

WALTER BENJAMİN AND POLITICAL POTENTIALS OF CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

As monotheist traditions, Western Philosophy has problematized the end of history as a moment of emancipation. In materialism, as the historical progress is linked to concrete human praxis, the concrete picture of the end of history vanishes. Following the crisis of Marxism in early 20th Century, the concrete embodiment of the emancipation as proletariat becomes undependable. So, the critical theory focuses on the possibility of a critical stance which would nourish emancipatory potentials. In this context, Walter Benjamin develops a peculiar point of view. He seeks the sources of the emancipatory energies able to mobilize masses in the history, in the pains of the past. The energies of the past manifest themselves in the realm of the art. Benjamin considers modernists such as Surrealists and Proust in this framework: they seek to overcome voluntary memory in various ways in order to achieve a shock which will reveal emancipatory energies. However, in its relation to the masses, the potentials of cinema has a privileged place for Benjamin, as it address to distracted masses open “to be shocked” through the tools available to cinema.

Key words: Walter Benjamin, Cinema, Emancipation, Critical Theory

ÖZET

Tektanrıci dinler gibi Batı Felsefesi de kuruluş anı olarak tarihin sonunu bir sorun olarak ele almıştır. Maddecilik’te tarihsel gelişim somut insani eylemliliğe bağlı olduğundan, daha önceki felsefelerin

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sahip olduđu somut tarihin sonu resmi kaybolur. Marksizm'in 20. yüzyıl başlarında yaşadığı krizden sonra özgürleşmenin işçi sınıfında cisimleşmesi düşüncesi eski güvenilirliğini yitirmiştir. Bu sebeple eleştirel teori, özgürleşmeci potansiyelleri besleyecek bir eleştirel duruşun imkanına odaklanır. Walter Benjamin, bu çerçevede kendine özgü bir bakış açısı geliştirir. Kitleleri harekete geçirecek özgürlükçü enerjinin kaynaklarını tarihte, geçmişin acılarında arar. Bu enerji kendini sanat alanında dışavurur. Benjamin gerçeküstücüler ve Proust gibi modernistleri bu bağlamda düşünür: İstençli hafızayı çeşitli yöntemlerle aşarak özgürleştirici enerjiyi açığa çıkaracak bir şok yaratmayı hedefler. Fakat Benjamin için, kitlelerle ilişkisi açısından sinemanın potansiyellerinin ayrıcalıklı bir yeri vardır, çünkü sinema “şok edilmeye” açık “dalgın” kitlelere hitap eder.

Anahtar sözcükler: Maddecilik, eleştirel teori, marksizm, özgürlük, sinema, Walter Benjamin

WALTER BENJAMIN AND POLITICAL POTENTIALS OF CINEMA INTRODUCTION

Cultural studies, link itself to a number of XX. century scholars as a kind of scholarly Olympus: Althusser, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, E. Laclau were the last generation, there were also an earlier generation consisting mainly of Gramsci, Bakhtin and undoubtedly Walter Benjamin. Here Walter Benjamin constitutes a striking example. He only partially owes its current actuality to “Cultural Studies”. What brought the originality of his works in academy’s focus were the efforts of his two friends, Adorno and Scholem in 1960’s. On the other hand, one of these two figures, namely Adorno is always referred as a malicious figure in Cultural Studies, guilty of the capital crime, that is, elitism. Indeed, cultural studies were heavily influenced by the early writings of Laclau which tries to locate the emancipatory moment in the categories of “people” and “populism” which is located in front of the elites of the “power bloc”. What Cultural Studies tries to do was to find the emancipatory moment in “popular culture”. Adorno, on the other hand, argued that the realm of popular culture (he never uses this term, he uses the term “culture industry”) is the ground of enslavement. The moment of the emancipation, if it still exists under the domination of culture industry, can be found in “autonomous high art”. On the other hand, Benjamin’s essay “*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*” achieved status of a cult, as it does what Adorno refutes, that is, seeking emancipatory potentials in popular.

