
II.7 Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School

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Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. Precursors of the Frankfurt School in Transference with the Slavic Body of Thought

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate how, on the one hand, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin perceived Russia – and marginally Poland – through the lenses of their respective theories and how, on the other hand, numerous Russian ideas frequently embodied in works of art shaped the very way in which the two comprehended art, history, and contemporaneity at large. This process of projection–reception remains relevant after many decades in view of the fact that the confrontation with the Slavic body of thought inspired Kracauer and Benjamin to formulate the ideas for which the Frankfurt School and, more generally, the German intellectual Left subsequently became celebrated.

Siegfried Kracauer had the greatest impact on the exchange with Russian thought conducted by the influential group of Jewish-German progressive thinkers who to this day receive the lion's share of the attention from German departments the world over. First, he was a leading intellectual figure in the circle of thinkers also encompassing Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor W. Adorno, whom he introduced to Benjamin as his long-time friend and a youthful protégé. Secondly, in his capacity as an editor of the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he influenced the selection of books Benjamin reviewed – and the present chapter owes much to the reviews they both penned for said publication. That this chapter rests on Kracauer and Benjamin's journalistic work reflects a recent surge in interest in Benjamin's entanglement in the Weimar Republic's media change (Duttlinger and Weidner 2019–20). From the new vantage point, Slavic elements appear more prominent than ever before.

Scholars in the field of comparative literature (for example Géry 2017) have pointed out striking resemblances between Walter Benjamin's notion of the storyteller and the Russian formalist Boris Èikhenbaum's theory of *skaz* (the imitation of oral narration in writing), both concepts having been explained in relation to the material of Nikolai Leskov's writings. I will argue that this concurrence is only one aspect of a broader complex encompassing the dialectical relations between the archaic and the modern, sleep and awakening, the word and the body (or gesture), Enlightenment and nature. All these problems – all of them the most influential tenets of Benjamin's philosophy of culture – took shape in a creative process fuelled by Slavic resources and oriented toward the comprehension and

justification of the Soviet Union. Benjamin's thought demonstrates a particular proximity to the Leningrad formalism of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Obshchestvo izucheniia Poëticheskogo Iazyka, OPOIaZ) and semantic palaeontology understood broadly so as to engulf Nikolai Marr's linguistics and Mikhail Bakhtin's vision of the carnival as a feast of endless life and the collective body (on communal ecstasy see sections 1 and 2). Benjamin's confrontation with Russian formalism foregrounds in the latter the elements generally not considered central to the movement but which have aroused ever-increasing interest, namely the legacy of Romanticism as precisely the sober, prosaic, and technically-minded attitude, 'the living word' (*zhivoe slovo*), i.e., the bodily performance of (literary) utterances, 'production art' and the 'literature of the fact', in the development of which, alongside Sergei Tret'iakov, whom Benjamin appreciated greatly, the old formalists Viktor Shklovskii and Osip Brik played an active role. In the light of Benjamin's comments, Shklovskii's formalism shares with Marr's semantic palaeontology the assumption of the historicity of perception and the general ways in which the human body thinks, speaks, behaves and experiences (the world and itself) (on semantic paleontology see Galin Tihanov's chapter on this topic in this volume).

1 Relative identities: Germans, Russians and Dostoevskii

The transfer of Russian ideas to the German intellectual milieu of the first four decades of the twentieth century bore a resemblance to the situation of transference in Freudian therapy, given that the Germans redirected to Russia the fascination and enthusiasm which they had experienced towards the Ancient Greeks at the turn of the nineteenth century, the time when German modern identity was formed (Chytry 1986; Marchand 1996; Ferris 2000). The situation of transference explains why the engagement with Russian ideas bore the traits of "reception in distraction", to use the term with which Benjamin described going to the movies (Benjamin 2002a [1935–1936], 120); fascination intermingled with philological ignorance as many an intermediary, Kracauer and Benjamin included, had a less than rudimentary command of the Russian language (Benjamin 1991a [1927] *passim*), often relying on stereotypical notions relating to the "national character" of the Russians. With regard to philological proficiency, Kracauer and Benjamin differed from their prodigious predecessors from the turn of the nineteenth century, who defined Germanness by relating it to the Greek ideal. But other than that, Kracauer and Benjamin took up the tried and tested figures of thought about

the role of the Other in the advent of the self. Kracauer repeats in his early but consequential essay titled “Nietzsche und Dostojewski” (1921, “Nietzsche and Dostoevskii”, 1990a) the scheme once formulated by Friedrich Hölderlin (1988 [1801]), whose popularity was then enjoying a resurgence. (Benjamin wrote about him in 1996a [1914–1915] and probably took some cues from his notion of *caesura* (Hölderlin 2001 [1804], 64–68) while working on his notions of discontinuity and the dialectical image – cf. below; moreover, he devoted his formative works to the epoch of Romanticism and Goethe – 1996b [1920]; 1996c [1924–1925].) According to Hölderlin, the Germans as a nation epitomise a mirror reversal of the Greeks with a view to two essential features which prefigure Nietzsche’s dichotomy of the Dionysian and the Apollonian – in Hölderlin’s terms: the “fire from heaven” and the “clarity of the presentation”, i. e., the formal (Hölderlin 1988 [1801]: 149). Just as the Greeks, unbridled by nature, had to adopt the strictly formal classical form in order to attain full humanity, so too must the phlegmatic Germans admit more fire to their personal and political lives. Kracauer projects these figures of thought onto the Germans and the Russians, as represented by their most distinctive individuals, Nietzsche and Dostoevskii.

