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A Crystal of Time

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A Crystal of Time

(Political) Reflections towards a History of the Now: Benjamin and Derrida

Nassima Sahraoui

Introduction

"[A]nd the crystal yielded to his pressure and expanded, 'til the breast of the captive could move and heave. [...] Then horror and despair took hold of him: he gathered all his force, he dashed violently [...] against the crystal."

E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot*

"But this order [...] must rather be of the purest crystal. But this crystal does not appear as an abstraction, but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

- 1 In Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin introduces the metaphor of a crystal to demonstrate how a specific understanding of historical events provides insights into the dynamics of history. Here, the possibility to reveal a totality of historico-political events is introduced by a precise analysis of the momentum, which leads to historical knowledge.
- 2 The following article¹ deconstructs certain figures of Benjamin's thoughts on history and on epistemology – such as image, trace, crystal, standstill, the 'Now', and the 'subject of historical knowledge' – and relates them to the political dimension of his "Critique of Violence" (1921), and to his remarks on the linguistic structure of political writing. Thereby it centres on the following questions: in what way could Benjamin's characterisation of the singular moment, as well as his analysis of temporality, provide insights into historical dynamics? Furthermore, it aims at investigating if, and to what

extent, historico-political action is related to a certain understanding of time and power: can such action be seen as a crystallised emanation of the 'Now', of *Jetztzeit*?

- 3 Referring to Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence", I will furthermore point out that the 'Now' must be understood as a condensation of force within an unspecified area of possible political actions, through which the latter are initially realised and performed. Drawing on Derrida's remarks, I attempt to show that the initiating force or power² results from a de-constitutive act rather than out of constitution itself. Both, Derrida and Benjamin, introduce this de-constitutive act in referring to 'silence' as indispensable for any initial moment of historico-political action. In other words, the initiating linguistic force of silence is inseparable from an instantaneous moment of the 'Now', from which every possible action and event derive.
- 4 At the junction between the essential claims of both approaches, I will focus on the temporal moment where historical events take place – the 'Now' – and thus draw a picture of how the realms of time and history merge together with a certain understanding of political language, as Benjamin suggests. I finally conclude by stating that the specific relations *between* instantaneous historical events, political action, and language must, in the last instance, be understood as the initiating force for political and historical events. The 'Now' is thus, metaphorically speaking, a crystallised historical event, and this crystallised historical event – or force – already hints towards a certain ethical direction,³ as Derrida finally indicates.

I. Trace, Subject, and Image

"In the trace, we gain possession of the things [...]
History decays into images, not into stories."
Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

- 5 In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-36), Walter Benjamin defines the trace – against the philosophical tradition – not simply as a 'place' in which objects (things) are re-presented without being present. Accordingly, philosophy's theoretical task does not only consist in dissolving the dialectical, paradoxical, and aporetic relation between presence and absence.⁴ Instead, the trace is related to, but different from, the concept that Benjamin has prominently elaborated: the aura. The concept of aura suggests the possibility that things can be perceived as they are *in-themselves*, that is to say, in their specific singularity. This being *in-itself* indicates the authentic state of things in a certain instant of time and at a certain place; any other essential reality remains unattainable. To the question: "What, then, is the aura?" Benjamin therefore answers: "A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be."⁵
- 6 In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin relates the trace immediately to the aura. Whilst the aura shows worldly objects in their "here and now",⁶ and hence in their socio-historical situatedness, the trace is analogously characterised through the objects' non-presence. Hereby the auratic presence of things is not simply reversed, which means, they are not simply conceived as being absent. Rather, they are structured as being *not-here* and *not-now*. Every analysis of what a trace actually is must therefore proceed *ex negativo*. Hence, in the trace one can detect the objects in their non-presence, and in tracing these objects they are made present. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin amplifies his definition of the aura

from the 'Artwork' essay, when he formulates the relation between trace and aura as follows:

Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the things; in the aura it takes possession of us.⁷

- 7 By definition, the trace always has a double and mutual reference to its exterior, and this referentiality is located between the present and the presence/non-presence of the objects. On the primary level, the trace refers to the problematic relation between reality and temporality. While the traditional paradigm is dominated by the idea that in the trace the objects are represented as a mere likeness (*Abbild*) of reality, where the 'task' of deciphering traces then would simply be to track the right and reasonable signs in order to recognise the true essence of the objects, Benjamin's short remarks already indicate that this is an insufficient description, which does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. Just as the aura is identical with the here and now of the objects, so the trace concerns not only *how* something appears, but also as *what* it appears. That is to say, the only reality of the thing in the trace therefore consists in the manifestation of that which it *is not*. For a thing to be present in the trace is tantamount to, both, its simultaneous appearance *and* to its negation. What the object is in 'truth' can be shown only by negating what it is not. But if the 'truth' of the things *in truth* consists in showing their negative attributes, and if the trace furthermore is structurally interlinked with the here and now, then the 'truth' of the things lies in their negativity. This negativity, then, is immediately related to socio-historical constellations of the 'here and now'.⁸ The transformative dynamics of socio-historical constellations are transformations of the 'truth' – therefore the 'truth' must always be understood within the referential horizon of its respective epochs. In acknowledging this referential relation, any metaphysical notion of unity and originality must be destroyed.⁹
- 8 Whilst in metaphysics, the objects have an inherent perpetuating truth – be it essential, eternal, absolute, otherworldly or omnipresent – Benjamin's trace absorbs the time-instances of past, present and future into the here and now.¹⁰ The trace can therefore be understood as the relational, intermediating instance within this trinomial time-structure. Through its absorbing and intermediate character, the trace opens the possibility to recognise the 'trueness' of things. It does so through the interfering movement between presence and non-presence, of presensation and presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*), of representation and presentation (*Darstellung*). This movement manifests itself as a permanent deferment in the interior of the trace, and the detection of the trace flows together with an actualisation of time. Consequently, the trace is nothing but this contraction of nearness and distance.
- 9 On a secondary level, the trace is, therefore, the truth-establishing condition for the 'subject'. Because the trace essentially consists in this aporetic movement between presence and non-presence, the notion of truth – and with it each and every other metaphysical attempt at unification, which undoubtedly contains the notion of the 'subject' itself – is structured though this immanent deferment. This means that these allegedly unified classical concepts are themselves already and inherently determined by this time-deferring movement. Tracing the future then finally means to bundle the past *ex tempore in tempore*.