Indeed, beginning from his earliest writings such as “On Violence”, Benjamin seeks the image of the end of history which will equip masses with “revolutionary energies”. In this endeavor, he neither refers to the category of people, nor does he differentiate between high and popular culture. So as the mainstream of Frankfurt School, he focuses on the source of the critical distance taken towards the existing world. However, unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, he also takes into account potentials in the cultural forms located outside the scope of the “high art”. He focuses on a number of tools which would be able to animate these potentials. Ultimately, all this potentials are located in the memory and history and not technological development or pure imagination of the philosopher. So, to trace Benjamin’s account of revolutionary energies located in the culture, the right place to begin is the philosophy of history.

I-THE IMAGE OF THE END OF HISTORY

In monotheist theology, profane time has a beginning, “the creation”, and will have an end, “the apocalypse”. Apocalypse is a catastrophe, but also a judgment day that the ultimate justice will triumph, and the end of the unhappy exile of human spirits in the world. Then, the divine kingdom, the timeless, ahistorical condition of things will begin, if one can speak of beginning or ending after that. The will of god will be realized at once and for all¹.

Such an end of history appears also in the philosophy of enlightenment. However, not as an end which will be caused by the will of God, but as a *telos*. In Kant, it is hardly recognizable, the “regulative ideal” pushes humanity to their future emancipation and enlightenment, whereas their empirical being resists. So, the end of history as universal peace is uncertain, even improbable. However in Hegel, progress is mandatory. The history moves according to the laws of dialectic, and the end of history under the form of state has to come, and in Prussian Monarchy, it is already there.

The concrete picture of the future emancipation is easily achieved by both theology and German Idealism. To theology, it is inscribed in the texts inspired by god, in German Idealism, the philosopher, following Plato, achieves this image through his knowledge on Idea. In Kant, this is the knowledge of intelligible realm, regulative ideal acquired through the philosopher’s critique. In Hegel, the dialectical laws of *Geist*, is achievable by means of philosophy. So, to Idealism, the knowledge on the future does not present a difficult problem as the philosophy has the necessary tools to solve it.

For Marx, it is a puzzle. When Hegelian dialectics are ‘turned upside down’, philosopher lose his privileged position. Whereas in the Marxist scheme also, the history has an end as the ultimate synthesis of primitive classless society and hierarchic civilization, we cannot have a picture of such a society in our minds. However, the end of history has to come. We do not know it solely by the knowledge of the laws of dialectics, but we have a force in the material world that pushes for this

¹ Of course, there are significant differences between different versions of religions and sects. Especially for Jews, divine kingdom will actualize in our world, not in the paradise.

ultimate emancipation, namely, the Proletariat. In Proletariat's practice, Marx sees the coming apocalyptical revolution, which will put a point to the history of civilization, and the ultimate of emancipation through the end of exploration of man by man. So, the *telos* is apparent in the presence of proletariat and its opposition to Capitalist Mode of Production.

After the crisis of Marxism in 1910's, the belief on the existence of such a *telos* became hard to sustain. The idea of progress, and the trust to this idea among Marxists had been challenged by the revolution in Russia as 'the revolution against Capital' in Gramsci's words, the failure of "council communism" in Western Europe (notably Italy and Germany) and then, by the rise of Fascism. In the theoretical construction of Western Marxism, opposed to Orthodox Marxism, teleological approaches had been disfavored. But the idea of the end of history, of emancipation, had not been left over immediately, even by social democrats.

It is in this historical background that the Critical Theory of Frankfurt School flourished. To Frankfurt School, the existence of the image of the end of history, of the image of ultimate happiness, of image of the society whose *telos* is "to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members, and to negate the internal reflexive forms of that suffering.", had been destroyed by the dialectics of enlightenment and by the culture industry (Adorno, 1973, p. 204). The former autonomous art had once power both as the knowledge of the past and the temptation of *seirens*, but "Bourgeoisie" as Ulysses has closed the ears of the proletariat and tied himself to the mast (Horkheimer and Adorno 1996, p. 32-36). The image of the end of history which gave his power to the revolutionary practice has irrevocably gone. This absence gives way and crystallizes in III. Reich.