In the eyes of both conservatives and progressives, Dostoevskii commonly embodied the Super-Russian who in the situation of transference holds answers to German woes. Hermann Hesse stated plainly in 1918 that without doubt Germany’s youth regarded Dostoevskii, and not Goethe or Nietzsche, as their great writer (Koenen 2005, 350); Thomas Mann (1986 [1920], 109) wrote in 1920 about Dostoevskii’s reign over ‘European’ (in Germany it usually means ‘German’) youth. As in the case of the translations of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century (Höfele 2016), some Germans believed to have enhanced Dostoevskii so that in the future the world would be able to take possession of the Russian Dostoevskii only through the mediation of the German one (Koenen 2005, 351–352). In accordance with Dostoevskii’s own worldview, he was celebrated mostly by the conservative circles; the trailblazer of the ‘conservative revolution’, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, together with the Russian culture pessimist Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, edited the German version of Dostoevskii’s collected writings. However, revolutionary thinkers such as Ernst Bloch also mimicked the Russian’s sombre apocalyptic style and frequently evoked his name in a utopian context (Bloch 1918, 184, 216, 431–432). And in this spirit, I would like to read Kracauer’s essay on Nietzsche and Dostoevskii and some passages from Benjamin as attempts to appropriate the significant writer, admittedly a conservative one, for the progressive revolution, which should nevertheless render the entire past available to enfranchised humanity.

In “Nietzsche and Dostoevskii”, Kracauer fills in Hölderlin’s scheme of trans-cultural reversal to the effect that Germans now correspond with the formal, the

Apollonian, the individualist, and the upward movement, whereas the Russians appear as the informal, Dionysian, communal, and downward-striving people (Kracauer 1990a [1921], 98–99). German youth cannot, however, identify with either ideal; confronted with the choice between individualism and communitarianism, they balk (Kracauer 1990a [1921], 102). As is so often the case in critical German thought, the danger itself conceals the salvation: the impossibility to take sides amounts to the proper answer. What the identity crisis of youth lays bare is, according to Kracauer, the true nature of the two nations. In harmony with Hölderlin's model, the Apollonian nature of the Germans, their individualism, turns out to be nothing but a defensive reaction to their own nature, endowed with a proclivity towards orgiastic and mystical ecstasy, as Nietzsche's intellectual biography purportedly demonstrates. The Russians' (Dostoevskii's) tendency towards a dissolution in the unity with humanity directed toward God results from overcoming innate individualism, the proponent of which the young Dostoevskii supposedly had been before the punishment and the tsar's clemency made him a new man (Kracauer 1990a [1921], 104). The undecidedness of German youth attests to its intuitive openness to the ideal of the whole human which reconciles the formal with the informal, unites the upward and the downward tendencies, Germans and Russians. The people, *das Volk*, embodies the "third party", the mediator who strives towards an ideal while standing in solidarity with the huddled masses; however, the mediator's spirit still remains muffled, dull (*dumpf*, Kracauer 1990a [1921], 107). The youth ought to awaken the people's spirit without, however, forcing it to relinquish their universality and spontaneity. As I will demonstrate below, this figure of thought will be prominent in the dialectics of the Enlightenment developed by Kracauer using the material of Soviet prose (see section 4).

In "Nietzsche and Dostoevskii", Kracauer refrains from foisting upon his readers a utopian ideal of an archaic community. On the contrary, he validates its qualities as only a point of reference and departure for a future-oriented youth culture. Moreover, a traditional culture simply cannot survive in the modern world. In his report on a public lecture by the long-standing minister of culture Anatolii Lunacharskii, Kracauer expands on the different meanings phrases acquire while travelling across time and space; the Russians' apparent scientism in fact expresses something completely different than the aspirations of the nineteenth century (Kracauer 1990b [1931], 397). The same applies to the term "the people", which no longer evokes Slavophile sentiments.

On another occasion, Kracauer deems his vision of the people instrumental in understanding the culture of the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union purportedly makes a great leap in 1930, Kracauer states that in the Soviet Union, "under the guise of Marxism, contemporary Slavdom (*Slaventum*) is lived out" (Kracauer 1990c [1930], 183). He mentions in this context Dostoevskii and Vladimir Solov'ev

and adds: “One only half understands Russian communism if one deliberately overlooks its reliance on the national” (Kracauer 1990c [1930], 183). Not that the Soviet cultural activists, who faced the task of implementing proletarian culture in an overwhelmingly rural country, were unaware of this: the quality of *narodnost*’ (popularity/nationality) soon became a distinctive feature of Socialist Realism. But Kracauer also foregrounded another element of the Russian communitarian legacy present in the Soviet project. The former bears on Soviet socialism in that its creators understand their work in religious or even ecclesiastical terms. For example, Lunacharskii likens socialism in the period of its construction to an *ecclesia militans* (church militant) and its eventual triumph would amount to an *ecclesia triumphans* (church triumphant, Kracauer 1990b [1931], 397).

An important aspect of this secularised “doctrine of salvation” (*Heilslehre*, Kracauer 1990b [1931], 397) is the seriousness of the Soviet approach to even the most minute things, which tends to be regarded in the light of the ultimate truth. It is precisely this interest in theory that Kracauer appreciates. He describes theory’s importance for everyday life as a continuous confrontation of quotidian practices with theory; every activity turns out to have a political meaning (Kracauer 1990b [1931], 396). Germany’s spiritual life would profit – Kracauer (1990b [1931], 396) suggests – from such a decomposition of the apparent neutrality dominating discussions in Germany, while the Russians attest to the fact that everything is political and thus theoretical. Serious theory thus appears to combine science with the doctrine of salvation.

