On Some Utopian Motives
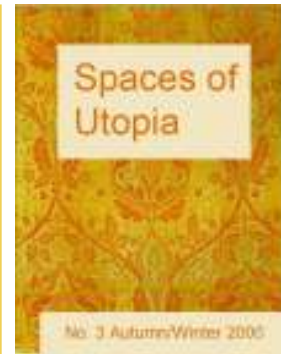# in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin

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This paper will introduce some reflections on the concept of utopia in the work of the Jewish-German critical thinker and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). In the first part we shall represent two distinct motives of utopian thought already interpreted in reference to Benjamin's writings. The first one is a redemptive utopian millenarianism which we shall illustrate with the figure of baroque allegory. The second one can be found in the project of revolutionary anarcho-socialist utopianism that we shall try to decipher through Benjamin's concept of "pure" violence. On the background of these motives Benjamin's utopian thinking will be reconsidered in relation to his use of the concept of utopia in the third part of our text. There the term "utopia" will be referred to as it comes to direct use in the blueprint of *The Arcades Project* and the essays related to it. It will be explored in the perspective of its appearance as the central hermeneutical figure of the project – the dialectical image of standstill. On the background of this third synthetic sample of Benjamin's utopian thinking, we shall outline both the importance of the concept of utopia as a critical tool to Benjamin's theoretical system and the significance of his writings to a new elaborate reading of the concept of utopia.

"Utopia" is not a central concept in the work of Benjamin. Yet, it appears in the focal point of one of the crucial debates on the legacy of the author. Many commentators outline the existence of different readings of Benjamin's works

(Habermas 1979: 30-31). Critics try either to attribute to Benjamin's Marxism the role of a mere intellectual game on the background of his Judaic mysticism, or to outline the former as a central concern of the author despite the theological motives of his work. What strikes the attention of the careful reader is the synthetic and original position of Benjamin who has similar basic intuitions, "elective affinities" with both traditions, without fully adhering to any one of them. More striking, however, is another sudden "elective affinity" that the impossibility of resolution of this debate reveals. On the threshold of the study of Benjamin's utopian thought one finds almost oracular instructions in the comments of Miguel Abensour on the existing readings of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The literary and philosophical interpretations of More's book are usually either radically socialist or fundamentally Christian.[1] As we shall see, however, Benjamin's utopian thought suggests this parallel from a peculiar position: that of the constellation, of the manifestation of the same meaning, of the same truth from unexpectedly different perspectives. Not only do More's and Benjamin's works manifest two important moments of utopia. In this sudden proximity, both authors enter the same category, the same constellation – that of the thinkers who use the figure of utopia not only to defend socialist or religious positions (Abensour 2002: 36). They both seem to think of it as a riddle-image, pointing to something different, having something more to say than a mere critique of reality or a mere depiction of an ideal (*idem*, 49).

Utopia as Abolition. Two Hypotheses: Allegory and Revolution

Speaking of the utopian vision of Walter Benjamin in the broader context of his work, each commentator faces a difficult dilemma. Benjamin's philosophical system represents a complex inner tension between two seemingly incompatible perspectives: a positive optimistic utopianism, attributed to Benjamin's political writings, and a negative utopian pessimism, which the theologian motives of his works suggest (Gur'ze-ev 1998). Their controversy is displayed in a figurative metaphor in his *Theological-Political Fragment:*

> The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness. (…) If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction. (Benjamin 2002: 305)

Following the Messianic axis of this constellation, one could read in Benjamin a redemptive chiliasm as a mere passive critique of mundane existence. In the anticipation of the appearance of the Messiah, some interpretations of Benjamin perceive a Judaic hope, or better hopelessness, anticipating the collective redemption. The latter would rather end, abolish, than improve the profane, forsaken post-lapsarian human existence (Gur'ze-ev 1998). However, the interpretation of the political texts of Benjamin from a Marxist perspective emphasises the activist, revolutionary potential of his social critique. Such reading is partially justified by the revolutionary motives in *The Critique of Violence*. Regarding this controversy, a variety of commentators seem to choose one of the two options and interpret Benjamin's work according to the chosen reading of the text (Habermas 1979: 32). Yet trying to answer the question whether Benjamin's utopian thought should be considered primarily in the modus of revolutionary, *i.e.* transformative political thinking, or in its allegorical, *i.e.* passively critical potential, the reader can discover a significant particularity. These two seemingly opposite utopian directions end up serving the same purpose: the final abolition of the status quo, of the existing social and world order. We can illustrate this statement using the figures of baroque allegory and of pure revolutionary violence.