Walter Benjamin, in many instances, is interested to the same issues. As the Frankfurt School, he is interested in a critique of progress, a critical theory of culture, and a theoretical framework interpreting Fascism. On the other hand, Benjamin does not share the pessimism which is emblematic to Adorno. As a critique, he still tries to find the origin of the image of emancipation within the realm of culture.

As a disciple of Kaballah, Benjamin's approach to the idea of end of History was influenced by the Jewish theology. This characteristic finds itself best expressed in the appendix B of 'thesis on history'.

"The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance--namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter"

(Benjamin 2004)

So, as a materialist Jew, Benjamin had lost his ability to make prophesies, because he no more believes on a homogeneous time bringing *telos* nearer. However, he did not lost his ability to consult the past while waiting the messianic moment which he is unable to say when it will come. Indeed, "Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (Benjamin, 2004). So, we do not need an image of emancipated society for emancipation. Rather, looking backwards to the 'catastrophe' of civilization, we gain enough power to refute the present. So, the necessary energy for the future emancipation lies on the past, on the history.

His famous *Arcades Project* should be interpreted in the light of such a philosophy of history. Benjamin seeks to collect the ruins of the 19th century in order to grasp revolutionary energy. As the historian "[a] historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin 2004). Parisian

arcades as subject matter and Benjamin himself as historian is the concrete form as formulization. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin sought to construct “Dialectical Images” concerning Paris of 1848 Revolution and II. Empire. Dialectical Images are, in McCole’s words “had nothing impressionistic about it. Dialectical Images were to be analytical constructions, meant to lay bare of both the regressive elements and the utopian potential in modern culture” (1193, p. 281).

In the center of *Arcades Project* lies the commodity but not purely in Marxist terms. As Buck-Morss puts it “[f]or Benjamin, whose point of departure was a philosophy of historical experience rather than an economic analysis of capital, the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to fore” (1989, p. 81-82). This is particularly visible in World Expositions, where working class members visit these places of pilgrimage of commodity, and become blinded by the brilliance of lux and progress (Benjamin 1998a, p. 93-96). The commodity as the fetish on World Expositions and the myth of progress find its roots on the urban phantasmagoria of 19. Century’s Paris as deception. On the other hand, the moment of protest is there in the allegories of Baudelaire and the dreams of *flaneur*². *Flaneur*, the hero of modernity is a genuine dialectical image, it is an intellectual for sale (Benjamin 1998b, p. 129) and a protestor of the division of work and even the work itself (Benjamin 1998b, p. 148).

There Benjamin’s concept of wish-image is important for our purposes. In the arcades the petrified nature of commodities was exposed, however, they had a further function as wish-image of the collective. Buck-Morss explores the concept:

“In nature, the new is mythic, because its potential is not yet been realized; in consciousness, the old is mythic, because its desires never were fulfilled. Paradoxically, collective imagination mobilizes its powers for a revolutionary break from the recent past by evoking a cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols from a more distant ur-

² *Flaneur* is a figure of XIX. century Paris that attract Benjamin’s special attention via Baudelaire. It refers to "a person who walks the city in order to experience it".

past. The ‘collective wish-image’ is nothing else than this. Sparked by the new, from which they ‘maintain the impulse,’ they envision its revolutionary potential by conjuring up archaic images of the collective ‘wish’ for social utopia. Utopian imagination that cuts across the continuum of technology’s historical development as the possibility of revolutionary rupture. This means that each of the corresponding elements -mythic nature and mythic consciousness- works to liberate the other from myth. Wish images’ emerge at the point where they intersect” (1989, p.116).

So, technology shelters myth as far as its potentials are unknown, there lies the origin of science fiction. Jules Verne mystified the submarine, Clarke the space voyage, Orwell telecommunication, *Terminator* Robotics, *Matrix* cybernetics, as far as their full potentials are still unknown. When it meets the unfulfilled wishes of consciousness, there appears utopia. However, for Benjamin, this utopia is emancipation’s motivation rather than its description.