Benjamin likewise devoted one of his early essays (1996d [1917]) to Dostoevskii, specifically to his novel *Idiot* (1868, *The Idiot*). The preoccupation with Dostoevskii inconspicuously frames Benjamin’s oeuvre, as the essay contains the first formulation of the notion of the “aura”, which will be essential in his late works in media theory (see section 2). Benjamin depicts Prince Myshkin, the hero of Dostoevskii’s novel, as somebody who travels between Russia with its boundless life and the West firmly set on individualism. Hence in Benjamin, too, Dostoevskii appears as a figure of cultural transference regarded in Hölderlin’s and Nietzsche’s categories. As I will show in the next section, Benjamin’s rendering of Dostoevskii correlates with another grand topic in the former’s philosophy of culture, dream and awakening, to which the unfinished *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*) in particular was (to be) devoted. The image of Dostoevskii in Benjamin’s writings oscillates between a dream, which must be confronted with the soberness of an operative artist like Sergei Tret’iakov, and the moment of awakening, in which all pieces of the dream fall into place.

2 Dream and awakening: from Hofmannsthal's *The Tower* to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact

But it was Poland, Dostoevskii's *bête noire*, which provided the arena where Benjamin's most important motifs – dream and awakening, myth and reflection, body and word – converged. The action of Pedro Calderón's play *La vida es sueño* (1635, *Life is a Dream*) is set in Poland; the setting remained unchanged in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 'tragic drama' (*Trauerspiel*) *Der Turm* (1925/1927, *The Tower*) based on Calderón's prototype. In his first review of Hofmannsthal's reworking of Calderón from 1926 (two years later, Benjamin also penned a review of a new version of the play – Benjamin 1999a [1928]), Benjamin refers to the mythical Poland of the tragic drama as an arena where politics consist in radical uncertainty as to whether we find ourselves in a dream or in reality. In all versions of the tragic play, King Basilio imprisons his son Segismundo in a tower in order to avoid the fulfilment of an oedipal prophecy. One day, the king frees the prince by way of trial, convincing him that he only dreamt his incarceration, but when the prince displays his roughness, the king has him imprisoned again and persuaded that the entire adventure was just a dream. The plot appealed to Benjamin's theoretical imagination. The passages from dream to reality and back serve as a master metaphor in Benjamin's concept of history. He perceives the tragic drama as an allegory of the fact that dreams are the royal road to the meaning of history: "The dream as the lynchpin of historical event – this is [Hofmannsthal's] fascinating, strange formula" (Benjamin 1991b [1926], 31). And just as the historian described in Benjamin's mature work, Hofmannsthal leads his audience into the awakened world, the *Wachwelt* (Benjamin 1991b [1926], 31).

In his unfinished magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin states: "The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian" (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 464). And in another fragment:

Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else. [*The Arcades Project*], accordingly, deals with awakening from the nineteenth century. (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 464)

The moment of awakening is paradigmatic for the historian of culture because it unifies all the *gestalten* of false consciousness, which truthfully express the false conditions in which they emerged, with an ultimate state of consciousness that sees through them and arranges them in a meaningful way. The awakening can be understood both in economic-political and theological terms (since theological

metaphors manage the distribution of political imaginary even in the minds of Soviet operatives like Lunacharskii). Benjamin parallels the moment of awakening with the “now of recognisability” of the “dialectic image”, an instant in which “what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 463) and to show its actual nature:

Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the “now of recognizability”, in which things put on their true – surrealist – face. (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 463–464)

The fundamental issue as to why the main task of historical materialist consists in combining the dream and the waking state becomes less perplexing when it is related to the Soviet discussions concerning proletarian culture. At the same time, such a contextualisation of Benjamin reveals that even the most esoteric and quasi-theological areas of his thought were permeated with considerations on current political issues, most notably Soviet ideology. The utmost pressing issue in the relations between formalist literary theory as the voice of the avant-garde and the Bolshevik state concerned the attitude towards the pre-revolutionary past (the dream-reality). Should the proletariat create its own culture from scratch, renouncing all achievements of the past as expressions of false consciousness, as the futurists, the Left Front of Art (Levyi front iskusstv, LEF) and some representatives of the *proletkul't* (‘proletarian culture’) would have it, or should the proletariat perceive itself as the rightful heir of the whole of human history? Benjamin suggests a kind of “historical apocatastasis” (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 459) as a result of which all elements of the past without exception are “brought into the present” (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 459). However, they are altered, displaced in the dialectical process of destroying the previous contexts (cf. Benjamin’s comments on the nature of criticism, for example in 2003 [1928], 180–182). The whole past thus belongs to the liberated working class, but the past turns out to be something different than it was before the professional historian began his or her work of fragmentation and montage. The answer to the question as to whether Benjamin proposed his own separate approach to the problem of legacy or just tried to implement the “Leninist approach” (Garzonio and Zalambani 2011, 14) to the best of his abilities depends on the scope of the destructive work. According to Lenin, all elements of past culture could be used in the construction of socialism and Benjamin’s cringeworthy kowtowing to Lenin in his review of the former’s correspondence with Maksim Gor’kii on religion and myth suggests he might wish to raise the banner of Leninism (Benjamin 1991c [1926]). The discussions of the 1920s on the pre-revolutionary legacy were placed in a new light after the instauration of Socialist Realism in 1934. During the First Congress of Soviet Writers, where

the doctrine of Socialist Realism was proclaimed, Maksim Gor'kii spoke about the necessity of mythology and mythological thinking in socialist creation (Gor'kii 1977 [1935]). Socialism was to combine collective mythmaking with the sobriety of an engineer, which corresponds with Benjamin's moment of awakening, likewise consisting of dream and clearheaded re-structuration. Was Benjamin's *Arcades Project* simply a Socialist Realist take on the cultural history of the nineteenth century? It definitely repeated the most general tenets of Socialist Realism. However, since Socialist Realism imitated the aesthetics and the poetics of nineteenth-century prose, Benjamin's theory and practice of the dialectical image, which leans on the latest innovations in the humanities and the arts and does not resemble or imitate but displaces and reinterprets, derails the official doctrine. In this veritably Kafkaesque way, the strictest conformity with party policy turns out to be the most subversive.

