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Walter Benjamin on Cinema: An Object of Human Innervation

Daniel Mourenza, *Universitat de Barcelona*

Walter Benjamin began to engage with cinema in the second half of the twenties, when he started to write a series of film reviews for *Die literarische Welt*. During the following years, he kept developing his thoughts on film in other articles and notes, culminating in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technologically Reproducibility" (1935—1939), one of his most important and widely read essays.[1] Admittedly, Benjamin hardly could be considered a film expert or a cinephile, as some of his remarks about Soviet cinema prove. Nevertheless, in 1931 he was in the jury of a competition of sound film scripts, for which he had to read around 120 drafts a week.[2] Whether he was a regular moviegoer is more debateable. Gershom Scholem maintains that Benjamin was a great admirer of actor Adolphe Menjou and attended all his films.[3] And, in his correspondence with Gretel Adorno, Alfred Cohn, and Kitti Marx-Steinschneider, he often discussed the last films he saw.[4] Although the texts Benjamin wrote on cinema may seem at first sight fragmentary, even contradictory, I want to show in this chapter that they form part of a single project: to defend film as a privileged medium in which humans could rehearse a better relationship with technology. As such, Benjamin's writings on film cannot be dissociated from

[1] Hereafter, I will refer to this text as the "Work of Art" essay.

[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910–1940)*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 385.

[3] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), 162.

[4] In a letter to Alfred Cohn, Benjamin refers to *A Social Celebrity* (dir. Malcolm St. Clair, 1926) and *Blonde or Brunette* (dir. Richard Rosson, 1927), two films that precisely star Menjou (*Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Briefe, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 6 vols. [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996–2000], III [1996]*, 293). In his correspondence with Gretel Adorno, Benjamin recognizes that he enjoyed George Cukor's film *Dinner at Eight* (1933) (*Gretel Adorno and Walter Benjamin: Correspondence 1930–1940,* ed. by Henri Lonitz and Christoph Gödde, trans. by Wieland Hoban [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008], 91); describes Norman McLeod's 1933 film version of *Alice in Wonderland* as "an extraordinary affair" (176); and confesses that he found Katharine Hepburn "superb" after he saw her for the first time in a film in the summer of 1938 (230). In another letter, he also told Kitti Marx-Steinschneider that John Ford's *Lost Patrol* (1934) was "not entirely unworthy" of the book on which it was based, *Death in the Desert*, by Philip Macdonald (1927) (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 526).

broader themes in his oeuvre. Particularly, I will argue that the theories that Benjamin developed regarding film are related to a latent notion of "anthropological materialism" and the way in which technology shapes and transforms the relation of human beings to the world. Benjamin used the concept of "anthropological materialism" inconsistently across his text, but it could be broadly defined as a type of materialism whose point of departure is the physicality of the body—something on which Theodor W. Adorno disagreed, for he could not accept that "the human body represents the measure of all concreteness."[5]

I will argue that Benjamin's writings on film are, first and foremost, concerned with a non-destructive reception of technology and the creation and organization of a collective body in the arena of cinema spectatorship. It should be noted, however, that Benjamin's idea of a collective body is far from political notions that equate a nation, a state, or any other community with a body that affirms its own identity. As Léa Barbisan argues, Benjamin's collective body should better be described as an "eccentric body," a body without a clear identity or ego, a body that is always elusive and does not hold a coherent meaning.[6] As I will develop, Benjamin grounds the creation of this collective body through the concept of "innervation." For Benjamin, cinema acts as an exemplary space in which human beings can, through a rush of energy that regroups the apperceptions of the spectators, collectively adapt a non-instrumental—and, therefore, non-exploitative—technology onto their bodies, while simultaneously shaping a collective body. In the late Benjamin of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940), the conversion of energy into the somatic characteristic of "innervation" is discussed in relation to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921) but, in earlier texts, it is addressed as a two-way transference of energy between the imagination—or that which is unreachable—and the body, associated in most cases with the child. Among other sources of energy, Benjamin argues that

[5] Letter by Adorno to Benjamin, September 6, 1936. *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, The Complete Correspondence (1928–1940),* ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 146.

[6] Léa Barbisan, "Eccentric Bodies. From Phenomenology to Marxism: Walter Benjamin's Reflections on Embodiment," *Anthropology & Materialism* 1 (2017), 1–15.

film can provide the necessary energy to bring this collective body under control. When writing about the reception of technology by society, and film in particular, Benjamin often uses a vocabulary closely related to energy and the nervous system. Society is, as such, regarded in physiological terms as a body that receives its energy through technology. Concepts such as innervation, shock, and stimulation are used to reflect on this relationship, as well as on the configurations of experience that technology makes possible. Cinema is conceived as an exemplary medium in which humans can train their perception in order to cope with the shocks and stimuli of a technologically saturated society and rehearse a better relationship with technology in a safer environment.