- 10 Benjamin's historico-philosophical fragments and excerpts in Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* provide a key for understanding the specific possibilities of knowledge in traces. Here, he begins his fragmentary reflections on epistemology and on the theory of progress with the following words: "In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes in lightning flashes."¹¹ Knowledge, as Benjamin further explains, does not emerge out of a continuous process of self-consciousness, but rather occurs in the exact moment of awakening. What then, one must ask at this point, is happening in this exact moment of awakening? Is there even a 'consciousness' to be *awakened*? And is Benjamin referring to something happening to the subject or is it rather the subject itself who initiates the *awakening* through its own actions? What is the relationship between the perceptive acts of self-consciousness and the initiation and practice of historico-political actions? For Benjamin, these questions are intimately linked with the conditions of historical action. The experience of the decay of the social order, as he explains following the conception of historical materialism, transforms the ways in which we perceive the ruling social and political asymmetries. But in contrast to the conception of historical materialism – which is the 'tradition' Benjamin sees himself in line with¹² – this perception has no systematic function. The perceptions of social and political asymmetries are not de-ideologising movements, in the sense that they would lead to a consciousness of continuous historical progress in which the immanent dialectical dynamics ultimately lead to a transformation of the social order.¹³ History, according to Benjamin, is not characterised in terms of continuity and progress, which would strive for completion or teleological process, but rather by unforeseeable events which suddenly, in lightning flashes, erupt into the present structures. The "fields with which we are concerned"¹⁴ can thus be identified as epistemology *and* history, and – as we will see later – politics as well.
- 11 Additionally, the paradoxical double referentiality in the trace not only denotes a transformation of the conditions of socio-political and historical knowledge; it also denotes a transformation – or, more precisely, a deferral – of the concept of the subject. If the trace operates as an interfering instance between the subject and its surrounding social, political, and thus historical reality, and if it is furthermore characterised by a paradoxical double referentiality in-between its temporal and spatial interior/exterior, then the notion of the 'subject' inevitably loses its unique position within the traditional philosophical paradigm of a binary coded world, consisting of linearly, transcendently, or dialectically related subjects and objects. But what exactly does this deferral of the concept of 'subject' mean for its constitution? In other words, who is the "subject of historical knowledge"¹⁵ that Benjamin refers to?
- 12 The following short speculative excursus¹⁶ takes its point of departure from a primarily negative hypothesis: Benjamin does not provide a 'concept' of the subject in the classical sense. Nor is he thinking the world merely through a dualistic schema of subjects and objects, respectively. And yet his entire work can be read as an attempt towards a "theory of the modern subject", as Gerhard Richter puts it.¹⁷ Throughout his work, Benjamin draws a multifaceted picture of the complex deferral of the concept of the 'subject' during the 19th century, whose unique position was hitherto seen as a sacrosanct philosophical fact, at least since Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. At the same time, he analyses the mobilization of the working class and although the cornerstones of this picture are multifarious they culminate in the antagonistic and dialectic struggle of the modern or 'industrialized' subject, which finds its theoretical pendant in historical materialism.¹⁸

- 13 As to the question ‘who is the subject of historical knowledge’, with Benjamin one would have to reply: “the struggling and oppressed class.”¹⁹ Although this assertion undoubtedly carries the initials of historical materialism, Benjamin is far from the theoretical assumptions of vulgar Marxism with its simplifying *Basis-Überbau*-structure. Instead of relying on a dual hierarchy between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, he departs from the ‘system’s’ intrinsic components – that is, its complexities, ideologies, hierarchies, and paradoxes – that together form the conditions of the capitalist dynamics. In *The Arcades Project*, this finally leads him to the transitional historical period of the Second Empire, and to the radical urban reorganization of its capital Paris, where these intrinsic components are condensed in a paradigmatic form. The intrinsic components of capitalism and the course of history, thus, are mutually dependent. Understood in terms of Benjamin’s rethinking of historical materialism, the modern subject then is located at the threshold of this immanent mutual dependency. It is exactly this threshold which must be taken as a point of departure for any understanding of the modern subject, and moreover, as a gateway for historiography itself. For it is only from the perspective of this in-between – the intersecting point of the formerly juxtaposed in- and outside – that an adequate description of the “changed ways of being-in-the-world [*Daseinsweise*] of the historical collectives” is possible, and, by extension, a changed perception of the world, as Benjamin puts it in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”.²⁰
- 14 This deferral of perspective towards the system’s intrinsic components is neither coming from the outside nor from beyond, in other words: it is neither a transcendental nor a metaphysical approach to history and knowledge, nor is it a judgment that would give preference to the oppressed or the oppressors. Instead, the task of the historian consists precisely in collecting and assembling these components; in Benjamin’s words, historiography’s task is to “carry over the principle of montage into history.”²¹ Set in a ‘right’ constellation, this montage intensifies history’s dialectic dynamics, rather than exposing it, as will be shown below.
- 15 Thus, the notion of the ‘subject’ in Benjamin cannot be fully grasped in either metaphysical or transcendental terms nor, indeed, in terms of historical materialism. Accordingly, in one of his notes towards the theses “On the Concept of History” (1940), Benjamin strongly rejects the notion of a transcendental subject:
- This subject is by no means a transcendental subject but the struggling, oppressed class in its most exposed situation. Historical knowledge exists only for them and for them solely in a historical moment.²²
- 16 Hence, the subject of historical knowledge is nothing other than the oppressed class itself. We can assume that Benjamin uses the concept of the subject here in a double sense: it is the ‘subject’ as historico-political agent *and* the ‘subject’ as theme or topic of historiography. But while the latter hinges on the historian’s “sharpened awareness for the crisis in which the subject of history has respectively stepped in”,²³ as Benjamin remarks in his notes, the first is ultimately grounded in historical experience. In other words, historical experience itself is the condition of the possibility of the subject’s (i.e. the oppressed class’s) very existence. With this claim, Benjamin inverts the Kantian idea that the transcendental subject is the condition of possibility of experience. To exist as a subject at all, however, means to be legible as such, and this, in turn, is indispensably entangled with the sudden moment of historical knowledge. Benjamin’s idiosyncratic reading of historical materialism provides a thought-figure: the a-chronological and a-

linear dialectical movement between history and its subject, experience and knowledge, and finally between historiography and the historian. Now, the dialectic is not only restricted to perceive this movement as a whole, as a *unique* movement of subordinated components, but it is inherent in each of its components, and in each and every moment of alteration or turn from one to the other. The subject with its experience now stands at the threshold of this dialectic. In this Benjaminian metamorphosis of the concept of the modern subject, the subject itself is not merely a singular unity anymore, but rather a frame filled with potential experiences of the intersecting alterations of history's components, along with all the rifts and ruptures that the capitalist system produces.

- 17 Remembering the aforementioned quote, “[i]n the field with which we are concerned, knowledge comes in lightning flashes”,²⁴ we can now say that these rifts and ruptures in the present (industrialised, capitalistic) structures manifest themselves only through the experience of a subject who is instantaneously affected by social and political dialectics. Knowledge in this sense is empirical knowledge. It seems evident that the moment of ‘lightning’, in which knowledge is concealed, and the historical event coincide here. However, this conclusion loses its simplicity if we recall Benjamin’s explications on the correlation between the event, the historical process, and the subject.

- 18 The concept Benjamin repeatedly uses to define these moments of lightening, in which subjective experience, action, and historical knowledge are inseparably entangled is that of the *image*. The image is primarily defined by its inherent dialectical movement. The dialectical movement always takes place in the *in-between* before and after present historical moments:

[E]very dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant interpenetrates it.

