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THE PROBLEM OF ART: TECHNIQUE IN BENJAMIN'S EARLY AESTHETICS

1. Problem as basic category of Benjamin's early writings¹

Since the second version, *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* begins with an introductory paragraph where Benjamin proudly claims that it is finally time to do in the theory of art what Marx did in the realm of political economy. Following the example of Marx, the introduction of new analytical categories has to derive from the critique of the incapacity of the traditional concept to trustfully describe the dialectic of material reality (see Jameson 2020).

Benjamin briefly enlists some of these categories, which should be dismissed in the theory of art. In the second version of the essay we find the longest list including: «concepts — such as creativity and geniality, eternal value and style, form and content [...]» (Benjamin 2012, 53; the traslation is mine). Since the third version of the essay, the list is shortened and includes: «Creativity [*Schöpfung*] and geniality [*Genialität*], eternal value and mystery» (Benjamin 2012, 97 and 208). Of course, the crisis of traditional aesthetic categories is part of the much more general diagnosis that can be summarized by the expression “decay of the aura” which refers to the progressive revolution in the technological (re-)production of artworks².

The decay of the aura is surely Benjamin's most famous claim. Its fame is matched only by its controversial obscurity. My intention in this essay is *not* to tackle this problematic issue. On the

¹ In accordance with the usual conventions for bibliographic citation in studies on Walter Benjamin, the following abbreviations will be used in this work: GS = Benjamin 1972-1989, OGT = Benjamin 2019, SW = Benjamin 1996-2003. The Roman numeral indicates the volume number, while the Arabic numeral indicates the page number.

² On the decay of aura see at least Hansen 1987, Hansen 2008 and Tomba 2016. On the notion of reproduction see Montanelli 2017.

contrary, my aim is to show how it was possible for Benjamin to point out the technological side of artistic production in modern times. More precisely, what I mean is that, with the exception of the Marxist conceptuality, the general critical intention of the Artwork Essay is deeply grounded in the inner nature of Benjamin's aesthetic reflections. That is the case since Benjamin — as I hope to show in this article — *always intended the work of art as the product of a technical activity*.

This awareness made immediately Benjamin skeptical on the possibility of traditional aesthetic categories to give an adequate account of art in general. In particular, we will see that the concepts describing the activity of the artistic subject (the painter, the novelist, the storyteller, etc.) such as, for instance, genius, creation or inspiration are from the very beginning considered as false answers to the challenging question of the artistic production. In other terms, the aim of the present essay is to show that the Artwork Essay is not a desert flower in Benjamin's production and that it is neither a mere product of his attentive analysis of new media since the mid-Twenties. However, that implies to point out the fundamental role technique plays in Benjamin's early aesthetic thought.

Before proceeding with my argument, it is important to underline again that my aim is not to find the nuclear roots of Benjamin's understanding of technology as it is exposed in the Artwork Essay. The question here is not to explore how Benjamin approached the phenomena of mass culture and their technical dimension. His reflection on cinema, for instance, has its own history, with its own particular sources and internal development. More narrowly, the aim of this work is to investigate how that was possible, that is, *which epistemological conditions made possible for Benjamin the disclosure of the technological side of the production of art* in his early reflections on art. As outlined earlier, my position here is that, in Benjamin's eyes, the shaping of the work of art has always been a matter of technique, with relevant consequences for the conceptual endurance of some of the most important aesthetic categories of the tradition. On this background, Benjamin's continuous rewriting of the Artwork Essay could arguably represent his late effort to seek an answer to the questions raised by his early aesthetics.

However, the very notion of an early aesthetics in Benjamin's work invites further scrutiny. Is there something like an aesthetics

in Benjamin's early writings? Approaching his essay on Hölderlin, Goethe and German Romanticism, one could feel embarrassed using the word "aesthetics"³. Surely, for more than a century the objects he is dealing with in these writings — such as poems and novels — have been the domain of a discipline called "aesthetics"⁴. However, traditional aesthetic categories (beauty, form, content, etc.) are sublated into a different realm: that of the knowledge of the truth. As we are told in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*: the function of artistic form is «to make historical material contents, such as lie at the basis of every significant work, into philosophical truth contents» (GS I.1, 358; OGT, 194). This Nietzschean formulation reworks the mediation-role of literature already present in the analysis of Hölderlin's two poems where the totality of life was the *Grenzbegriff* of the poet's activity (see Jennings 1983 and Hanssen 1997).

