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Benjamin's Figures: Dialogues on the Vocation of the Humanities

Edited by
Madeleine Kasten, Rico Sneller, Gerard Visser

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Walter Benjamin at the age of five,
dressed up as a Prussian hussar (1897).
Photograph courtesy of the Akademie der Künste,
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Walter Benjamin on Charlie Chaplin: The *Rehabilitation* of the Allegorical in Modernity

Daniel Mourenza

In this article I will present Benjamin's writings on Chaplin as a rehabilitation of allegory in the twentieth century. I will argue that his attempt to rehabilitate allegory in contemporary cultural figures extended to other authors, such as Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht. This article follows and develops an argument that Miriam Hansen opened up in her posthumously published book *Cinema and Experience*. There, Hansen claimed that Benjamin discerned in both Chaplin and Kafka "a return of the allegorical mode in modernity" (Hansen 2012, 48). For her, both performed the fragmentation and abstraction of the bodies of their characters, thus making readable their own alienation. Hansen also argued that the social and political significance of American slapstick was its ability to represent the perceptual and bodily fragmentation of the human body in modernity through a "gestic" performance. In a working note for the completion of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", Benjamin did in fact describe Chaplin's performance with the Brechtian concept of *Gestus*. Benjamin thus approached Chaplin through this Brechtian concept, in a similar way as he did in his celebrated 1934 essay "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death". What is lesser known is that Brecht, for his part, had originally based his concept of *Gestus* on Chaplin's performance. There are, in short, plenty of links that close the circle among these three figures and prove that these three authors became part of the same project. In this paper I will develop these links as part of what I consider a rehabilitation of the allegorical procedures that Benjamin had previously analyzed in the Baroque mourning dramas and, later, in the nineteenth century, in Baudelaire. More specifically, I will argue that Benjamin perceived in contemporary cultural figures such as Kafka, Brecht

and Chaplin an allegorical intention to express the fragmentation of modern human beings through different media such as literature, theatre and film. Although Benjamin remained cautious about ascribing an allegorical intention to Chaplin, he wrote literally in a note: "er legt sich selbst allegorisch aus" (*GS* I.3, 1047). This note at least contains evidence that Benjamin considered the possibility of rehabilitating allegory in Chaplin.

The Rehabilitation of Allegory

Benjamin theorized his conception of allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, where he understood the German mourning drama of the Baroque as secularized Christian drama. Whereas in the Middle Ages the transience of living creatures was seen as a road to salvation, the Baroque seemed to deny this religious fulfilment and focused instead on a secular solution. Uwe Steiner argues that this "book can be understood as an attempt to reveal the representative art form of the Baroque as the adequate expression of the era's theological situation" (Steiner 2010, 69). Bainard Cowan suggests that allegory emerges as the form of expression of that age, because it "arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being" (Cowan 1981, 110). He also argues that because allegory is pre-eminently a kind of experience, it discloses the truth of the world through its fragmentary nature better than the Romantic symbol with its pursuit of wholeness. Accordingly, Benjamin notes that Baroque dramas are no longer based on myth, as in the case of ancient tragedy, but on earth-bound historical matter. Thus, the tragic hero plays no role in these dramas. Here Brecht comes in. Certainly, Brecht's plays are not melancholic and could therefore hardly be claimed to be allegorical. However, Benjamin conceived irony and fragmentation as variants of allegory which may reappear in later periods (*OGTD* 188). In "What Is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin argued that there is a German connection between the Baroque drama and Brecht's plays. However, says Benjamin, this connection has not reached us through a monumental road, but rather through a "mule track, neglected and overgrown". Hence, the untragic hero comes to light again in Brecht, but after having passed through "some obscure smugglers' path" (*SW* 4, 304).

Benjamin's attribution of an allegorical mode to Kafka and Chaplin found its origin in some drafted notes which led to the great essay on Kafka of 1934. The most important of these notes for the present discussion reads as follows:

> *Einen wirklichen Schlüssel zur Deutung Kafkas hält Chaplin in Händen. Wie Chaplin Situationen gibt, in denen sich auf einmalige Art das Ausgestoßen- und Enterbtsein, ewiges Menschenweh, mit den besondersten Umständen heutigen Daseins, dem Geldwesen, der Großstadt, der Polizei u.s.w. verbindet, ist auch bei Kafka jede Begebenheit janushaft, ganz unvordenklich, geschichtslos und dann auch wieder von letzter, journalistischer Aktualität* (*GS* II.3, 1198).

