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**Dreams of a Better Nature:
Walter Benjamin
on the Creation of a Collective Techno-Body¹**

*Sueños de una naturaleza mejor:
Walter Benjamin
sobre la creación de un tecno-cuerpo colectivo*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that the theories of Walter Benjamin about technology may help us to understand the historical and utopian functions that new technologies open up in the social body. According to Benjamin, the arrival of modern technology created a collective physis in which technology can be incorporated into the nature of human beings. The promises of a better nature—both for people's surroundings and for the human organic nature—will be only

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achieved if the collective gains control of such a body. The capitalist-imperialist use of technology, understood as the mastery of nature by man, has betrayed the potentials of technology for humanity and therefore has prevented its revolutionary uses to be deployed for the sake of human beings. I will discuss possible forms of bringing that collective techno-body under control. Through the concept of aesthetics, which Benjamin conceived as a theory of perceptions which analysed the relation of the senses to a world which is increasingly affected by modern technologies, I will argue that the arena of cinema reception is an empowering training ground for the interpenetration between technology and the collective through a regime of play. My aim with this article is to elucidate theoretical understandings about the possibilities of digital technologies with regard to the creation of a social body.

KEYWORDS

Suicide, Suicide Media Contagion, Social Psychology, Constructivism, Physiological Psychology.

RESUMEN

El argumento que defiende en este artículo es que las teorías que Walter Benjamin desarrolló sobre tecnología nos pueden ayudar a entender mejor las posibilidades históricas y utópicas que las nuevas tecnologías ofrecen en relación a la formación de un cuerpo social. Según Benjamin, la aparición de la tecnología moderna creó una *physis* colectiva en la cual era posible incorporar la tecnología directamente a la naturaleza humana. Las promesas de una naturaleza mejor, por la que no sólo mejoraría el espacio físico en el que los seres humanos viven, sino también su propia naturaleza orgánica, se pueden alcanzar tan sólo si el colectivo toma control de este cuerpo. El uso de la tecnología promovido por el capitalismo y el imperialismo, basado en el dominio de la naturaleza por parte del hombre, ha traicionado el potencial que la tecnología tenía para la humanidad y, por tanto, ha impedido su uso revolucionario. En el artículo, discuto algunas formas posibles por las que este cuerpo tecnológico puede ser reapropiado por los seres humanos y, más específicamente, por el proletariado. A través del concepto de estética que Benjamin entendió como la teoría de la percepción que analiza la relación de los sentidos hacia un mundo cada vez más afectado por la tecnología, argumentaré que el espacio de recepción cinematográfica puede ser un campo de entrenamiento

para la interpenetración entre tecnología y el colectivo bajo un régimen lúdico. Mi intención con este artículo es dilucidar nuevos entendimientos teóricos sobre las posibilidades que las tecnologías digitales ofrecen en relación a la formación de un cuerpo social.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Walter Benjamin, tecnología, segunda naturaleza, utopía.

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In this article I want to discuss the theories developed by Walter Benjamin about the creation of a new social body in technology; a theory which may help us to rethink the possibilities which digital technologies can offer for the organisation of a collective *physis* and for a closer relation between technology and the human, organic body. This idea might sound similar to Michel Foucault's writings on biopolitics and the way in which disciplinary *dispositifs* shape society. Yet while both theories are concerned with power relations, there are significant differences between the two approaches. Whereas for Foucault technology separates, for Benjamin technology shapes a collective body in which the opposition between individual and mass is overcome. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests that disciplinary power separates and decomposes individuals into sufficient single units, instead of yielding subjects into a uniform, compact mass (Foucault, 1991: 170). As such, the techniques employed in the administration of power aim to individualise rather than unite. In "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1938) Benjamin makes a similar remark (which may also remind the reader of Gilles Deleuze's "control society"). There he talks about the technical measures which came to the aid of the administrative control process in the nineteenth century. Photography provided a turning point: it made it possible for the first time "to preserve permanent and unmistakable traces of a human being." (Benjamin, 2006b: 26, 27) In this way, the

mechanical reproduction of photography could help the administrators of society to follow the traces of individuals. Hence, in this text, Benjamin conceives the technologies of reproduction in a similar vein to Foucault and Deleuze. As Maurizio Lazzarato has argued, Foucault's theory of biopolitics can be reversed from the administration of control into "the production and government of new forms of life." (Lazzarato, 2002: 110) For Foucault, there is always the possibility for change. There is always a gap through which new subjectivities can escape biopower. Nevertheless, both control and resistance are exercised over and by the individual. Benjamin, however, believed that there was an "elective affinity" between technology and proletariat. Technology, he argued, could provide the proletariat with the necessary analytic and scientific procedures to dissect and analyse the world and thus gain a better understanding

of itself as a class. The adaptation to modern technology was therefore, first and foremost, a collective process.