On the otherhand, as the historiography is dominated by the winners, discovering political potentials of the past cannot be done simply by pursuing the standard methods of history as a discipline. The potentials of the past should materialize elsewhere to be activated. Benjamin offers us an analysis of the cultural movements which are trying to find a way to mobilize such energies between the two world wars.

II-DISTRACTION AND HIGH CULTURE

Benjamin's problematic personal and intellectual existence between two poles of the aesthetic theory in Germany, i.e. Adorno and Brecht, is interesting. His belief to technology's potentials and his interest on proletarian pedagogy is Brechtian in spirit. However, the reference to the cultural achievements of Bourgeois avant-guard and his sophisticated elaboration of dialectics is of the reason of his relation to Frankfurt School, although as an outsider. However, his understanding of culture was much controversial to the members of Frankfurt School

First of all, mass culture and avant-guard were not two different realms to be opposed to each other. For Benjamin, both have revolutionary potentials. In his essay on surrealism, Benjamin explores a revolutionary aspect of avant-guard: "it is as magical experiments with words, not an artistic dabbling, that we must understand the passionate phonetic and graphical transformational games that have run through the whole literature of the avant-guard for the past fifteen years, whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism." (Benjamin 1978, p. 184). But by the same manner, he believes that the distraction and absentmindedness, not only concentration, is related to the avant-guard. For example, Surrealists backed to write poems in distraction, between the sleep and dream, and thus acquiring the truth of the unconsciousness. As Breton puts it in the manifesto of 1924:

"Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense. It could, on the contrary, only serve to justify the complete state of distraction which we hope to achieve here below. Kant's absentmindedness regarding women, Pasteur's absentmindedness about "grapes," Curie's absentmindedness with respect to vehicles, are in this regard profoundly symptomatic. This world is only very relatively in tune with thought, and incidents of this kind are only the most obvious episodes of a war in which I am proud to be participating. "Ce monde n'est que très relativement à la mesure de la pensée et les incidents de ce genre ne sont que les épisodes jusqu'ici les plus marquants d'une guerre

d'indépendance à laquelle je me fais gloire de participer." Surrealism is the "invisible ray" which will one day enable us to win out over our opponents. "You are no longer trembling, carcass." This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere"(2004).³

Indeed, surrealists tried different methods to overcome their consciousness, including hypnosis and drugs. For surrealist, concentration was an obstacle to deal with the struggle for truth and freedom.

Moreover, a similar distraction theory is also present in Proust, whose '*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*' had been partially translated by Benjamin. Indeed, Proust insists that we cannot reach the truth through consciousness, methodic search and "voluntary memory". Instead, he suggests "involuntary memory and awakening" as the appropriate tools to reach it. The famous experience of Madeleine, where through the taste of a Madeleine the narrator involuntarily remembers his childhood at Combray as a whole, in its veritable unity for a short moment, is the symbol of his novel '*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*', which is itself a quest for truth. Through undistracted memory triggered by a resemblance between two moments, the acquisition of such a truth is impossible. In that paragraph, Proust wanders what is so miraculous about the taste of Madeline and the tea:

"And I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I decide to attempt to make it reappear. I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I find again the same state, illumined by no fresh light. I compel my mind to make one further effort, to follow and recapture once again the fleeting sensation. And that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every

³ The phrase in French is the translation of the precedent English Phrase

extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention to the sounds which come from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is growing fatigued without having any success to report, I compel it for a change to enjoy that distraction which I have just denied it, to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before the supreme attempt. And then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it. I place in position before my mind's eye the still recent taste of that first mouthful, and I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed" (1999, p. 51-52)⁴.

So, the truth touched by the involuntary memory, by distraction is not open to the revelations of concentrated mind, the concentration is the enemy of truth, the resistance offered to revelation. So, both surrealists and Proust get their inspiration and freedom from their leap towards getting rid of consciousness. Their writings are absent minded, and through this absent mindedness that he achieves shocks, shock of the Madeleine, shock of blue roses, wood made of glass, of surrealism and Dadaism. And this shock overlaps with the tiger's jump identical with the revolution that Marx is waiting for (Benjamin 2004). Then, the task of surrealism is "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" (Benjamin 1978, p. 189).