This commentary suggests that the connection between the allegorical mode in Kafka and Chaplin materializes in the way they combine eternal, human conditions and contingent situations. To understand this "allegorical mode" I will argue, first, that the "journalistic topicality" that Benjamin detects in both figures is linked to the allegorical intention that he recognized in the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin's allegory is opposed to both tragedy and symbol because instead of being rooted in myth, it is rooted in history. Hence, both content and style are generated from history and the socio-political texture in which the dramas take place. In his introduction to Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, George Steiner argues that the baroque dramatist and the allegorist "cling fervently to the world" because the *Trauerspiel*, "emphatically 'mundane', earth-bound, corporeal", rather than being transcendental, "celebrates the immanence of existence" (*OGTD* 16).

Secondly, I will argue why the completely ahistorical conditions of human existence which Kafka and Chaplin brought about in their works are the other side of allegory. After all, Benjamin explains that allegory does not only concern the appreciation of the transience of things, but also their rescue for eternity. Allegory is in this way able to rescue the forgotten, hidden, unsuccessful and sorrowful elements from history to create and unfold new and multiple meanings which may eventually affect the present. The allegorical mode which both Kafka and Chaplin retrieve in their own styles is the possibility of creating that leap from a sort of eternal knowledge which has lain dormant from time immemorial to the very actuality of the modern, chaotic and fragmentary world.

Benjamin also presents this function of allegory in his discussion of Kafka's parables. In a diary entry of 1934, recorded during his stay at Brecht's residence in Denmark, Benjamin writes a note on Kafka in which he pairs up parable and allegory: "His starting point is really the parable, the allegory, which is answerable to reason and hence cannot be entirely in earnest on the literal plane" (*SW* 2, 784). Following this line of argument, Benjamin claims in his 1934 essay on Kafka that his stories are set in a

swamp world, on a stage which is now forgotten, but that this does not mean that the world in question does not extend to the present. "On the contrary", says Benjamin, "it is present by virtue of this very oblivion" (*ibid.*, 809) . According to Benjamin, the experience transmitted in these stories is deeper than the average person's, because Kafka did not consider his age to be ahead of previous times, but overlapping with earlier ages, thus making eternal knowledge mingle with contemporary actualities. The power of his parables lies in his capacity to bring ancient wisdom to the present and to offer allegorical commentaries on the contemporary situation of man in this way. Benjamin argues that Kafka's parables unfold as a bud unfolds into a blossom – and not as a folded paper unfolds into a flat sheet. For that reason, Kafka's parables do not give a single and clear meaning; they do not clarify, but rather unfold to a richness of significance, a propensity which aligns them with religious-like teachings. Tim Beasley-Murray has argued that the difference between these two ways of unfolding runs parallel to the different approaches towards the past of historicism and historical materialism. Whereas the historicist provides a unique, eternal image of the past (as the paper that unfolds into a flat sheet), historical materialism, by confronting the past as a monad, recognizes a seed inside historical time with germinative power which can be nourished, empowered and brought into present. Thus historical materialism does not overlook historical phenomena as the former approach does. For Beasley-Murray, blasting a specific era or object out of the homogenous course of history, as Benjamin proposes in *On the Concept of History*, is a variant of unfolding "that allows time itself to come to fruit as the historically understood" (Beasley-Murray 2012, 780). Seen this way, the past is a seed pregnant with germinating powers, opening to unfold in the present and the future.

Allegory and Film

The problem of rehabilitating allegory in a medium such as cinema still needs to be explored. To this purpose, I will address the form of allegory in connection with Benjamin's writings on film. According to Benjamin, truth in allegory resides not so much in the content as in the form, i.e. in the process of representing. Allegory does not aim at a self-enclosed organicity like the symbol, but links the fragment to the total, leaving visible its fragmentariness. In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin observes with regard to the form of allegory that

> The writer must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging, since it was not so much the mere whole as its obviously constructed quality that was the principal impression which was aimed at. Hence the display of the craftsmanship, which, in Calderón especially, shows through like the masonry in a building whose rendering has broken away (*OGTD* 179).