While Proust, whom Benjamin regards as the poet of awakening (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 464) and translates into German during his visit to Moscow in preference to learning Russian (1991a [1927], 298, 327), prompts the organisation of the materialist image of the past, the poet of the dream – the nightmare – is none other than Dostoevskii. Benjamin writes in a review of a contemporary Russian writer that the experience of finishing reading a Dostoevskii novel differs drastically from what one undergoes with other writers. Whereas closing a book usually resembles closing the door while going outside, the Dostoevskii reader has to come to; he must collect himself:

I have to, as when waking, find my bearings. While reading, I feel only so shadow-like, as if I were a dreamer. It is because Dostoevskii delivers my bounded consciousness to the petrifying laboratory of his imagination, exposes it to events, visions, and voices in which my consciousness becomes alien to me and dissolves. It surrenders unconditionally even to the most minor of his characters, it is bound, at his mercy. (Benjamin (1991d [1927], 64)

Dostoevskii is the primordial poet of the dream – and likewise of the 'aura'. Benjamin introduces the very important notion of his theory of media – the contemporary mode of perception is characterised precisely by the dissolution of the "aura" (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 104–105) – in an essay on Dostoevskii's *The Idiot*, published in 1917, but written even earlier. The two occurrences of the word 'aura', separated by two decades, cannot be deemed merely homonymous, since the Dostoevskii aura possesses the two most important qualities of the aura as outlined in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility" ("Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", 1935–1936): an auratic work of art, on the one hand, pertains to a particular place in time and space and on the other it evokes the feeling of an insurmountable distance, hailing from the cultic origins of art. As for the first quality, "[i]n even the most perfect reproduction,

one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place”, writes Benjamin in 1936 (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 103). The embeddedness of every work of art in a unique context amounts to founding auratic artworks’ most cherished qualities – genuineness and situatedness in tradition. Similarly, for Dostoevskii as Benjamin sees him during World War One, i.e., as the “great nationalist”,

there is no profound human impulse which would not find its decisive place in the aura of the Russian spirit. The ability to represent such impulses together with their aura, freely suspended in the context of the nation and yet inseparable from it, is perhaps the quintessence of freedom in the great art of this writer. (Benjamin [1917] 1996, 78; translation altered)

Furthermore, the profoundly auratic art of Dostoevskii demands a respectful distance, which likewise defines the aura in the later essay on reproducibility: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 104–105). In the case of *The Idiot* (read before 1917) the distancing force of the aura is so strong that it inhibits the critic in conducting his destructive procedures. Whereas in Benjamin’s later thought criticism displays a resolve towards works of arts which the critic fragments with the aim of creating dialectical images while at the same time destroying their beautiful appearance, in 1917 Dostevskii’s aura strikes awe into the heart of the reader: “Criticism can justify its right to approach works of art only by respecting their territory and taking care not to trespass on that forbidden soil” [Again, the auratic work of art is thought of as a special place – M.M.] (Benjamin 1996d [1917], 78–79).

In Benjamin’s theoretical imagination, the polar opposite of the dreamy and auratic Dostevskii is another Russian writer, Sergei Tret’iakov, the hero of the lecture “Der Autor als Produzent” (1936, “The Autor as Producer”) and, incognito, of “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility”. Benjamin’s biographer stresses that he repeatedly tried to publish the “Work of Art” essay in the Soviet Union and wrote in a letter to Margarete Steffin (an actress and a translator, one of Bertolt Brecht’s closest collaborators) that it would mean a lot to him if Tret’iakov could acquaint himself with this article (Jäger 2017, 309). Tret’iakov, who, incidentally, spoke excellent German and needed no translation into Russian, represents in Benjamin the fading of the aura in the shape of a radical reduction of the distance between the author and the audience. Any member of the reading public can – thanks to the new means of literary production such as a newspaper, magazine, or radio – assume the function of the creator (Benjamin 1999c [1934], 770–772; 2002a [1935–36], 114–115). This exchangeability of positions between authors and receivers hinges on the organisational role of the writer. The “opera-

tional writer”, as Tret’iakov sees him, intervenes in reality, taking the side of the proletariat and changing the conditions in accordance with the most progressive (awakened) consciousness. He takes, for instance, an active part in establishing collective farms. In the controversy within Russian Marxism concerning the role of literature and art in general – should it reflect reality as Georgii Plekhanov would have it, or should it organise it, as Aleksandr Bogdanov and the *proletkul’t* and the avant-garde posited? (Novozhilova 1968, 20; Owczarek 1979, 14–25) – Benjamin sides with the latter stance. Consequently, he can assume that the proper political tendency of the work guarantees its artistic refinement, that, in other words, the political tendency, which always ultimately relates to the proper usage of the means of production, encompasses the successful deployment of literary devices, i. e., the literary means of production (Benjamin 1999c [1934], 768–770). A writer not only works on products, but he incessantly develops the means of production too; the organisational function of his writing consists precisely in this double task, which endows his work with exemplary qualities, potent enough to turn a reader into a writer. Thanks to Tret’iakov – Benjamin repeats in both essays – labour or work (*Arbeit*) itself speaks.