Benjamin was principally concerned with the historical consequences of the reception of technology by humanity. For him, it could either result in a positive adaptation —which could set revolutionary demands on the new social body that emerged —or a failed reception—which could bring about a destructive potential, ending in the pleasure of human annihilation described in the last section of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-39). In this article, I will focus on the theories that Benjamin developed with regard to the confluence between technology and aesthetics in their relation with the human body. I will focus primarily on the historical role of film, as a technology of reproduction, to pose questions about the organic nature of human beings, not only as individuals but also as a collective. These ideas, I argue, can broaden the scope of our thought about technologies of reproduction and their relationship to the human body. As I have anticipated above, rather than being concerned with the use of these new technologies for controlling the population and creating new subjectivities, Benjamin focused on their reproducible, collective nature. From this nature, Benjamin thought of a collective subjectivity, of a techno-body which was formed among the proletarian masses that filled the cinemas at night after their working hours. Film could supply a realm to both preserve and overcome (in the full meaning of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*) the utopian but commodified features of mass culture.

First, however, I want to give a couple of definitions about the concept of utopia which I will use throughout the article. The French socialist utopian thinker Charles Fourier, who inspired Benjamin's own writings on the topic, described utopia as "the dream of well-being without the means of execution." (Spencer, 1981:126) Ruth Levitas, in contrast, claims in *The Concept of Utopia* that the essential element of utopia is desire: "the desire of a better way of being". (Levitas, 1990:221) Therefore, utopia is about the imagination of a state of being in which the gap between the problems which confront us and their realisation is closed. In the realm of the theories of Benjamin about technology and its relation to human nature, utopia is envisaged as a collective dream of a better nature in which to live —a nature which involves not only what surrounds human beings, but also their own organic nature. The arrival of modern technology stimulates new dreams within or without reach —dreams which are still far from fulfilment but which can take advantage of the new means at their disposal.

"Anthropological materialism"

The ideas developed by Benjamin on technology and, more specifically, on the technologies of reproduction belong to the tradition of "anthropological materialism;" a school of thought which analysed the changes in the human sensorium caused by the alteration of their environment through technology.² It is in this tradition that Benjamin develops his conception of aesthetics or, more accurately, the "theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics," since the original term *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις) means "perception from the senses." (Benjamin, 2006a:120) Aesthetics, then, is intimately linked to the way our apperceptions of the world change according to technology and the way our senses evolve. For Benjamin, aesthetics can thus act as a training ground for the interpenetration between technology and human beings.

One of the first and most important theoretical developments about the relation between technology and humanity was outlined by Benjamin in his 1926 book *One-Way Street*. In the section "To the Planetarium," Benjamin defines the role of technology as the mastery of the relation between human beings and nature. This understanding stands against the widespread, imperialist-capitalist conception of technology as the mastery of nature by man. Benjamin illustrates this idea with the image of a cane wielder who proclaims that the purpose of education is the mastery of children by adults. For Benjamin, the ruling class' lust for profit had betrayed the positive potential of technology. In one of the first formulations of his concept of "anthropological materialism," he claims that technology is organising a new *physis*, or collective body for mankind, different to the hitherto configurations of humanity, based primarily on great organic life complexes such as families and nations. While men as species have completed their development thousands of years ago, Benjamin thinks that the "species mankind" is just in its beginning and has to adapt to the new nature. Thus, Benjamin prefigures the notion of second nature as humanity's own nature. With a language which could well resemble that of Charles Fourier, Benjamin talks about a new body which emerges from

² Walter Benjamin's "anthropological materialism" is drawn from French socialist utopian thinkers such as Charles Fourier and Saint-Simon, whose focus of interest was the human collective; and from a Germanic current of thought which comprises authors such as Jean Paul, Georg Büchner, Karl Gutzkow and Gottfried Keller, who put instead the individual at the core of their interest (Benjamin, 1999:633).

the collision between technology and human beings, fruit of the procreation between humanity and the cosmos.³ However, because of the use which the ruling classes made of technology, favouring the domination over nature and man, technology took revenge and caused a bloodbath. Benjamin understands thus the First World War as the first, failed attempt to organise a collective physis at a planetary scale.

Benjamin returns to this idea in "Theories of German Fascism" (1930), a critique of a collection of essays entitled *Krieg und Krieger* edited by Ernst Jünger. Benjamin continues in this article his theory on the relation between humanity, technology and nature. Technology, he argued, was now developed enough to master the social forces of society. However German society did not prove to be mature enough to make technology its organ and used it instead as a destructive, cultic power. In contrast to the Russian people, who took advantage of the loss of the war to correct the direction taken by the imperialistic usage of technology, Germany grew a cult to a lost war and endowed technology with a destructive character. For Benjamin, technology should be conceived as "a key to happiness," instead of as "a fetish of doom." (Benjamin, 2005a:321) Technology could give voice to nature and illuminate the mystery of nature for human beings. The authors of *Krieg und Krieger*, however, praise the heroic, destructive potential of technology vis-à-vis nature. In light of these ideas, Benjamin declares that we have a "last chance to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology." If this effort fails, he continues, "millions of human bodies will indeed inevitably be chopped to pieces and chewed up by iron and gas." (Benjamin, 2005a:320, 321) The failed reception of technology which led to the First World War threatened to repeat another annihilating war if the direction taken by technology was not corrected. Benjamin thus foresaw very accurately World War II in the destructive reception of technology which took place in the Weimar Republic.