Allegory is thus both fragmentary and visible. In fact, Benjamin always highlighted the fragmentary nature of those forms in which he detected a redemptive function. Thus in "The Task of the Translator" he compares translation with the fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together. For him, both the original and the translation must be "recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" (*SW* 1, 260). This idea of the fragments of a broken vessel which must be brought together can be compared with the image of the cinematographic apparatus entering reality as a surgical tool that Benjamin uses in the "Work of Art" essay to illustrate the assembled nature of film. Whereas the painter – as the magician – maintains a natural distance from reality, the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. While the former creates a total image, the cinematographer's image is piecemeal, "its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law" (*SW* 3, 116). Previously, in his "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (1927), Benjamin had described film as a kind of dynamite that explodes reality and turns it into ruins:

> 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 (*SW* 2, 17).

In this fragment of his article written in defence of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), partially repeated in the section on the "optical unconscious" in the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin presents the prismatic work of film as a new mode of accessing reality. He argues that thanks to film, people's immediate environment, which had become second nature to them, could be transformed from a prison-world – as Lukács had defined it – into a journey of adventure. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács describes the modern reified world – in opposition to the epic world of the Greeks, in

which a totality of life had been directly given – as a world presented "in a multiplicity of forms too complex for understanding". In this reified world, second nature (i.e. the world of human convention) does not offer itself as meaning to the subject; it is, in short, "incomprehensible, unknowable in its real substance" (Lukács 1971, 62). In the first version of his "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin describes the technology liberated from a ritual function – such as film technology – as a second nature. Benjamin points out that this second nature appears now to society as elementary as (first) nature appeared to primeval society. In other words, second nature appears to contemporary society as its own nature. Benjamin argues, in the same manner as Lukács, that we cannot control this second nature anymore: "Humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront; they are thus just as compelled to undertake an apprenticeship as they were once when confronted with first nature" (Benjamin 2010, 18, 19) . Benjamin understands that people in this reified world cannot master this second nature which appears alien to them. Nevertheless he suggests that people, even if they do not have the mastery to control it, can at least take an apprenticeship and learn how to confront it – as people in a primeval society did with regard to first nature. At this point film comes into play: "art once again places itself at the service of such an apprenticeship – and in particular film" *(ibid.*, 19). Benjamin thus believes that thanks to the dissecting tools of film, second nature can be transformed from something incomprehensible into something comprehensible and meaningful.

It is no accident that Benjamin used the idea of ruins, as he had previously done in the *Trauerspiel* book, to describe the dissection and reassembling of slices of reality in film. Benjamin conceived ruins as the setting of the allegorical in the Baroque German mourning dramas, along with the concept of "natural history" (*Naturgeschichte*). Adorno borrowed this term, together with Lukács' "second nature", in his 1932 lecture "The Idea of Natural History". Adorno's articulation of the concept in this lecture is very enlightening to understand the allegorical function that Benjamin assigned to film. According to Adorno, Lukács, through his concept of "second nature". had already envisioned the idea of understanding petrified history as nature and the petrified life of nature as the mere product of historical development. However, says Adorno, Lukács had done so in an eschatological context. Benjamin, on the contrary, "brought the resurrection of second nature out of infinite distance into

infinite closeness and made it an object of philosophical interpretation" (Adorno 1984, 119). In order to avoid the enchantment of history, Benjamin understood history in terms of the first nature which had passed away with it. Adorno argues that for Benjamin, nature is transitory and consequently includes elements of history. History, in turn, is written in the countenance of nature, as transience. The form of the ruin thus takes on the allegorical physiognomy of natural history; in other words, history, represented in the ruin, embodies the process of irresistible decay. Allegory's function is thus to petrify history and show that it is part of nature. Nature, in turn, shows marks of transience; it passes away with history. In this moment of transience and interruption, what has been sorrowful or unsuccessful can be expressed and rescued; put differently, the untimely is actualized in the present through allegory.

Adorno thought that only through a subjective intention, such as that which produces allegory, can we endow second nature with meaning. For him, second nature is always illusory, because we think that we understand it, but it is only a semblance which has been historically produced. Thus, we can understand the aim of allegory as an attempt to see through the false appearance of second nature:

> Whenever an historical element appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away within it. Likewise the reverse: whenever "second nature" appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its meaning is shown to be precisely its transience *(ibid.*, 120).