Benjamin's essays often fall back on his highly speculative theological interpretation of human existence. In the essay *On Language as Such, and on the Language of Man* Benjamin depicts in consensus with the Judaic messianic vision of the world the God-forsaken state of human existence: after the Fall, people lost the language of Paradise that enabled them to give things their proper name. This loss led them to the endless cacophonic "prattle" of overnaming the creation with the delusion that they knew the difference between good and bad.

What Benjamin claims is that there is a potential for salvaging the human experience of these realities in an immediate natural approach to them. In the essay *On the Mimetic Faculty* Benjamin describes a "redemptive" behaviour as

embedded in the onomatopoeic and genuinely mimetic language of children.[2] There Benjamin speaks of the ability of children to discover anew things that are introduced to them even in a very sophisticated and technologically advanced form (Benjamin 1999b: 390).

> Nature produces similarities – one need only think of mimicry. The greatest capacity of similarities, however, belongs to human beings (…) Children's play is always permeated by mimetic behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. (Benjamin 1999a: 694)

Benjamin's theory of experience rests on the human ability to produce and perceive similarities, correspondences. For him the most palpable knowledge is visual and mimetic: mimetic-intuitive corrections are to assist even the abstractions of mere conceptual thinking (Tiedemann 1988: 281). Mimesis is the reproduction of correspondences of an image, redeeming the qualities of the environment. For this reason the mimetic faculty, which has deteriorated with historical development, is important for Benjamin's own project to redeem the experience of the so-called Ur-phenomena[3]: the objects as manifesting the laws of their existence in their very material embodiment. The experience of Ur-phenomena is the way of enacting the mimetic faculty in human communication. This mimetic faculty is expressed in children's language, as well as in the genuine language of nature in the language of art. For Benjamin the type of art that uses this mimetic language is not the uncriticisable, self-affirmative art in its romantic concept. He affirms the art forms alternative to the "auratic" art which claims to represent the totality of human experience. He envisages the subversive forms of art as redemptive since they display a fragmentary language or images that cause a shock effect through the use of allegories, repetition and montage. For Benjamin these images and realities seem to unlock the critical awareness in the human consciousness. However, as we shall see, where these motives of Benjamin's work appear as wedded to theology. They often express a rather passive critique of the state of affairs in the face of the final redemption.

Baroque Allegory

In his early work *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin introduces the figure of baroque allegory. He uses it to underline the peculiar genre discrepancy between the German baroque tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*) and classical tragedy, re-established by late Romanticism. According to Benjamin, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Baroque drama is not an heir of the Greek tragedy as interpreted in Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is a unique dramatic form: a parody of tragedy, rich in expressive buffo means. The dramatic action is often interrupted by untimely predictions of the culmination: the death of the main character, the baroque sovereign. Thus, the action is deprived from secrecy, and the audience from the expected catharsis. Devoid of heroism, it represents an event in the "unfulfilled", empty time of profane history, as opposed to the "fulfilled" absolute time tragedy seems to expand over. The mourning over the dead corpse of the monarch is expressed in a cacophony of exaggerated gestures and onomatopoeic sounds. The sovereign's dead body represents a ruin of mortality on the persisting background of eternity of universal history, an allegory in itself. Thus, both in its form and its content *Trauerspiel* opposes the romantic understanding of art as a supreme translation of the language of nature into the language of men.[4] It reveals the transience and fragmentation of human existence in the God-forsaken world that gape behind the idea of a sacred continuum of human history.

Allegory is a central figure and a critical instrument of *Trauerspiel*. According to Benjamin the tradition of German Romanticism perceived allegory as a dogmatic, fixed means of representation, while the symbol was affirmed as a supreme expression of perfection and totality. However (as in the differentiation between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy), Walter Benjamin considers this pretension of the totality of symbolic representation problematic and false. It discloses the object of art in its unproblematic, perfect, distant, unapproachable auratic expression, and leaves no space for interpretation and critique. Allegory, on the contrary, never stands for a direct representation, hence shows historical reality in its crystallised moments, in its ruins.

