

ALICE BARALE  
(Università degli Studi di Firenze)

**STUFF THAT MATTERS.  
MIMESIS AND (THE END OF) MAGIC  
IN WALTER BENJAMIN**

1. In a fragment of 1933, Benjamin compares the process of imitation or mimesis to that of the comic: «To imitate may be a magic act; but the person who imitates removes at the same time magic from nature, because he brings nature closer to language. To bring nature closer to language is an essential function of the comic» (Benjamin 1933a, 956). The fragment goes on talking about laughing, but we'll see that later. Let's focus for the moment on the antinomic character of mimesis that is described in this passage. Imitation is defined here as an act of magic and as an overcoming of magic at the same time. We can notice very shortly that this was actually also Aby Warburg's problem. In Warburg's essay on Luther, quoted by Benjamin in the *Trauerspielbuch*, images are shaped by an inner dialectic between their demonic power and the fight against demons that they permit (Warburg 1920). But what does the comic have to do with all that? The comic and mimesis – Benjamin argues here – have one thing in common: they bring nature closer to language. There is an aspect of nature then that is far from language: an extraneous aspect, which comes to be approached through the comic and through mimesis.

This necessity of taking away magic from nature corresponds actually in these years for Benjamin to another similar necessity: that of taking away magic from language. What does that mean? When Benjamin writes his famous essay *On the mimetic faculty*, in the same year of this fragment, his aim is – as he writes to his friend and Kabbalah scholar Gerschom Scholem – that of setting a connection (a «problematic» connection, but a connection still) between his early meditation on language and the dialectic materialism (Benjamin 1931, 523). This connection, according to Benjamin, was already possible as he was writing his book on the baroque drama, but it has become clear to him only at this mo-

ment (Benjamin 1931, 523). Now, to set a connection between materialism and the philosophy of language means – Benjamin writes – to «liquidate the magic function of language» in favor of its «profane function» (Benjamin 1933a)<sup>1</sup>.

Of course Benjamin's friend Scholem was not at all enthusiastic about all these strange statements. Scholem actually sees a contradiction between Benjamin's aim for a «Liquidation der Magie der Sprache», that the materialistic perspective requires, and the theological and mystical «inspiration» that runs all through Benjamin's writings (Scholem 1975, 259). And we can actually not blame him for his perplexity. Let's consider, for example, the central idea of Benjamin's theory of mimesis. That is the idea of «immaterial similarity» (Benjamin 1933b, 210-213). The word in German is *unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*, so more literally «non-sensuous similarity»<sup>2</sup>. Anyway, that's an idea that doesn't seem very 'material'...

In this regard, Scholem argues that in Benjamin's thought the idea of matter arises always only in a completely magical sense (Scholem 1975, 259). Is that true? The notion of the comic, from which we have started, can give us a thread.

2. If we go back to the book on the German baroque drama (1928), we see that here Benjamin says something very peculiar about the comic. He's talking about some comic figures of the Shakespearean dramas – such as Jago or Polonio, later also Richard III – and he says that in all these cases the comic «emigrates into» drama (Benjamin 1928, 306). That means that the comic becomes smaller and goes literally inside drama. This is something that relies – Benjamin says – on the inner nature of the comic. The opposite can not happen: drama can not emigrate into the comic. Why? And what does all that have to do with mimesis?

It actually has to do with the idea of matter that mimesis, as we have seen, implies. Or better, as we shall see, with one of the possible ideas of matter. In fact Polonio, Richard III and Jago are for Benjamin all stuntmen, all doubles, of a very strange and anti-quate figure that comes forth at the end of *The origin of German*

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<sup>1</sup> On the «magic of language» and the necessity of its «liquidation» in Benjamin's thought see at least Hanssen 2004, Menninghaus 1980, Weigel 1997 and 2008. On Benjamin's and Scholem's discussion on language see Tagliacozzo 2016.

<sup>2</sup> On that see at least Caygill 1998, 5-6; Gebauer, Wulf 1995, 269-280; Hanssen 2004; Friedlander 2012, 285-86; Opitz 2000; Weigel 1997.

*tragic drama*: the figure of the devil. From the Middle Ages on – Benjamin states – the devil has become the symbol of the entire sphere of matter, and in the figure of the devil, he explains here, matter laughs. The laugh of the devil is the laugh of matter. A laugh that actually says something important (something terrible): it says the failure, in relation to matter, of every «meaning» that our language can have (Benjamin 1928, 400-401). Every meaning is in vain: with that melancholy turns into laughing.

