



Recordando a

**Walter Benjamin**

Justicia, Historia y Verdad. *Escrituras de la Memoria.*

III SEMINARIO INTERNACIONAL  
POLÍTICAS DE LA MEMORIA

CENTRO CULTURAL DE LA MEMORIA HAROLDO CONTI  
Buenos Aires - Argentina

## **Benjamin, Brecht, Cinema**

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### **Resumen:**

Entre os diversos equívocos interpretativos relacionados ao ensaio “A obra de arte na era de sua reprodutibilidade técnica”, um dos mais comuns é a acusação de que nesse ensaio Benjamin teria adotado uma visão tecnológica-determinista do desenvolvimento das linguagens artísticas, segundo a qual as relações de produção capitalistas desapareceriam “naturalmente” no momento em que aprisionassem o desenvolvimento das forças produtivas (artísticas, neste caso). Nesta apresentação, pretendo analisar as relações entre o ensaio de Benjamin e os escritos de Brecht sobre a indústria cinematográfica alemã, para enfatizar o caráter militante do ensaio, cuja ênfase estaria na aliança entre, de um lado, o potencial revolucionário de certo tipo de cinema (aquele que recupera as energias revolucionárias identificadas por Benjamin no surrealismo e no teatro épico), e, de outro, a necessidade da luta política pela posse dos meios de produção.

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## **Benjamin, Brecht, Cinema**

In many academic circles – and this is certainly true in my own country – Walter Benjamin has become a fashionable name. In a way, that is the worst thing that could happen to his work, fashion being the opposite of critical power. No radical form of criticism can become fashionable without losing its soul. In the writings of a number of postmodern critics, Benjamin’s declaration of war against the Establishment has been watered down into a form of criticism of the media, in which attacks against selected products of the culture industry often reveal a secret fascination for them. This paper is based on the assumption that an analysis of Benjamin’s interest in comedy – in American film comedy, to be more precise – can be a good starting point from which to begin to recover the radical content of his cultural intervention.

Benjamin’s various writings on American comic films – culminating in the central role the reference to Chaplin plays in the seminal essay “The work of art in the age of its technological reproduction” (1934-36) – reveal the “elective affinities”, the strict and consequential conceptual and political homologies he identified between three cultural formulations, which he saw as training grounds for the development of a revolutionary use of the senses: the new technologies based on photography and film, Brecht’s epic theater and French Surrealism.

Perhaps the most controversial of these interventions is Benjamin’s well-known reflection on the revolutionary uses of film, associated to his praise of “low-brow” forms of the new art such as American popular comedy. Indeed, his essay on technological reproduction has all too often been misconstrued as a naïve appraisal of the new technologies, their inevitable thrust towards progressive uses, supposedly stemming from a belief in the triumphant praise of technical and industrial progress that



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was common in the Soviet Union. This sort of optimism, which Benjamin identified with the reformist, if not openly reactionary, trends of both the German Social Democracy and the Stalinism that came to dominate the various European CPs after the Third International, will become the explicit target of Benjamin's militant criticism, in which he claims that a productive "organization of pessimism" is "the call of the hour."

For those who, fueled by the revolutionary hopes of the 30's, were genuinely interested in discussing the "ownership of the means of production", Brecht's essays on his own attempts to write and make films had shattered any illusions the "optimists" still might have about the nature of film industry, both in its most advanced forms (Hollywood) as well as in the various indigenous attempts to imitate the "efficiency" of the American system in Germany, France and Russia. In the two texts that Brecht wrote, which were to constitute a major influence on Benjamin's reproduction essay, Brecht had demonstrated the damaging effects of the verticalization of film production, pioneered and fully developed in Hollywood by the end of the 1920's and already a central pillar of the German production system by the beginning of the 1930's. The system, described in its essential traits, consists of the "trustification" of the industry, with the control of production, distribution and exhibition in the hands of finance executives. The new emphasis on efficiency and productivity dealt a major blow on the artistic integrity of films, but no other genre felt the effects of this process as deeply as the comedy. This process can be better understood by focusing on one single, major innovation demanded by the studios: the introduction of the modern film script. For most comedians working in the film industry in the 1920's, the script consisted basically of a short description of the main events of the storyline (a central tradition in European comedy since the *Commedia del Arte*), which they then developed by the creative use of improvisation on the set, with comic effects gaining precedence over plot



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development and character psychology. The new form of scriptwriting introduced a new form of control over each step of the production by demanding that each sequence of the film be described in detail, so that producers could better analyze the “feasibility” of the project, while making sure that no time or film was “wasted” both on the set and in the post-production phase. The introduction of a series of new functions, including that of the editor, depended on this new division of labor, based on the detailed description of the script so that each person involved in the production would be able to work in a conveyor-belt fashion, without the assistance of the film director.

