

WALTER BENJAMIN. A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE WORLD THROUGH POETRY GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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ABSTRACT

This special issue dedicated to Walter Benjamin collects five essays in which a fundamental feature of his critical Theory is explored: his ability to inquire and interpret complex problems of a social, political, legal, and artistic order, through images made out of a Philosophy and a Theory of History that finds its most lucid expression in Poetry and in the Work of Art.

KEYWORDS

Critical Theory, Images, Interpretation, Work of Art, Philosophy/Poetry.

In the 1920s the expressionism of Gottfried Benn, Ernst Stadler and Georg Heym emerged, as well as the narratives of Thomas Mann and Kafka, the poetics of Rilke, the theater of Brecht, the philosophy of Heidegger, the literary criticism of Husserl, among other examples of great intellectuals and thinkers, many of them Jews, who contributed to enhance the great spectrum of German letters. In this environment, the figure of Walter Benjamin came out, who despite being impregnated with a German cultural awareness, represents a particular sort of philosopher and critical theorist that cannot be classified: his prose on Kant, on Baroque Drama, on Ibiza, on the streets of a city or on a childhood memory expresses the philosophical content of a continuous intention that systematically leads to allegory or metaphor, and his concepts are often reduced to aphorisms or parables evoking the past, either lived and not lived.

Benjamin's descriptions, for example of cities, are not limited to an objective literary outline, but rather represent a philosophy of history: this notion is echoed by what is narrated in *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, a work written in various stages throughout the 1930s, in which the force of the past meets the consciousness of what

has been lived. The foregoing as a preamble to state that there's a close relationship between poetry and philosophy that underlies Benjamin's thought. On this basis, many philosophers and sociologists used literary procedures to create metaphors or rhetorical figures to express new models or philosophical perspectives, emphasizing the role of the creative and nominating language (literary language) in the face of the "surprises" that reality opposes, since it makes them explainable and documentable beyond the possibilities offered by essay prose.

Regarding the refraction of social and political issues in literature, it is explicitly addressed by Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* as he wonders "How does a literary work find itself in society within the relations of production?" (1968:218). But beyond this question that regards several problems of modern lyric, this short essay opens the possibility of a "poetic philosophy": an affinity between Benjamin and Hegel related to their assimilation of an epochal change in the reproductive nature and in the sociological sense of art. Hegel considered poetry and literature in his *Aesthetics*, on the occasion of the historical and social changes that occurred after the Industrial and French Revolutions, and the consequent rise of the Bourgeoisie. The affinity between Benjamin and Hegel appears precisely in the fact that Benjamin also ties the relations between literature and society to a contrast between what art and lyrics were before and after their industrial reproduction; before the illustration, the conception of Aesthetics was based on the "aura" as a vital and cult value of the works, which saw in the Beauty a unity together with the True and the Good. After industrialization, Benjamin argues, the works lose this aesthetic axiom and the aura, and its individuality is destroyed. In this sense, one could once more equate Hegel's "end of art" with Benjamin's "loss of aura" as consequence of Modernity for the artist; both perceive the new relationships between art and society as a form of destruction of the artist's image (or the writer's) as an isolated creator, that within the industrial relations of production becomes a mediator who "translate" society into art.

But what exactly is aura for Benjamin: "We define the aura of [natural objects] as the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (222-223). This definition refers to that peaceful halo that can be perceived in memories and images in the field of tradition, and this takes on special value in Benjamin's case: as we have already said, he experiences an exceptional attraction for the allegorical content not only of the images themselves, but also by the essential conjunction of temporal and spatial relationships that are assimilated in their substance, a conjunction that in the work of art refers to the memory of experiences, in the poetic contemplation of a toy, a book, some antiquarian rarity, a mythological figure, and of

course also in a painting such as the *Mona Lisa*, a work that, as Benjamin himself notes, had already been the subject of innumerable copies.

This contemplation of the artwork as a phenomenon is crucial to understand the links between poetry and philosophy. The essays collected in this monographic issue of *Ethics & Politics* are outsourced from that dialogue and regard a wide spectrum of traits that include Benjamin's political theology, his theory of Aesthetics as well as his political Aesthetics, in addition to some attempts in literary criticism in which he tested his own understanding of the Philosophy of History, and the Ethics of Law and the legal system in representative novels of the time in which he lived.

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