For Benjamin, technology could provide humanity with scientific procedures that would give them a better understanding of nature. Fascists, however, tried to awaken cultic and auratic elements in a modern technology which was supposed to wither these ritual features.

³ According to Fourier planets have two souls and two sexes and can copulate. Therefore, they are also reproducible. Planets can copulate, first, with themselves, because the north pole is male and spreads a boreal fluid and the south pole is female and spreads the southern fluid; second, with other planets, by means of emissions from opposite poles; and finally, with an intermediary. (Fourier, 1996:45).

Notwithstanding this failed reception of technology, Benjamin believed that the new collective *physis* organised by technology could still be rescued and adopted by mankind. The revolts which followed the war —namely, the Soviet Revolution and the 1919 Spartacist uprising in Germany— were attempts on the part of the proletariat to bring this new body under control. Once the recovery of this organic, proletarian techno-body is completed, mankind would have taken a new step in its development towards a better relation to nature and to itself. Film —as Benjamin would later develop in a number of essays, from "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (1927) to the "Work of Art" essay— supplies the collective an exemplary realm for gaining control of such a body and, therefore, for a better relationship between humanity and the new nature which has inscribed in itself the man-made world.

First and second nature

In his writings on technology, Benjamin started to use the Hegelian concepts first and second nature developed by Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* (1914-15). For Lukács, first nature is what we understand in general terms as nature: the mountains, the sea, in other words, what is created independently of the agency of man. Second nature, on the other hand, is the world of human convention, man-made structures, the social world. Theodor W. Adorno also borrowed this term from Lukács and used it from his 1932 lecture "The Idea of Natural History" to his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970. For both Adorno and Lukács, the dangerous thing about second nature is that it presents itself as it were first nature and, as such, presents social conditions as a natural state. In the first version of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin presented these concepts in similar terms. However, he was increasingly complicating this division and implying that nature had always been affected by man; eventually changing them into first and second technology in the second version of the "Work of Art" essay. Benjamin ascribed film the function of making second nature human beings' first nature, at the same time it opened up the possibility to create a social body out of this process of innervation: "To make the technical apparatus of our time, which is second nature to the individual, into first nature for the collective, is the historic task of film." (Hansen, 2012:139) Benjamin first presented this idea in "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," an article in which he defends Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* against the criticism of the playwright

Schmitz, who believed that the film was marred by its political tendencies. In that text, Benjamin returns to an idea from *One-Way Street*, in which he talked about the technologies which are preparing and training human perception to adapt to the new rhythms of modern life:

One need recall only the experience of velocities by virtue of which mankind is now preparing to embark on incalculable journeys into the interior of time, to encounter there rhythms from which the sick shall draw strength as they did earlier on high mountains or on the shores of southern seas. The "Lunaparks" are a prefiguration of sanatoria.

(Benjamin, 2004:487)

If Lunaparks are therapeutic places to prevent people from the traumas engendered by the quick technologisation (Technisierung) of society, film would provide a similar function, but at the same time it would supply a realm to dissect the world and know better the second nature in which mankind is now evolving. Benjamin thought that thanks to film, the second nature of people's immediate environment could be transformed from a prison-world—as Lukács defined it—into a journey of adventure. Lukács described the modern reified world—in opposition to the epic world of the Greeks, in which a totality of life was directly given—as a world presented "in a multiplicity of forms too complex for understanding." Second nature, in this reified world, does not offer itself as meaning to the subject; it is, in short, "incomprehensible, unknowable in its real substance." (Lukács, 1971:62) Benjamin, however, thought that thanks to the dissecting tools of film, second nature could be transformed from something incomprehensible into something comprehensible and meaningful. As such, it could be presented to a collective audience, organising a collective body through a process of cognition and perception.

To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions

of a second, so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins. (Benjamin, 2005a: 17)

The advent of cinema brought about the possibility of offering an understanding of a world which seemed to people incomprehensible. The collective could take journeys, as those in the Lunaparks, between the scattered ruins of the world of human convention, i.e. of second nature. In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin similarly compares the cinematographer with a surgeon who penetrates the patient's body with the scalpel. The cinematographer penetrates deeply into the tissue of reality and, as a result, he obtains an image which is piecemeal. Then, the manifold parts of such a dissection in reality —the reality of second nature— are assembled according to the laws of montage. This "fragmenting, allegorizing, destructive effect of cinematic devices," in the words of Esther Leslie, "cut through the natural appearance of the everyday landscape" and made a dissection of the "total." (Leslie, 2000:141) As I have mentioned above, for Lukács it was not possible that subjects in the modern and reified world would gain an understanding of the totality. Benjamin, however, thought that grasping totality was still possible, by means of presenting not the false image of a totality which could not be other than an illusion of "beautiful semblance," but the fragmentary nature of the modern world. Film brought about a new system of apperceptions which trained the masses, collectively, in their adaptation to the new rhythms of modernity, providing thus both a therapeutic and a cognitive function.