In these writings, the literary work provides the opportunity for the critic to remain in contact with the sphere of the non-intentional truth. It is a mean and instrument of knowledge rather than an object of autonomous consideration. Thus, Benjamin's understanding of the artwork in his early writings is basically an epistemology where he makes use of art in order to overcome the boundaries of the traditional notion of experience limited by the parameters of natural science⁵. His first account of the relation between art and technique derives precisely from this epistemological comprehension of the artwork.

In order to address this difficult question, we have to focus our attention on a detail. Since his first writings to the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Benjamin continuously works on a growing complex theory of knowledge whose central category has been left aside, on the background. This crucial concept is the notion of problem [*Problem*]. A short overview of the main occurrences in the writings explicitly devoted to artworks analysis or to epistemology brings this into focus. In his high school graduation essay he speaks openly of Goethe's problem in the *Tasso*. In the *Lebenslauf* from the same year, he also affirms that philosophy is composed of problems and systems (see GS VII.2, 532-533). More

³ Hodge 2005 has a different perspective on this point.

⁴ On the rise of aesthetics as discipline see Amoroso 2008.

⁵ On Benjamin's critiques to Kant's notion of *Erfahrung* in his early writings see Tagliacozzo 2003.

in details, in the 1916 essay *Trauerspiel and tragedy* the difference between these two kinds of literary works is located in the divergence of their fundamental problem⁶. In the coeval famous essay *On the language as such and on the language of man* the magic of language is called its *Urproblem*, its originary problem (see GS II.1, 143; SW I, 64). The same happens in the essays concerning the visual arts, such as *Painting and the graphic arts* where we discover that the evolution of art has been shaped according to the problem of the relation between the observer and the position in space of the thing drawn (see GS II.2, 603; SW I, 82). Problem is the key-word for determining the activity of philosophy in *On the program of the coming philosophy* whose very goal is to sketch out a new kind of philosophical reasoning able to face the problem of *Erkenntnistheorie* (see GS II.1, 163; SW I, 104). In the end, the first line of *The concept of criticism in German Romanticism* sounds: «The present work is conceived as a contribution into the investigation of the history of a problem [*problemgeschichtlichen Untersuchung*]» (GS I.1, 11; SW I, 116), whereas in the very first page of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* we are in front of the *Darstellungsproblem* (see GS I.1, 207; OGT, 2).

This centrality of the notion of problem could sound trivial and obvious. Actually, “problem” is a widespread word and part of our ordinary language. We commonly refer to a problem as a difficulty encountered during practical or intellectual endeavours. We will see in a while that the ordinary presence of “problem” in our language is the fruit of a long process of cultural sedimentation. However, the peculiar status of the notion of problem in Benjamin’s early writings was already pointed out by Bernd Witte in his 1976 challenging book on Benjamin’s early notion of literary criticism (Witte 1976), where he raises some perplexities on the following difficult passage of the great essay on Goethe’s *Elective affinities*:

The ideal of the problem, however, does not appear in a multiplicity of problems. Rather, it lies buried in a manifold of works, and its excavation is the business of the critique. The latter allows the ideal of the problem [*das Ideal des Problems*] to appear

⁶ GS II.1, 136; SW I, 57: «The mourning play exhausts artistically the historical idea of repetition. Consequently, it addresses a problem [Problem] that is completely different from the one dealt with in tragedy».

in the work of art in one of its manifestations [in eine seiner Erscheinungen]. (GS I.1, 173; SW I, 334).

To clarify the mystery hidden in these lines, Witte interprets the expression “das Ideal des Problems” as a metaphor of the system of philosophy (Witte 1976, 88). I hope to show later that Witte was wrong claiming that this notion has a barely metaphorical sense. Nevertheless, he is right when he says that Benjamin is using here a historically and philosophically relevant notion. As I will argue later, I remain skeptical whether Benjamin’s sources on this point can be limited to Novalis and Schlegel, as Witte seems to suggest. This because “problem” is a crucial lemma widely investigated in the development of modern philosophy. However, problem is not a philosophical word at its origins, but rather finds its first technical employment in Late-Ancient mathematics. That is why, strange as it may sound, in order to understand the importance of the concept for Benjamin, Pappus of Alexandria may be of help.