Benjamin's Film Criticism

Benjamin began to write about cinema in the pages of *Die literarische Welt*, a weekly literary journal published by Rowohlt Verlag that had become Benjamin's main platform for his journalistic work since 1925. When the chief editor of the journal, Willy Haas, found out that Benjamin would visit Moscow at the end of 1926, he asked him to write a rejoinder to a negative review that intellectual Oscar A. H. Schmitz wrote on Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potemkin, 1925). Unlike in Berlin, Benjamin could see in Moscow the uncut version. Eventually, he managed to watch the film in a small screening room with the only company of a translator and no musical accompaniment—an experience that, as Benjamin wrote down in his *Moscow Diary*, was particularly unpleasant.[7] During his stay in Russia, he also managed to see other films by Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov, and Yakov Protazanov, among other directors. His judgement about Soviet cinema is not particularly positive, as he wrote in his diary: "'Russian film itself, apart from a few outstanding productions, is not all that good on the average."[8] At least, in his "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (1927), a

[7] Walter Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," *October* 35 (1985), 103.
[8] "Moscow Diary," 55.

sarcastic text in which he portrays Schmitz as a bourgeois intellectual, Benjamin hails *Battleship Potemkin* as "a great film, a rare achievement" (SW2, 19) because its depiction of class movement "has been wholly shaped according to the principles of the film medium" (SW2, 16). Benjamin is much more critical in the other article that he published in the same issue, "On the Present Situation of Russian Film" (1927). In this panoramic view of Soviet cinema, he criticizes Dziga Vertov's *One-Sixth of the World* (Shestaya chast mira, 1926) because, in this case, the link between Russian people and "their modes of production is merely hinted at in an all too shadowy fashion" (SW2, 13). More positively, he talks about the process of "cinefication" (*kinofikatsiia*) in the Soviet Union, by which film technology was taken to the most remote places in the country for educational purposes, and describes it as "the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments ever undertaken in the gigantic laboratory that Russia has become" (SW2, 14). Nonetheless, Benjamin laments that Russians are "unable to appreciate irony and skepticism in technical matters" (SW2, 15). Somewhat misguidedly, he also laments the scarce import of American slapstick in the Soviet Union, especially Chaplin films (SW2, 12). He thought that Russians, given their passionate interest in technical matters, would enjoy slapstick comedy, because—as he also mentions in his review of *Battleship Potemkin*—"[i]ts target is technology" (SW2, 17). For Benjamin, these films would produce a salutary, therapeutic function in these moments of rapid industrialization in the Soviet Union.

Charlie Chaplin was precisely the focus of his next incursion into film criticism for *Die literarische Welt*, in its issue of February 8, 1929. In this article, "Chaplin in Retrospect," Benjamin reviews Chaplin's career from his latest movie, *The Circus* (1928). Benjamin defines this film as the product of a mature Chaplin, who has masterfully learnt to repeat his best motifs. As an example, Benjamin discusses the chase scene in the fairground marionette. At the end of the review, Benjamin reflects—through an article by surrealist writer Philippe Soupault—on the revolutionary character of laughter, a topic that reappears in the "Work of Art" essay and that becomes central for his theory of the "reception in distraction." From this time onwards, Chaplin

begins to appear in different notes and texts, always in a positive note, placed in comparison at various points to such different figures as Kafka, Brecht, and Hitler, becoming the most mentioned filmmaker in the "Work of Art" essay.

Another of Benjamin's favorites, Mickey Mouse, made his appearance in "Experience and Poverty" (1933) as the harbinger of a new, positive barbarism. Mickey Mouse had begun to attract Benjamin's attention following a conversation with Kurt Weill and Gustav Glück in 1931, after which he wrote a note entitled "*Zu Micky Maus*." Since then, Benjamin started to collect a number of newspaper clips on Disney, which he used not only to write "Experience and Poverty" but also the "Work of Art" essay. There, Disney appears alongside Charlie Chaplin in relation to the therapeutic function of laughter and to alternative bonds between human body and technology. Over the years, however, Benjamin acknowledged—through the persistence of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno—the problems of the mouse's destructive frenzy, and Benjamin's attraction to Mickey Mouse waned in parallel with other intellectuals, disappearing from the third, 1939 version of the "Work of Art" essay.

The first short texts that Benjamin wrote about film form the basis of the "Work of Art" essay, his longest and arguably most important text on film. Benjamin claims that he got the idea of the essay after a conversation in a bar with Karl Steinschneider one morning in 1935.[9] The essay repeats some ideas about the technologies of reproduction that Benjamin discussed a few years earlier in "Little History of Photography" (1931). Indeed, it repeats almost verbatim the fragments about the "optical unconscious" and the "aura," as well as a fragment from his review of *Battleship Potemkin* in which Benjamin characterizes film as dynamite. At the beginning of the essay, Benjamin analyzes the impact that the technologies of reproduction are having on traditional art—such as the mechanical reproduction of paintings or the recording of live music. In the second half, however, Benjamin focuses on film as the first artform "entirely determined by its reproducibility" (SW3, 109) and analyses how film is transforming not only art

[9] *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 515.

but also the human sensorium. Interestingly, his references to the eye in the first part of the essay, reminiscent of his previous article on photography, give way to references that are more bodily oriented in the second half, where Benjamin develops a new aesthetic theory based on the reception of film in cinemas.