However, the abuses of technology by capitalism and fascism corrupted the positive functions of film technology which Benjamin conceived as the *natural* uses of the medium. In his "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin blamed film capital for using the medium for counterrevolutionary purposes —basically by not letting the masses gain control of the film image and by preserving the actor's or actress' aura of personality through the exploitation of his / her commodity form. Similarly, Benjamin criticised the fascist use of film to reinforce the corruption of the class consciousness of the masses by supplanting it for an image of "beautiful semblance." (Benjamin, 2006a:113) Benjamin develops this point in the footnotes to the "Work of Art" essay. Here, he makes a very important insight about the masses and introduces the relation of fascism and the petty bourgeoisie. Benjamin argues that in the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle, "the dead undialectical opposition between individual and mass is abolished." (Benjamin, 2006a:129) But whereas among proletarians there is the consciousness of a class, the petty bourgeoisie forms only a compact mass. The action of the petty-bourgeois

mass is furthermore unmediated and reactive and have thus a panicked quality, giving rein to war fever, hatred of Jews and the instinct of self-preservation. With this purpose National Socialism mobilised compact masses in which the antagonistic classes of proletariat and bourgeoisie were diluted, in order to give vent to the counterrevolutionary instincts of the bourgeoisie —with the promise of preserving the same property relations. Benjamin explains in another footnote how National Socialism made use of film technology to reinforce the illusion of the compactness of these masses. Benjamin reflects on how mass movements are better apprehended by the camera than by the eye and how suitable a bird's-eye view is to capture the mass assemblies of thousands of people. For that reason, the camera is especially apt for ceremonial processions, giant rallies, mass sporting events and war. In short, he concludes, "mass movements, and above all war, are a form of human behaviour especially suited to the camera." (Benjamin, 2006a:132) For Benjamin, the interest of the masses in film lay in the possibilities of understanding themselves as a class. Fascism, however, corrupted and diluted the class consciousness of the proletariat into a compact mass shaped with the aid of the camera. To sum up, film capital and fascism exploited the medium for the interest of a property-owning minority. For this reason, says Benjamin, "the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat." (Benjamin, 2006a:115) The cognitive function with which film provides the proletariat should be used, therefore, to dissect and analyse the complex totalities of the world (concepts such as class, for example) and not to aestheticise and simulate false, harmonic totalities (such as organic constructions of nation and race).

Apart from the cognitive and therapeutic functions already mentioned, Benjamin added a utopian function which he illustrated with the image of a child who, in the process of learning how to grasp a ball, stretches out its hand for the moon. In a note related to the writing of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin talks about the utopias of first and second nature. The utopias of second nature are those concerning technology and society; whereas those of first nature are based on issues such as life and death and are primarily focused on the human body. Benjamin suggests that the problems of second nature are always closer to realisation than those of first nature. He gives the example of Soviet Russia, where the technical planning of society and technology had become a prior concern. Russia, he believed, had begun to act for an improved nature in which to live. (Benjamin, 1999:342) In a discussion which took place in Moscow in 1927, Benjamin's lover, Asja Lacis, described to him the stage in which the Russian Revolution was at: Soviet Russia needed a "conversion of revolutionary effort into

technological effort." Lacis continued: "Now it is made clear to every communist that at this hour revolutionary work does not signify conflict or civil war, but rather electrification, canal construction, creation of factories." (Benjamin, 1985:82) The electrification process which Russia was going through was part of the utopias of second nature, those concerning technology and the approach of the latter to the population. However, Benjamin thought that Russians should also look at the problems concerning the individual, problems based on first nature. For that reason, Benjamin answered Lacis by bringing up Paul Scheerbart, a science-fiction writer who had emphasised the revolutionary character of technological achievement. His novels reject the idea that the aim of technology is to exploit the forces of nature; they present technology rather as a liberator for humanity and the rest of creation. In Scheerbart's "utopia of the body" earth and humanity form a single body in which technology appears as a friend, not as a threatening force. (Leslie, 2002:90)

For Benjamin, revolutions were the attempts from part of the collective to dominate the second nature, as a prerequisite to master technically elemental forces of nature, but not to exploit nature and other men. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin links this idea of revolutions as innervations of the collective to Marx, for whom the transcendence of private property should bring along the complete emancipation of the human sensorium, since the senses of the workers have been appropriated by the capitalist. This emancipation, carried out in an association with other men, would help to develop social organs. (Benjamin, 1999:652) As in film, in this "anthropological materialist" conception of revolution the collective has to adapt and transform the new technologies into the new social body which emerges out of such revolts—creating thus a collective physis.