2. How poetry became mathematics

Pappus’ *Mathematical collections* is the masterpiece of Late-Ancient mathematics. What is important for us today is that Pappus’ main effort is that of classifying the multiple and scattered material of Greek mathematical reflection. Thus, he has to canonize the twofold nature of Ancient mathematics:

Those who favour a more exact terminology in the subjects studied in geometry, most excellent Pandrosius, use the term problem to mean an inquiry in which it is proposed to do or to construct something [τι ποιῆσαι καὶ κατασκευάσαι], and the term theorem an inquiry in which the consequences and necessary implications of certain hypothesis are investigated [θεωρεῖται]. (Thomas 1993, II, p. 567).

Poiein and *theorein*, making and knowing: since Euclid’s *Elements* Ancient mathematics is split up into these main epistemological categories. Thus, it is not a surprise if Proclus, following Pappus in his commentary at Euclid, put the theorem on the side of philosophy, while the problem is connected to the realm of technique and mechanics. Theorem demonstrating is a purely

noetic activity. On the contrary, solving a problem is a technical matter (see Proclus 1992, 157-158)⁷.

This Ancient background is crucial in order to examine the transformation happened in the XVII century. In the meanwhile, mathematics changed its face with the rise and affirmation in the Latin West of the Arabic calculation technique, that is, of algebra. During the Renaissance and the Early-Modern times, Western mathematicians hardly worked in order to conform the new (in their eyes) Greek terminology to a completely different practice⁸. The results of this length process can be well exemplified by the ending phrase of 1591 *Introduction to the analytical art* by François Viète, the very founder of Western algebra as a science, according to which the main task of algebraic calculation is «nullum non problema solvere», to leave no problem unsolved (Viète 1591, 11)⁹. An almost identical formulation is at the basis of Descartes' reformation project in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* where he characterizes mathematics as the capacity to solve every possible problem.

To more fully grasp the transformation we are examining, it is useful to pause momentarily and focus on a passage from the opening lines of Dante's *Monarchy*. Here, while asking for the purpose of knowledge, Dante rises some perplexities over the role of mathematics. He goes: «For what fruit would a man bear if he demonstrated some theorem of Euclid all over again?» (Alighieri 1313, 111). Thus, despite his questions, in the eyes of a learned intellectual and artist, grown up in the late XIII century Florence, mathematics is a theorem demonstrating activity following Euclid's example.

The answer of early-modern mathematics to Dante's difficult question will be: none. However, the difficulty is not that mathematics as such gives no fruits, but that the mathematics of the Ancients appears completely useless to life and humans. Thus, as if he would be answering Dante's accusation, Descartes writes in the *Rules*: «[...] even though we know other people's demonstrations by hearth, we shall never become mathematicians if we lack the intellectual aptitude to solve any given problem»

⁷ On Proclus, see O'Meara 1991.

⁸ See on this point Klein 1968.

⁹ The classic reconstruction of the history of algebra in the West is van der Waerden 1985.

(Descartes 1996, X, 367). Descartes goes further as follows: «And even though we have read all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, we shall never become philosophers if we are unable to make a sound judgement on matters which come up for discussion; in this case what we would seem to have learnt would not be science, but history» (Descartes 1985 – 1995 I, 13).

The new problem-solving mathematics is the example for a full reformation of philosophy whose first step is the interpretation of the traditional objects of metaphysics and natural enquiry as variables in problem. On this ground, what philosophy needs is an instrument able to produce the solution-strategy apt for every problem. Notoriously, this instrument able to produce every other instruments — as Descartes calls it in the *Sixth Meditation* — is the method. Thus, doing mathematics and philosophy become parts of the same problem-solving activity of the mind which looks at its objects as *tasks to be accomplished*. Therefore, Descartes makes of knowledge a strategic activity pointing at the realization of the goals the mind has to achieve. Thrown out from the physical world by the mechanical interpretation of nature, teleology establishes its empire as fundamental law of the new Cartesian mind¹⁰.