> [I]n allegory is *the facis hippocratica* of history that lies like a frozen landscape before the eye of the beholder. There progress is a sequence of moments (…). What is expressed here portentously in the form of a riddle is not only the nature of human life in general, but also the biographical historicity of the individual in its organically corrupted form… (Benjamin 1985: 166)

As a ruin, as a disintegrating human corpse, allegory does not serve the purpose of salvation, of immortality. It is there "to disclose in the ruined body the truth and hopelessness of the creaturely condition" (Gilloch 2002: 83) and to point in a still grotesque gesture towards the approaching abolition of this realm of existence. Thus it "surrenders to the contemplation of hopelessness", to a mere redemption in the order of the sacred. It abandons any hope history to be resolved in a better way in the order of political (*idem*, 85):

> an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity is one of the strongest impulses of allegory (…). [Thus, a]llegory goes away empty-handed… left to its own devices, [it] rediscovers itself, not playful in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. (Benjamin 1985: 232-233)

Despite being a transgressive means of representation, allegory "goes away empty-handed", merely depicting the confusion of the post-lapsarian prattle. As such it remains a key for the Judaic mystical interpretation of the pessimistic motives in Walter Benjamin's thought that does not suggest any project for positive action "under the eyes of heaven": for this reading of Benjamin, the only utopian motif he envisages is the final dissolution of humanity in Judgement Day. In the face of the negative pessimism of Benjamin's theological thought, other commentators of Benjamin's works argue that he is still concerned with the need to create a political activity and awareness in his own generation (Buck-Morss 1989: 47). Benjamin's essay *The Critique of Violence* displays the transformative tendency, his utopian impulse in the figure of a radical revolution; but does it display a positive political project?

Pure Violence: Revolution

In *The Critique of Violence* – an outstanding sample of Benjamin's political thought – Benjamin expresses a negative view of the institutionalized justice in the modern democratic states. Benjamin differentiates his critique of violence from those

embedded in the doctrines of positive law and natural law (Benjamin 1996: 236-237). The former rejects violence only as illegal means to its own ends, dogmatically predefined as just. The latter rejects it only as an end. Natural law does not, however, express attitude to violence in the cases in which it has to be used for the sake of peace. In the very act of signing the "social contract" the individuals declare that they seek protection from each other. For this purpose they delegate the state to regulate violence. To regulate violence between each other, they agree to use violence on behalf of the state. Benjamin's critique of violence is an attempt to justify the means, which constitute violence, regardless of the criterion of justice, *i.e.* of its ends:

> lawmaking pursues at its ends, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. (*idem*, 248)

Benjamin argues that every regime which has come to power with violent mean justifies its emergence through an action of secrecy, as the Weberian charismatic power. Western democracies use legally acknowledged means of violence in both "law-making" and "law-preserving" function. The new ruler or constitution is established at a ceremony, as by fate. This fate is then represented in history as lawful regularity, as divine providence. In such a way violence "acknowledges" its means in world history and it infuses violence into its legal system in order to protect its statute. It also tries to establish control over all forms of violence which could question its power. Here violence becomes immanent to the state; every revolution or attempt to break with the status quo is reduced to the form of institutionalized strike; every reformative opposition and every "state of exception",[5] declared if the state order is threatened is designed in support of the system.

Instead, Benjamin comes closer to the genuine definition of the state of emergency as "a return to an original pleromatic state, in which the distinction of different powers (legal, executive, etc.) has not yet been produced", *i.e.* the return to the mere state of nature (Agamben 2005: 6). Here, namely, flashes the radical

impulse of Benjamin's political thought, the political stance which has saved his philosophy from being characterized as merely mystical. His attempt to redeem "pure" violence is developed in a vision of a revolution. Unlike the system supporting reformative strikes, this revolution should appear in the form of a "general syndicate strike": as an urge of abolition, of a final break with the status quo of institutionalised violence (Benjamin 1996: 239, 246). Benjamin maintains this position when he writes in the twelfth thesis *On the Concept of History*:

> Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, (…) nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren. (Benjamin 2003: 392)