25

- 19 Within this tension between past and future, the dialectical moment creates its own possible interruptions, insofar as it overstretches the actual relation between subjective perceptibility in the modes of experience and the conception of an objective historical succession. But the dialectical movement neither departs from the past, nor does the historical process endeavour to attain a future programme. Rather, due to their mere existence, the actual moments themselves already challenge fore- and after-historical processes; hence the present contains the dialectic in itself. Referring back to the metaphor of the ‘flash’, we can conclude that there is no causal connection between *what-has-been* and *what-is-now*. Moreover, actuality fundamentally questions its own time-status by its own immanent dialectical movement. In doing so, it negates both the ideology of the “semblance of eternal sameness”²⁶ and a teleological, idealistic concept of history. Hence, the recognisability of events is immediately connected to their actual manifestation – because in it, the present leaps forth into the past, it almost takes a leap out of itself. As Benjamin famously writes in his fourteenth and fifteenth theses ‘on the Concept of History’, “it is the tiger’s leap into the past”, which “make[s] the continuum of history explode”.²⁷ Since there is no continuity between the past and the present, and since events only emerge in flashes, it is actuality itself that constitutes the dialectical movement. Moreover, this movement is only possible because of the discontinuity of history. If history were a continuous process, then there would be no *present*; hyperbolically speaking, there would be neither history, nor historical knowledge:

[t]he dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognisability.²⁸

20 And,

each “now” is the now of a particular recognisability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time.²⁹

21 Historical knowledge therefore is possible only in those moments of lightning flashes, in which the *image* – that is, the sudden emergence of an event – appears. And it is possible only through the mediation of a ‘materialist’ perception, namely the subjective experience of dialectics. And this experience is the trace.

II. Silence, Standstill – Now

"The historian is the herald [...]."

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

"Silence is the perfectest herald of Joy."

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

22 The previous section should have made clear that there is no historical continuity and that historical events are actualised in a sudden way. Furthermore, historical knowledge is immediately related to the spontaneity of the present moment. As these moments are related to history as such, on the one side, and to the experience of the subject, on the other, they operate as an interfering instance between totality and singularity. Herein we recognise the truth:

[n]evertheless, truth is not [...] a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.³⁰

23 Benjamin limits the recognisability of historical events to singular ‘nuclei of time’ (*Zeitkerne*), because they depend on each *image* appearing in this singular moment. In opposition to a phenomenological approach to history – Benjamin is explicitly arguing against Heidegger³¹ – he shows that events not only belong to a specific time, but that they are only legible *in* a specific time. This *legibility* “constitutes a specific critical point in the movement of their interior.”³² Legibility therefore means interrupting the dialectical process of the event *in itself*. The only instant of time in which this interruptive act is possible at all is the moment of the ‘Now’. At this point the fundamental question arises: what exactly brings forth the legibility and, more importantly, the criticisability of events? Considering my previous observations, it now seems to be clear that a systematic, teleological model for the interpretation of historical events neither leads to historical knowledge, nor to historical transformation. Instead, Benjamin illustrates that the image must coincide, or as he puts it, must be ‘synchronic’ with the particular ‘Now’ of its recognisability: “image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.”³³

24 So what finally is to be recognised in the ‘Now’ of recognisability is the disruption of the historical process, the deconstruction of its very own dynamics. The image that flashes up in the ‘Now’ does construct anything but, rather, destroys. What happens in the moment of this particular formation is actually – nothing. Literally this means that the recognisability of history is bundled in a particular point of time. Herein it seems as if it is detached from its surrounding, as if the dialectic process is suspended. Therefore Benjamin writes: “[t]o thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tension – there the dialectical image appears”;³⁴ “image is dialectics at a standstill.”³⁵ The ‘Now’ is

immediately linked to the image, and the sudden emergence of the *image* implements a *standstill*. But what exactly are the implications of this standstill, and what does happen in this specific moment of the 'Now'? If the dialectic movement has been interrupted – if it has crystallized – this could suggest that the moment contains *nothing*. But history is not nothing. Rather, the standstill absorbs *what-has-been* in one particular point of time. This absorption creates an immense tension because it designates exactly the moment *before* a new event, before something *must* happen.³⁶ The dialectical image and the object of materialistic historicism coincide within this 'force field' (*Kraftfeld*). This is why it is justified to 'blast' historical events out of the continual process of history in an act of violence.

- 25 Force and violence: both concepts refer to the connection between Benjamin's epistemological and historico-philosophical statements on the one hand, and the sphere of politics on the other. Not least, they refer to the all-encompassing ethical-political realm, which is most obvious in his specific interpretation of justice. It is therefore indispensable at this point to turn to a passage from Benjamin's "Critique of Violence", and to Derrida's interpretation thereof in "Force of Law" (1994).³⁷
- 26 In his essay, Benjamin focuses on the relation between right and violence, and introduces the decisive distinction between 'constituent violence' (*rechtsetzende Gewalt*) and 'constituted violence' (*rechterhaltende Gewalt*). This is not the place to comment in detail on the complex structure of his argument; nevertheless, it is worth noting a few points about this distinction, accentuating especially the constituent act. Benjamin analyses the right-inherited violence and elucidates that every act of law, be it constituent or constituted, is an act of violence. Following a short genealogy of the traditional understanding of law, and taking into account the opposition between natural and positive law, he postulates another form of violence in order to overcome the circularity of law and violence: 'pure violence' (*reine Gewalt*) on the one hand, and the proletarian general strike on the other. In this framework, the only possibility for a transformation of the existing order lies in the identification and the affirmation of a quasi-apocalyptic notion of completing and finalising judgement.
- 27 According to Derrida, the distinction between constituent and constituted violence cannot be maintained. On the contrary: the inseparability between both forms of violence must be underlined in order to extract the possibility of political – and historical – transformation, without endangering basic normative rights. In line with Benjamin's argument, Derrida further explains that the differentiation between performative and conservative acts is rendered obsolete. That is to say, it is necessary to enter into the *de facto* existing terminology in order to initiate right, yet – at the same time – the conservation of law permanently confirms its validity. The conservative and the performative act are intrinsically interrelated according to their mutual dispute along indistinct borders. Their reciprocal interdependence is characterised by the aporetic movement between two antagonistic poles, and it brings about a *surplus* which originates in the initiating side: the founding act always tends towards a domination of existing laws, thus endangering their authority. Derrida closely follows Benjamin in his reconstruction of this dynamic up to its founding origin. However, the violent original institution of the law happens within the law and without the law at the same time. This is why, according to Derrida, the original foundation of law cannot be sufficiently explained within a terminology of violence.³⁸

- 28 The specificity of this founding violence stems from the problem of temporality. In the context of his elaborations on 'pure violence', Benjamin already remarks that it can only be ascertained retrospectively if 'pure violence' has in fact manifested itself. If this manifestation has actually lead to a transformation of the social, political, and historical order, then any decision whatsoever can only be taken from the perspective of a future anterior. Whereas Benjamin relates this insight to the possible realisation of an ulterior violence, Derrida emphasises that it affects the foundation of law as such. For the time-structure of the future anterior can certainly hint at the founding act, but it cannot give any information about events which take place presently, since it is at the innermost core of this initiating moment that it cannot be articulated completely in traditional categories of time or language. In these particular founding moments, there is no logical succession of cause and effect. Due to their indefinability and their inscrutability, the potentially constituent acts also contain a potential danger that makes one worry about the manner in which they manifest themselves here and now. Simultaneously, the performative character of the founding act indicates that what is unleashed here can be regarded as the condition of the possibility of *each and every* political act. In its potentiality, the foundation of this initiating moment, which lets all action begin, remains hidden in the moment of its initiation: it remains *mystical*. Any certainty and any secure knowledge as to whether this founding moment is a transforming act or not, can only be gained retrospectively. The original foundation remains necessarily undecidable, as Derrida writes:

[h]ere, a silence is walled up in the violent structure of the founding act. Walled up and walled in because silence is not exterior to language. It is in that sense that I would be tempted to interpret [...] what Montaigne and Pascal call the mystical foundation of authority.³⁹