Now, the impact of the problem-solving revolution is crucial in modern culture. The problem is the driving force of the logic of invention which represents the ground of the early-modern understanding of logic. For instance, in their 1662 *Logique de Port-Royale* Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole write that a theorem is a question whose truth or falsity we do not know, and that a problem is a question whose possibility we do not know. In other terms, theorem and problem are different aspects of the same solving activity¹¹. More than a century later, in the introductory remarks of his 1804 second exposition of the *Doctrine of Science*, Fichte states firstly that philosophy has a task, and that this task is to solve definitely the riddle of world and consciousness with «mathematical evidence»¹². This same Cartesian faith finds its widest anthropological expansion in the *Preface* to Marx's *Contribution to the critique of political economy*,

¹⁰ On all these points see Lachterman 1989.

¹¹ See the chapters on analysis and synthesis in Arnauld – Nicole 1683, 395-408.

¹² Fichte 2005, 23.

according to which: «Mankind inevitably sets itself only such tasks, as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material condition for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation» (Marx 1859, 4). Approaching the world entails engaging in a recurring process: setting a task and developing all the necessary tools to achieve it. Here humanity finds its epistemic and practical unity, no matter if this activity is mathematics or philosophy or economy. “Problem” is now a category of a higher level with which we can generally refer to our multiple and internally different relations with the life and the world¹³.

That is why Benjamin (a Jewish German upper class twenty-years-old candidate to the final exam of the high school) can write in his literature proof that: «The problem of the genius [*das Problem des Genies*] forcefully attracted almost all the greatest dramatists by their own nature» (GS VII.2, 532). A writer, just like a mathematician or a philosopher, is a problem-solver.

This is evident in the essay *Two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin*. Describing the relation between *das Gedichte* and life Benjamin says:

This other functional unity [that of the *Gedichte*], now, is the idea of the task [*die Idee der Aufgabe*], corresponding to the idea of the solution [*der Idee der Lösung*] as which the poem exists. (For task and solution can be separated only in the abstract). For the creator, this idea of a task is always life. In it lies the other extreme functional unity. Thus, the poetized emerges as the transition from the functional unity of life to that of the poem. In the poetized, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution. (GS I.1, 107; SW I, 19-20).

Despite the absence of the word itself, the problem-constellation is clearly at work as subtext of this passage. Consequently, Benjamin is able to connect Hölderlin’s two poems due to the fact that they correspond to the same functional unity, that is, they are trying to accomplish the same task. This broad interpretation is possible thanks to Benjamin’s Neo-Kantian sources. If the lemma “function” makes the presence of Cassirer’s philosophy evident¹⁴,

¹³ As far as I know, a full reconstruction of the history of the concept of problem is still missing. However, see Holzhey 1989.

¹⁴ See on this point Fenves 2010.

the very idea of the *Gedichte* as *Grenzbegriff* is possible on the ground of the simplification of Kantian conceptuality made popular by Cohen and Natorp (see Tagliacozzo 2022).

For instance, Benjamin here basically uses the expression “the idea of the task of the totality” and *Grenzbegriff* as if they were the same. However, in Kant’s *Critique of pure reason* the distinction is clear: the noumenon is a *Grenzbegriff*, while totality pertains to the transcendental ideas. Nevertheless, they are associated in being (especially the cosmological idea) a task to be accomplished. Going deeper, we find that this is possible because Kant understands both of them as problems (the noumenon is the problem of the intellect, while the ideas are the problem of reason). This made possible for the Post-Kantian philosophy to assimilate the noumenon to the ideas. In Cohen’s interpretation of Kant, the identification of the thing in itself with the ideas is complete (see Ferrari 1988). Knowledge is a matter of doing and this kind of doing is the accomplishment of a task. Paul Natorp brilliantly sums up this situation in the formulas that *Wissenschaft ist Wissen-schaffen* (science is knowledge-making) and that *das Gegebene wird zum Aufgegebenen* (the given becomes a task) (see Gigliotti 1989). Bringing this part of the argument to a close, we can observe that Benjamin derives his first interpretation of artwork from the problem-solving culture of modern philosophy.