In this critique Benjamin outlines the necessity of a revolutionary praxis. It should shatter the dialectic between law-making and law-preserving violence through the means of "pure" violence. "Pure" violence persistently remains out of any legal system. Only thus it is able to create a "pure" state of exception (as the one envisaged by the Marxian proletarian revolution) in order to abolish the status quo which has brought and maintains the oppressing class in power:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency… (*ibidem*)

However, these political motives of Benjamin's thought fall short of building towards a positive (even if utopian) project. He does not instruct directly any concrete form of political organization and resistance. Even in his most radical political critique, he "adjusts" with an eschatological reading his own extreme political writings. In *The Critique of Violence* he performs a swift move from revolutionary politics to redemptive chiliasm. He calls pure, "law-destroying violence" "divine", as opposed to the "mythical" "law-making" violence (Benjamin 1996: 249). He speaks of the final decision which is to be made by God in an act of lethal, even if not bloody violence (*idem*, 250). This motive remains in the concluding final section of *On the Concept of History* in the sentence: "For every

second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter" (Benjamin 2003: 400).

Not unlike allegory, the vision of pure violence does not provide humanity with any instructions, with any suggestion of the pillars of a coming society. It ends up at a standstill: there it merely becomes subject to the final act of redemption, to the "divine" violence that would come with the appearance of the Messiah. Despite their radically critical messages, these two figures leave humanity with the only alternative of an ascetic mode of mundane existence in an idle anticipation of the Final Day. Both the state of emergence and the surrender to the allegorical imagination seem to follow the same direction: the direction of a negative utopian pessimism.

Thus, neither a passive anticipation of Judgement Day, nor a purely political, transformative utopian project could be justified by the philosophical system of Benjamin. Both purely theological and purely political aspects of Benjamin's thought serve the purpose of abolition of the status quo, subjecting human future to the coming of a Messiah. Yet, we argue that Benjamin's thought does not generally lack a positive utopian dimension.

Utopia as Redemption: Dialectical Image of Standstill

The figure of the ending of oppressive history in the radical rupture of Judgement Day is indeed a persistent motive in Benjamin's writings. However, one could still argue that the hopeless anticipation of the abolition of the profane order does not represent fully Benjamin's utopian vision. If all his works were only aimed to predict the final dissolution of profane history, Benjamin's doctrine would have merely served the function of baroque allegory. Yet, in the final words in the *Trauerspiel* book about the surrender of allegory before the eyes of heaven, we could also read Benjamin's critique of this passive anticipation (Gilloch 2002: 85). As we shall see, despite the cultural pessimism of his age, Benjamin's project on "redemptive" critique of art and history undoubtedly ascribes transgressive means of representation an active, catalysing role. There the promise of a final redemption

seems to display a rather didactic function: it aims to guarantee the possibility of critique on the negative background of transcendence. There, exactly, in the act of redemptive counteraction against the oblivion of profane history, in the constant dialectic of new, aging and old, Benjamin discovers the *topos* of utopia. And there, in the "garbage heap of modern history", in the redemptive recollection of dream images of every past generation, and in the collection of material embodiments of these desires with every next generation – there is where we could find the "container", the receptacle of positive historical experience (Buck-Morss 1989: 217-218). Thus, we could base a third hypothesis of the positive and instructive utopian vision of Benjamin on the practice of historical and cultural redemptive criticism.

In his writings on the Paris arcades, two important developments of Benjamin's utopian thought come forth: first of all, he discovers the concept of utopia as useful for his project; then, he emancipates its positive moments in the figure of the "dialectical image of standstill" – Benjamin's hermeneutic tool for reading history (Olalquiaga 2002: 26). In *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*[6] Benjamin refers to the arcades of Paris. He sees them as an embodiment of the utopian visions of the citizens of the modern Mecca of bourgeois culture in the age of industrial heyday. What becomes clear from the *Exposé*, the completed blueprint of the unfinished project, is that *the arcades*[7] were important for their author both in their form and their content. On the one hand, Benjamin considered the peculiar constructions as a historical object that is rewarding for such a materialist historical analysis. On the other hand, the unfinished project should have served to display a method of writing cultural history. The immense number of quotations and references published were presented to reaffirm Benjamin's belief that there was no need to mediate, to theoretically explicate the self-manifest truth cultural artefacts contain. The writings on the arcades had to be arcades themselves, representing semantic door-gates to a certain historical experience: the rough material of Benjamin's theoretical "excavations". As he eventually describes his method:

> Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behaviour and the new economically and technologically

based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of phantasmagoria. These creations undergo illumination not only in a theoretical manner (…) but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias. (Benjamin 1999b: 14-15)

Depicting nineteenth-century Paris is not a random decision.[8] It contains the cultural artefacts and embodies the trends that attract Benjamin's attention as traces, as residues of a dream world of the ruling class of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century this dream world has been forsaken, but exactly for this reason Benjamin does not want to allow the conditions of its emergence and existence to remain concealed. For the author they are preserved in dialectical images:

These images are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production. (…) In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements of prehistory [*Urgeschichte*] (…). (Benjamin 2002: 52)

that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experience of such society, which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective engender – through interpretation of what is new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions. (*idem*, 34)

The reappearance of the transfigured motives of pre-history in modern times has an important function for Benjamin's thinking of utopia. He perceives utopia as a vision en-coded, in-scribed in the remnants of each epoch, which gradually indulges itself into a cycle of endless repetition; in always recurrent projection of the Golden Age in the artefacts of past cultures. Benjamin is struck by the way samples of modern technology; architecture and design appear under the form and decoration of archaic images.[9] This re-emergence of classical images and their uncritical adoption and proliferation is just the visual expression: it represents the persistence of myth in modernity that repudiates the Enlightenment's self-confidence to have done away with it.[10] Fashion, the dwelling of these novelties, the very embodiment of the mythical reappearance, is where Benjamin recognises a permanent tension: people dream of more advanced forms of production and facilities, but their consciousness can not reconcile with these rapidly proliferating novelties. For this reason, the latter find their expression and explication in old and

familiar images and concepts (Buck-Morss 1989: 115).

> But precisely modernity is always citing primal history. (…) this occurs through the ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. (...) This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. (Benjamin 2002: 40)

Benjamin believes that the very phenomenon of commodity fetishism in its mechanism of rapid shift from one fashion into another is self-explicable in its manifestation. In his words, being a dream image, every utopia is indeed an image at a standstill. The dialectical image does not even need to perform a synthesis; unlike allegory it does not need to point helplessly to a different meaning, to a different world. In its fixedness it serves transcendence in the order of the profane: it is used in the transgressive means of representation in decadent modern art. Displaying with immediacy and urgency the ambiguous co-existence of new and old in fashionable commodities, it represents the grotesque, a paradox. The shock effect of the material appearance of such an image should have a redemptive function in ordinary, mundane life: it aims to tear down the mask of modern commodity fetishism, of the vicious ideology of capitalist production.

In its implicit reading of art and history the Exposé of *The Arcades* provokes much debate.[11] Benjamin's method of materialist analysis is opposed by the supporters of orthodox Marxism. His understanding of the derivation of wishful images from the collective unconscious is believed to be idealistic and delusive: he is criticised for negating the differentiations between the classes and of the structural conditions of life acting in the formation of dreams (Adorno 1990: 112). Yet – as it becomes clear in his later works on the critique of art – for Benjamin the fetish character of commodity has a different meaning than the one that the ideology critics of his generation invest in it, *i.e.* that "[i]t is dialectical in the imminent sense that it produces [false] consciousness" (Habermas 1979: 53). In his critical reinterpretation of the orthodox Marxist understanding of art Benjamin does not consider the phenomena of the superstructure – in Marxian terms – as a mere secondary reflection of the economic conditions of social existence. What he believes is that the former correspond to the latter as their expression.[12] The forms

of art, and the dialectical images represented by their subversive variations, express, embody the "correspondences" between base and superstructure. In the broader sense of the doctrine of Benjamin, this correspondence is a semantic category and not a psychological one (Habermas 1979: 53). This statement finds confirmation in the already explained method of *The Arcades* project: there Benjamin seeks for meaning not merely in the interpretation of the wishful dreams of each generation, but in the material expressions and manifestations of these dreams in the ruined artefacts of each epoch (Buck-Morss 1989: 114).