The difference between a Dostoveskii and a Tret’iakov is best expressed in “The Work of Art...” in the form of an opposition between the magician and the surgeon (*Opérateur* – Benjamin 1991e [1939], 495–496 – a clear allusion to Tret’iakovs “operative writer” as well as to the cameraman, the *Kameraopérateur*):

The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient’s body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. [...] – Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 115–116)

And the painter is to the cinematographer as Dostoevskii is to Tret’iakov. Nevertheless, the materialist historian does not have to take sides: the moment of awakening by no means involves the abandonment of Dostoevskii in favour of Tret’iakov, but rather a synthesis of the two moments. This is the reason why Benjamin – in contradistinction to Kracauer (1990d [1931]) – could spare himself the indignation at Tret’iakov’s disregard for the writer’s individuality and his or her particular gift. Upon hearing Tret’iakov, Kracauer could not stand the effacement of the borderline separating a profane native speaker of a language who can pen a letter to the editor from a creator steeped in captivating the audience. For Benjamin, Tret’iakov’s sober-mindedness, anti-auratic as it were, amounts to being just

an element of the dialectic process of the materialist historiography of culture – an element which, by way of reacting with remnants of the dreamworld, enters a dialectical image of tradition. Just as in the essay about surrealism, the roughness of, say, Adam Mickiewicz, Mikhail Bakunin, and Lautréamont's "revolt" should coincide with a clearheaded engineering to result in a "revolution" (Benjamin 2002b [1929], 215) and just as in the finale of *Einbahnstraße* (1928, *One-Way Street*) modern technology opens a chance for humanity to renew its ancient liaison with the universe by way of collective ecstasy (Benjamin 1996e [1928], 486–487), so the angel of history needs the two wings to soar and recuperate the past. These central motives of Benjamin's thought resonate with the Soviet discussion on myth and technology in Socialist Realism and reality as expressed in Gor'kii's programmatic speech at the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.

Furthermore, the synthesis of Dostoevskii's dream-and-mythmaking with the modern technique of montage already occurred in Dostoevskii. The technique of montage itself was prefigured in Dostoevskii's *Besy* (1871–1872, *Demons*). Benjamin writes on his uncompleted work on the Parisian passages: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show", with the help of ready-made unflashy quotes (Benjamin 1999b [1982], 460). One of the protagonists of Dostoevskii's novel, Lizaveta Nikolaevna, discussed with Shatov the idea of a book consisting only of citations from newspapers and showing a complete image of "the has been":

A multitude of metropolitan and provincial newspapers and other journals is published in Russia, and these report daily on a multitude of events. The year goes by, the newspapers are everywhere stacked up in bookcases, or turned into litter, torn up, used for wrapping things or for hats. Many of the facts published produce an impression and remain in the public memory, but are then forgotten over the years. Many people would like to refer to them later, but what an effort it is to search through that sea of pages, often without knowing the day, or the place, or even the year when the event occurred. And yet, if all these facts for a whole year were brought together in one book, with a certain plan and a certain idea, with a table of contents, an index, a classification by month and day – such a combined totality could present a whole characterization of Russian life for that whole year, notwithstanding the extremely small portion of facts as compared with all that had happened. [...] [T]he main thing was the plan and the way the facts were presented. (Dostoevskii 2011 [1871], 128)

Benjamin came up with the plan to focus the symbolic history of the nineteenth century on the Parisian arcades as a kind of dreamy space of commodity fetishism shaped by implacable economic factors.

This is what the ideal awakening would look like if Benjamin were able to bring his project to completion. Instead, a rude awakening occurred in the form of Stalin's complicity in the outbreak of World War II. The Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact achieved what the Moscow show trials could not (Jäger 2017, 286, 316) and swept

away Benjamin's illusions about the Soviet Union and with it a big chunk of the foundations of his later thought, whose starting point was the strict distinction between fascist and anti-fascist ('proletarian') tendencies and the identification of the latter with Soviet communism. His theory embodied a stage in the Soviet propaganda – the 'popular front' manoeuvre, which aimed to turn all non-fascist political movements into the broad margins of the Komintern – when he preached a philosophy of art, the most important feature of which was its complete unsuitability for fascism (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 102); and when he claimed that the autonomy of the contemporary writer actually means a surrender to the service of the proletariat (Benjamin 1999c [1934], 768–769) because one needs to respond to the fascist anesthetisation of politics with the politization of aesthetics (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 122), i. e., a purposeful combination of sober-mindedness and ecstasy, waking state with oneiric visions. Actual politics bypassed the thought which imagined itself as belonging to the organising committee of reality itself.

3 Materialism, formalism, and the bodily thought

I would like now to come back to my starting point drawing on Benjamin's review of Hofmannsthal's *The Tower*. Here, Benjamin not only introduces the dialectics of awakening, but also relates it to what would form the core of his take on historical 'materialism' – the relationship of the word to the body, which is the prototypical means of production and reproduction. The worker brings to the market his or her body and his or her mind, which usually interface with a machine. In Hofmannsthal, the word and the body meet in a place called 'the pre-tragic' (*das Vortragische*), testifying to the drama's origins in religious rites, which Benjamin conceives of in accordance with his time as a dual action: verbal behaviour that accompanies ceremonial gestures. Accordingly,

the prototype of the dramatic tension is the tension between word and action. [...] [N]either a tension in the province of words alone (one of the debate), nor the tension of the speechless struggle (of the fight as such) is dramatic. The only thing that is dramatic is the tension of the ritual, which oscillates between the poles of activity and speech itself. (Benjamin 1991b [1926], 32)

Hofmannsthal's tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*) transports its viewers into the vicinity of the pre-tragic because tragedy (*Tragödie*), which Hofmannsthal renounces, stages as a later formation the tension between "body and language – action and word" (Benjamin 1991b [1926], 32) in a purely linguistic fashion (Benjamin 1991b [1926], 32–33).