- 29 Silence reigns in the founding moment – there is no hope of ever finding reasons for the originary, initiative act. No theory will ever be able to give answers about the origin of authority, because the origin of authority founds itself. This is why it is not even acceptable to talk about an 'origin'. Instead,

[i]ts very moment of foundation or institution [...] would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate. No justificatory discourse could or should insure the role of metalanguage in relation to the performativity or institutive language or to its dominant interpretation.⁴⁰

- 30 The categories of 'just' and 'unjust' are therefore not applicable, because this law-positing moment is beyond transcendence and immanence. Neither the reference to a higher reason nor the verification of inherent criteria is capable of affecting this event. In the moment of initiation, there is no movement, and yet everything is decided exactly here. It is the moment of standstill, in which the performative act exceeds its very own moment of silence and demands a decision. Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill' therefore does not mean the suspension of dialectical movement, but its unfolding expansion, its potentialisation, beyond the chronological succession of past – present – future.⁴¹ This view is not comprehensible within the framework of a classical conception of time, because in fact *nothing happens* at this point. The initiating acts actually happen *in between time(s)*, and since they are happening perpetually in these instants, they are elusive and deny any searching for reasons. From the perspective of the *In-Between*, the realm beyond transcendence and immanence does not have a peripheral character, but is inherent in

itself. The transcendence of law only comes to pass insofar as it is installed as a coming law. In other words: it is only in its future institution that the law attains its transcendental status and returns to the level of action. Thus, the source of the law is always both immanent *and* transcendent. At the same time, it can never be completely traced back to these antagonistic poles. Hence, the interpretability of future events depends on the particular effective structure of law in the same measure as the outcome of the initiation remains necessarily open.

31 For Benjamin, it is the historian's responsibility to ultimately interpret the manifestations of divine violence as such, whereas Derrida states that even an interpretation in retrospect cannot take place outside of the axioms of the existing order. The interpretation of law thus always happens within the limits of the already existing frameworks of interpretation. The future interpretation of constituent acts therefore must refer to the semantic structure of *what-has-been* in order to attain both comprehensibility and comprehension of the outcome of the initiation. The necessity to actualise the already-existing models of interpretation results, not least, in fulfilling the requirement to establish and legitimate the instituting violence. The *surplus*, which originates from the relation between the possibilities of interpretation already inherent in the system's matrix and the contingency of potentially realisable acts are the conditions for the realisation of constituent events *per se*. Their creative power results from this synchronising mutual dynamic of convention and actualisation, conservation and destruction. The event of the constituent action obtains its facticity only in the moment of its temporalisation, which brings it inevitably and immediately into a relation with the present and effective ethical order. This implies that this order has to be permanently *cited*.

32 This is why Benjamin's dichotomic distinctions (constituent/constituted, proletarian/political) become problematic for Derrida, as they ultimately do not come together, but are completely negated by an external violence. The negation that is meant here, however, has the paradoxical character of being both a founding and a preserving power. It is not similar to complete destruction, however messianic this completion may be; rather, it dislocates the two poles, which are not definitely distinguishable, taking into consideration the differentiating moment. Initiation and conservation of law are not self-contained antipodes in the historical process of a purposively rational eschatology – even Benjamin admits the impossibility of a total closure of these moments – but their characteristic feature is precisely the impossibility to abolish the symbiotic, aporetic movement of their immanent antagonisms, as Derrida writes:

But this figure is also a contamination. It effaces or blurs the distinction, pure and simple, between foundation and conservation. It inscribes iterability in originarity, in unicity and singularity [...].⁴²

33 The singularity, in which the iterability (citability and repeatability) is originally engraved, is the law, and – along with it – the idea of justice. Whereas Benjamin demands to finally arrest the possibility of a circular movement of law-positing and law-conserving violence through the instauration of a pure divine violence, Derrida, on the contrary, insists on the necessity to bear this aporia.⁴³ For him, the *surplus* is a direct consequence of the undecidability of every political and legal decision, as it gives an outlook on the necessary claim of an infinite justice, and therefore points to the urgency to do justice to the singularity and the alterity of the Other.

- 34 The *surplus* opens up a third perspective, in which the non-positionality of the boundaries can possibly be established against the background of normative claims. If, following Benjamin's argument, historical events are always regarded as something completely new, then the task of the historian is to identify and to scatter any thought of progress and any current of thought assuming that historical events could be repeated. For the repetition does not take place on the level of the events themselves but rather on the level of citation and iteration. Within this understanding of historical dynamics, 'writing history' means focussing on the singular events and assembling them into a greater scope.
- 35 Accordingly, Benjamin's term for historiography is *montage*. In order to arrange a montage, the historian is supposed to "cite history".⁴⁴ The application of this 'method' of citation in materialist historiography means that the objects have to be extracted from their respective contexts. As Benjamin writes: "[i]t belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context."⁴⁵ In an earlier passage from this text, he expresses this thought even more pointedly, writing that "the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession"⁴⁶ and, moreover, that materialist historiography not only takes hold of historical objects, but rather "springs them loose from the order of succession".⁴⁷
- 36 From a retrospective standpoint, then, the historian attains knowledge about the objects in order to detach them from the continuum of history. Everything now depends on the *right* interpretation of the relation between the past and the future. The correct exegesis of history shifts from a supposedly objective sequence of events to the level of the subject's perception, or more precisely: to the subject's relation to a concrete context. Benjamin's 'ideal historian' arranges a montage of history – he cites historical events, which are essentially characterised by their "monadological structure".⁴⁸ The historian is the one who passes on tradition as discontinuity and he passes it on through destruction.⁴⁹ The historian is the herald who follows the disruptive traces of history, who interprets them and puts them into writing. In line with this argument, the quote presented at the outset of this article – 'In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes' – concludes with the following sentence: "The text is the long roll of thunder that follows."⁵⁰
- 37 If it is true that 'subjects' are not subjected to the fate of the course of history, and if it is true that they are obliged to cross seemingly established and unchangeable boundaries, then historical knowledge is equivalent to the opening towards a world of potential possibilities of action.⁵¹ It is in this opening, in its destruction of pre-established successions, that Benjamin locates the premise for the realisation of happiness. The historian is the herald of this happiness.

III. Crystal Magic

"These are signs of the times, not to be hidden by purple mantles or black cassocks. They do not signify that tomorrow a miracle will happen. They show that, within the ruling classes themselves, a foreboding is dawning, that the present society is no solid crystal, but an organism capable of

change, and is constantly changing."