The Aesthetics of Cinema

The "Work of Art" essay consists of a series of theses in which Benjamin seeks to define the tendencies of art since the arrival of the technologies of reproduction. By understanding the changes produced by the inception of photography, sound recording, radio, and film, Benjamin aimed to debunk the uses and abuses of the technology of reproduction under fascism and capitalism, such as the cultivation of the "magic of the personality" in politicians and movie stars. He wanted to prove that old concepts such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery were no longer applicable to the new technological art forms (SW3, 101). Benjamin claims that technologies of reproduction revolutionized the social character of art through the destruction of notions of originality, eternity, and distance. In reproducible art, the authority of the artwork is no longer attached to its uniqueness, to the *hic et nunc* of the object, which informed its cult value. Therefore, the technology of reproduction, and particularly film, "emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual" (SW3, 106). This decay of aura is caused, says Benjamin, by the desire of the masses to get closer to things and by the mass reproduction of even that which is unique. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in cinema, where the audience watches the film and responds to the screen collectively. This new organization in the consumption of art, Benjamin contends, has profound changes in the field of perception. In the fourth section of the essay, Benjamin introduces Aloïs Riegl to theorize this transformation. Benjamin argues that, when Riegl studied the rise of the Roman art industry, he not only distinguished a new art, but also the development of a new perception. From here, Benjamin draws a conclusion: "*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long*

historical periods, so too does their mode of perception" (SW3, 104). Therefore, for Benjamin, perception changes historically, and the arrival of cinema is a turning point in a new configuration of perception.

Benjamin returns to Riegl in the eighteenth section of the essay, when he introduces his theory of the reception in distraction (*Zerstreuung*) in cinema. Benjamin presents the reception in distraction as antithetical to the reception in contemplation typical of traditional art which, as Benjamin writes elsewhere, begins "at a distance of two meters from the body" (SW2, 4–5). He argues that the reception in distraction "*finds in film its true training ground*" (SW3, 120). The reception in cinema has, first of all, attracted a greater mass of participants and, therefore, says Benjamin, requires a new mode of participation. Whereas, for Benjamin, a person who contemplates a work of art is absorbed by it, the masses in the cinema attract the artwork into themselves. This form of reception in cinemas, he argues, is similar to architecture.[10] Benjamin uses here Riegl's concept of *taktisch* to stress that cinema is not only approached through the eye, but also, as Riegl argues in his *Late Roman Art Industry* regarding architecture, in a tactile manner. Riegl laments that modern art and modern art theory led people to suppose that the "absorption" of a work of art is only possible through the sense of sight.[11] For Riegl, there is always a combination of optical and tactile stimuli in the reception of art. It is through the combination of different sense perceptions, both tactile and optical, along with the intervention of subjective thinking, that a passerby appreciates architecture. According to Benjamin, film spectators approach film similarly, not only through the eye but with the whole body. For this reason, Benjamin thinks that film should be studied in the light of "the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics" (SW3, 120). In other words, he argues that film could no

[10] In the first version of the essay, Benjamin writes that in cinemas, "where the collective seeks distraction, the tactically [*taktisch*] dominant element that rules over the regrouping of apperception is by no means lacking. It finds its more originary form in architecture." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (first version), *Grey Room*, 39 (2010), 7.
[11] Aloïs Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. by Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 341.

longer be understood through a traditional conception of aesthetics—that is, as a branch of philosophy concerned with art and beauty—but in its original Greek meaning, *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις), which means "perception, sensation" and refers to all the senses employed in aesthetic reception, as well as the impressions that the artwork leaves on the body.

Interestingly, in 1902, one year after the publication of *Late Roman Art Industry*, Riegl discarded the term *taktisch* as ambiguous and opted for *haptisch*—which, according to him, better conveyed the idea of expressing tactile qualities by optical means. Indeed, "haptics" has now become a recurrent term in Film Studies, thanks particularly to the work of Laura U. Marks. She defines haptic perception "as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions." Although Marks focuses very much on how touch is conveyed on screen, when "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch," she also recognizes that haptic perception "draws from other forms of sense experience."[12] Indeed, despite the fact that she does not refer to Benjamin's use of *taktisch*, she does introduce him in her genealogy of embodied spectatorship. Through the involvement of senses such as tactility, kinesthetics, and proprioception in haptic perception, one can easily understand that Riegl's description of the reception of architecture—and Benjamin's comparison with cinema—is better conveyed by the term *haptisch* than by *taktisch*, despite the polysemy that some Benjamin scholars have stressed. For example, Tobias Wilke suggests that the term *taktisch*, which means not only "tactile" but also "tactical," should be understood within the rhetoric of the 1920s avant-garde movements, particularly in relation to its semantic association with the military units that were sent to explore the territory before the main corps. According to him, only through this double meaning, "in which the tactical and the tactile codetermine each other […] can one truly begin to understand the historical task that Benjamin ascribes to film."[13] While it is true that Benjamin