The concept of the pre-tragic weighs on Benjamin's attitude towards literary theory (precisely: literary formalism) and the sociology of language. As for literary formalism, it suffices to compare the contempt he expresses for the German formalist Oskar Walzel with his enthusiastic praise of Viktor Shklovskii – on grounds of the relation of their writing to their bodily experiences in time and space. In his Moscow diary, Benjamin (1991a [1927], 339; cf. 1999d [1927], 37–38) shudders at the thought that the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (Gosudarstvennaia Akademia khudozhestvennykh nauk, GAKhN) elected Walzel a member; the event mars his image of the Soviet Union. From Benjamin's earlier review of Walzel's seminal book *Das Wortkunstwerk* (1926, *The Literary Work of Art*) follows that he particularly disdains Walzel's pedantic detachment from his object. "What he studies," Benjamin writes in a review, "is not poetry itself, but writing and talking about it" (Benjamin 1991f [1926], 50). And he sharply distinguishes the Walzel-like kind of 'formal analysis' (*Formanalyse*) from another, masterly way of dealing with form which does not consist in superficial, albeit conscientious, application of methods to material, but in penetrating pragmatic contents (*Sachgehalte*) so thoroughly that "the curve of their heartbeat appears as the line of their form" (Benjamin 1991f [1926], 50). Whatever he means by that, Benjamin definitively stresses the dialectical unity of form and content and, moreover, the fact that their relationship is mediated by the body, its rhythms and shape. Benjamin praises in passing the mastery of the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl as opposed to Walzel's ways. A decade later, in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility", he expands on Riegl's and Franz Wickhoff's resourcefulness in demonstrating, using the material of art from the so-called eras of decadence, the historicity of human perception (Benjamin 2002a [1935–36], 104). The formalist master works, therefore, at the interface of the body and history. He or she relates, as it were, every work of art to the pre-tragic, the cultic origin of the work of art, and to the historicity of human (collective) sensibility contingent on the dominant forms of organisation (of production).

This is how Benjamin perceived "the Bolshevik epic writer" (Benjamin 1991g [1928], 108) Viktor Shklovskii, with whose work he became acquainted via the French translation of his *Sentimental'noe puteshestvie* (1923, *Sentimental Journey*). Benjamin puts Shklovskii's book in the context of the pre-tragic (without explicitly referring to the notion), i.e., he counts it among the works that show how "today, the most trained, the strictest thinking is forced to turn into political activity" (Benjamin 1991g [1928], 108). "There is nothing banal about Shklovskii's theories", affirms Benjamin, in crass contrast to his opinion of Walzel's bookish formalism, and he goes on to quote typical Shklovskiiianisms on how art is in its origin destructive and ironic, how it aims to produce unevenness by using the device of comparison, how the creation of new forms involves the canonisation of subaltern ones – Pushkin's point of departure is the friendship book,

Nekrasov draws on vaudeville and Blok on gypsy romances. Finally, Benjamin quotes Shklovskii's claim that the fate of protagonists, the time of action, of every element of narrative serves exclusively as a motivation of form (Benjamin 1991g [1928], 108–109). If the scholarly work of reconstructing the motivation behind forms is not to degenerate into a pedantry of lesser formalism, Benjamin suggests, the hero's fate, the time of his actions, every element of a narrative must affect or at least relate to the body. And this is exactly the topic of Shklovskii's *Sentimental Journey* as Benjamin perceives it, namely as a Baroque mediation on the futility of existence. That is, what interests him is the lived experience behind the paradoxical book which purports to be written by a sentimental formalist but shows no traces of sentimentalism and remains formless: "[T]he form of the book consists not in the mode of presentation (*Darstellung*), but in the previously experienced, in the perceived itself" (Benjamin 1991g [1928], 108). And further he identifies the form of the book as a gesture:

[I]f [Shklovskii] is right and the energy, the courage, the love he deployed against the chaos have achieved nothing, the clear, convincing gesture of this man is his book: an unforgettable gesture full of ruthless sadness (*Trauer*) and full of superior tenderness. (Benjamin 1991g [1928], 109)

Shklovskii therefore penetrates the pre-tragic domain of sadness, *Trauer*, where the negotiations between the word and the gesture take place. Benjamin's approach to Shklovskii's theory, seen as an expression of his embodied experiences in the space of revolutionary Russia, agrees with the mode of presentation adopted by the editor of Shklovskii's collected works, Ilia Kalinin, who classifies his writings as expressions of different aspects of the revolution (in politics, science, art, etc. cf. Shklovskii 2018). While unfolding in the latter writings the shock character of new media and the avant-garde art, Benjamin (2002a [1935–36], 118–119) does not refer to Shklovskii's conceptualisation of 'estrangement' (*ostranenie*), but he does correlate, as Shklovskii did, the renewal of perception with new sensual and bodily experiences enabled by the development of technology:

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second [...]. [T]he tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means, that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – taking their cue from tactile reception – through habit. (2002a [1935–36], 117, 120)