Benjamin does not need to step back from the use of the dialectical image of standstill (and hence, of utopia) as a central figure in his doctrine. Even further, he perceives dialectical images as a critical tool of the redemptive forms of art that he promotes. One of the distinctive features of these redemptive forms of art is their ability to present cultural artefacts to an immediate, shared, exoteric reading. Thus, they could contribute to the democratisation of the reception of the work of art in its modern appearance.[13] Benjamin wants to ascribe the dialectical images to the changes in the function of modern art that uses technology to perform a shock effect, representing things as stripped of their romanticist aura. Only in such techniques, could modern art approach the attention of the indifferent masses. The represented objects gain a more precise and realistic appearance through the technical medium which intervenes between them and the selective sensory organs (Habermas 1979: 37).[14] In this sense, in direct reference to his interpretation of the redemptive function of art, Benjamin is reluctant to merely mistrust the advancement of technique. Even further, he envisages a redemptive function for technique in its potential positive impact on the everyday life of people. In correspondence with the Hegelian notions of first and second nature, Benjamin believes that there is a differentiation between first [genuine, redemptive] and second [reified, alienated] forms of technique. An illustration of this statement we could find in Benjamin's evocation of the utopian visions of Charles Fourier.[15] According to Benjamin, Fourier discloses "a kind of labour which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials" – unlike the evolutionist ideology, that "recognizes only the

progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society" (Benjamin 1968: Thesis XI).

The primary function of the employment of the utopian vision of Fourier is to express a possible nature-friendly revolutionization of the means of production "in the age of mechanical reproduction".[16] Thus, in its "different utopian will"[17] modern art and technique could unlock critical thinking, and emancipate people from the manipulation of mass culture and enforced labour. It is namely in this sense that collective reception and enjoyment of art expressed through the new technological media is both instructive and critical. It enables the emergence of the forms of art that Benjamin cherishes: democratic and subversive (Löwy 1996: 211). In the discontinuous series of montages, the work of art divested of its aura releases experiences which formerly had been locked up in its esoteric style. And, for Benjamin, cultural critique commits destruction only in order to transpose what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful into that of truth, and thereby to *rescue* and *redeem* it (Habermas 1979: 37).

Parallel to the rediscovery of the redemptive powers of modern art and technique in the shocking, montage-like, immediate representations of cultural artefacts, Benjamin also critically examined the new function of history. He instructs the historian to turn towards the past in order to redeem its lost moments. In Benjamin's words, "progress" is actually the eternal return of what is always the same: the disguised eternal catastrophe of human mundane existence.[18] To counteract it, to make people aware of its fraud, history should rest collected in a focal point, as in the utopian images. In this stance Benjamin uses the utopian standstill as a critical tool of his reading of history. He tries to escape from the position of orthodox Marxism: understanding history as progress, it conforms to the modern ideology, according to which history is a perfect law-governed causal sequence of events spanning over a homogeneous continuum of time (Benjamin 1968: Thesis XVIII). For Benjamin, it is precisely such understanding of history as a social evolution what enables the oppressive ruling classes to present their violent acts as predetermined by fate. It restricts historical science to the description of their own victories (Buck-Morss 1989: 58). Progress asserts itself as fate, but in

this claim it proves to be a mere myth. As such, its perfection can be brought to a standstill by a materialist analysis:

> [a] historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. (…) Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. (Benjamin 2003: 396)

> The first stage is this voyage will be to carry the montage principle over into history. That is to build up the large structures out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Indeed, to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment. (Benjamin 1999b: 461)

In the shock effect of historical materialism, performing an operation, a montage of historical moments, history could be read "against the grain"[19] (Benjamin 2003: 392), in its petrified condensed moments of truth lay the seeds of a new utopian intention: the realised need to collect and redeem the images of the past. There is where nature salvaged from its mythical interpretations and from its extreme rationalization could be redeemed as well. In the subversive forms of representation, history, as well as art and technique, could find its positive resolution distinguishing it from historicism: the second nature in which history was arrested by enlightened thought.