This holds true on two distinct levels. On the first one, he looks at the artist as a person who is dealing with a problem and at the artwork as its solution. On the other one, the analytical instruments Benjamin employs are products of the same culture. Better said, as Benjamin will say in the essay on Goethe’s *Elective affinities*, the role played by the critique is to show «in the work of art the virtual possibility of formulating the work’s truth content as the highest philosophical problem» (GS I.1, 173; SW I, 334). This means that the critique has to make evident that the artwork is an attempt to face a task which overcomes the boundaries of the work of art in itself as sensible appearance of the ideal. In other terms, the critic has to make visible that the work of art is the sensible manifestation of an ideal object, not representable as such. Using the expression Benjamin will employ in the *Epistemo-critical Preface* to the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, the aim of the critical interpretation is to look at the object as the sensible exhibition or the *Darstellung* of the idea.

3. How mathematics became poetry

We stated that Benjamin's early aesthetics and epistemology belong in a long-lasting tradition. Surely, this allows us to look at Benjamin as the heir of a legacy, giving an account of some apparently eclectic positions. The question now is: what does this have to do with our point of departure? What can this explain about Benjamin's early conception of technology? The answer is relatively easy. The narrative we are navigating — which, of course, is not the only possible one— implies that a problem-solving culture looks at knowledge as a kind of praxis, as a making-activity. In turn, this implies that the problem-solving thought is seen as the intellectual activity corresponding to technique (mechanics, for example, if we take the examples of XVII century thinkers, such as Newton¹⁵). In other words, when Benjamin presents Hölderlin or Goethe as problem-solvers, he is looking at their activity as a technical one. This is precisely the point where he starts to perceive the inaptitude of traditional aesthetics concepts to capture the true nature of art. The first symptom of this awareness is the pivotal recognition of the inadequacy of categories such as genius and beauty.

The connection between the technical interpretation of poetry and the decay of the idea of the creative genius is already present in the essay on Hölderlin (without being made a topic of explicit analysis) in the idea of the sobriety of the poet¹⁶. We find the same idea in a work of a few years later, *The concept of critique in the German Romanticism*, but in this case the connection is clearly stated. According to Benjamin, Schlegel and Novalis understood art as a product of a "*machen*", of a making (see GS I.1, 105). This is the fruit of the elevation of poetry «to the status of the *μηχανή* of the ancients», as Schlegel declares in a passage Benjamin reports in the text, where the mechanical reason [*mechanische Vernunft*] is the driving force of the Romantic understanding of art and critique, and «the antithesis of ecstasy, the *μανία* of Plato» (GS I.1, 104; SW I, 175). Descartes' dream could not be better realized.

Now, what does this mean? And, why should there be a conflict between mechanics and genius? In order to understand the historical meaning of Benjamin's position, it is necessary to briefly explore in greater depth the narrative previously outlined.

¹⁵ On this point see Guicciardini 2009.

¹⁶ On this see again Fenves 2010.

Actually, I presented a unitary story without fragmentations and inner contradictions. Of course, this was merely an abstraction that allowed for a better appreciation of the historical stratification of Benjamin's conceptuality. Notwithstanding, the problem-solving culture is full of tensions and different solutions that affirm the human capacity to produce truth and escape the trap of falsity. Generally speaking, one fundamental tension can be detected in the modern problem-solving culture. As already said, solving a problem means to find a method thanks to which leaving "no problem unsolved" — in Viète's words. The idea of the method does not necessarily imply that of subjectivity. Indeed, the method seeks to guarantee the possibility of gaining the truth leaving aside individual and subjective differences or aptitudes. The early-modern understanding of the method as the art of finding was an explicit critique against the Renaissance renewal of Platonic *ἔργον*, which is the basis of the idea of geniality¹⁷. On the other side, although the explicit task of the method is the dissolution of subjectivity in knowledge and the full realization of objectivity, this implies that something like a method exists or, in other terms, that *someone finds the art of finding*. The Modern notion of spontaneously creative subject arises in order to address this complicated question. Thus, modern problem-solving culture is animated by the tension between the abolishment of the subject in the mechanical universality of the method and the unregulated individual creation presupposed by the method itself.