Karl Marx, *Capital*

- 38 If, as we have seen above, historical knowledge provides the basis for transcending established boundaries towards the realm of potential action, then this gives rise to the following questions: how exactly could this action be understood? Why is an initiating act necessary? And what is the role and function of the *surplus*? These questions rest on the assumption that a further distinction is the immanent basis of the moment of initiation: for not only does it contain the act itself; it also contains the moment before an action is actually performed. In this sense, the *surplus* provides a possible performative act as *the* possibility of a transforming political action *par excellence*.
- 39 This dialectic between pure possibility and manifestation is the point at which the force originates and, as such, it is the condition of possibility of political action because it enforces and empowers decisions. It must immerse itself in existing terminologies and yet it destroys them at the same time. This is why political action, as well as historical action, is primarily to be understood as de-constitutive action, which is always already connected to the singular event – the 'Now'.
- 40 Departing from this dialectic between pure possibility and its manifestation, historico-political action is relieved from any chronological timescale, and hence directed inwards towards the core of its dialectical or aporetic movement. In his aforementioned discussion of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence", Derrida characterises precisely this core of the mythical founding act as necessarily undecidable, which is to say, as a moment of silence. Furthermore, as he reminds us, this fundamental silence "is not exterior to language".⁵² This statement points us to the connection between language and the historico-political sphere, and, indeed, between Benjamin's and Derrida's writings.
- 41 In his illuminating early letter to Martin Buber, written in July 1916, Benjamin explicitly refers to the relation between politics and language.⁵³ In this letter, he refuses Buber's invitation to publish an article in his newly founded journal *Der Jude*. Benjamin justifies his refusal by arguing that, to him, the journal's content is unbearable as it conforms to the general tone of political writing in Germany at that time: a terminological performance of war propaganda.⁵⁴ Behind the idea of "politically effectual writing" (*politisch wirksamem Schrifttum*), Benjamin argues, lies a profound misunderstanding about how writing, or theory in general, may affect political action: language here is regarded as if it could deliver the "motives behind action".⁵⁵ Hence, as Benjamin writes, language and writing are "degraded" to a status of being only "mere means" to calculable instrumental actions.⁵⁶ The relation between "word[s] and deed[s]" can thus only be understood as a chain of mediations, as "a mechanism for the actualisation [*Verwirklichung*] of the true absolute".⁵⁷ Directing political writing towards an absolute truth is equivalent to a "pitiful, weak action [...] whose origin does not reside within itself, but in some kind of sayable and expressible motives."⁵⁸ In contrast to this view of language as a mere means-end-relation, Benjamin unfolds his concept of "objective writing", in which language is not understood as "mediation of contents" but as immediateness.⁵⁹ The relation between language and politics can therefore be understood as a relation between the unsayable and political action, in which the magical nature of language is preserved and destroyed at the same time. "I can understand writing as such", Benjamin elucidates,
- as poetic, prophetic, objective in terms of its effect, but in any case only as *magical*, that is as un-mediated. [...] And if I disregard other effective forms here – aside from

poetry and prophecy – it repeatedly seems to me that the crystal-pure elimination of the unsayable in language is the most obvious form given to us to be effective within language and, to that extent, through it. This elimination of the unsayable seems to me to coincide precisely with what is actually the objective and dispassionate manner of writing [...].⁶⁰

- 42 Only a writing which includes the realm of the unsayable fulfils the criteria of being ‘politically effectual writing’, and can be equated with politically effectual action. But this inclusion not only contains the preservation of the unsayable, it is also its instantaneous negation. Thus, the magic of language⁶¹ as such is a necessary condition for what Benjamin calls ‘objective writing’:

My concept of objective and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to direct towards [*hinzuführen*] what was denied to the word; only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides. Only the intensive direction [*intensive Richtung*] of words into the core of intrinsic silence is truly effective.⁶²

- 43 Therefore, the ‘crystal-pure elimination’ of ‘what is denied to the word’ is neither only an “expansive tendency”⁶³ – as popular political writing is for Benjamin – nor is it restrictive, in the sense of a mere reduction. Rather, it indicates a direction towards the centre of the dialectic between suspension and preservation. That is to say, it is an inverse effectuality. This inverse directedness into the inner core of the dialectical movement cannot be regarded as a geometrical line, but as an extension *in* the point, as an extension without extension – in other words, as an *in-tension* in the sense of an inner tension. The German expression *hinführen* (*zu/auf*) – which signifies a *directing* or *leading towards* – then is closely linked to the intensity of the introversive direction towards the ineffable. Its *in-tense* directedness not only rests on an approximation of ‘what was denied to the word’ but, at the same time, adds a *supplement* to the momentary point. Hence, within the dialectical movement, in which language and the political are entangled, something additional is exposed. This is the reason why Benjamin characterizes the moment of silence as a moment of tension or, as he writes, as a manifestation of ‘pure power’ (*reiner Macht*).⁶⁴ In language, this supplementary power enforces an unveiling of its magical origin – that is its infinite potential – whereas in politics the role and function of this additive moment (or let us say the *surplus*) – can be regarded as an empowering, de-constitutive act, that is to say, as an initiating, but indeterminable and therefore mystical force. With regard to the realm of the unspeakable, one can thus draw a structural similarity between language and politics. Silence, the unspeakable, and that which ‘was denied to the word’ are, in this respect, the sites where the mystical foundation of politics (and law) and the magical origin of language coincide. And although it is undeniable that the notions of the magical and the mystical have varying connotations, both orbit the border between the worldly/expressible and the unsayable.⁶⁵

- 44 As a result a tension arises – a tension which potentially comes to be *and* is subjected to negation only in the singular moment of the Now. Therefore, the ‘Now’, in its initiating, preserving and destructive character, is fraught with a tension in which all of its elements – time, space, dialectical movement – form an *in-tense* constellation. This instantaneous moment can be regarded as the aforementioned extraction of power. Rather than clinging to a historico-political notion – which includes philosophical as well as theological concepts – the ‘telos of historical dynamis’ can be found in this ‘force field’ (*Kraftfeld*), as Benjamin writes in his “Theologico-Political Fragment” (c. 1921).⁶⁶ Turning

back to *The Arcades Project*, we can now say that “the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest”⁶⁷ in this ‘force field’. And with Derrida, we can add: the point where the dialectical opposite is greatest is aporetic because none of the aforementioned inverse and tense moments can ultimately suspend or arrest their own forceful movements.⁶⁸ Therefore the ‘historical telos’ does not point towards an ultimate goal, aim or good, but towards a realm of potentialities. The ‘historical telos’ is, therefore, infinite or – more precisely – its directedness is an inverse infinity.

- 45 At this point, we can see that a structural similarity obtains, not only between the inverse infinity of the historico-political and language, but also between the former and the ethical realm. In his book *Aporias* (1993), Jacques Derrida elucidates the necessity of the infinite continuation of polar movements. Rather than “giving in to any dialectical [solution]”⁶⁹ – even a suspension of the historical succession – he clearly indicates that we should adhere to aporias. “There”, he states in reference to some of his writings,

at a precise moment [...] I used the term “aporia” for a single duty that recurrently duplicates itself interminably, fissures itself, and contradicts itself without remaining the same [...]. I suggested that a sort of nonpassive endurance of the aporia was the condition of responsibility and of decision.⁷⁰

- 46 To experience Benjamin’s historical momentum could, within this spectrum, be equivalent to an endurance of this aporia. Thus, it could lead to an approximation of historical writing and political action – of the unsayable, the mystical and the political sphere. The convergence of Benjamin’s epistemological and historico-philosophical considerations and Derrida’s ethical-political concept of enduring aporias could prepare a path towards a new form of critique. As Benjamin writes in the thirteenth of his theses “On the Concept of History”, this new form of critique “must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself”.⁷¹ Hence, it would have to start with a general transformation of the traditional understanding of history and time:

The first stage of this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.⁷²

- 47 In view of the metaphor of the crystal, the ‘Now’ is the crystallised historical event. It is crystallised time, and as such it represents the condition of the possibility of a politics of openness. In E.T.A. Hoffmann’s novella *The Golden Pot* (1814), the crystal is a solidification charm – and charms, magic, and the unspeakable are “material of vital importance politically”⁷³ for historical knowledge.