Benjamin's work both theorises and enacts a positive project of redemption that could be read on the background of the project of abolition. In *The Arcades*, the quintessential, montage-like standstill of his unfinished life-work project, Benjamin follows exactly the mode of writing of cultural history described so far. Displaying arcade by arcade, and topic by topic, the peculiarities of nineteenth century thought and images, Benjamin's crystallized, scattered illuminations achieve "shock effect" for his readers. His critique is redemptive: it orients itself towards historical moments in their ageing and ruination; it recognizes and collects the memories of what have remained repressed and unredeemed in the European nineteenth century. This task is of crucial importance because "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably" (*idem*, 390). Only in being presented with this knowledge, Benjamin believes, can the new generations live in a better world. This world's

utopian ideal is the ultimate awareness. Only by being aware of the origins of the dreams of their ancestors and alertly critical to their own dreams for the future, can each generation be ready to contribute to the process of a redemptive collective awakening in the profane realm of human existence.

Conclusion

Having examined closely the most vibrant utopian motives in Benjamin's philosophical system, we could definitely ascertain the existence of positive thinking of utopia and utopian thought in the work of Walter Benjamin. They are synthesised in the use of utopia as a dialectical image of standstill in both its transformative and in its critical function. As such it perpetuates a parallel movement: redeeming from oblivion the utopian visions of the defeated of the past, and redeeming the defeated in the present from the manipulation by the current state of affairs. Benjamin encourages a cautious and pedantic all-human project of collection and recollection of ruined artefacts and instances of history. He believes in the possibility of reconstruction of the moments when history might have taken a different, alternative direction.

In the face of this discussion, Walter Benjamin seems to find a place in the context of the utopian thought of the twentieth century. In his representation of utopia on the threshold between its transformative and its critical function, between the ideological dream of advanced capitalist societies and the collective awakening from this dream, Benjamin shows a rich and original interpretation of the concept of utopia. He puts it at stake as a central figure – and thus a critical tool – in the discussion about the relations of base and superstructure in Marxist social philosophy. He bridges it with a positive project for a human existence based on relations of concern between human beings, art, technology, and nature.

Finally, what remains peculiar in this rather simple expression of Benjamin's interpretation of utopia is the proximity that might be found between it and Thomas More's own understanding of "Utopia"*,* as it is interpreted in recent readings. An example is the interpretation of Miguel Abensour, which was mentioned in the beginning of our study. The author gives predominance neither to the realist,

political, nor to the allegorical, redemptive reading of the prototypical text. Instead, Abensour speaks of the peculiar form of the writing, the emblematic repetitions, the paradoxes and contradictions implicit in the text. Even next to the critique of the British society of the sixteenth century, represented in the first book of *Utopia*, More's peculiar narrative does not indicate particular reforms in the second book. Neither does it represent the second book – describing the island of Utopia – only as an image of Judaic-Christian redemption. What Abensour suggests is that the text should not be read with the instruments of pure logic (Abensour 2002: 78). It should rather be observed as a revolutionary form of writing in its attempt to evoke critical awareness in the readers in the mere discussion of two different developments of history, neither of which perfect. And thus it seeks potentials of the future in the complex redemption for the lost solutions of the past – a project which, as we demonstrated with the present study, is in a peculiar elective affinity with Walter Benjamin's work on utopia.

Notes

[1] Even if he names his book *L'Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin,* Abensour does not make a parallel with the two possible readings of the utopian thought of the two authors. He is explicit in his will not to represent the authors as representative of the same tradition but of two different moments of utopia.

[2] As explored in his reading of Marcel Proust, in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and in *The Doctrine of the Similar*.

[3] A term adopted from Goethe who used it to state that the objective regularities of living organisms are graphically visible in their structural forms, as the Platonic ideas in the world of shadows (Buck-Morss 1989: 71).

[4] As in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project of Richard Wagner.

[5] Benjamin does not mention the term "state of exception" in *The Critique of Violence*: it appears in his latest work *On the Concept of History*. The First World War and the years after European states have represented "a laboratory for testing and honing (…) the state of exception as a paradigm of government" (Agamben 2005: 7). The concept of "state of exception" (suspension of the constitution when the judicial order is threatened) is of a paradoxical nature. It is a juridical measure which seeks to reject the existent system of law. As part of this debate Benjamin opposes Carl

Schmitt's conception of "sovereign" dictatorship, affirming sovereignty as "the place of the extreme decision" included in law, and as such excluding any violence outside the law (*idem*, 58).

[6] Preliminary *Exposé* of "The Arcades Project" from 1935.