[12] Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.
[13] Tobias Wilke, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses," *Grey Room,* 39 (2010), 49.

uses his own political tactics in this essay, I want to argue that Benjamin's arguments about montage and the shock effects of film do indeed have a haptic—and proprioceptive—quality, precisely because "filmic stimuli effectively transcend the category of purely optical impressions," jolting and clashing the body of the spectators.[14] The haptic and aural impressions of the film could indeed transform into kinaesthetic apperceptions in the collective body of the spectators, as Benjamin writes in the working note "*Erfahrungsarmut*" (1933). There, he claims that Mickey Mouse governs the whole audience rhythmically (GS2, 962).

Cinema as a Medium

In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin is interested in tracing how the film medium is shaping a different type of perception and, with it, transforming the human sensorium. Benjamin's conception of "medium," however, has a wider scope than the way it is usually understood. He writes: "the way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (SW3, 104). In this sense, Tobias Wilke argues that, for Benjamin, medium refers to "the comprehensive force field that links human sensorium to world" and which is constituted "by the interplay between natural (physiological, physical) and historical (social, technological, and aesthetic) factors."[15] For Benjamin, social and historical factors, such as the inception of cinema, transform the human sensorium. The changes in human perception and, indeed, its concurrent anthropological evolution are negotiated in the medium of film technology.

This particular conception of medium can be traced back to earlier texts in which Benjamin discusses anthropological changes in humans' relationship with, and adaptation of, technology. In "Outline of the Psychophysical Problem" (*c*.1922–1923), technology itself is

[14] Wilke, 47.
[15] Wilke, 40.

conceived as a medium. When talking about the expansion of the individual into the collective, as both the annihilation and fulfilment of humankind, Benjamin writes:

> In addition to the totality of all its living members, humanity is able partly to draw nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal, into this life of the body of mankind, and thereby into this annihilation and fulfillment. It can do this by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed. Ultimately, everything that subserves humanity's happiness may be counted part of its life, its limbs. (SW1, 395)

In this fragment, Benjamin argues that technology enables the union of different human beings and things as part of the body of humankind. If one pays close attention to the way in which Benjamin articulates the role of technology, it is clear that technology is not conceived as a means, but as a space or a medium in which this collective body is constructed. This body is formed by different beings, both human and non-human, and objects, including technological tools, which become its limbs.

Benjamin returns to the same idea in "To the Planetarium," the last section of his book of aphorism *One Way Street* (1928). As in the "Work of Art" essay, he is interested in the historical, anthropological transformation of humans, not as individuals but as collective:

> Men as species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology, a physis is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families. (SW1 487)

Benjamin conceives of technology here once again as a space or a medium in which the very anthropological nature of humans is being transformed. There are some puzzling and perturbing issues in this text, in part because of the influence of Ludwig Klages. The creation of a collective body is conceived here as a sexual intercourse—or, rather, a rape—between human beings and the cosmos in the ecstasy of war. This problematic point aside, this text interestingly prefigures with this dichotomy between the modern individual stargazer as opposed to a communal

absorption of cosmic experience the later dichotomy of the individual contemplation of painting as opposed to the collective reception of film in the "Work of Art" essay. The latter introduces the possibility of organizing, through film's technological nature, a collective body, exposing the audience to a technology that does not embody an instrumentalist logic.

In "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), Benjamin returns to the same idea of the creation of a collective body in technology:

> 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*. (SW2, 217)

The stimulus that organizes this collective body is no longer the ecstasy of war, as it was the case in "To the Planetarium," but rather the collision of images and body that is present in the avant-gardist practice of the surrealists. Indeed, at the beginning of the article, Benjamin argues that surrealism produces the necessary "head of water" to run a power station (SW2, 207). This source of energy, which is created in the interpenetration of body and image, becomes the basis for his argument on the collective body being formed in the arena of film spectatorship. "Surrealism" is also the first text in which Benjamin articulates the creation of this collective body through the concept of "innervation," a word that bears clear physiological connotations. With this term, Benjamin refers to the capacity of technology to provide both a source of energy and also the nerves through which that energy is innervated, as a prerequisite for the formation of a collective body. Technology thus helps bring this collective body together, connecting—as if it were the nerves—the individual to a collective *physis*. Technology not only becomes the

medium in which this body is organized, and the *nerves* that electrify the body, but also its *organs*.