There, we need to explore better the connection between distraction, shock and revolution. Anyway, such a relationship is ambiguous in high art. In Proust, distraction, involuntary memory is a way to reach truth in its unity, because as I stated earlier, such knowledge is impossible to the voluntary memory. However, a more effective way to reach truth is possible. The moment of revelation that Madeleine suppose is instantaneous, whereas the work of art itself is more adequate to the understanding of truth as a unique entity, only through work of art that we may acquire unity. But, the important point there is that the quasi auto-biographic content of '*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*' has

⁴ The English translation I took there is from e-books from www.etextlibrary.adelaide.edu.au/aut/proust_marcel.htm

no interest to us. The final revelation does not pop up in the end of the intrigue, but it is embedded in its style. Indeed, we are unable to locate a specific story told by Proust. There is neither an intrigue, nor a final. The lack of final is telling when we consider that the novel is constructed upon a rhythm of deceptions and revelations. Whereas deceptions and revelations form a melody, it is an atonal one, they are not tied to each other by a central intrigue. The nature of the novel has few similarities to a Sherlock Holmes story. The work of art in its unity is the final revelation. As Deleuze puts it:

“The true theme of a work is not the subject matter it deals with, the conscious and wanted subject which confounds with what words shows, but unconscious themes, les archetypes where words, but also colours and voices take their meaning and life. Art is a veritable transmutation of the matter. The matter is spiritualized there for refracting the essence, that is the quality of an originary world. And this deal with matter can be done only through ‘style’ (1971, p. 58-59).⁵

Then, Proust’s method is “to animate, not to think and analyze.” (Benjamin 2001, p. 112). So, even if the novel is written to discover unconscious themes, an extremely attentive, individual reading is needed to discover them.

Surrealism has also its weaknesses, as Benjamin illustrates as follows: “shortly after the war, when the surrealists, who deemed the celebration for a poet they worshiped compromised by the presence of nationalistic elements, burst out with the cry, ‘Long live Germany,’ they remained within boundaries of scandal, toward which, as is known, the bourgeoisie is as thick-skinned as it is sensitive to all action” (Benjamin 1978, p.185). Surrealist are unable to shock society, because their art is distant from praxis.

The case of Dadaism may be more telling. Take for example the famous poem of Tzara:

“XIII

DADA is a virgin microbe

DADA is against the high cost of living

⁵ my translation

DADA

limited company for the exploitation of ideas

DADA has 391 different attitudes and colours according to the sex of the president

It changes - affirms - says the opposite at the same time - no importance - shouts - goes fishing.

Dada is the chameleon of rapid and self-interested change.

Dada is against the future. Dada is dead. Dada is absurd. Long live Dada.

Dada is not a literary school, how” (Tzara 2004).

So, what Dada seeks is clear, its self-destruction. But, why does it need to happen to die? Because it has no power to suicide, to annihilate itself. It needs the power of a shocked audience, a ‘succès de scandale’, to happen and then, to end. This self-destruction was only possible through the outrage of the public, so vehement distraction (Benjamin 1999, p. 231). But, as Debord puts it: “Dadaism wanted *to suppress art without realizing it*; surrealism wanted *to realize art without suppressing it*”(196, p. 103). Of course, both positions are impossible to hold. So, the shocks they created remained as ineffective scandals. While in ‘*Author as Producer*,’ Benjamin acknowledges us the benefices of avant-garde (Benjamin 1982, p. 267-269), the real shock lies somewhere else.

III- DISTRACTION AND VISUAL TECHNOLOGIES

On the other hand, the shock that high art attempt to create is not welcomed by the masses. Indeed, it does not aim to be welcomed. On the other hand, there are two aesthetic phenomena that Benjamin claims to be politically significant. First is the epic theatre of Brecht, that Benjamin celebrates for a number of reasons, between them its relationship to distracted spectators (Benjamin 200, p. 28-29). The other is the ‘film’ that I will consider there in length. Indeed, “The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie” and this is the mechanical reproduction of art that causes this change (Benjamin 1999b, p. 227). And there originates the revolutionary potential of the visual technologies.