First and second technology

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes a fragment from Marx in which he claims that man's real nature is the nature which develops in social history. Nature develops with industry and this is, according to Marx, the real anthropological nature. (Benjamin, 1999:652) In the section above analysed from *One-Way Street*, Benjamin already considered that nature has always been worked upon and thus nature has increasingly been inscribed in society. Hence, in the second version of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin produced two concepts which are

similar to those of first and second nature, but focus on the aims and uses of the technologies which are shaping the social world. These concepts are first and second technology. This new conceptualisation complicates the first definitions of technology which Benjamin had developed in prior texts. For Benjamin, first technology existed in fusion with ritual and made use of human beings, culminating in human sacrifice. The aim of this first technology was the mastery of nature —and of man. Second technology, instead, reduced the use of human beings to the minimum. The aim of second technology was —as the first definition of technology given by Benjamin— the mastery of the relation between humanity and nature. Thereby, the decisive function Benjamin ascribed to art, and especially film, was the training practice (*Einübung*) of this interplay between nature and humans. According to Benjamin, art is linked to both first and second technology. As Benjamin develops throughout the "Work of Art" essay, art has always been based on ritual. However, with the arrival of the technologies of reproduction, the ritualistic function of art has withered and only remains parasitically in some works of art. Benjamin also points out that the results of first technology are valid for eternity, whereas those of second technology are wholly provisional. Second technology is, in other words, based on testing and scientific procedures, that is, on experimentation and play (*Spiel*).

Benjamin defines now the role of revolutions as the attempts to accelerate the adaptation of second technology to the "historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology." (Benjamin, 2006a:124) Second technology is, for Benjamin, a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces —the emerging collective techno-body— is now a prerequisite for playing with nature. According to Benjamin, second technology aims to liberate humanity from drudgery through play. A room-for-play (*Spielraum*) is therefore opened up by second technology, in which the collective can set its revolutionary and utopian demands. In this revolution, the collective should make second technology its own and liberate itself from first technology. Benjamin, however, points out that "No sooner has the second technology secured its initial revolutionary gains than vital questions affecting the individual— questions of love and death which had been buried by the first technology—once again press for solutions." (Benjamin, 2006a:124) These utopian concerns should be addressed again. This is the new stage which Benjamin demands of the Soviet Revolution. For him, the new Russian's unqualified trust in technical matters has blinded these primal concerns. For that reason, utopian thinkers such as Scheerbart and Fourier are of great interest: they address the vital concerns of individuals once they have allied with (second) technology. Fourier provided

Benjamin with an example to illustrate his vision of politics, which tried to break up the organic totalities and the determinism of progress characteristic of many philosophies and politics of the time. In his theses "On the concept of History" (1940), Benjamin criticises the German Social Democrats positivistic conception of labour as the mastery of nature and the deterministic vision of progress as a result of that exploitation. In opposition to this conception, Benjamin defends the kind of collective labour promoted by Fourier which, far from exploiting nature, would help nature "give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb."⁴ (Benjamin, 2006b: 393, 394) Benjamin also compares Fourier's notion of collective labour and the collective organisation of the social body in phalansteries to his own idea of revolutions as innervations of the technical organs of the collective. (Benjamin, 1999:631) Indeed, Fourier anticipates to some extent the idea of the creation of an energy surplus through co-operative labour which Marx outlines in *Capital*.⁵

With the term "innervation," Benjamin was referring to a collective adaptation to technology. Benjamin borrowed this concept from Freud, for whom the term designates a rush of energy through the nervous system. With the same term, Benjamin refers to an incorporation of technology to the collective acting as a body. Susan Buck-Morss analysed and developed the process of innervation which Benjamin ascribed to film in her essay "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." In this essay, Buck-Morss focuses on the changes of experience in modernity with the arrival of technology to the everyday life of citizens. Following Benjamin's theses on experience, Buck-Morss claims that citizens had been cheated out of their experience. Their synaesthetic system —responsible for the correspondences between the outer and inner stimulus— was thus "marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the

⁴ Benjamin illustrates the utopian world which is possible to achieve by means of this collective labour as follows: "According to Fourier, cooperative labor would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding." (Benjamin, 2006b: 394)

⁵ In the chapter 13 of *Capital*, volume 1, Marx argues that co-operative labour is not the sum of the individual labour of every worker, since the output is always more than such an aggregate. For that reason, Marx claims that there is "the creation of a new power, namely, the collective power of masses." (Marx, 1976:443) This new power comes out with the historical emergence of the masses. Although this power in waged labour is robbed by the capitalist, it is implicit that it can be recovered and channelled for other purposes. The argument that I present in this article about the empowering of the collective through technological innervation, especially in the collective reception of film, can be traced back to this idea.

psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock." (Buck-Morss, 1992:18) As a result, the defence system of the body ends up numbing the organism and repressing memory. In this way, the cognitive function of synaesthetics becomes attenuated, and is altered into a system of anaesthetics; that is, to one that shuns experience in order to protect the body and the psyche from the shocks of modern life. Cinema came into being in this "crisis of perception." Consequently, Benjamin ascribed cinema the potential of restoring perception, of undoing the alienation of the corporeal sensorium of modern human beings. The task was, then, to restore the power of the human bodily senses by *passing through* technology. This positive, stimulating adaptation to technology involved an empowering mimetic reception of the external world, as opposed to a mimetic adaptation that paralyses the organism and robs the person of their capacity to imagine. One of Benjamin's earliest uses of the term "innervation" is found in *One-Way Street*. There he compares the typewriter with a fountain pen:

The typewriter will alienate the hand of the man of letters from the pen only when the precision of typographic forms had directly entered the conception of his books. One might suppose that new systems with more variable typefaces would then be needed. They will replace the pliancy of the hand with the innervation of commanding fingers.