Innervation

The concept of "innervation" appeared for the first time in *One-Way Street*. In "Teaching Aid," Benjamin argues that the typewriter "will replace the pliancy of the hand with the innervation of commanding fingers" (SW1, 457). In other words, humans will adapt the technology of the typewriter into their own body as a prosthesis.[16] In "Prayer Wheel," Benjamin considers breathing in yoga a regulator of this innervation: "There is no intact will without exact pictorial imagination. No imagination without innervation" (SW1, 466). For him, every breath—that is, a physiological gesture—is coordinated with "the holy syllables," which are remote and unapproachable. There is therefore a two-way process, in which the mind stimulates the body and the movement of the body, in turn, triggers the imagination.

Miriam Hansen defines innervation broadly as "a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers."[17] She argues that Benjamin might have borrowed the concept from Sigmund Freud, for whom the term designates a transmission or rush of energy through the nervous system, that is, through the anatomical distribution of nerves in an organism or bodily region, implying a process of discharge. In his discussion of hysteria, Freud gives the concept another meaning and defines innervation as "the transformation of an unbearable, incompatible psychic excitation into '*something somatic*'."[18] Hansen claims that, whereas for Freud innervation is a unidirectional transfer of energy from the psychic to the somatic, for Benjamin innervation is

[16] According to Miriam Hansen, Benjamin here "anticipates ways in which contemporary technologies both interface with the bodily sensorium and extend it into and through the apparatus." Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W.* Adorno (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 2012), 151. Indeed, he is anticipating theories such as those of Marshall McLuhan about media as extensions of human beings.
[17] Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999), 313.
[18] Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema," 316.

"a *two-way* process, that is, not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form, but also the possibility of reconverting, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation."[19] This process does not correspond to a protective shield against external stimuli, but as a medium or porous interface between the organism and the world established through a bidirectional exchange of psychic energies.

However, Matthew Charles has suggested that the concept was not informed as much by Freudian psychoanalysis, as it was by Soviet discourses about biorhythmics and biomechanics, developed by such writers as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Sergei M. Eisenstein, and Sergei Tretyakov.[20] Benjamin probably became acquainted with these ideas through Asja Lācis, whom he met in 1924 (and, therefore, before Benjamin's first use of the concept in 1925). In "The Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" (1928-1929), on Lācis's theatrical practice with children, Benjamin introduces a dualistic structure of tension (*Spannung*) and release (*Erlösung*) which is found in biomechanical theory, as well as in Benjamin's conception of innervation. In the text, Benjamin champions theater as a medium of education, because it "will unleash in children the most powerful energies of the future" (SW2, 202). This energy is associated with the children's imagination, which, in the non-hierarchical medium of collective play, is transferred from a "magical world of sheer fantasy" to their gestures and actions (SW2, 204). The release of energies, following "a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands," is applied to the theater's material, which is primarily the children's performances. Benjamin refers then to innervation as a discharge through corporeal movements. As an example, he defines a painter as "a man who sees more accurately with his hand when his eye fails him, who is able to transfer the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand" (SW2, 204). He then compares the painter's ability with the gestures of children in the proletarian theatre: "What characterizes every child's

[19] Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema," 317.
[20] Matthew Charles, "Secret Signals from Another World: Walter Benjamin's Concept of Innervation," *New German Critique* 45, no. 3 (2018), 39–72.

gesture is that creative innervation is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation" (SW2, 204). Innervations in this proletarian children's theater are associated with the "wild liberation of the child's imagination" that takes place during the performance (SW2, 205). Matthew Charles argues that innervation's two-way process, that which Miriam Hansen sought to find in psychoanalysis, can be found in the gestures of the child, where there is a "balanced transference between the 'receptive innervation' of the perceptual organs and the 'creative innervation' of the motor organs."[21]

The concept appears in the "Work of Art" essay twice. In the first version of the essay, Benjamin explicitly ascribes cinema with the role of adapting film technology into the collective: "To make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation—that is the historical task in whose service film finds its true meaning."[22] This sentence disappears from the second and third versions of the essay, but the idea remains implicit in Benjamin's points about "second technology" and film's function as the rehearsal of the interplay between humans and nature. The concept of "innervation" also appears in an important footnote in which he links innervation to revolutions. For Benjamin, revolutions are moved by a stream of energy that is both spontaneous and unmediated by theory (SW3, 43). Benjamin uses an image similar to the "Prayer Wheel" and the "The Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" to talk about the process by which imagination may trigger a physiological response in the form of an adaptation to "second technology." Benjamin defines "second technology" as a non-instrumentalist technology, whose aim is to manage a non-exploitative relationship between humans and nature. He writes:

> The aim of revolutions is to accelerate this adaptation. Revolutions are innervations of the collective—or, more precisely, efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology. This second

[21] Charles, 47.
[22] Benjamin, "Work of Art" (first version), 19.