When questions on technologies are raised, we always need to keep in mind that a technology is introduced only when it fulfills a socially existing demand. It does not have a *per se* power to determine social conditions. The technological situation of the classical Ottoman Society provides irrefutable evidence: The military technologies had been swiftly adapted by Ottoman Army as far as economic resources are sufficient, whereas printing technologies were refuted consciously. The reason is not simple, but obviously cultural: Ottoman high culture’s dislike of every kind of record, and the understanding of writing as a genuine artistic form. So Ottomans needed guns, but not printing press.

Avoiding all kinds of technological determinism, our task there is to explore the potentials of the visual technologies by reference to Benjamin. Referring back to Buck-Morss’s explanation of the concept of wish-image, in Benjamin’s thought, when the unexplored, so mythic aspect of technology meets utopic desires, it acquires the revolutionary chances to get rid of myths. Benjamin’s endeavor, like Brecht’s one, is the exploration of this potentials. His radio speeches are also part of this endeavor, and in Gilloch’s words “He expounds upon the merits of the mutual invisibility of broadcaster and audience, and the potential of radio for technical experimentation and proletarian pedagogy” (2002, p. 163).

As a technology, what desire has brought photography and film to us? Benjamin gives a straightforward answer: “The desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and

humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (199b, p. 216-127). That is, what hindered the adaptation of the printing press as a mechanical reproduction was Ottoman High Culture’s wish to preserve authenticity, to defend the tradition. The printing press would be the loss of the authenticity of writing, and the decline of its religious, ritualistic value. Indeed, religious writings constitute a formidable example for what Benjamin calls tradition. In fact, each book used to be singular work of art, written not only to transmit a message, but to achieve beauty. This artistic beauty formed a part of its ritualistic value; the beauty was not a luxury, but an imperative for the book’s holiness. What Benjamin calls “aura” find its supreme expression in there. Indeed, aura is not only the unique existence in time and space, but also a deep connection to the ritualistic, magical past of work of art. The printing press, as Ottomans clearly saw it, would have destroyed that value. The technological innovations after lithography has gave way some qualitative changes in the nature of the work of art finding is ‘most powerful agent in the film’ (Benjamin 1999b, p. 215). The work of art gets rid of its ritualistic value to become pure exhibition value, thus loosing its authority, its distance, its untouchability.

The results of the decline of aura do not mean the end of authority, and the liberation, however. Indeed, an artificial aura is created by the film industry:

“The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial building of ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the spell of personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers’ capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art” (Benjamin 1999b, p. 224).

On the other hand, Vertoff, by filming the people working without caring on camera, and by including the filming process itself into film, challenges the artificial aura. However the responses of masses are more crucial because, even the film industry serves to the critic of the authority on tradition.

Why the response of masses towards film is progressive while it is reactionary towards surrealism? Benjamin gives us some clues. First of all, film, unlike painting, “presents an object for simultaneous collective experience” (Benjamin 199b, p. 228). Second, through its techniques such as slow motion and close up, it has the ability to explore deeply the quotidian. It reveals the hidden details on our quotidian practices and our familiar habitats, which were the landscape of boredom for us:

“Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands, with slow motion, movement is extended” (Benjamin 1999b, p. 229).

But this does not mean re-enchantment of the prison. We are introduced into the world of unconscious optics, but not in a conformist therapeutic manner that aims to regain us in the society. Instead, by showing us the unconscious aspects of our quotidian lives, it introduces us to a critical realm, where the unseen may be seen both on a spatial and temporal level, and thus the normalizing aspects of the quotidian is annihilated. The arbitrariness of the normal becomes visible.

At last, but not least, comes the emancipation of the powers of distraction. Benjamin takes the side of distraction against concentration, tactile against optics. This passage from optics to tactile was existent in Dadaism: Dadaist poem does not offer us an alluring appearance, so a medium of contemplation, and this was its foremost intention. Instead, it happened to the spectator (Benjamin 1999b, p. 231). That is, we may not contemplate on a Dadaist poem and wander what it ought to say. To contemplate about the meaning of the statement ‘391 different attitudes and colours according to the sex of the president’ is ridiculous. Instead, we are hit by the scandal, by the extreme absence of meaning of the thing which is supposed to be the most sublime of all meaning bearers.