The active, gesticulating body of the speaking human would preoccupy Benjamin throughout his career, especially in relation to Kafka and Brecht. Accordingly, in the domain of linguistics his interest lies at the juncture of word and action. The

bulk of his report, dated 1935, on the most relevant works on the sociology of language (Benjamin 2002c [1935]; Gess 2012) concentrates not on the interpersonal exchanges but on the tension between the gesture or the “sound gesture” and articulated language. Benjamin assumes at the outset that “[t]he central problems of philology and sociology come together most naturally and obviously in the question of the origin of language” (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 68), which since the Baroque era entails dealing with onomatopoeia, expressive screams, and hand gestures. In this extremely interdisciplinary field of study, bordering on child and animal psychology, ethnology, and psychopathology (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 68), two Soviet scholars contribute most to the mapping of the space of the pre-tragic. Nikolai Marr produces the most convincing (for Benjamin) model of the connection between articulated language and the material process of production, whereas Lev Vygotskii (1929) elucidates the necessity of interruption and of making-difficult for thought to emerge – the motif is especially salient in relation to the importance of discontinuity in Benjamin’s philosophy (as in the notion of criticism, dialectic image, his understanding of epic theatre etc.). As for the genetic relationship between gestural and articulated language, Benjamin acknowledges (just as every citizen of the Soviet Union was supposed to back then) the authority of Nikolai Marr’s vision of the origin of language (Marr 1926).

Marr starts by acknowledging the hand as the principal tool of both production and communication. Prior to the invention of external tools, the hand managed communication in its entirety: “The hand or hands were a person’s tongue. Hand movements, facial expressions, and in some cases body movements as well were the only available means of linguistic creation” (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 74). The invention of articulated language depends on the invention of the first technical devices. Marr denies that

the hand ‘could have been replaced as the producer of a mental value – language – before it was replaced by tools as the producer of material goods [...]’ Rather, [...] ‘articulated language could not have emerged before mankind’s transition to productive work with the aid of artificially fashioned tools’. (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 74)

This vantage point allows Marr to put forward a history of language the principal collective of which is class as defined by its relationship to the means of production rather than ethnicity, the main hero of traditional historical linguistics and *Völkerpsychologie*.

In Benjamin’s eyes, Vygotskii supplements Marr’s theory, which relates the emergence of articulated language to the invention of tools (on Vygotskii also see Sylvia Sasse’s chapter on “‘Aesthetic Reaction’ and ‘Verbal Reaction’: Reader-response Criticism from Vygotskii to Voloshinov” in this volume). “But since the former activity is impossible without thought”, Benjamin points out soberly,

“there must have been a kind of thought which antedated speech” (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 81). Vygotskii looks for cues as to the nature of this thought in chimpanzees and children; Benjamin devotes most detailed attention to his acknowledging polemics with Jean Piaget’s concept of egocentric childhood language (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 82). Children under the age of six tend to mumble away in a continuous commentary on their playful activities, without showing any intention of communication. Vygotskii notices that children speak to themselves more frequently when confronted with an obstacle. Benjamin quotes Vygotskii’s conclusion “that impedance or interruption of a smooth-running occupation is an important factor in generating egocentric language. [...] Thinking is brought into action only when an activity which has run unhindered up to then is interrupted” (Benjamin 2002c [1935], 83). That is to say, if thought emerges, as Vygotskii assumes to Benjamin’s delight, in early childhood’s egocentric language, making a practical task difficult or interrupting it facilitates the inception of thinking. Consequently, one can depict both the formalistic device of making-difficult (*zatrudnenie*) and Benjamin’s special penchant for discontinuity in criticism as means of provoking thought.

Marr points to the passageway from quasi-theological or anthropological questions of the pre-tragic and the cultic function of the work of art to the historico-materialist focus on the means and the organization of production; Vygotskii, for his part, helps appreciate the significance of interruption and making difficult, which happen to be not only basic formal devices of Baroque and modernist art, but also the principal techniques of literary criticism.

4 The Russian dialectic of the Enlightenment

Literary techniques and devices thus relate to the body, and through the body the word and the thought permeate both animate and inanimate nature. In the art of Nikolai Leskov, as the prototypical storyteller for Benjamin,

storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling what is expressed gains support in a hundred ways from the work-seasoned gestures of the hand. [...] That old coordination among the soul, eye, and hand [...] is that of the artisan which we encounter wherever the art of storytelling is at home. In fact, one might go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life is not in itself a craftsman’s relationship – whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. (Benjamin 2002d [1936], 161–162)

Earlier on in this essay (Benjamin 2002d [1936], 160–161), Benjamin describes how the art of the storyteller Leskov gives the floor to the ‘voice of nature’ – crystals speak of the political history of Russia under the reign of Aleksander II. Storytellers, endowed with insight into matter, precede novelists, the chroniclers of the purely human. Indeed, the novel with its incessant search for the unachievable meaning of life – here the influence of Lukács’s *Die Theorie des Romans* (1971 [1916], *Theory of the Novel*) makes itself felt – marks the demise of the art of storytelling. The craftsman as the prototypical storyteller, on the one hand, combines the knowledge of faraway lands, since his apprenticeship comprised a journey, with the wisdom of sedentariness – he displays insight into space and time. On the other hand, his narratives coincide with the movements of his body, which gesticulates and works on animate and inanimate materials; he therefore draws on the ‘pre-tragic’. I would argue, however, that the storyteller serves not as a regressive ideal, pertaining to the patriarchal and rural Russia, but as a model of the proper approach to technique and material progress. The intellectual strives to establish a more fruitful rapport between the word (thought) and the material than mere domination. It is no accident that this future-oriented ideal came to Benjamin from Russia, since Kracauer likewise had located the lieu where the dialectics of the Enlightenment *avant la lettre* took place in the Soviet Union. Long before Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term in their book of the same title in 1947 (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947]), Kracauer described the very process in his Weimar essays – most notably in “Das Ornament der Masse” (1995 [1927], “The Mass Ornament”) and in at least two reviews of Soviet books in which, in contradistinction to his refined essays, he cuts right to the heart of the matter.