French Enlightenment, for instance, upholds the supremacy of creation. In his *Preliminary discourse* to the *Encyclopedia* D'Alembert states that: «In a creative geometer [*dans un géometre qui crée*] the imagination has no less force than in an inventing poet [*dans un poëte qui invente*]» (D'Alembert 1751, 579). Both of them, the poet and the mathematician, are quite the same in their being «*génies inventeurs*» (ivi, 29). Nevertheless, the tension between the method and the genius is still present in the *Critique of Judgement*, where Kant distinguishes the scientist as a follower of the rule and the artistic genius as the inventor or founder of the rules of creation¹⁸.

¹⁷ On the birth of the concept of genius in Ficino's commentary to Plato's *Symposium* see Panofsky 1972.

¹⁸ On this discussion see Bäumlér 1967.

Within this framework, Benjamin's short comment on Balzac, cited by Scholem in his notebook, proves particularly important:

Balzac's universality (and likely that of the greatest modern French novel as such) partially originates in the circumstance that the French spirit operates in metaphysical questions according to a kind of analytic geometry, so to speak. That means that it knows a realm where the things can in principle be solved according to a method, without considering the singular (or even intuitive) depths of the individual things, but solving them with a method on which their solvability is grounded. The geometrical solution of a geometrical task [*geometrische Aufgabe*] can require geniality [*Genie*], while its analytical solution needs just a method. In both cases, it is *solved*. Balzac's *œuvre* owns its universality to this methodical procedure considering the great metaphysical realities. If we consider it from the perspective of other (however geometrical) parameters, it could appear as not-deep (which does *not* mean: not profound or superficial). (GS II.2, 60, my translation).

According to the idea that literature is a problem-solving activity, method and genius constitute opposite modes of finding a solution. This unusual passage must be read referring to the discussion of the mechanical reason typical of the Romantic understanding of art. Actually, the analytic novelist is the heir of Hölderlin's sobriety and Novalis' mechanics¹⁹. Notably, «the doctrine that art and its works are essentially neither appearance of beauty nor manifestation of immediately inspired emotion, but media of forms, resting in themselves, has not fallen into oblivion since Romantics [...]» (GS I.1, 107; SW I, 177). German Romanticism disclosed the inner secret of modern art as not «essentially a revelation and a mystery of a creative genius [...]; it is a mystery of the order [...]» (GS I.1, 86; SW I, 165). The order is the correspondence of the artwork to an idea which is «the a-priori of a method» according to which the work of art is shaped. Creation can be seen as an inherently passive act of immediate receptivity to forms, followed by a playful process of deconstructing and recomposing them. However, Schlegel and Novalis were not the first to identify the collapse of genius and the necessity of a different understanding of the production of

¹⁹ On Novalis' understanding of art and modern mathematics see Ende 1973. For a general exposition of the relation between mathematics and philosophy in German Post-Kantian debate see Chiaravalli 2018.

artworks. The roots of their attitude toward art and critique can be traced back to the XVI century. Thus, in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* the theme is addressed through the figure of allegory. The allegorist «is a man who could operate in sovereign fashion with the existing models [*Mustern*]» (GS I.1, 355; OGT, 189). On this bases, literature must be considered as an *ars inveniendi*, as an art for finding. In this sense: «Imagination, what the moderns call creative capacity, was unknown as the measure of a hierarchy of the minds» (*ibidem*).

Summing up the results of our analysis, it should be evident that, according to Benjamin, modern artwork and artistic activities are basically a technical activity. This necessary entails not conceiving productive activity as the outcome of the genial inspiration of an extraordinary individual. The literary artwork, such as language in general, lives its own historical life as a product in continuous relation with its times. In the controversy between the method and the genius, Benjamin is deciding in favor of the method.

Nevertheless, Benjamin's partisanship for a technically shaped art is so deep that he is forced to revise the entire modern framework. We previously saw that one of the main features of the problem-solving culture is the understanding of knowledge as a teleological process. Teleology is the mark of the subjectivity in the solving-process: the mind has to face this problem because it has a specific interest in solving it. The spontaneous ability to fulfil the objectives of the mechanical procedure represents the assertion of the subject's control over its technique. However, as the Balzac-note clearly shows, Benjamin is perfectly aware that the genius and the method are the product of the same technical culture. Thus, what is at stake here is not a conflict between a non-technically conditioned conception of art and an understanding of artistic process as mechanical combination. The technical nature of art is a definite acquisition. The point here is the distinction between *two different ways of understanding technique*.