> technology is a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces is a precondition for playing [*das Spiel*] with natural forces. Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so humanity, in its efforts at innervation, sets its sights as much on currently utopian goals as on goals within reach. (SW3, n124)

Through the child, innervation is the product of a motor-perceptual miscognition within the field of the imaginary. Although the child is not able to grasp the moon, this movement sparks creative and transformative energies. Similarly, in politics, the collective can also be empowered in its enterprise of reaching what is beyond the imaginable. In this image, the physiological implications of the term are clear: technology appears not only as the medium in which the collective body is being formed, it also becomes part of the body, following and informing the collective imagination. Benjamin adapts Ludwig Klages' ideas on a cosmic experience, present in "To the Planetarium," to a more physiological argument in which humans can bring the remote as close as their own bodies through the mimetic faculty. In this way, images can be integrated into the somatic, and the body becomes imbued with the *Rausch* of this collision between remoteness and nearness. The word "innervation" also relates to nerves and, more specifically, to a rush of energy channeled through the nervous system. Benjamin might assign this collective body with nerves, but they do not precede their own creation and hence their existence. It is precisely the discharge of energy that takes place through these nerves, as a *Rausch*, which draws together humans, technology, and nature. In this way, Benjamin adopts the term to highlight, on the one hand, the corporeality of the collective *physis* and, on the other, the energy that, according to Benjamin, is deployed by technology. This source of energy, which can be found in war, in the practice of the surrealists, and in cinemas, can thus stimulate and innervate a collective body.

The idea of cinema as a source of energy was already present in Benjamin's references to Mickey Mouse in "Experience and Poverty." Cinema is for Benjamin a supplier of dreams

which, as imagination, can provide a rush of energy to energize the collective audience in cinemas. Mickey Mouse can be conceived as a supplier of this energy:

> Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. (SW2, 734–735)

If people in their day-to-day existence lack energy, the imagination induced by Mickey Mouse films can provide them with that source of power. Later in the article, Benjamin argues that Mickey Mouse films portray "miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them" (SW2, 735). In other words, the creatures that appear in these films hyperbolize the promise of technology and, through this excess, a rush of energy is transferred to their own bodies and gestures through a process of creative innervation.

The Hyperstimulation of Urban Modernity

In his film writings, Benjamin often uses a vocabulary closely related to energy and the nervous system, in which the audience is regarded in physiological terms as a body that receives its energy from the screen. In fact, this vocabulary relating to energy and its effects on the body was very common in the writings about film in the 1910s and 1920s. Cinema was seen by many critics as a nervous stimulation of the senses, and words such as thrill, shock, and astonishment—which are later used by Benjamin—were commonly used in the film criticism of the time. Carl Forch, for example, writes that cinema, with its thrills (*Sensationen*), "can satisfy the hunger for nervous stimulation" better than other arts or spectacles.[23] Hermann Kienzl argues that city dwellers are subjected to a number of impressions or shocks but, as they do not

[23] Carl Forch, "Thrills in Film Drama and Elsewhere," *Bild und Film: Zeitschrift für Lichtbilderei und Kinematographie* 2, no. 7 (1912–1913), 164–165; reproduced in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, ed. by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, trans. By Sara Hall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 37.

have the stamina and concentration required for intellectual absorption, they need trivial relaxation "in order to replenish their exhausted energies" and claims that cinemagoers are "accustomed to nervous stimuli as the drug addict to his poison."[24] More negatively, Aurel Wolfram compares cinema to urban modernity, producing "the *nervous restlessness* of a massively accelerated speed of life" and accuses film of "whip[ping] the nerves."[25] Finally, the neurologist and psychiatrist Robert Gaupp warns that "the cinematograph, with its temporal concentration of events, has […] damaging and nerve-shattering effects."[26] In short, cinema was commonly associated with a type of energy that stimulated, for better or worse, the nervous system.

Benjamin also introduces film as a phenomenon belonging to urban modernity and, as the authors above, situates his writings on film within this debate about the overstimulation of the nervous system. He thinks, however, that humans could become accustomed to cope with this hyperstimulation and that film would train them in their adaptation to these stimuli. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin compares film with "all forms of perception, tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today's machines." He argues that "all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in connection with film" (AP, 394). As such, film shares the same form of pace and perception with machines. For Benjamin, the avant-garde might have tirelessly attempted to reproduce those rhythms and impressions, but film is ultimately the best art form to act as a "training ground" (*Übungsinstrument*) (SW3, 120; GS1.2, 505) for the senses in a technology-saturated society. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin argues that, in film, as in other modern technologies, perception is conditioned by shock. He acknowledges that, since the nineteenth century, shock experience has become the norm in big cities, where the

[24] Hermann Kienzl, "Theater and Cinematograph," *Der Strom* 1, no. 7 (1911), 219–221; reproduced in *The Promise of Cinema*, trans. Michael Cowan, 31.
[25] Aurel Wolfram, "Cinema," *Deutsches Volkstum* 13, no. 8 (1931), 647–649; reproduced in *The Promise of Cinema*, trans. Michael Cowan, 249.
[26] Robert Gaupp, "The Dangers of the Cinema," *Süddeutsche Monatschefte* 9.2, no. 9 (1911–1912), 363–366; reproduced in *The Promise of Cinema*, trans. Eric Ames, 225.