The most important thing to note, nevertheless, is that there is a paradox in all that: in fact, through this figure of the devil, matter acquires a human appearance, it becomes something spiritual. It *seems* to be connected with the animal sphere, but it is *in fact* much more spiritual than the sphere of meaning and the sphere of language that it teases. The matter acquires in short – Benjamin writes – a «redundancy» or an «exuberance of spirit» (ibidem). A redundancy that is an attempt – a crazy attempt – to overcome the realm of animals (of creatures) and of their attempts with language: to jump over that. Nothing is more magic, then, than this idea of matter: here Scholem’s remark proves to be completely right.

3. There is yet another idea of matter that has an important role already in this period – already in the book on the German baroque drama –, even though its presence is not so evident as the other one. It is the idea of «Stoff». The *Stoff* is the material (it is the ‘stuff’) things are made of. In the passage of *The origin of German tragic drama* that we are going to examine, it is the material of the works of art, in opposition to their external structure (*Gerüst*). Here Benjamin argues, in fact, that the baroque poets were desperately concentrated on the external structure of their works and for this reason they couldn’t reach the material stratus (*Stoffschicht*: a kind of geological stratus) that constitutes the deeper and vital force of the works of art and that is – this is even more important – something that they have in *common*, something *shared* (Benjamin 1928, 229)<sup>3</sup>.

It is interesting for us that exactly this problem constitutes the starting point from which the question of mimesis arises for the first time, in a work that prepares for many aspects *The origin of German tragic drama*, the essay on Calderon and Hebbel (Ben-

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<sup>3</sup> For an investigation on the «material» as a locus of potentiality see Benjamin 2015.

jamin 1923). In this work Benjamin explains that the shared dimension of the *material*, which is what our modern search for originality leaves behind, has to do not only with tradition and language, but also – here comes the new term – with «nature». The material is «for the individual work» of art, Benjamin argues, what nature is «for art» in general (Benjamin 1923, 248). In this essay mimesis is conceived, actually, as the way we can think this relation between nature and art. Already the Greeks – Benjamin states – thought this relation in terms of mimesis.

Here comes, nevertheless, another problem, because Benjamin refers to the ancient tragic mimesis and says that it is a transformation of the ancient myth – this is a question that will be very important in *The origin of German tragic drama*<sup>4</sup>. It seems, however, that we loose with that the term of *nature*. What does nature have to do with all that? We can find an answer if we consider what comes to be transformed inside the myth. What is «called into question» – not only transformed then – in the tragic mimesis is the representation, inside the myth, of the «world order» (Benjamin 1923, 249). Of the order of nature then, as it is represented in language. We'll come back to that.

Let's return, for the moment, to the question of the material (*Stoff*). What the material is inside the single representation and in what sense – if not in the classical sense of tradition – it can break our isolation remains an open question inside this essay. A question that will start to find an answer much later, in the period of the essay on mimesis. Which is also the period of the first version of the *Berlin childhood*.

4. One of the central ideas of Benjamin's childhood memories is, in fact, that of the «Stoffwelt» (stuff-world; Benjamin 1938, 61). It is the whole material world. One of the secrets of children and of primitive men is that you can actually transform into everything this world offers to you (Benjamin 1929, 185-187). But what Benjamin tries to think here is also the philosophical meaning of this material. If we look for a definition of the *Stoffwelt*, we can find it in a chapter that is called *Die Mummerehlen*. It is «the mute, soft and flocky element that – like the snow tempest in the small snowglobes – clouds over inside the core of things» (Benjamin 1932-

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<sup>4</sup> See on that Birnbaum 2009.

1938, 10)<sup>5</sup>. Clouds over: meaning at the same time that it compacts, like clouds, and that it becomes covered.