The first one, exemplified in the aesthetics of XVII century Enlightenment and in Classicism, represents the reduction of technique to a rule given by the subjectivity. Thus, the subject becomes automatically the center of the aesthetics consideration, such as production of artworks as spontaneous active creation of an individual and artistic beauty as the effect on the subject of its own products. Beautiful arts are barely a self-affection of the

subjectivity. On the contrary, what Benjamin detects in the allegory and in Romantic is the possibility to understand technique *free from the boundaries of its subjective declination*. Technique has its own specific logic with its own methods and rules. The subject has to submit its activity to the forms and orders which regulate technic aggregation. Otherwise, we continuously take for technique something — the subjective teleology — which is basically different, without understanding the true nature of the instrument as such.

This effort is omnipresent in Benjamin's early production and represents its mark of unity and coherence. It is the case of the notion of violence as pure mean in *The Critique of Violence*, for example. Again, in the highly challenging yet crucial essay *On the Language as such and on the Language of Man*, Benjamin's problem is to present language as «in the purest sense the "medium" of communication» (GS II.1, 142; SW I, 64). Paradoxically, the problem in considering language is not the instrumental character of the common understanding, but the reduction of the instrumentality of language to the ends of the linguistic subjectivity. Conversely, language is a medium, better said, it is the medium through which the world manifests itself. Thus, the linguistic subjectivity of humanity can be regarded as a singular articulation of a part of world-significance. Speaking we are firstly making ourselves part of the general meaning of the world as manifested through naming²⁰. Instead of being the master of language, the subject is a construction of the historical life deposited in the words.

4. Conclusion: from Technique to Technology

This analysis has shown that Benjamin's comprehension of artworks is inherently informed by an awareness of their technical dimension, which in turn radically problematizes traditional aesthetic categories. This conclusion is supported by the presence of epistemological categories in Benjamin's early aesthetic writings, which are deeply rooted in the problem-solving culture distinctive of modern science and philosophy. For Benjamin, the work of art is essentially a problem-solving endeavor, where the artistic subject poses a challenge and devises procedures to address it. This perspective reveals a deeper

²⁰ On language in Benjamin see Friedlander 2012.

tension surrounding the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of these procedures, echoing modern philosophy's debates on the mechanization and automation of cognitive processes and their implications for individual creativity. Benjamin's approach is remarkably radical in that he doesn't posit a binary opposition between art grounded in technique and art that rejects it in favor of subjectivity. Benjamin's radicality consists precisely in immediately addressing (and from various points of view: philosophy of language, theory of knowledge, analysis of violence, art criticism, etc.) the possibility that technique can be liberated from the principle of subjectivity. By tracing this argumentative path, I aimed to uncover the epistemic and conceptual foundations that enabled Benjamin to philosophically valorize artistic forms like cinema and photography, while revealing the underlying unity of his critique of traditional aesthetic categories. In this context, it becomes clear that the distinction between a first and second technology in *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* not only revisits themes from his earlier work on Romantic art criticism but also fundamentally rearticulates the distinction between technique as a tool of subjectivity and technique as a means of emancipation from subjectivity itself.

While this insight holds true, it is equally evident that Benjamin's thought undergoes significant shifts from the mid-1920s onwards²¹. Although space constraints prevent me from fully elaborating on the narrative I've outlined, I would like to conclude by highlighting what I see as the key elements of transformation in his work.

In its most distilled form, the evolution of Benjamin's thought on aesthetic themes can be understood as a transition from the metaphorical to the literal²². Technique is not technology. The language of technique, which Benjamin uses to describe the creation of artwork and its nature, is obviously a metaphor. Thanks to the allegory and German Romantics, he is able to present the relation between content and form in the literary work as if it were a technique activity. The question, then, is how

²¹ One of the best reconstructions of Benjamin's biographical and philosophical path is Eiland – Jennings 2014.