(Benjamin, 2004:457)

Benjamin is here calling for a prosthesis of the human body in the form of a technology more advanced than the typewriter —basically a computer with a word processor and an editing software. Benjamin is thus prefiguring digital technologies which can be used as prostheses of the human, organic body. According to Miriam Hansen, with this idea Benjamin "anticipates ways in which contemporary technologies both interface with the bodily sensorium and extend it into and through the apparatus." (Hansen, 2012:151) However, rather than the innervation of technology into an individual body, Benjamin thought of innervation as a collective process of adaptation. For that reason, film —itself a collective medium— became an exemplary realm for such a collective innervation.

Benjamin resumes his theory of a collective *phsyis* organised by technology in his 1929 essay on Surrealism. In the praxis of the surrealists, Benjamin finds a space in which the "energies of intoxication" supplied by Surrealism can burst a revolutionary discharge through

the bodily innervations of the collective. In order to theorise the different organisation of space in art and everyday life in modernity, Benjamin developed the concepts "image-space" (*Bildraum*) and "body-space" (*Leibraum*). The surrealists, he argued, had succeeded in bringing together image- and body-space, challenging the traditional conception of art that began "at a distance of two meters from the body." (Benjamin, 2005a:4, 5) The site for political action for Surrealists was a "one hundred percent image-space." (Benjamin, 2005a:217) As the habitat of the masses was being dominated by the image-space, there was no longer a distance between image- and body-space. The space of this collision between image- and body-space was for surrealists the site for their artistic/political action. In this reconfiguration of physical space, Hansen argues that for Benjamin images "have come to inhabit a three-dimensional and public space, the space of the collective." (Hansen, 2004:21) Benjamin understood in the framework of his "anthropological materialism" that technology had changed the human bodily sensorium and provided the collective with a new *physis* which should be re--appropriated and embodied in a collective body. The collision between body- and image-space could supply the necessary energies to innervate and, therefore, empower the collective body in a revolutionary way:

The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervations, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.

(Benjamin, 2005a:218)

Miriam Hansen understands that cinema for Benjamin had brought about a similar merging in the interpenetration between the physiological and mental functions of human beings and the technological structures of the cinematic apparatus. Cinema emerges thus as a medium in which the collective can reappropriate its own techno-body. The room-for-play offered by film should not only create the realm for a relation of interplay between humanity and nature, but also to gain control of that new body which emerges out of the collision of the proletariat and

technology. Art —or, more accurately, the art which is no longer based on contemplation, of which film is its main exponent— is a space (an interpenetration between body- and image-space) for political actuality (*Aktualität*), in which Benjamin's conception of revolutions as innervations of the collective can materialise.

Cinema: the space for technological innervation

In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin develops this interpenetration between body- and image-space in the arena of cinema reception. Here, he argues that in film an individual perception can be appropriated by collective perception. The audience, consuming the film collectively, can thus appropriate the cinematographic image and the individual perceptions of the characters displayed in the film. One of the ways in which the spectators could adapt the energy coming from the cinematographic image into the collective body formed by the audience was through collective laughter. Benjamin presents the function of collective laughter first of all as therapeutic. For Benjamin, the technologisation of the everyday life had caused mass psychoses, but it had also created the possibility of psychic immunization. The collective laughter aroused by American slapstick and Disney films could act for Benjamin as a "preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis" by means of releasing those unconscious energies therapeutically. (Benjamin, 2006a:118) Indeed, through a regime of play, film could prevent those tendencies from being acted out in reality. For Benjamin, the reception in distraction (*Zerstreuung*)⁶ characteristic of cinema concentrated the reactions of the spectators into a mass. Thus the audience reacted as a collective body which could incorporate, in that moment of collective laughter, the energy coming from the film in a non-traumatic adaptation to technology. In the famous response of Theodor W. Adorno to the "Work of Art" essay, in a letter from 18 March 1936, he rejects the conception of collective laughter as either salutary or revolutionary. For Adorno, this laughter is instead full of bourgeois sadism. On the advice of Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin chose to recognise the double meaning of Mickey Mouse, whose films display an ambiguity which has both a comic and a horrifying effect. In a footnote to the second version of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin wrote that Mickey

⁶ *Zerstreuung* means both distraction and entertainment.