individual is constantly confronted by shock and collision, which produce "nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery." Benjamin compares this situation with the protagonist of Baudelaire's poetry, "who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy" (SW4, 328). He conceives these outer stimuli and shocks as a form of energy. Benjamin inherited this argument from Freud, for whom consciousness acts as a protective shield against these shocks or "excessive energies" which could have a traumatic effect. He quotes Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921): "The protective shield is equipped with its own store of energy operating in it against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world—effects that tend toward an equalization of potential and hence toward destruction" (SW4, 317). According to Freud, the greater the shock, the more vigilant the consciousness. The consciousness protects the senses by blocking such impressions, which become isolated and immediate experiences (*Erlebnisse*) rather than vital experience (*Erfahrung*). Modernity's hyperstimulation, which film only accentuates, contributes to the thickening of the protective shield of consciousness, which ends up numbing the senses and its capacity to experience. For Benjamin, this principle is the cause of the "atrophy of experience" in industrial-capitalist modernity. For him, experience is always paired with memory and with its own communicability, the capacity to pass experience down from generation to generation. However, in industrial-capitalist modernity, this type of communicable experience (*Erfahrung*), which is significantly communal, has been replaced by a multiplicity of immediate and subjective experiences (*Erlebnisse*). Susan Buck-Morss argues that, as a consequence of the consciousness' protective function, the cognitive function of the synaesthetic system—responsible for the correspondences between the outer and inner stimulus—becomes attenuated and is transformed into a system of anaesthetics, one that shuns experience in order to protect the body and the psyche from the shocks of modern life. Nevertheless, Benjamin ascribes to cinema the potential of restoring perception, of undoing this alienation within the corporeal sensorium

of modern human beings. The goal is, then, to restore the power of human bodily senses, "not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them."[27]

In his working notes on the "theory of distraction" for the composition of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin discerns a cathartic release in the reception of film (SW3, 141). For him, the mode of distraction found in film spectatorship is physiologically similar to the catharsis found in tragedy. For him, both should be conceived of as physiological phenomena. In the case of cinema, the audience consumes the film as a body and releases the tensions and unconscious energies collectively. The term used by Benjamin, *Zerstreuung*, which denotes both distraction and entertainment, is employed ambivalently in different texts. Howard Eiland notices that, in essays such as "Theater and Radio" (1932) and "The Author as Producer" (1934), Benjamin understands *Zerstreuung* in negative terms, as a form of bourgeois *divertissement*, whereas in the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin uses the term to denote productive distraction, "a spur to new ways of perceiving."[28] Here, cinema acts as a training ground for the sort of reception in a state of distraction which is symptomatic of the new kinetic apperception of all aspects of everyday life. In the fragment in which Benjamin speaks of shock effects, he says that the interruption of the train of thought characteristic of film reception constitutes the shock effects of film, "which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention" (SW3, n132). Benjamin here refers to film montage in similar terms to the Brechtian techniques of interruption and, therefore, in opposition to the former, negative attitude towards *Zerstreuung*.

According to Carolin Duttlinger, *Zerstreuung* is intertwined with practice and routine, attentiveness and automatic response, enabling "the observer to take in the stream of impressions in a detached yet alert way."[29] She argues that performative media such as theater and film represented a certain space of resistance for Benjamin, given that they built a collective

[27] Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992), 5.
[28] Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," *boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (2003), 59.
[29] Carolin Duttlinger, "Benjamin's Literary History of Attention: Between Reception and Production," *Paragraph* 32, no. 3 (2009), 281.

community whose reception of works in a state of semi-distracted relaxation provided "a fertile ground for productive reception."[30] For him, spectators of silent cinema watched the film in a semi-alert mindset that resisted complete absorption. This type of response, according to Duttlinger, was productive not only to the film screen, but also to city life: "a versatile alertness able to respond to the fragmented stimuli of city life without being absorbed by them, attention in a state of distraction."[31] Therefore, in Benjamin's "theory of distraction," there is always a dialectical interplay between attention and distraction, concentration and absentmindedness.

Collective Laughter

Laughter is particularly important for the release of tension that is characteristic of the "reception in distraction." Through collective laughter, the audience can release the dangerous energies flourishing in the masses as a consequence of the threats inherent to modern life. In the sixteenth thesis of the second version of the "Work of Art" essay, he writes:

> *If one considers the dangerous tension which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large—tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character—one also has to recognize that this same technologization* [Technisierung] *has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses.* Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. (SW3, 118)

[30] Duttlinger, "Benjamin's Literary History of Attention," 279.
[31] Duttlinger, "Benjamin's Literary History of Attention," 279.