Hence, ruins are the physiognomy of "natural history", because they show the transience of second nature. Now it can be argued that film, by exploding reality with "the dynamite of its fractions of a second" and turning it into ruins, can to some extent decipher its meaning, bestow meaning on a reality which was hitherto incomprehensible. The dynamite of film blasts reality – i.e. second nature – and reduces it to rubble, thereby showing the transience of that nature. In this way, film demystifies the idea of second nature, i.e. the world of convention as natural and at the same time recovers the very moments of contingency that threaten to pass away. The optical unconscious takes on significance precisely at this point.

In his discussion of Kafka's parables Beasley-Murray argues that for Benjamin, film unfolds in a comparable manner. To be sure, Benjamin does not use the same term as in the examples mentioned previously, that is,

entfalten, but *abrollen*, which is better translated as "rolling out".[1] *Abrollen* does not have the same connotations of unfolding to complexity, albeit that, according to Beasley-Murray, "the artificial landscape of modernity unfolds into new and unforeseeable blossoms" (Beasley-Murray 2012, 784) – thanks to the optical unconscious, and following the passage about exploding the prison-world of our city streets. Certainly, the outcome of such a blossoming is not nature, but second nature, "the Blue Flower in the land of technology" (Benjamin 2002, 115). Following Beasley-Murray's argument, I would argue that the allegorical unfoldings of Kafka, and by the same token of Chaplin, are able to bring seeds from the past – in the form of wisdom, gestures, etc. – to confront the present. In film, this collision allows the audience, in the mimetic innovation of film technology, to incorporate this blossoming seed in their own body.

Gestus

As I mentioned before, the concept of *Gestus* served purposes similar to those of allegory. This concept, which Benjamin used to analyze not only Brecht's theatre but also the art of Kafka and Chaplin, was also based on discontinuity and fragmentation. Brecht developed the concept from the German word for gesture (*Geste*). The first time that he used the term was in a 1920 theatre review in which *Gestus* was employed to signify body gesture as opposed to the spoken word, but it was not until 1929 that he began to use the concept as a major pillar of his theory of the epic theatre. Brecht's assistant director Carl Weber defined it "as the total process, the 'ensemble' of all physical behavior the actor displays when showing as a 'character' on stage by way of his/her social interactions" (Weber 2000, 43). Chaplin was in fact one of the most influential sources for Brecht's development of the concept. After Chaplin's films were first imported to Germany in 1921, Brecht became a great fan. In an entry to his diary from the 29th of October 1921, Brecht enthusiastically talks about the short film *The Face on the Barroom Floor* (1914). Brecht qualified the film as "the most profoundly moving thing I've ever seen in the cinema: utterly simple". Next, he writes about the qualities he perceives in Chaplin's performance: "Chaplin's face is always impassive, as though waxed over, a single expressive twitch rips it apart, very simple, strong, worried" (Brecht 1987, 140, 141). According to Weber, this early text on Chaplin is a perfect formulation of Brecht's later postulate that "the actor's face should be an empty face written on by the body's *Gestus*" (Weber 2000, 44). Brecht's indebtedness to Chaplin for his concept *Gestus* was still more obvious in a note by Brecht on the production of *Man Is Man* (1931), where he wrote: "The actor of the epic theatre needs an artistic economy totally different from that of the dramatic actor. In a way, Chaplin would serve the demands of the actor of the epic theatre better than those of the dramatic theatre" *(ibid.*, 45).

Benjamin analyzed the concept of *Gestus* in more depth in his texts on Brecht's epic theatre. He defined *Gestus* as dialectics at a standstill. The technique of *Gestus* frames and encloses an attitude and hence interrupts the flow of real life in a way that raises astonishment in the audience. Through this astonishment, spectators are able to spot the contradictions of such a situation. "This astonishment", says Benjamin, "is the means whereby epic theatre, in a hard, pure way, revives a Socratic praxis", as opposed to the Aristotelian psychological absorption (Benjamin 1998, 4). In "The Author as Producer" Benjamin defines epic theatre's aim as portraying situations rather than plots. The plays obtain the situations, says Benjamin, by interrupting the action, for example, through songs. In "What Is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin argues that the truly important thing about the epic theatre is that the audience discovers its own situation for the first time, or gets de-familiarized and looks at that common situation from a new, more critical perspective. This de-familiarization (*Verfremdung*) is achieved through interruptions of the action. Benjamin claims that the principle of interruption of the epic theatre takes up the function of the procedure that has become familiar in recent years in media such as film and radio, that is, montage. His suggestion is that montage in film has influenced other arts such as literature, photography and, in this case, also the theatre. Put differently, interruption is a procedure which the cinematic medium expresses naturally through montage and which the theatre can borrow and exploit. Benjamin puts it plainly when he says that "Brecht's discovery and use of the *gestus* is nothing but the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event" (Benjamin 1999, 778). The similarities between the interruption principle in the epic theatre and the dialectical structure of film, in which discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous

[1] Beasley-Murray refers to the following fragment from the "Work of Art" essay: "Let us compare the screen [*Leinwand*] on which a film unfolds with the canvas [*Leinwand*] of a painting. The image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not" (*SW* 3, n. 132).

sequence, are enhanced by Benjamin in the following remark in his article "What Is Epic Theatre?":

> Like the images of a film, the epic theater moves in spurts. Its basic form is that of the shock with which the individual, well-defined situations of a play collide. The songs, the captions, the gestic conventions set off one situation from another. This creates intervals which, if anything, undermine the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are provided so that the audience can respond critically to the player's actions and the way they are presented (*SW* 4, 306).

The principle of the epic theatre is, like that of radio and film, based on interruptions. The only difference, says Benjamin, is that in the epic theatre the interruption has a pedagogic function, whereas in film it primarily has the character of a stimulus. Epic theatre's interruption thus "brings the action to a halt, and hence compels the listener to take up an attitude toward the events on the stage and forces the actor to adopt a critical view of his role" (*SW* 2, 585). Through interruptions of the action, the spectator is dissuaded from psychological absorption into the plot and can reflect on the performed situation.

In a conversation with Benjamin, Brecht has said that Kafka always repeats the same theme: the astonishment of a man who foresees a new order in the near future and cannot find his place in it. The characters of Kafka are astonished and tinged with horror and therefore cannot describe any event without distortions. "In other words", says Benjamin, "everything he describes makes statements about something other than itself", a procedure which he sees as expressive of Kafka's allegorical intuition *(ibid.*, 477, 478). In the 1934 essay, Benjamin claims that "Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures" *(ibid.*, 801). Benjamin traces the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, from Kafka's novel *Amerika*, back to Chinese theatre (studied by Brecht to develop his epic theatre), a theatre which dissolves the events into gestural components. In the Nature Theatre, the applicants – among them the novel's main character Karl Rossmann – are only expected to play themselves. This theatre, then, tests the conditions of a typical man in society, in the same way as would happen later in Brecht's epic theatre. For this reason, Benjamin says that Kafka's world is a world theatre and that man is always on stage. The gestures performed by Kafka's characters uncover in the end the situations in which they are trapped. Benjamin argues that these gestures had no definite symbolic meaning from the outset for Kafka, but

rather he "tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts" *(ibid.)*. Benjamin concludes that Kafka can only understand things in the form of *Gestus* and this gesture, which he does not understand, "constitutes the cloudy part of the parables" *(ibid.*, 808).

In the 1934 essay, Benjamin compares Kafka's characters and creatures to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, whose main character is astonished at everything. Eventually, Benjamin compares the alienation of these figures with film technology:

> The invention of motion pictures and the phonograph came in an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of unpredictably intervening relationships which have become their only ones. Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to study, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence – fragments that are still within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost *gestus* the way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required! *(ibid.*, 814).

Kafka's characters are, then, similar to those people who cannot recognize in a film or a phonograph those gestures as their own, but who still encounter fragments of their own existence and, therefore, can discern their process of alienation. Benjamin compares the people's grasp of the fragments of their own social gesture through cinema and through Kafka's characters with the way Peter Schlemihl tries to recover the shadow he has sold. Schlemihl is a character from an early nineteenth-century story who sells his shadow to gain social recognition, but who nonetheless becomes an outcast eventually. In this fragment, Benjamin is also consciously comparing Kafka's situations with the representation of human beings by means of the cinematographic apparatus, which, according to Benjamin, can make possible *"a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation"* (*SW* 3, 113). In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin compares the stage actor, whose performance is made in front of the audience, with the film actor, who plays his role in front of a group of specialists (director, producer, technicians, etc.). According to him, this intervention of the specialist in the performance of the actor is what ultimately determines the process of film production. Thus, the action performed by the film actor can be recorded in different takes and from different angles; it is the eventual decision at the editing table (taken by the editor, the director, etc.) which will establish the final performance.