Mouse's films accepted "bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence." (Benjamin, 2006a:130) Benjamin feared that film could train audiences in brutal behaviour. This violence and brutality could become vicious and the critical laughter envisaged by Benjamin could turn into sadistic laughter. If this happened, these films could help to deploy the destructive energies performed by Mickey and his friends in the service of fascism.⁷

In what follows, I want to analyse a fragment in which Benjamin exposes, more successfully in my opinion than through the idea of collective laughter, how the audience can appropriate the energy coming from film. Benjamin develops this idea through Mickey Mouse in his essay "Experience and Poverty" (1933). Benjamin begins the fragment on Mickey Mouse by comparing his films with a dream: "a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality." (Benjamin, 2005b:734) Benjamin thus anticipates the idea expressed in the "Work of Art" essay in which he talks about the regrouping of apperceptions which Mickey Mouse performs over the audience as a collective dream figure:

The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film—and less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse.

(Benjamin, 2006a:118)

The fragment about Mickey Mouse in "Experience and Poverty" continues with a description of the relation between nature and technology which is performed in these films. This relation is a playful one, both excessive and parodic:

⁷ In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Max Horkheimer and Adorno returned to the point outlined in the letter to Benjamin. There, they claim that the protagonist of cartoons has become "the worthless object of general violence." (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2000:138) Donald Duck is such an object by which the audience can learn how to receive their own punishment. Although this argument is true, Mickey Mouse—at least the early one—should be put on the other side, as the administrator of violence against every animate or inanimate object—whether he is also object of the violence exercised by Pete. The point made by Benjamin is therefore more accurate, since the problem here is that violence among people, animals and objects is conceived as something natural. The commodification of the characters, which often act willingly as mere objects for the sake of Mickey's fun, is the other problem which should be critically addressed.

His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and prosecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon.

(Benjamin, 2005b:734, 735)

The presence of technology in these cartoons is not evident. Technology has interpenetrated so deeply in the bodies of Mickey, Minnie, his friends and prosecutors that they are able to perform out of their bodies the wonders and promises of technology. Benjamin is calling here for an interpenetration of technology into the body of the audience in a metamorphosis similar to those of the characters of Mickey Mouse. Sergei M. Eisenstein, in his text on Disney, described these metamorphoses as "a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form." (Eisenstein, 1998:21) Possibly Benjamin saw in this parabolic use of technology a more empowering understanding of technology than the simplistic and exploitative conception of technology as the mastery of nature. For that reason, Benjamin detected in these cartoons that the gap between nature and technology —or first and second nature— had been closed and pointed out to a reconciled world among nature, technology and humanity —in a similar way to the world dreamed of by Fourier. The audience had to adapt the energy coming from this hyperbolic representation of the fusion between technology and mankind into the collective body organised in the realm of cinema reception. Furthermore, Benjamin believed that the interpenetration between film image and audience was far easier through the synchronization of acoustic and visual rhythm inherent to the cartoons of Mickey Mouse. Through this phenomenon, called "Mickey Mousing," Benjamin thought that Mickey could "direct a whole public rhythmically." (Leslie,

2002:85) In essence, the innervation of technology into the body of the audience should be a collective enterprise, as Benjamin prefigures in the fragment about Heraclitus.

The last part of the fragment may sound very uncritical. The relief that the masses feel when they go to the cinema after working seems more like a safety valve for a momentary relief from the tensions of everyday life. Probably the audience would like to have an anthropomorphised car, such as Mickey's in *Traffic Troubles* (dir. Burt Gillett, 1931), which overtook other cars by extending its tyres and passing over or avoiding a puddle by rolling on the car's bodywork. For even though Mickey does not avoid the problem of traffic in big cities, at least he faces it in a playful and fanciful way. Nonetheless, if we understand the "relief" to which Benjamin refers as the simultaneous embodiment of the therapeutic and the utopian interpenetration of image- and body-space in the collective sphere of film reception, the argument reaches its full meaning. The collective body of the audience may adapt the energy that the cartoons spread out and which they lack in their lives. The phrase that Benjamin uses with regard to Surrealism, "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" (Benjamin, 2005a:215), could be thus applied to films featuring Mickey Mouse. The innervations of technology, and, more importantly, the dreams for a better nature which technology can supply humanity with, can be actualised into the collective body, which can take advantage of that rush of energy for a project of social —and organic— transformation.

Conclusion: Benjamin and new media

With this example about the collective reception of Mickey Mouse, I wanted to show how Benjamin thought that an interpenetration of technology into a collective body could materialise through his own conception of aesthetics. As we have seen, in the term "technological innervation," Benjamin foreshadowed to some extent the McLuhanite maxim of media as extensions of the human body. Nonetheless, there is a crucial difference: Benjamin conceived these prostheses as being first and foremost collective. In similar terms, Benjamin understood that a historical turning point was at place with the arrival of new technologies to art. Thus, through the theories of the art historian Aloïs Riegl, Benjamin sought to trace how the mode of perception of human collectives was being organised in the medium of technology. Hence, Benjamin found that thanks to reproducible technologies such as

photography, film and radio, the *Kunstwollen* of his contemporaries materialised in "*the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.*" (Benjamin, 2006a:105) These media changed the relation of the masses not only to art, but also to the world which was thus reproduced. In addition, this relation was no longer one of contemplation, but as Benjamin developed through Riegl, a *taktisch* one, as it had always been with regard to architecture: one marked by an interpenetration of optical and tactical stimuli and organised through habit.