Benjamin thinks that, even though the technologization of everyday life has caused mass psychoses, it has also created the possibility of psychic immunization. American slapstick and Disney animation, he argues, are able to counteract such mass psychoses, especially through collective laughter, which releases therapeutically unconscious energies. According to Benjamin, if the unconscious energies engendered by the rapid technologization of society are not released, they may mature into mass psychoses. A process of catharsis is thus necessary for the innervation of film technology into the collective body formed in cinemas. Thus, Benjamin conceives of the audience as a *physis* that must release the tensions and dangerous energies of its body, as part of the "tension" and "release" process of innervation, in order to adapt to technology in a satisfactory manner. The laughter of the masses, although not always critical, can incorporate the shocks displayed within film without creating a defense that would paralyze the organism. In this way, the distracted and relaxed state that Benjamin associates with both Brecht's epic theatre and film permit the integration of the shocking and fragmentary nature of the apperceptions of modern life. Through this, spectators would be trained to confront the new stimuli with which the rhythms of the city assault the human body.

Adorno and Horkheimer disagreed. For them, as Adorno states in his famous letter to Benjamin dated March 18, 1936, collective laughter in the cinema is neither salutary nor revolutionary. Instead, it is "full of the worst bourgeois sadism."[32] The laughter of the audience does not produce either a critical reflection on the situation of the modern man or woman with regard to technology, nor a preemptive function against the mass psychoses engendered by the rapid process of technologization. After discussing the first version with Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin introduced a number of footnotes which deepened its political and philosophical enquiry. Benjamin did recognize that laughter has not not always been positive. In a footnote, he writes that the comic effect in some Disney films is tinged with horror, and compares it with the depiction of people dancing in the middle of medieval pogroms (SW3,

[32] *The Complete Correspondence*, 130–131.

n130). With this argument, Benjamin envisages the possibility that such energy could also be directed to destructive purposes, rather than used for a salutary interpenetration of the collective body formed by the audience. He fears that these films could train audiences in brutal behavior and the destructive energies performed by Mickey and his friends could eventually be deployed in the service of fascism.

It was through this discussion of the position of Mickey Mouse in the "Work of Art" essay that Benjamin realized some flaws in his theory. The immediate—and theoretically unmediated—energy supplied by films is not always rechanneled in a positive manner. This energy can also be used to inflict violence on outsiders—admittedly not very different from how Mickey does in his films. The destruction caused by Mickey Mouse could teach audiences to tolerate violence as a normal aspect of civilization, instead of helping them imagine a better existence. Laughter might serve to ease the relationship workers have with film technology, but, in most cases, it would only work as a temporal relaxation between shifts, preparing workers to endure their next working day under the exploitation of other machines. In short, the outcome of the reception of cinema is not always a positive, collective innervation through which spectators communally incorporate the utopian promises that technology pose on them. Audiences might also embody the most destructive side of technology.

Some authors have argued that Benjamin's film writings refer to a type of film that, by the time he wrote these texts, was already gone. Miriam Hansen, for example, claims that the aesthetic qualities that Benjamin ascribes to film are characteristic of a pre-classical mode. She even suggests that Benjamin might be talking about what Tom Gunning called the "cinema of attractions," the early years of cinema in which films were not yet dominated by the narrative impulse that would prevail from around 1907.[33] These films did not require an identification with the characters in the story, but rather elicited an embodied and immediate response from the audience. Carolin Duttlinger, on the other hand, argues that Benjamin referred primarily to silent

[33] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 86.

film. She argues that, in opposition to sound film, silent cinema produces a similar reception to oral storytelling, because it resists the complete absorption of the audience and, therefore, the possibility of a more politically active response.[34] In this regard, Benjamin wrote to Adorno in a letter from December 1938 that it was now clear to him that "the launching of the sound film must be viewed as an industrial action designed to break through the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which fostered reactions that were hard to control and politically dangerous."[35] Whereas the spectators of silent films faced the screen with a bodily presence of mind, in the psychological absorption requested in many classical films the body was not as actively present as was the mind. In this type of film, the spectators might follow the plot and feel empathy with the characters without activating their imagination, thus blocking an empowering innervation. In short, according to Benjamin, the film industry was reducing the audience's capacity to respond to film with a corporeal presence that could become collective.

Despite these apparently historical limitations, Benjamin's theories have attracted the attention of many film and media scholars for decades. As such, his texts still speak to contemporary readers who are interested in understanding the ongoing transformations of the mediascape, and their consequences on art, politics, and society at large. Furthermore, given the way in which the field of Film Studies is more and more concerned with affects and the role of the senses, Benjamin's ideas about embodied spectatorship offer invaluable insights to understand the way that films shape human perception. Benjamin writings on cinema also helped him develop other concerns in his oeuvre, particularly in relation to technology, the human body, and the possibility of recovering communal experiences in a technologically saturated society. Concepts such as "innervation" and *Kollektivleib*, and discussions around the instrumentality of technology, which first emerged in other texts, attain their full expression in

[34] Duttlinger, "Benjamin's Literary History of Attention," 282.
[35] *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* 591.

these writings. For that reason, Benjamin's film writings are also crucial to understanding his philosophy.

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