Benjamin compares this aspect of filmmaking to a test. The specialists who are in front of the actor recording his performance are in the position of testers. In the cinema, however, this role is given to the masses. In addition, the film actor feels estrangement in the face of the apparatus in the same way one does in front of one's image in the mirror – or on watching one's gait in a film or hearing one's voice in a phonograph. The difference, Benjamin explains, is that this mirror is detachable and transportable to a place in front of the masses. The masses control and test the actor. In this process, they can also recognize themselves in the actor via a positive sense of estrangement. If the masses have relinquished their humanity in front of the machines in their workplaces, they can now be on the other side, testing the actor instead of being tested themselves. But the actor – and probably Chaplin was the most exemplary case to this end – is not only asserting his humanity against the apparatus, as the workers-turned-into-audience do, but also placing the apparatus in the service of the proletarian masses. The masses, which are here understood in a similar way to Brecht's proletarian audience, can thus recover an experience which is now mediated but which, for that very same reason, is easier to adapt to the collective body (*Kollektivleib*) formed by the audience. The sense of estrangement which is produced in the gap between the film actor and the spectator is what Benjamin calls the positive use of self-alienation.

Benjamin based this argument on psychotechnical tests used in the Weimar Republic to gauge the vocational aptitude of workers, job seekers or, more specifically, soldiers from World War I who went back to work.[2] For him, these vocational tests should assess the *Haltung* (attitude, stance, disposition) of the workers rather than the content of the work. In this way, the tests focused on the gestures, aptitudes and capabilities of the workers. By reversing the aim of the tests, both Benjamin and Brecht conceived them as means of representing human types, as the dissection of persons into bodily gestures. In this way, a job could be envisaged for people according to their aptitudes, even if this job did not exist. In short, these psychotechnical tests were a good means to dissect human behavior and social relations into gestural and behavioral components, as the method of epic theatre aimed to do. Therefore, Brecht and Benjamin used the term "test" in an inverted sense: the audience – probably many of them being subjects of these tests –

[2] For a more detailed analysis of the influence of these psychotechnical tests on the work of Benjamin and Brecht, see Doherty 2000.

was promoted to the position of the tester, and the actor performed the role of the tested. This was part of the transformation or refunctioning (*Umfunktionierung*) of the medium which both Brecht and Benjamin championed. The actors could thus dissect the persona of their characters into bodily and mental gestures. Through these gestures, they were able to quote the attitudes of the social types they were performing. Furthermore, the audience could easily recognize those social gestures with the appraisal of an expert.

The difference between Chaplin, Brecht and Kafka is that Chaplin's performance can only take place in film – not with techniques borrowed from film, as in Brecht. In a note on the composition of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin wrote:

> The formula in which the dialectical structure of film – film considered in its technological dimension – finds expression runs as follows. Discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence. A theory of film would need to take account of both these facts. First of all, with regard to continuity, it cannot be overlooked that the assembly line, which plays such a fundamental role in the process of production, is in a sense represented by the filmstrip in the process of consumption. Both came into being at roughly the same time. The social significance of the one cannot be fully understood without that of the other (*SW* 3, 94).

The structure by which the discontinuous images of cinema (frame, shot, sequence) are replaced in its reception in a continuous sequence is, for Benjamin, the same structure which is experienced by factory workers in the assembly line in the process of production. The social significance which Benjamin mentions here is the therapeutic, but also educative, mimetic adaptation to the new rhythms and apperceptions of modernity.