This happening is not the intention of the film, but its nature; the speed that images moves does not allow contemplation, and thus creates the shock that Dadaism desires in the constant change. Because the work of art does not absorb the spectator, just the opposite. Whereas in the former case of optics, contemplation counts, what counts in the latter mode of tactile is the habit. This has an extraordinary revolutionary potential, “for the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance the tactile appropriation” (Benjamin 1999b, p. 233).

The distraction of film spectator is not a simple inattention, but paying attention elsewhere (Gilloch 2002, p. 191). This elsewhere is an experience of habit formation, and thus in a sense a form of learning in boredom, -which is already present in storyteller’s practice (Benjamin 1999a, p. 90-91) - This distracted reception takes the position of audience into absent-minded critic, thus opening the way to the shocks that revolutionary practice needs as habits. Distraction is a critical standpoint as far as a habit can have a critical function, and for Benjamin, real, tactile shock may only be experienced through distraction⁶.

⁶ Adorno, in his famous 1938 essay ‘On the fetish character in music and the regression on listening’, defends concentration in a covert polemic with Benjamin. In the perspective he provides in that essay, the distraction is a regressive symptom in the Freudian sense, moreover, it results in an inability to perceive the whole and carry its victims to an infantile milieu. So, distraction is the loosening of the maturity of use its own reason, the capital demand of Kant’s Enlightenment. This regression has strong connections with the commodification of cultural products. In considering the value of the work of art, Adorno uses Marx’s concepts of use and exchange value instead of Benjamin’s cultic and exhibition value, and concludes that art has passed from pure use value to pure exchange value, instead of from pure cult value to pure exhibition value (Adorno 1992, p. 34). So getting rid of aura is not to exorcise the demons that haunt the work of art, but make it vulnerable to a more powerful spirit, the commodity form. The rules of commodity form reduce art to entertainment, and difference to homogeneity. On the other hand, the once autonomous art used to be a ‘promesse de bonheur’, an image of the end of history. But this moment is lost. Benjamin’s “idea that a reactionary is turned into a member of the avant-garde by expert knowledge of Chaplin films strikes as out-and-out romanticisation” (Gilloch 2002, p. 193).

IV-CONCLUSION: FILM TOWARDS THE END OF HISTORY

I made earlier a distinction between Adorno's 'promesse de bonheur' and Benjamin's collective wish image. In Benjamin's thought, the wish image as an image of the future is related to the technology. The new visual technologies have a clear promise, to bring the work of art nearer; to destroy the authoritarian distance between work of art and masses. However, it is doubtful that the withering away of this distance is automatically progressive, because "The masses have a right to change property relations, Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property" (Benjamin 1999b, p. 234). The lack of distance gives them the chance to do so by aesthetizing the politics. The radio speeches of Hitler are no misinformation, but a manipulative poetry, an expression of unfulfilled desires by means of technology in a manner to give them a reactionary force.

But, new technologies, especially film, have also progressive aspects for Benjamin. Indeed, Benjamin is looking for a shock. Eagleton describes this shock: "If we were able to recollect our ancestors, then in a moment of shock we might trigger the unpalatable memory trace at a ripe time, blast through the continuum of history and create the empty space in which the forces of tradition might congregate to shatter the present. That moment of shock is socialist revolution"(1981, p. 78). Indeed, there lies the power of the metaphor of Angelus Novus. From the film, masses may acquire an involuntary memory based on a shock similar to the shock of Madeleine; that they cannot acquire from Proust or Surrealists. Whereas the real reader of Proust is the one who is feeling the trembling of constant small shocks (Benjamin 2000, p. 109) and the real intention of Dadaism is to deny society by denying art, in film that the nature of shock excels, because, its reception is characterized by distraction. Only there shocks may situate themselves in the habit, so crucial in the tradition and memory to create the necessary energies to recapture the pains of past generations and thus the energies for revolution which will bring the end of history.

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