream world, "in which everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise, opaquely similar to itself" (*GS* II/1:314/*SW* 2:239). In the "image" of Proust, resemblance constitute the temporality of the image, the eternity of "intertwined time" (*verschränkte Zeit*), a time "folded" (*verschränkt*) upon itself, in which similarity and *correspondances* rule. This structure becomes essential for the constellation that constitutes the dialectical image, characterized by *resemblance* and *synchronicity*: the image emerges from the perception of "nonsensuous similarities" that link one *Jetztzeit* with another.

Many other examples could be presented, and indeed the *correspondance* with Deleuzian repetition is worth pursuing. However, a characteristic that becomes central in Benjamin's construction is the *dialectical* structure of the similarities, a dialectics certainly *sui generis* and as distant from the Hegelian *Aufhebung* as the Deleuzian or Derridean "difference," but nonetheless constitutive and fundamental for Benjamin's argument. Precisely in *Difference and Repetition* (2004) Deleuze attacks dialectics by identifying it with the "labor of the negative" and replaces it with Nietzschean *affirmation*: *difference is affirmation*, it is not the negative which is the motor, but rather positive differential elements which determine the genesis of both the affirmation and the difference affirmed. I

am not sure how much this construction would fit Benjamin's discourse, but most of all I do not see the necessity of superimposing an anti-dialectic schema on it; the risk is that of distorting Benjamin's text in order to "adapt" it to theoretical demands extraneous to it. Dialectics is thus necessarily downplayed in Weber's readings.

Where dialectics become essential, however, is in the notion of *Konstruktion*, which is the fundamental structure of the dialectical image and of the methodology of the *Arcades Project*, but, it can be argued, is implicitly present also in the figures of criticism, translation and quotation, central for Weber's argument. The *construction* of a constellation with the present is the labor of *actualization* that *fixates* an image by arresting the dialectical movement—the movement of what Weber calls *repetitions* and *transformations*: "history is the subject of a *construction*," Benjamin writes for example in thesis XIV of "On the Concept of History," "whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time" (*GS* I/2:701/*SW* 4:395, emphasis added). This arresting-that-actualizes *is* the act of criticism, *is* translation, *is* quotation, *is* the dialectical image or any other interpretive act. The methodological exigencies of *Konstruktion* are though ill at ease with Weber's *virtuality*: the infinite, *virtual* potentialities of language must come to a standstill, must be fixated in a singular act of interpretation, *readability must become reading*. The process will immediately restart anew, but this does not impugn the need of the act of interpretation to take *actually* place. *Destruktion* is certainly as fundamental as *Konstruktion* (even more: "'construction' presupposes 'destruction' [N7,6])—de(con)struction of the organicity of the work (through criticism), of the "original" (through translation, quotation and reproduction), of the commodity world (through collection), of the phantasmagoria of modernity and the continuum of the history of the victors (through historical materialism)—but only as preliminary moment: the fragments must be picked up (as the ragpicker does) and rearranged in a—dialectical—*construction*, one that *actualizes* and *politicizes* the interpretive act.

4. On Reading and Method

A last point needs to be emphasized. Chapter Ten of Weber's book analyses the question of history and the genealogy of modernity in reference to the *Trauerspiel* book. The incipit revealingly establishes a connection between the problematization of the representation of history made by Poststructuralism (in opposition to Habermas) and Benjamin's discourse, and the essay revolves then around the analysis of *Ursprung*.

This argument is central also to various essays in the first part of the book, so we already know that *Ursprung* is read as a figure of *repetition*, *difference* and *recombination*. Chapter Eleven focuses then on the central notion of "Awakening" as the articulation of that non-synthetic relationship between concepts which Benjamin put forward as theoretical requirement in the 1918 "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." This non-synthesis relates concepts to one another while preserving their differences and, in "awakening" as experience of the threshold (*Schwelle*), is related to *Ursprung*: a function of repetition and iteration from which, and only from which, the "singular" can emerge. Chapter Twelve is an extremely acute reading of the relation between Benjamin and Carl Schmitt and is centered on the category of "extreme," which the two thinkers shared as methodological demand, whereas Chapter Thirteen reads Agamben reading Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and the essays on Kafka in *State of Exception*, rehearsing the argument about *Mit-teil-barkeit* (impart-ability) and the analysis of language. Chapter Fourteen analyses the question of "name" and allegory, especially in relation to Scholem's reading of the two 1933 fragments titled "Agesilaus Santander," where Chapter Fifteen focuses on Benjamin's reading of Paris—from a Derridean perspective.