The dialectics of the Enlightenment explains how reason itself became irrational; how the instance which was supposed to dispel the power of mythical forces over human lives became the myth itself. Instead of waking us up, reason drives us deeper into the dream. A short answer to this conundrum points to the fact that reason reduced itself to the intellect; it identified with instrumental reason alone and thus became irrational. Instrumental reason is driven by fear and set on domination and control with the help of which it expects to do away with anxiety and inadequacy. It pursues the domination of nature by and in human beings and consequently the domination of some humans by others as a means of managing nature (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947], 11). In contrast, art displays – at least potentially – a true enlightenment, as it appeals to the whole human (soul, eye, and hand – to revert to Benjamin); it displays a coherent organisation which does not boil down to the blind violence of the struggle between man and nature. This partly explains why by Benjamin’s lights the organisational role of art trumps its mimetic function – which shows itself most clearly in the art of the avant-garde.

Kracauer observes first signs of the true Enlightenment in narratives on Soviet Russia. In Mikhail Sholokhov's *Tikhii Don* (1928–1932, 1940, *And Quiet Flows the Don*), the hero is “the natural community of the Cossacks” (Kracauer 1990e [1931], 277), which the story places in the situation of the revolution. The author knows that “it is nature, too, that in his Cossacks rears up against revolutionary knowledge, nature that can be bent and shaped, but never curtailed. On the basis of this insight, he affirms the revolution without negating the people” (Kracauer 1990e [1931], 278). In Sholokhov, it is the form of the epic time that allows nature to come to terms with itself in reason and reason to be reconciled with nature without truncating it (Kracauer 1990e [1931], 276–278). Similarly, Franz Carl Weiskopf's reportage from 1932 suggests to Kracauer that the Soviet Union may be the place where the dialectic of the Enlightenment is being brought to a fortunate conclusion. To begin with, the land is free from fear, the driving force of rampant instrumental reason, the very fear that serves as the distinctive feature of “our new nationalism: the fear that the intellect could cause harm to nature” (Kracauer 1990 f [1932], 166). In the light of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, the fascist celebration of the irrational amounts to its apparent opposite, obsessive control over nature. In contrast, Weiskopf's reportage tells a story about simple people who soak up polytechnical knowledge as a sponge and about the active role of nature in the industrial re-shaping of the land (Kracauer 1990 f [1932], 166–167). In Germany, one tends to confuse

two kinds of intellect (*Intellekt*): that which is itself a bad product of nature and which unfolds blindly and selfishly, and that which, thanks to its origin in reason (*Vernunft*), undertakes to regulate human society. The latter is not an enemy, but a friend of any nature that wants to be arranged at all, and the Russians only mean this second kind of intellect. This is clear from their relationship to technology. (Kracauer 1990 f [1932], 167)

Admittedly, they like to intoxicate themselves, not with technology as such, but with technology as placed at the service of society. And this is the only way the intellect can bound the arrogance of the nationalist principle driven by fear. Likewise, in this case, the scheme of thought outlived its real-life inspiration as the historical Soviet Union did not live up to its narrative depictions, the symbolic representation of which is the Chernobyl disaster in its technological and societal dimensions.

5 Conclusion: Back in Russia

As this chapter began with the Russo-German transference, so it concludes with the knowledge that the true relationship between mind and body, word and action, intellect and instinct, individuality and communality, the social and the national can only be attained in a transcultural setting.

Kracauer and Benjamin spun their theories while constantly referring to Russia and the Soviet Union. One can assume that without their fundamental illusions and deep knowledge about Eastern Europe they would probably have lacked the courage to formulate their most impactful ideas – they assumed the existence of a land in which the realisation of their notions of the dream and the awakening, embodied, narrative-based and non-violent reason seemed more likely. These ideas subsequently gained their own agency and had a bearing on the development of the humanities and, consequently, human reality.

For a long time, speakers of Russian were forced to ignore the input of Kracauer and especially Benjamin. While Kracauer's works on film appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1970s (Kracauer 1974, 1977), Benjamin had to wait for another two decades and the decline of the empire; his writings on the theory of media came first (Benjamin 1996 f), flanked by his *Moskauer Tagebuch* (*Moscow Diary*, 1997). The diary has aroused the interest of Russian researchers, who seek in it a vantage point from which to study Russian Modernism (as in the special issue of the journal *Logos* volume 28/1, 2018). Alongside abundant Russian translations, two approaches prevail in the process of reception. On the one hand, scholars scrutinize similarities with Russian thinkers. On the other hand, Igor' Chubarov (2018), Ivan Boldyrev (2012), Elena Vogman (2014, 2016) and others apply Benjamin's categories to describe the Russian avant-garde, while Krill Ospovat mostly focuses on the literature of the eighteenth century (Ospovat 2016a), but also on Andrei Belyi and Osip Mandel'shtam (Ospovat 2016b).

It is only recently that the situation has started to change so that delusional (dreamy, mythical) transference may become an aspect of a transfer taking place on a give-and-take basis. For the transfer to hold, the Western reader should remember how much Benjamin and Kracauer owe to Russian culture and to their own illusions about it.

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