Dismemberment of Chaplin

Benjamin used the word *Gestus* likewise to describe Chaplin's performance. In the following note Benjamin develops a comparison between the stage actor and the film actor. Chaplin, as a film actor, is able to render the fragmentation of his contemporaries by means of integrating his body and mental posture into the film image:

Chaplin's way of moving [*Gestus*] is not really that of an actor. He could not have made an impact on the stage. His unique significance lies in the fact that, in his work, the human being is integrated into the film image by way

of his gestures – that is, his bodily and mental posture. The innovation of Chaplin's gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat – always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions. *(ibid.)*

The importance of Chaplin's performance is that he is able to dissect the expressive movements of human beings (in an age in which discontinuity of experience has become the norm) into "a succession of staccato bits of movements". Human functions are thus fragmented and incorporated into the film image which is, in turn, a discontinuous succession of images. Miriam Hansen defines the social output of the fragmentary performance of Chaplin as "a 'gestic' rendering of the experience of perceptual and bodily fragmentation" (Hansen 2012, 47). She argues that film can fulfil a cognitive task in the period of the industrial transformation of human perception: "Chaplin's exercises in fragmentation are a case in point: by chopping up expressive body movement into a sequence of minute mechanical impulses, he renders the law of the apparatus visible as the law of human movement" (Hansen 1987, 203. Thus the representation of human self-alienation, in Hansen's view, is allegorical insofar as such cinematic representation can make the condition of alienation visible, readable, or even quotable in materialist terms. This is precisely what Benjamin is referring to when he suggests that Chaplin's performance is allegorical. Benjamin writes in a note: "Zerstücklung bei Chaplin; er legt sich selbst allegorisch aus". (*GS* I.3, 1047) Thus he finds in the dismemberment of Chaplin's body and mental posture, characteristic of his interpretation, an allegorical representation of the modern experience of human beings.

In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin had already prefigured a surgical function in allegory similar to the dismemberment of Chaplin. Benjamin not only characterized allegory as an expressive procedure able to fragment reality and unfold new meanings through the very cracks of that fragmentation; he also implied that allegory could be used to represent the body which, consequently, should be fragmented, that is, cut into pieces. Benjamin quotes the French heraldist Claude-François Ménestrier in a controversy about the norms of emblemata: "The whole human body cannot

enter a symbolical icon, but it is not inappropriate for parts of the body to constitute it". Following this commentary, he states that

> the human body could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments. Where, indeed, could this law be more triumphantly displayed than in the man who abandons his conventional, conscious physis in order to scatter it to the manifold regions of meaning? (Benjamin 1985, 216-217).

For Benjamin, the allegorization of the body can be carried through in all its vigor only in the corpse, where limbs can be dismembered and the body falls away piece by piece. The dismemberment of Chaplin could be thus enacted in a medium in which Chaplin's body is integrated into the discontinuous and fragmentary structure of film. In this way, Chaplin consciously abandons his body, and by doing so, he renders the multiple layers of significance of the shock experience characteristic of modernity. Hence, by mimicking the structure of film through the human motorial functions characteristic of modern urban life, Chaplin is able to perform the experience of his contemporaries in relation to technology through the very same technology of reproduction which is part of such a disintegration of experience.

In her essay "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered", Susan Buck-Morss analyzes the transformation of experience in modernity with the arrival of technology into the everyday life of citizens. Following Benjamin's theses on experience, Buck-Morss claims that citizens have been cheated out of their experience. Their synaesthetic system – responsible for the correspondences between the outer and inner stimuli – is thus "marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the 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"; the very medium to which Benjamin ascribed 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 paralyzes the organism and robs people of their imaginative capacity. Reading through these ideas, Buck-Morss claims that Benjamin is asking art to undo the alienation of the senses not by avoiding new technologies, but by adopting them. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin repeats the same argument about the film strip and the conveyor belt that I quoted above. In this passage, Benjamin emphasizes the importance of cinema as both training viewers and catering to their consumptive needs, in order to make them adapt themselves to the new experiences of modernity:

> Technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock [*chockförmige Wahrnehmung*] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film (*SW* 4, 328).

In the parallelism between the assembly line in production and the film strip in reception, Benjamin implies a mimetic correspondence that allows the worker to enter a cognitive process and understand his or her position in the system of production. At the same time, the audience trains its senses and adapts them to everyday interaction with technology. The physiological, therapeutic function of film is, in short, an attempt to recover the full faculty of the senses.