The new media —especially radio and film— also made it possible to reach very large audiences. In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin argues that mass exhibition entailed a crisis in democracy. Politicians had to improve their presentational skills in front of the apparatus in a similar manner to professional actors. Benjamin notes that it is generally the dictator who emerges victorious in this new paradigm. But he also believed that these technologies contained the inherent possibility of refunctioning (*Umfunktionierung*) the apparatus and overcoming the division between practitioners and public. Throughout his texts on radio and, especially in the essay "The Author as Producer" (1934), Benjamin calls for overturning the traditional separation of author and public both in art and in communication. Benjamin poses the example of the press, in which readers were increasingly having more opportunities to turn into writers, to show how technology has closed to some extent this gap between authors and public. In the Soviet Union this shift had also been partly realised in film. Benjamin refers to Sergei M. Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1929) and Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934) as examples of films in which the actors are people who portray themselves and therefore accomplish their right to be filmed. In this way, for Benjamin, technologies such as radio and film offer the possibility of turning increasingly the masses from audience into producers. With this paradigm in mind, it is easy to extrapolate Benjamin's ideas on technology to a medium such as the Internet, where it is now easier than ever to become a producer and to develop new forms of reaching larger numbers of people without the aid of big capital.

Digital technologies have also changed the way our sensorium interacts with second nature. This relationship is undoubtedly more mediated and our senses are to a greater extent more alienated from our first nature. But this was precisely the task that Benjamin ascribed to new technologies: to be innervated into the organic nature of humans in order to eventually

create a collective, technological body. Today the relation of people to the new digital devices is increasingly becoming one of touching. The two meanings of the German term *taktisch*, tactile and tactical, can unfold in the way we adapt our senses into these technologies and develop new approaches to the world. And yet these more *taktisch* technologies—in the form of smartphones, tablets, laptops, or to use names which reaffirm their commodity value, iPhones, iPads, MacBooks—have been controlled by big capital. Nevertheless, the utopian side of these commodities can inform the way we appropriate, refunction and ultimately overcome these technologies. Writing in 1979, Fredric Jameson reflected on the utopian side of a reified mass culture, concluding that the works of mass culture, even when their function may lie primarily in legitimating the social order, have always to unfold "the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity." (Jameson, 1979:144) Similarly, Benjamin thought that the phantasmagorias of capital produced a dream world to sustain the social order as it was, but, at the same time, these phantasmagoric images had a side turned to dream, a utopian side which could be rescued.⁸ Max Weber understood that with the triumph of abstract and formal reason as the organising principles of modern capitalism and the state, there had been a rationalisation and a disenchantment of the world. Benjamin, however, thought that while it was true that there had been a rationalisation in form, capitalism had brought about a re-enchantment of the social world and a "reactivation of mythic powers." (Benjamin, 1999:391) According to Buck-Morss, the goal of Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* was to develop "A materialist history that disenchant the new nature in order to free it from the spell of capitalism, and yet reserves all the power of enchantment for the purpose of social transformation." (Buck-Morss, 1989:275) As I have suggested in this article, the historical role of cinema was also to disenchant second nature by dissecting it and, at the same time, to innervate in the collective body a revolutionary—utopian, re-enchanting—discharge.

It could be argued that in the current transformations in audiovisual reception, in which film, radio and any other form of communication has increasingly become individually consumed, the theses of Benjamin on mass reception are no longer valid. However, as I try to

⁸ Benjamin follows the definition of phantasmagoria given by Theodor W. Adorno in *In Search of Wagner*: "as a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being. It becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor." (Benjamin, 1999:669, 670) Adorno adds an important point about the dream nature of phantasmagorias: "The phantasmagoria tends towards dream not merely as the deluded wish-fulfilment of would-be buyers, but chiefly to conceal the labour that has gone into making it." (Adorno, 1981:91, 92).

argue, the Internet and new technologies in general have created technical prostheses for the human body which make it possible to interconnect millions of people. If the collective laughter which used to echo in cinema theatres is not as often heard as it was in the past, a collective body can be organised more easily than ever through digital technologies. Through the technological prostheses that we have adapted to our new, organic nature in form of technological devices, we can reach more people than ever. One only has to think of the ways in which social movements are organised through social networks. Although big capitalist corporations fight to control the world wide spectrum of the web, the Internet has created a large space for resistance and a new way to reach the masses via non-traditional —and especially non-capital-controlled— media. The second nature which surrounds us and creates logics which escape our control may still appear to us incomprehensible, but we can organise new mediated forms with which to understand, in cognitive and sensuous terms, that second nature. Nevertheless, the promises for a better nature will not come automatically in an all too easy form. The social body in which technology has already interpenetrated will only gain control of its own technologically-enhanced collective *physis* if the abuses of technology made by capitalism for the interest of a property-owning minority are finally corrected. For that reason, issues about class and organisation must be brought to the fore again.

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