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ENDNOTES

1. An earlier, shorter version of this article will be published in Spanish under the title "Cristales de tiempo. Reflexiones (políticas) sobre unahistoria del ahora", trans. Nicolás Esteban Vargas, in: *Esperanza, pero no para nosotros. Capitalismo, técnica y estética en W. Benjamin*, eds. Horst Nitschak & Miguel Vatter (Santiago de Chile: LOM Ediciones, forthcoming). I would like to thank Werner Hamacher, Sami Khatib, Caroline Sauter, María del Rosario Acosta López, Martin Saar, Jan Sieber, and Sebastian Truskolaski for their critical and fruitful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and, once again, Caroline Sauter for her patient and careful translation of parts of this text into English.
2. Why it is legitimate to explicitly understand the concept of power as force is grounded on a specific interpretation of the Aristotelian notion of *dynamis*. In this ontological reading, power means a relational potentiality which lies *in*, and *in between* beings and things, and which has – if actualised – an inherent possibility to initiate surrounding structures. (Cf. Aristoteles, *Metaphysik*, trans. Hermann Bonitz [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998], IX 8, 1049b 4-5, p.12-17) In his groundbreaking essay collection on Aristotle's *dynamis*, Giorgio Agamben has successfully related this concept to the theories of Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. (Cf. Agamben, *La potencia del pensiero. Saggi e conferenze* [Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005]). A first selection of Agamben's essays have already been edited and translated into English by Daniel Heller-Roazen in 1999. See: Agamben, *Potentialities*, ed./trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
3. Here, it must be briefly pointed out that the ways these 'ethical reasons' are to be understood throughout Derrida's work differ profoundly from a traditional understanding of ethics, and thus depart from classical teleological or deontological approaches. Instead Derrida develops the idea of a *quasi-transcendental*, in which the transcendental not only announces the condition of possibility for the subject of cognition, but at the same time also refers to the condition of impossibility. Hence, ethics are located at the border of the possible and the impossible, of the conditional and unconditional. That is to say, they depart from a *différance*, as Derrida elucidates in *Limited Inc* (1988). In his intense engagement with Levinas, he works out that the question of ethics is inseparably bound to the question of alterity and thus to an openness towards the Other. It points beyond the remit of the present article to further investigate this remark. Instead, I refer to a few relevant and enlightening texts, such as: Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans.

Werner Rappl & Dagmar Travner (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2001); Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", in: *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). An analysis of how ethics and the quasi-transcendental are correlated is provided by Matthias Fritsch in his article "Deconstructive Aporias: Quasi-Transcendental and Normative", in: *Continental Philosophy Review*, No. 44: 4 (November 2011), pp. 439-468. To what extent this openness to the Other is entangled to the gift (*le don*), and to the question of hospitality has been worked out by Dirk Quadflieg in his article "Die Frage des Fremden. Derrida und das Paradox der absoluten Gastfreundschaft", in: *Politische Philosophie und Dekonstruktion. Beiträge zur politischen Theorie im Anschluss an Jacques Derrida*, eds. Andreas Niederberger & Markus Wolf (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007), pp. 27-38.

4. Cf. Benjamin, Walter, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Erste Fassung)", in: *Gesammelte Schriften I.2* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 431-469; "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", in: *Selected Writings 3, 1935-1938*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 101-133. Henceforth referred to as GS I.2. All English-language quotes are taken from the canonical English edition: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). Although artworks have always been "reproducible" (GS I.2, p. 436; SW III, p. 102), in his essay Benjamin astutely analyses the new dimension of the advancing mechanisation of reproductive means, and the concomitant alteration of the status of particular works. Artworks are not only replaced by their likeness (*Abbild*), but rather achieve their own status through processes of ritualisation, in which they are admittedly detached from their respective 'original', but without retaining an 'original' kernel. By implementing the new techniques of reproduction, Benjamin concludes, the authenticity and originality of the artwork is irretrievably lost. The *chock* – being the primary characteristic of modern times – describes the advancing acceleration and transformation of established modalities of action and perception, which go hand in hand with Benjamin's prognosis of the "decay of the aura" (GS I.2, p. 440; SW III, p. 104). At this point, any further implication or critique of Benjamin's use of the concept of the aura, such as, for instance, Bertolt Brecht's charge of mysticism, have to be excluded for evident reasons. (Cf. Hans Robert Jauß, "Spur und Aura. Bemerkungen zu Walter Benjamins Passagenwerk", in: *Art social und art industriel. Funktionen der Kunst im Zeitalter des Industrialismus*, eds. H. R. Jauß & H. Pfeiffer et al. [München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987], pp. 19-38.)

5. GS I.2, p. 440; SW III, p. 104.

6. GS I.2, p. 438; SW III, p. 103.

7. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), M 16 a, 4. Henceforth referred to as AP. It is no coincidence that this formula is embedded into the paragraph on the flâneur. Here, the flâneur and the detective are literally synchronised, and behind the flâneur's *seemingly true* sublime abstention from the social environment, "in reality, hides the riveted attention of an observer who will not let the unsuspected malefactor out of his sight." With investigative skill the flâneur perceives, uncovers, and deepens the traces of society and to this extent his 'task' is of socio-critical relevance (Cf. AP, M 13 a, 2). Benjamin's terminology in this paragraph, and his remarks on 'habitus' and 'social legitimation', lead to the assumption that he might consider the flâneur as being a proto-sociological observer. The specifically 'flaneurous' behaviour of the flâneur, his interruption of the social environment, does not result in his ability to *empathise* with things. (On the concept of *empathy*, see: AP, M 17a 2, 4, 5.) It is of primary interest for my purpose here that the flâneur's sublimity can be traced back to a rational perception of the social surroundings. Nevertheless, at this point, it must be remarked that the flâneur is undoubtedly one of the most ambivalent figures in Benjamin's work. See for instance Carlo Salzani's thorough study *Constellations of Reading. Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality* (Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, 2009), pp.

37-80. In her groundbreaking *Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1989), Susan Buck-Morss also provides a short but precise portrait of this figure, cf. 304-307. See also: Nassima Sahraoui, "The Flâneur and Socio-Economic Critique", in: *Benjamin's Figures*, eds. Madeleine Kasten, Rico Sneller et al. (Nordhausen/ Leiden: Bautz Traugott, 2015), forthcoming.

8. Benjamin makes use of the concept of constellation throughout his work; for instance in *One-Way Street* (1928), *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (c. 1933-1938), "On the Concept of History" (1940), the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to his *Origin of the German Mourning-Play* (1928). In one of the fragments of *The Arcades Project* he writes: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation." (AP, N 2a, 3).

9. The concept of destruction in Benjamin hints at a minor theoretical similarity between Benjamin and Heidegger. Even if Benjamin himself sharply criticised Heidegger, it is worth considering how both thinkers deal with the philosophical tradition. The point at which they briefly touch theoretically is in their respective focus on momentum. In *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger writes: "But this destruction is just as far from having the negative sense of shaking off the ontological tradition. [...] On its negative side, this destruction does not relate itself toward the past; its criticism is aimed at 'today' and at the prevalent way of treating the history of ontology. But to bury the past in nullity (*Nichtigkeit*) is not the purpose of this destruction; its aim is positive; its negative function remains unexpressed and indirect." (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 44].) Of course Benjamin and Heidegger offer very different ways in which this 'criticism of today' can be pursued. For instance, Heidegger states that these times are defined by worldly abandonment (a thought that is pursued by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, 1958) and by structural, historical regression (a thought which, despite fundamental differences, also appears in Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences*, 1936). In contrast, Benjamin diagnoses not only a spiritual crisis or a *Weltvergessenheit*, but also the negative effects of capitalism. So while the Heideggerian *Dasein* can only be salvaged from oblivion through embedding itself in the (existentially actualised) 'man' – a notion which places him in ideological proximity to right-wing politics – Benjamin proposes the arrest of historical processes instead of their mere ontologisation. The sense in which Benjamin's 'increased destruction' might also be suspected of being 'unethical' will be shown below, with Derrida.