With these new forms of efficiency, producers were able to smuggle new forms of “bourgeois respectability”, thus “encouraging in all possible ways the commendation and support of the moving picture business by the better class of the community”, or, to put it more bluntly, ensuring that the film industry would be a reliable form of investment for ever larger segments of the moneyed public. These entailed a strict obedience of the norms of dramatic construction, based on realism, plot development and character internal motivation, with loose threads being either subsumed under the demands of “coherent” plot or character development or regarded as examples of bad taste, immorality or poor narrative construction. Theoretical and critical discourse on this question has proliferated since then, but mostly in keeping with the protocols of the situation: although film histories do not substantiate a simple narrative of any kind, most have obediently toed the line. Few, if any, critics, despite their differences on the matter, have seriously challenged the hegemonic view of American film moving towards greater and greater levels of respectability and aesthetic sophistication, triumphantly embodied in the films of Griffith, who summarized and surpassed the works of the so-called primitives to create a coherent and organic structure based on plot development and character motivation. According to this logic, modern film only



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truly appeared when it discovered its narrative vocation, its mission of telling well-rounded stories.

In this task the film trusts were greatly aided by new forms of censorship. In 1908 the newly founded Motion Picture Patents Company, whose explicit aim was to establish motion pictures as the entertainment of “all classes” rather than the “theater of the working class man”, divulged the ways it would deal with “bad taste and immorality”. Indeed, the Board made it a principle to judge each film as a narrative whole. A revealing passage of their “manifesto” explains that “...if the incident is essential to the plot of the story and the development of the character of the play, it is often permissible if not necessary to show some scenes which are in themselves open to criticism but which have sufficient value in the play to make it obligatory upon the Board to pass them to avoid arbitrarily and irrationally limiting the possibilities of photoplay development”.

For Benjamin, the struggle between the gag and narrative linearity, or, to use the well-known terms, between a cinema of attractions, with its staccato jolts of surprise and jagged rhythm, and what came to be known as the Hollywood classical style and its rules of continuity and realism, was far from inevitable or even commendable. Rather than assuming a teleological logic, according to which the later styles of cinema are a sort of natural norm that early cinema envisioned but was not yet able of realizing, Benjamin claimed that early comedy was a full-fledged realization of the most advanced features of the poetics of epic theater and surrealism. And instead of seeking some sort of critical accommodation, by claiming that “attractions are not abolished by the classical paradigm, they simply find their place within it”, Benjamin saw the confrontation between gag and narrative as a site for political struggle, with early comedy as a “memory as it flashed up at a moment of danger.”



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As the surviving documents amply demonstrate, both the French Surrealists and Brecht were great admirers of early American comedy. One of the earliest theoretical attempts to assess Chaplin's achievements from a broad perspective was written by Surrealist poet Philippe Soupault in 1928 and the next year Luis Buñuel wrote an eloquent review of Buster Keaton's *College*, which he praised for being "as beautiful as a bathroom", for smelling of "disinfection", of "freedom from tradition." In 1929, Benjamin first met Brecht, while working on his essay on Surrealism, and both talked about the instructive example afforded by Charlie Chaplin, whose film *The Circus* had opened in Berlin at the beginning of the year and had impressed Benjamin as "the first work of maturity in the art of film." In later years, both would turn to Chaplin's work for examples of what they thought were typical instances of epic construction. Brecht famously quoted the scene in which Chaplin's tramp eats the boot in *The Gold Rush* (1925) as an instance of the way in which the peculiar dialectic between the familiar and the strange worked to produce distancing effects: "Eating the boot with proper table manners, removing the nail like a chicken bone, the index finger pointing outward."

For Benjamin it was a question of, as he put it in his essay on Surrealism, winning "the energies of intoxication for the revolution." In the case of Surrealism, as indeed with film comedy and political theater, the progressive direction – the one taken by André Breton's revolutionary poetics – was far from guaranteed. Surrealism was in constant danger of deteriorating either into a mere "poetic and literary school", (which in fact it did, leading to the anarchy of the post-war avant-gardes and indeed to post-modernism), or into total subservience to a totalitarian commitment to the revolution, as was the case with Louis Aragon's conversion to Stalinism and social realism. At the service of a revolutionary poetics was the surrealist concept of intoxication of the senses, whose political translation Benjamin saw as the intoxication caused by thinking,



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in an anarchic regime for the arts based on a dissatisfaction with the present, in the spirit of the philosophical realism of the Middle Ages, praised by the Surrealists: rather than a realism of “what is”, the realism of “if I think about it, it exists”, the realism of what is to come, essential for any generation which sees as its main task the construction of new forms of social organization. For Benjamin the surrealist dialectic between the familiar and the strange, its inconceivable analogies and connection between events, its use of objects jolted out of their utilitarian, ordinary uses were all training grounds of this new sensibility, this re-enchantment of the world. For him, the “profane illumination” afforded in this way must be considered a potential source of sabotage from the perspective of bourgeois instrumental reason, provoking a hostility which would force the artist beyond the boundaries of scandal and its highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition (in fact, it would not be long before the Nazis began to burn books and kill artists and intellectuals).