When Benjamin analyzes allegory in Baudelaire, he focuses primarily on the commodity form. Thus, whereas Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections of the inevitability of decay, the devaluation of the new nature, i.e. second nature, became in Baudelaire instructive politically: "Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from within" (*SW* 4, 186). The corpse that Baudelaire sees from within is the body that has become a commodity, a thing. The human body is conceived of as something inorganic, and thus allegory can act on it in all its vigor. Benjamin ends the fragment quoted above about the way that Chaplin integrates himself into the film image by wondering: "what is it about this behavior that is distinctively comic?" (*SW* 2, 94). Henri Bergson wrote in his essay about the comic that the idea of an artificial mechanization of the human body produces laughter. For him, "The attitudes, gestures and movements of

the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (Bergson 2007, 13). The connection between this comic effect and allegory is precisely the thingly (*dinglich*) character of the body.[3] As I argued above, allegory acts more effectively on an inorganic body. In the case of Baudelaire, the allegory concerned precisely a body that had been penetrated by the commodity form. According to Cowan, Benjamin, in his writings on Baudelaire, suggests that the genuine gaze of allegory is able to expose the fact of reification in capitalism, by which human processes turn into dead objects. (Cowan 1981, 121) In this way, it can be argued that Chaplin performs and quotes both allegorically and comically the mental and bodily reification of his contemporaries under capitalism.

Chaplin performed the mechanization of the body in a number of films. In his review of *The Circus* (1928), Benjamin praised Chaplin's imitation of a fairground marionette in the long chase scene in the amusement park, involving a policeman, a thief and himself. In this game of hide-and-seek, Chaplin passes himself off as a carnival automaton to evade his pursuers. By imitating the mechanic movements of an automaton he not only succeeds in evading the policeman for a while, but also to hit the thief with a club and knock him out. Benjamin qualifies this embodiment of the automatization of a human body as Chaplin's distinctive mask of non-involvement (*SW* 2, 222).

Benjamin never mentioned *Modern Times* (1936) in his texts.[4] Nevertheless it could be argued that Chaplin's most paradigmatic use of *Gestus*, in order to render the alienation of the human body in modernity, is to be found in *Modern Times* – a film precisely about the psychoses of assembly-line workers. Chaplin wrote in his autobiography that he first conceived the idea of *Modern Times* when a reporter of the *New York World* told him about healthy young men from the countryside who went to work in Detroit under a factory belt system and, after four or five years, became nervous wrecks. (Chaplin 1964, 415) The first minutes of the film portray

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[3] I am grateful for this insight to Prof. Gerard Visser.

[4] In his letter from 18 March 1936, Adorno alludes to *Modern Times*. He had been to see the film in London, where it had been released on 11 February. However, the film was not released in France until 24 September 1936. Therefore, Benjamin could not have seen it before the completion of the two first versions of the "Work of Art" essay, the notes around it and its publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in the French translation by Pierre Klossowski.

the misadaptation to technology of a factory worker. The famous sequence in the assembly line seems in fact to be a response to the abovementioned lines on the discontinuity of the film form and its similarity to the process of production in the conveyor belt. There, Chaplin works in an assembly line along with other workers tightening screws. When the character takes a break, he keeps making discontinuous movements, as if quoting the mechanical dependence of factory workers on the speedy assembly line. These jerky movements can be defined as the *Gestus* of a worker making readable his bodily and mental alienation in a factory.

In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin quotes Marx's *Capital* to convey that working conditions make use of the workers and, in turn, machinery gives workers a technologically concrete form, by which "workers learn to coordinate 'their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton'" (*SW* 4, 328). Chaplin's *Gestus* can be understood as the quotability of this process by which the worker learns to act as automaton; a worker who, Benjamin reminds us later, has been sealed off from experience. The mimetic repetition of the gestures of a machine is a defensive mechanism which numbs the senses and paralyzes the adaptation of the human being to the external world. However, by performing consciously that mimicking of the factory worker on the screen, Chaplin makes readable the numbing and psychopathological mimesis of a worker. Furthermore, he educates the masses in the structure of film and its stimuli, similar to the rhythms imposed by the assembly line. Thus, through Chaplin the audience could be educated in the rhythms imposed by technology in a playful way and, hence, reverse the workers' sensory alienation, the numbness of their senses in defense against shock and their disintegration of experience. In conclusion, the allegorical function that Benjamin detected in Chaplin can be said on the one hand to represent the mental and bodily reification of his contemporaries, and on the other hand to recover – through the mediation of the film apparatus – that experience from which human beings are sealed off. At the same time, the mediation of film allows the audience to incorporate the second nature of people's surroundings into its own collective body as something comprehensible and even desirable to overcome their alienation in modernity.

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