10. There is an evident proximity to Derrida's exegesis of the trace. In *Of Grammatology* (1967) he writes on the relation between the trace and the real: "*The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaître] and signification.*" (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009], p. 65.) An excellent analysis of the philosophical overlappings on the concept of trace between Derrida, Husserl and Heidegger can be found in Paola Marrati's *Genesis and Trace: Derrida reading Husserl and Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). For a thorough reading of the relation between Benjamin and Husserl, see Uwe Steiner's article "Phänomenologie der Moderne", in: *Benjamin-Studien 1*, eds. Daniel Weidner & Sigrid Weigel (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2008), pp. 107-126.

11. AP, N1,1.

12. The manifold problems around Benjamin's very specific and even idiosyncratic reading of historical materialism, his 'alliance' with Bert Brecht, and his differences with the Frankfurt School could be the object of an extensive and detailed study in itself. This study can, sadly, not be provided here.

13. One could continue this thought by stating that Benjamin does not conform to a more or less classical critique of ideology in general, if ideology is merely understood as a phenomenon of

consciousness, where subjects find themselves in a context of delusion out of which they can only escape through insight into a particular truth. (Cf. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, [Berlin: Luchterhand 1970].) Another example of a Marxist approach that is not primarily concerned with revealing a 'transcendental' truth can be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci, who attempts to deconstruct the discourse on ideology itself. Gramsci's contemporary followers include Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and Ernesto Laclau (Cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Gefängnishefte*, [Hamburg: Argument, 1991], and, amongst others, Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, [London: Verso, 1977].)

14. AP, N 1,1.

15. SW 4, p. 394.

16. Benjamin's notion of the subject consists of many layers and can be approached in multiple ways. A thorough reading of how these multiple layers of Benjamin's concept of the subject might be understood, however, exceeds the confines of the present article.

17. Gerhard Richter, "Acts of Self-Portraiture: Benjamin's Confessional and Literary Writings", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 224.

18. In his essay, Richter – with reference to Benjamin's autobiographical writings – shows how Benjamin upholds the concept of the subject, rather than neglecting it as a whole. (See Richter, "Acts of Self-Portraiture", pp. 224ff) Werner Hamacher refers to Benjamin's autobiographical writings, too, as Richter points out (cf. *ibid.*, p. 225). In his illuminating essay 'The Word Wolke-If It Is One', Hamacher confirms that "it cannot be doubted that Benjamin's memoirs represent the impetus as well as the explication, extrapolation and fulfilment of the program that his theoretical writings formulate." (Werner Hamacher, "The Word Wolke – If It Is One", in: *Benjamin's Grounds. New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 152.

19. SW 4, p. 394.

20. The whole quote reads as follows: "Innerhalb großer geschichtlicher Zeiträume verändert sich mit der gesamten Daseinsweise der historischen Kollektiva auch ihre Wahrnehmung. Die Art und Weise, in der die menschliche Wahrnehmung sich organisiert – das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt – ist nicht nur natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt." (GS I.2, p. 439.) [My translation.]

21. AP, N 2,6.

22. GS I.3, p. 1243 (Ms. 474.) [My translation.] The original quotation reads as follows: "Dieses Subjekt ist beileibe kein Transzendentsubjekt sondern die kämpfende unterdrückte Klasse in ihrer exponiertesten Situation. Historische Erkenntnis gibt es allein für sie und für sie einzig im historischen Augenblick." In his article "Walter Benjamin and the Subject of Historical Cognition", Sami Khatib provides a first analysis of how Benjamin's subject of historical knowledge is intertwined with and dissociated from Kant's transcendental subject, whose principal characteristic lies precisely in its "non-historicity". (Cf. Sami Khatib, "Walter Benjamin and the Subject of Historical Cognition", in: *Annals of Scholarship*, Special Issue "Walter Benjamin Unbound", vol. 21.1 [2015], p. 23.) Khatib rightly assumes that Benjamin's notion of the subject can thus only be understood "against the backdrop of Marx and Kant." (*Ibid.*)

23. GS I.3, p. 1245. [My translation.]

24. AP, N 1,1.

25. AP, N 7a,1.

26. AP, N 9,5.

27. GS I.2, p. 701; SW 4, p. 395.

28. AP, N 9,7.

29. AP, N 3,1.

30. AP, N 3,2.

31. See AP, N 3,1 and N 8a,4. In contrast to Hannah Arendt's reading, Benjamin repeatedly polemicalizes against Heidegger's approach to a philosophy of history – not only in *The Arcades Project*. (Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin (Essay 1968/71)", in: *Arendt und Benjamin. Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, eds. Detlev Schöttker & Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt/Main: 2006), pp. 45-98.

32. "For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time." (AP, N 3,1.)

33. AP, N 2a,3. Werner Hamacher and Sabine Gölz provided two outstanding interpretations of Benjamin's concept of the 'Now', albeit with different emphases. Hamacher focuses on the aspect of non-messianic messianicity, whereas Sabine Gölz concentrates on the inter-legibility of Benjamin's 'Now' and Ingeborg Bachmann's concept of 'Heute'. (Werner Hamacher, "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time", trans. N. Rosenthal, in: *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin [London/New York: Routledge, 2005], pp. 38-68; Sabine Gölz, "Geistesgegenwart als Lichtung im Ähnlichen: Benjamins 'Gegenwart' – 'Heute' bei Bachmann", in: *Re-Acting to Ingeborg Bachmann: New Essays and Performances*, eds. Caitríona Leahy & Bernadette Cronin [Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006], pp. 97-109.)

34. AP, N 10a,3.

35. AP, N 3,1.

36. See also AP, N 3,1: "In it [the Now], truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.)"

37. At this point it is impossible to highlight all aspects of the discussion that followed the publication of Derrida's book. Instead, I would like to point to exemplary contributions, such as the volumes *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, David Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992); and *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit. Derrida-Benjamin*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 1994). See especially Christoph Menke, "Können und Glauben. Die Möglichkeit der Gerechtigkeit", in: *Spiegelungen der Gleichheit: Politische Philosophie nach Adorno und Derrida* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004); see also Burkhard Lindner, "Derrida. Benjamin. Holocaust", in: *global benjamin 3*, eds. Klaus Garber & Ludger Rehm (München: Fink Verlag, 1999). A critique on Derrida's reading of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' is formulated by Giorgio Agamben in his book on the state of exception. See Giorgio Agamben, *Ausnahmezustand* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).