[7] In the nineteenth century the arcades – cross-like corridors between the buildings, covered with a transparent roof of iron and glass – were used to expose the fashionable commodities of the age. In the twentieth century they languished in oblivion due to the restructuring of the surrounding urban space. The several arcades that remained in Paris became containers of the old-fashioned antiques of the former fashionable stores (*apud* Olalquiaga 2002: 24-26).

[8] Benjamin sees Paris as an embodiment of the bourgeois commodity fetishism in the variety of its manifestations. The dioramas, peculiar voyeurs' machines, show panoramic images of the glorious stages of the imperial victories as lawful culmination in the course of universal history. The World exhibitions, greedily occupying more fashionable spaces, display the unabashed splendour of bourgeois commodities cherished for their price rather than for their utility. The interior of the bourgeois flats becomes a dwelling of boredom where luxury accessories come to fill in the sudden abyss of surfeited urban experience. The Barricades, rendered impossible by the post-revolutionary building of the new boulevards, end up being built anew as a reminder that a revolution perpetuated by the ruling class is a mere affirmation of the status quo. These all and the streets and arcades of Paris, haunted by the figure of the poet-flaneur Baudelaire who depicts the crowd of the metropolis but pays the price of becoming an alienated part of it: they all show that Paris is the mere embodiment, the capital of nineteenth century splendour, lost in oblivion in the twentieth century (see Benjamin 2002: 32-42).

[9] Susan Buck-Morss presents exquisite illustrations of modern devices designed under the forms of nature or such of previously existent "fashionable" devices, e.g. trains designed like coaches, electric bulbs like fire, etc. (see Buck-Morss 1989: 110-111).

[10] This position of Benjamin seems to have influenced the interpretation of myth in modernity in M.Horkheimer's and T. W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

[11] The most important text that represents the possible critique against the Exposé is T. W. Adorno's epistolary response to its first version that Benjamin sent to his friend and disciple. Adorno criticised the "uncritical" examination of the "reappearance of the eternal myth" first of all in the entirely positive connotation of the return of utopia, and then in the linear representation of history implicit in this reading. He also criticised as "idealistic" the derivation of pre-historical images from the collective unconscious (Adorno 1990: 111-112). In response to the first set of critical remarks, in the later version of the Exposé (1939) the prisoner's writings of the nineteenth century "professional revolutionary" August Blanqui on astronomy assert the persistence of hellish motives in the reappearance of pre-historical utopian images in modernity: "Blanqui, revealed (…) the terrifying features of this phantasmagoria. Humanity figures there as damned. Everything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present" (Benjamin 1999b: 16).

[12] "if the infrastructure in a certain way (in the materials of thought and experience) determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then – apart from any question of the originating cause – to be characterized? As its expression [*Ausdruck*]" (Benjamin 1999b: 393).

[13] Benjamin finds himself again in opposition to T. W. Adorno who defends the esoteric redemption of art in the individual contemplation (for a detailed comparison, see *e.g.* Habermas 1979: 43).

[14] For Benjamin, at the dawning of the nineteenth century, in the degeneration of the bourgeoisie, art gradually loses its esoteric, asocial mode of production and perception. Some genres

degenerate under the pressure of the new technology: photography and film proliferate images once restricted to private collections of paintings; printing and journalistic writing obliterate the practice of story-telling; literature finds always less space in the modern newspaper seized by advertisements; cinema fragmentises not only the experience of the audience but also that of the actor. (These ideas are developed in detail in Benjamin's essays *The Storyteller* and *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproductibility.*)

[15] "According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labor, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding" (Benjamin 2003: 394).

[16] A useful discussion of the first (*Technik*) and second (*Technologie*) technique in Walter Benjamin's project is to be found in Esther Leslie's reading of Benjamin (Leslie 2000: viii). Here we could also guess utopian socialism's adhesion to Benjamin's own understanding of technique as a free liberating child-like game (Abensour 2002: 174).

[17] This conception of Benjamin is condensed in his fragment *A Different Utopian Will*, supposedly a draft version of the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.*

[18] In Benjamin's famous allegory of Angelus Novus, the image of Paul Klee's homonymous painting, the angel if "swept away by a storm that is calling from Heaven". The author states portentously: The storm is called progress (Benjamin 2003: 392).

[19] For further discussion of this concept, see Löwy 1996.

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