This definition can help us, from my point of view, to understand the way Benjamin explains, in his essay on the mimetic faculty, his idea of the «immaterial similarity» and the materialism that, despite Scholem, he ascribes to it. To describe the immaterial similarity inside language, Benjamin says that «if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all — while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another — are similar to the signified at their center» (Benjamin 1933b, 212). This is quite mysterious and recalls, as Benjamin writes in the first version of the essay — *Doctrine of the similar* — the «mystical or theological theories of language» (Benjamin 1933c, 207-208)<sup>6</sup>. But in the definitive version of the essay (*On the mimetic faculty*) he removes this comment, because the aim is, as we have seen, that of taking away all magic from language. Now I think that we can understand the materialistic character Benjamin ascribes to this idea of «immaterial similarity», if we think the invisible «center» he's talking about here as the «flocky element» at the «core of things» that we have just seen. In fact this element is something you can touch, or better you can try to be touched by — like the «irresolute flakes of the first snow», Benjamin says (Benjamin 1938, 60). And it is something you can try to become enveloped by: *Mummerehlen* comes from 'mummen', which means to mask, but in the sense of being enveloped, like a mummy. It is not something in front of us then, like the demonic matter of *The origin of German tragic drama*, but it is everywhere, on every side, like snow again.

This diffusive character of the material, however, has a *limit*. It has a limit in the fact that it compacts, as we have seen, inside the core of things. And this is precisely also the limit of its magic. Benjamin had already talked about a «magic of matter» in his essay on language in 1916. «There is also a magic of matter» he wrote (Benjamin 1916, 147)<sup>7</sup>. «Also»: the other one is the magic of

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<sup>5</sup> «Das Stumme, Lockere, Flockige, das gleich dem Schneegestöber in den kleinen Glas- kugeln sich im Kern der Dinge wölkt» (trans. mine). On the connection between this text and the essays on mimesis, see Steiner 2004, 150 ff.

<sup>6</sup> On magic, also in the context of the essays on mimesis, see Downing 2011.

<sup>7</sup> On the connection between the essay *On language* and that *On the mimetic faculty*, see Weigel 1997, in part. pp. 90-93. The nexus Weigel traces between immediacy and «Ent- stellung» (deformation) is indeed a central point. Mimesis could start, from this point of

human language. Both, language and matter have a magic that consists – according to Benjamin in 1916 – in the fact that they «communicate» themselves. There is an aspect of immediacy in this communication, and we can call this something magic (Benjamin 1916, 142). Both the magic of matter and the magic of language find, nevertheless, a limit in the fact that there is a core of things – as we have just seen – that is mute. This limit had also already been clearly marked in 1916: «things are mute», Benjamin wrote (Benjamin 1916, 147).

What has changed now, in comparison with this first essay on language? I think we can understand that if we consider one of the strangest passages of the essay of 1916. Benjamin writes here that things communicate not only to humans but also among themselves. They do that through a sort of «material community (*stoffliche Gemeinschaft*)» (Benjamin 1916, 147). This material community is exactly, I think, what the idea of the material (*Stoff*) – which is developed in 1933 – permits to join. It permits to think of taking part to it.

5. That happens, of course, first of all through our body: «The first material upon which the mimetic faculty attempts to operate is our body» (Benjamin 1939, 127)<sup>8</sup>. In this regard, Benjamin writes, in another fragment, that the focus in the mimetic process is not so much on the eyes, but rather on the mouth (Benjamin 1935, 958): on our attempt, then, to give a word to things. In order to do that, however, language has to make a «detour [*Umweg*]» through the whole body. A detour that constitutes – Benjamin writes – an overcoming of myth (Benjamin 1935, 958).

An overcoming then, if we go back to the essay on Calderon, of the «world order» – of the order of nature – as it is represented in language. And this happens through the rupture of the isolation both of language and of nature. Both the magic isolation of language and the magic isolation of nature – whose common product is, as we have seen, the myth – are broken now, through their encounter. An encounter that can last, like every encounter, only for a moment. The contact between the significative aspect of lan-

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view, already with perception. For this hypothesis see Desideri 2017. On the connection between the essay *On language* and that *On the mimetic faculty*, see also Hanssen 2004.

<sup>8</sup> For an investigation of this passage see Desideri 2005 and 2012.

guage and its mimetic relationship to the material world<sup>9</sup> has to be searched every time again. There can be no redundancy in it.

If there's a kind of laugh that is inherent to this moment, then – as the fragment from which we have started states – it is certainly not the redundant laugh of the demonic matter. It is not the laugh of Polonio or Jago. It could be rather, if we want to remain inside the Shakespearean context, the laugh of Puck that vanishes in a while and brings at the end everything in order again – or, at least, it promises to do so<sup>10</sup>. A kind of laugh, then, that is not teasing, but rather – as Benjamin writes in the fragment from which we have started – «a chaos of articulation».

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<sup>9</sup> See on that Benjamin 1933b, 722: «The mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element».

<sup>10</sup> W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.