38. Cf. Derrida, Jacques, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", in: *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992) [henceforth referred to as FL]: "This moment of suspense, of *épokhe*, this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instant of non-law. [...] But it is also the whole history of law. *This moment always takes place and never takes place in presence*" (FL, p. 36). What characterises this *Non-Law* is that it is not bound to a specific time. Benjamin already writes in his Kafka essay that it is a sort of "pre-world" (*Vorwelt*), in which the "law which is not practised anymore" becomes the "narrow gate of justice". (Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka", in: *Gesammelte Schriften II.2* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002], p. 437.) [My translation.]

The prefix *pre-* points to Derrida's deconstruction of Kafka's famous parable "Before the Law" in *Préjugés*, where the protagonist 'K.' endures in front of the law's gate to achieve the admission to enter. As he does not initiate this action himself, he dies *before* the law. (Cf. Franz Kafka, "Vor dem Gesetz", in: *Der Proceß* [Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 2009], p. 226-227; Jacques Derrida, "Préjugés – devant la loi", in: *La faculté de juger* [Paris: Edition de Minuit, 1985]) For a brilliant and quite hyperbolic interpretation of Kafka's parable, see Giorgio Agamben, "K.", in: *Nudità* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2009).

39. FL, p. 14.

40. FL, pp. 13-14.

41. As these moments do not contain a spatial extension, this ‘unfolding expansion’ must rather be understood as an infinite ‘infolding expansion’ into their inner kernel, that is to say, the moments approximate the realm beyond chronology *infinitesimally*. For an account of the concepts of the infinitesimal and infinite approximation in Benjamin see: Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

42. FL, p. 41.

43. In his enlightening article on the proletarian general strike in Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”, Werner Hamacher has explicitly argued against this reading of Benjamin. Moreover, Hamacher focuses on the logic of de-positing acts. He points out that the dichotomic distinction between law-positing and law-conserving violence is not ultimately suspended by pure violence, but rather de-positing by pure means. (Cf. Werner Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike: Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’”, in: *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne [London/New York: Routledge, 1994], pp. 110-138.)

44. AP, N 11, 3.

45. AP, N 11, 3.

46. AP, N 10, 3.

47. AP, N 10a, 1.

48. AP, N 10, 3.

49. In “The Destructive Character” (1931) Walter Benjamin writes: “[t]he destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears away the traces of our own age [...]”. (SW II, p. 541)

50. AP, N 1, 1.

51. In his early essay “Fate and Character” (1919), Benjamin explains that the only way to escape the fate of an order constituted by ‘unhappiness and guilt’ is a definite breaking apart of this very order. Only in this way can happiness be obtained: “Happiness is, rather, what releases the fortunate man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate. Not for nothing does Hölderlin call blissful gods ‘fateless’.” (SW I, p. 203.)

52. FL, p. 14.

53. The letter can be found in: *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 79-81. Henceforth referred to as Corresp. The German edition was published as: *Walter Benjamin: Briefe*, eds. Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), pp. 125-128.

54. This charge can be traced back to Buber’s overture for the first volume of the journal, in which he asserts that the Jewish youth movement has to have a certain dutiful enthusiasm for the First World War. This ‘attestation’ caused a great amount of discussion amongst German-Jewish thinkers at that time, especially those who were involved in pacifist and anarcho-socialist movements, such as Gustav Landauer and Gershom Scholem. With regards to Buber’s views, Benjamin writes: “[a]fter this conversation [with Gershom Scholem], I was in a position to decide whether I could possibly contribute to it [the journal *Der Jude*]. Because, in view of how intensely I disagreed with so many of the contributions to the first volume – especially their position on the European war – my awareness that, in reality, my attitude toward this journal was and could be no other than my attitude toward all politically effectual writing [*politisch wirksamem Schrifttum*] was obscured. The beginning of the war finally and decisively revealed this to me.” (Corresp., p. 79.) [Translation modified.] An interesting genealogy of Buber’s journal can be found in Eleonore Lappin, *Der Jude 1916-1928: Jüdische Moderne zwischen Partikularismus und Universalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

55. Corresp., p.79.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid, pp. 79-80. [Translation modified.]

60. Ibid, p. 80. [Translation modified.]

61. For the concept of magical language in Benjamin, see Winfried Menninghaus' groundbreaking work *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). Menninghaus highlights that Benjamin's usage of the term magic in the context of language must be read in close connection to his remarks on revelation, which is the "self-manifestation of something unspeakable" (p. 22.) [All translations are my own]. Thereby, however, Benjamin does not simply relapse into a form of language-mysticism, as e.g. the Romantics do; instead, he provides the "language-immanent ground, the specific possibility to transcend a linguistic sensibility into mystical theology", that means to "surmount" its religious connotations without finally suspending, but in "critically saving" them (p. 226). Uwe Steiner provides a thorough introduction to the magic of language in Benjamin's writings. Cf. "Die Magie der Sprache", in: *Walter Benjamin* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2004), pp. 42-50.

62. Corresp., p. 80. [Translation modified.]

63. Ibid.

64. Although Benjamin uses the word *revelation* instead of manifestation, I would tend to exclude this more or less theological reading at this point and, with it, all the implications for Political Theology, which can be drawn out of it. A broad overview of this topic is given in the volume *Theologie und Politik: Walter Benjamin und ein Paradigma der Moderne*, eds. Bernd Witte & Ponzi Mauro (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2005).

65. For the purpose of this article, the differences between magic and mysticism can be left aside, since I focus only on the connecting axis of both notions. In his later work, too, Benjamin does not clearly distinguish between both terms and occasionally uses them as synonyms. An illustration of how magic and mysticism differ can be found in: Gershom Scholem, "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala", in: *Judaica 3. Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 26-31.

66. GS II.2, p. 203.

67. AP, N 10a,3.

68. I am grateful to Miguel Vatter for having pointed out the importance of deepening the question of how it is possible at all to think Benjamin's dialectic together with Derrida's aporias. This very important aspect cannot, however, be fully elaborated in this paper.

69. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying - Awaiting (One Another at) the "Limits of Truth"*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 16. Henceforth referred to as Aporias.

70. Aporias, p. 16.

71. GS I.2, p. 701; SW 4, p. 395.

72. AP, N 2,6.

73. AP, N 1,11. It is remarkable that in 1814, at the time of the publication of his novella *The Golden Pot*, E.T.A. Hoffmann already criticised the naïveté of the bourgeoisie. Self-evidently his point of departure lies in the Romantic tradition, unlike Marx, who wrote the preface to *Capital*, quoted above, in 1867. But whereas Marx still accentuates a linear time model and historical succession, at least in Hoffmann's fairy-tales, the world consists of various realities with differing time structures. For example, within the crystal, time is almost solidified, whereas on the outside it 'fleets'. (Cf. E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot: A Modern Fairytale* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992]; see also: Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I, The Process of Production of Capital*, in: Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org), 1995, 1999.

ABSTRACTS

The following article deconstructs certain figures of Benjamin's thoughts on history and on epistemology – such as image, trace, crystal, standstill, the 'Now', and the 'subject of historical knowledge' – and relates them to the political dimension of his "Critique of Violence", and to his remarks on the linguistic structure of political writing. Thereby it centres on the following questions: in what way could Benjamin's characterisation of the singular moment, as well as his analysis of temporality provide insights into historical dynamics? Furthermore, it aims at investigating if and to what extent historico-political action is related to a certain understanding of time and power: can such action be seen as a crystallised emanation of the 'Now', of *Jetztzeit*?

INDEX

Keywords: Benjamin Walter, Derrida Jacques, history, epistemology, Marxism, deconstruction, language

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