It is worth dwelling a bit longer on this essay for a couple of reasons. Weber—as many others have done—utilizes Derrida's notion of "generalized text" in order to analyze Benjamin's notes on Paris. As it is well known, under this label Derrida meant that any process of articulation—whether discursive or non-discursive—operates in the manner of a text, insofar as meaning determines itself through the differential relations in which it is engaged. The city thus "can be read" as a text. The differential process, however, entails the *deferring* of meaning, which therefore can never be self-contained or complete (Weber 2008, 228). The text is thus "readable," but can never be wrapped up in a definitive or conclusive meaning. At this point Weber affirms that Benjaminian (or Derridean) reading is "tied not to the universality of the concept or that of 'theory', but to the critical moment of *singularity* that marks the *disjunctive convergence* of the two: of the general and the particular, the theoretical and the practical" (2008, 231). That is, "reading" cannot be tied to a "theory," cannot approach a text through a preordained matrix; but is this not precisely what Weber does, interpreting Benjamin through the theoretical schemas of deconstruction? The following paragraph adds an important corollary: this way of "responding to singularity […] does not lead to general conclusions that can be extrapolated from their singular occurrences and made into elements of a

universally valid system of knowledge or even a methodology. *Benjamin has no methodology*, no more than does Derrida" (2008, 231, emphasis added). This statement is really puzzling, especially coming from such a brilliant and thorough Benjamin scholar as Weber, considering that the question of method emerges as the central preoccupation in the notes for the *Arcades Project*: convolute "N" (which Weber amply reads in his analysis of *Erkennbarkeit* and *Lesbarkeit*) is precisely the attempt to define a methodology for "reading" the prehistory of modernity. A methodology which can quite easily be identified as a constant in Benjamin's approach to "texts" and to "reading," from the early essays to the late notes.[5] We should also recall Benjamin's polemic with Adorno about this point: apropos of "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," but also of the methodology of the *Arcades Project* more in general, Adorno repeatedly urged Benjamin to support with a "theory" what otherwise would be only a "wide-eyed presentation of mere facts" (*BA* 365/*CA* 281). Benjamin, on his part, tried to demonstrate that not a "theory," but rather a "method" was the basis of his reading: not a theory, which would set *a priori* the agenda and the goals of interpretation, but a method, which establishes an open-ended—but nonetheless structured—approach to the text[6]; and this method is precisely *Konstruktion*—and not merely *de-construction*. If the deconstructive moment is fundamental (is a prerequisite), it must be completed by a moment of *construction*, the instant in which the text—the city, history—becomes finally readable.[7]

Chapter Nineteen of Weber's book analyses the task of reading, and writing on, Walter Benjamin. Noteworthy in this essay—and in the following one—is the attention that Weber finally devotes to the question of the "image": as in the *Darstellung* of the *Trauerspiel* book, the truth of a text cannot be "seized" or "grasped" in a *concept* (*Be-griff*), cannot be "possessed" in an act of cognition (2008, 298). It rather "congeals" around

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[5] The literature on Benjamin's "method" is extensive, as Weber must surely know. For some examples, see Pensky (2004); Arens (2007); Feldman (2011).

[6] In the same way it could be argued that deconstruction itself is a method.

[7] A significative passage in Benjamin's response to Adorno reads: "There is an antagonism here of which I would not wish to be relieved even in my dreams. And overcoming this antagonism constitutes the problem of my study, and that is a problem of construction. I believe that speculation can only begin its inevitably audacious flight with some prospect of success if, instead of donning the waxen wings of esotericism, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone. It is the needs of construction which dictated that the second part of my book should consist primarily of philological material. What is involved here is less a case of 'ascetic discipline' than a methodological precaution" (*BA* 379/*CA* 291)

an image, which Weber prefers to relate to the *Sprung*, the leap which separates—*differentiates*—cognitions from cognitions, rather than to the constellation which holds together the ideas. Weber recognizes that commentary, critique and translation are some of these images/figures or, he emphasizes, *Schrift-bilder*, "writing-images," but, again, refuses to relate them to the necessary constructive moment of reading and its "actuality."

Because this is, in the end, the whole point: Benjamin's work contains precise instructions on how it should be read, it provides a "method" which almost prescribes a reading that will be polarized by the present, that is, driven by the notion of *Aktualität*. It asks to be read *historically*, to be put into a constellation with our present and that our reading recognize its nonsensuous correspondences with our time, that its historicity be "unfolded" and its *Ursprung* unveiled. It asks to be "mortified" and "ruined"—*de(con)structed*—and its truth-content represented. As a cultural artefact, it asks to be violated and read against the grain of its and our own time, and thus re-inscribed in new practices, re-assembled and re-made always anew. To look for *correspondances* with contemporary practices of interpretation is certainly part of this process: deconstruction, Deleuzian repetition, allegory, the focus on language, on the text, on the metropolis, the virtuality of the media, and many other contemporary interests can enter into fruitful constellations with Benjamin's work and perhaps help unveiling its truth-content. However, this does not mean to approach his work with a pre-established "theory," a discourse and a language external to it, in order to co-opt him as a predecessor. His method—and precisely "method" as the rejection of any "theory"—presents a coherent politics and ethics of interpretation: a perpetual vigilance and attentiveness to the text that goes beyond the minute analysis of its language and rather calls for its continuous renewal and actualization.

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