In the dialectic between the familiar and the strange, Benjamin not only identified one the basic traits of the Surrealist poetics, but also a formulation of Brecht’s epic theater and a description of the most common procedures of early comedy and its peculiar sense of realism. For Brecht had also, against the accusations of dogmatism and political catechism frequently leveled at him, famously described the pedagogy of epic theater as a “pedagogy of the senses”, based on the assumption that thinking can be the most pleasurable of all human activities, with laughter taking a special place in the hierarchy of human mental activities: for him, laughing at an event means being able to spot its contradictions. From this perspective, the fragmented structure of early film comedy justified itself as the springboard for this new kind of thinking: instead of a linear construction based on the rules of realism, with one event leading naturally to the next, thought realizes itself by building associations between disparate materials, by



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laying bare causal networks and emphasizing the dynamics of development, with the storyline as a mere pretext on which the comedian hangs his suite of attractions, in a highly paratactic structure with no attraction preparing the way for the next, but in a simple rule of succession functioning, as in vaudeville and other forms of popular entertainment.

For both Benjamin and Brecht the advantages afforded by the new technology of film in relation to literature and theater were obvious: with its emphasis on shock, on mobility, on montage and fragmentation, on the adoption of different points of view to tell many stories at the same time, on the creative use of the juxtaposition between disparate materials, the new means was specially prepared to meet the challenge, with early comedy at the forefront, with its obstinate refusal to follow rules of realism, continuity and stylistic transparency. For the population of the new dynamic urban centers, for whom the experiences of shock and mobility were part of the very texture of daily life, no other artistic language could match its potential.

The same Philippe Soupault who wrote about Chaplin provides a surrealist vision of the connection between the city and the world of film:

We used to walk the cold, deserted streets in search of accident, an encounter, life. To distract ourselves we had to hitch our imaginations to sensational dreams. [...] One of us, the strongest among us, declared: "I'll be a trapper or thief or explorer or hunter or miner or driller." One day you saw huge posters, as long as snakes, stretching out along the walls. At each street corner a man, his face covered with a red handkerchief, was pointing a revolver at the unconcerned passerby. You thought you heard galloping, a motor kicking over, screams of death. We descended on the cinemas and understood that everything had changed. [...] Wide-eyed, we read of crimes, departures, wonders, nothing less than the poetry of our age. We did not understand what was happening. We



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lived at speed, with passion. It was a beautiful time. Doubtless many other things contributed to its beauty, but American cinema was one of its finest ornaments.

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's most ambitious work, he would insist on the homologies between the new technologies and the activities of the *flâneur* of the modern urban centers, both involved in the task of collecting images in the rather chaotic urban space of modernity. In film comedy Benjamin found a powerful equivalent to the dialectical image he encountered in the streets of Paris. If the objects in the Parisian arcades, the former temples of bourgeois consumption, were described as dialectical images for showing what had been the climax of progress and technology as irrevocably decaying, comedy provided a revolutionary reversal of those images. If the formerly luxurious objects of the arcades had been the expression of the victory of the reaction and the scorn of the French bourgeoisie towards the French people, defeated in the street battles of 1848, film comedy, as described in the reproduction essay, was the revenge of the common people, who went to the movies to see a worker mastering technology, instead of being overpowered by it. "... the majority of city dwellers", Benjamin claims, "throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph."

From this perspective, the film gag can be seen as one of the most perfect expressions of this revenge: what people such as Chaplin and Buster Keaton had risked their lives to do in vaudeville could be made perfect in the new media (from all the masters of early film comedy, Keaton was the most eloquent in the description of the physical risks



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involved in the very violent act he performed in vaudeville with his father). For the precision demanded by the gag, among filmic structures the one the most dependent on the precision of execution (one thinks of Chaplin roller skating blindfolded in the department store of *Modern Times*, turning away from the abyss at the very last second) can be achieved by the repetition of the act in front of the camera, and the choice of the most perfect bits of film, with the least precise or wrong bits thrown away. Benjamin's formulation could be seen, from the perspective, as a politicized version of Freud's definition of humor: if laughing for Freud means the "saving of psychical energy aiming at a yield of pleasure", and the "restriction of our muscular work and an increase of our intellectual work", for Benjamin it meant the saving of the artist's life and the liberation of his energy not for the nightly repetition of the dangerous act (the fate of most defeated workers), for the work of mental creativity and imagination. Let us say, then, to go back to the concept of the dialectical image, that what the common people laughed at when they saw Chaplin eating the boots was the very reversal implicit in it, with the image both as the expression of the most desperate poverty, and as the expression of the moment in which destitution was symbolically overcome through the mastery of technology.

None of the expected progressive results, however, were guaranteed, depending on the victory of the revolutionary struggle for their success. Quino's cartoon, drawn much later in the midst of one of the darkest moments of the various military dictatorships which dominated Latin America from the end of the 60's, putting an end to the very concrete chances of revolution in the continent and paving the way for the glorious days of globalization, shows the results of the defeat. Here Chaplin's images have lost part of their dialectical power, showing destitution and reminding the common people that a chance to overcome it had been lost. No reason for laughing. Now, however, that the



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long season of perverse apologia for commodity culture that characterized the last few decades may be coming to an end, we may look forward to other possible reversions, so that the continuation of the cartoon may show a change in who is laughing at whom.