²² On the context of Benjamin's late reflections see Frisby 1988, Buck-Morss 1989 and Montanelli 2022.

it is possible that the metaphor becomes real. In other terms, how can a figural connotation become a real description? The answer coincides with a transformation not in the understanding of art, but in the understanding of the world outside art. Actually, although we can obviously detect the symptoms of his later reflections on history, in his early writings Benjamin is quite generic in describing society. Omnipresent is the concept of *Leben*, life, which, even if not similar to that of Dilthey or Simmel, claims to exhaust the context of an author or an artist.

On this point, the Marxist approach to reality radically changes the situation. Life and history take the shape of the process of the production and reproduction of society grounded on exploitation. In this context, technique becomes the social procedure thanks to which the totality unequally provides the means for survival. Benjamin rapidly notes that the processes he detected in the aesthetic realm are part of a more general dialectics which marks the capitalistic employment of technical tools. Technique is now the social praxis thanks to which we produce our means of life. This is the rise of technology.

This radical change has some fundamental consequences. The first is that the history of art and artistic transformations is not a *Geistesgeschichte*, but rather the history of how technical revolutions have reshaped artistic forms. Thus, the technological transformations of artistic production become the fulcrum for evaluating the adequacy of aesthetic categories, because it is from the technological context that they are formed. As Benjamin himself says in his 1927 *Reply to Oscar A.H. Schmitz*, defending Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*: « the vital, fundamental advances in art are a matter neither of new content nor of new forms-the technological revolution takes precedence over both» (GS II.2, 753; SW II.1, 17). Consequently, the emergence of new technical forms of artistic production gives rise to novel realms of consciousness (*ibidem*).

For Benjamin, it is possible to radically change his youthful conception of experience, showing how the Marxian theory of the relationship between structure and superstructure must provide a place of intermediation, determined by a historical-epistemological analysis of how social production determines our

experience of reality²³. The 1929 essay on Proust is a key example, where Benjamin demonstrates how the fundamental nucleus of the *Recherche* is nothing other than the gigantic effort to react to the fragmentation of our life and experience through the novel. Benjamin looks at Proust not only as the great narrator of the new feudalism that the fin-de-siècle bourgeoisie is prey to. In Proust's novel, Benjamin discerns a monumental yet ultimately unsuccessful effort to restore a now-fragmented experience into a unified whole. It is no coincidence that it is precisely from the preparatory materials for the essay on Proust that Benjamin begins to intensively reflect on Baudelaire²⁴.

The second consequence is that Benjamin's already given understanding of art as technique makes it possible for him to conceive artistic production as an expression of broader social-technological processes. In this sense, the technique-metaphor becomes a real description of the conditions of social production of art in a capitalistic society. This is true, for example, in the case of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*, where the pure language of poetry assumes the vertical language of advertisement; this is illustrated most clearly in the case of cinema, where it becomes evident that: «the vital, fundamental advances in art are a matter neither of new content nor of new forms — the technological revolution takes precedence over both» (GS II.2, 753; SW II.1, 17). Especially, cinema seems to present clearly the structure of a work of art finally free from the empire of subjectivity — even if it is mutilated by the context of the capitalist metropolis. The conflict between two different ways of understanding art becomes the expression of two different tensions in social technology²⁵.

However, if art is conceived as a technical production in certain given technological conditions, that means that art *is* a mean of production. Thus, in *The author as producer* Benjamin can state: «Rather than asking, "What is the attitude of a work *to* the relations of production of its time?" I would like to ask "What is its position *in* them?". This question directly concerns the function

²³ A full reconstruction of Benjamin's reflection on the concept of experience can be found in Caygill 1998.

²⁴ On Benjamin and Proust see Szondi 1961. Franco Moretti has written memorable pages, with a strong Benjaminian imprint, on the relationship between literary modernity, the novel, and experience in Moretti 1994.

²⁵ On technology in Benjamin's late reflection see Desideri 2005.

the work has in the literary relations of production of its time. It is directly concerned, in other words, with the literary *technique* of the work» (GS II.2, 686; SW II.2, 770). Thus, the technical nature of artwork is what makes of it an organic part of social reproduction (and not something far from the general dialectics) giving to the artistic production its fundamental political relevance in shaping our relationship with that mysterious and powerful entity to which Benjamin has given the name of *physis*.

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