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Joel White

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Interrupting Tradition: Now-time (*Jetztzeit*) In and Out of the Theatre

Joel White

King's College, London

Walter Benjamin's concept of now-time (*Jetztzeit*), other than its now famous elaboration in *The Arcades Project*, is most cogently summarised in his final piece of writing *On the Concept of History*. In Thesis XVIII of this fragment, Benjamin writes:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that reason historical. It becomes historical, posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a specific earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "now-time" which is shot through with splinters of Messianic time.¹

Now-time, shot through with splinters of Messianic time, locates its site of action in the present. Through the continuous promise of discontinuity, now-time, as Peter Osborne remarks, becomes 'endowed with endless revolutionary and redemptive potential.'² Notably for this paper, now-time is conceived of by Benjamin as precisely that which ceaselessly retains the potential to interrupt historicism—with historicism being defined as the continuity of tradition. Other than these later, arguably more political, indeed revolutionary, engagements with the concept of now-time, a certain *philosophy of interruption* can be located in Benjamin's earlier writings, both on literature and the theatre. In particular, I argue that the theoretical germ for the concept of now-time derives from Benjamin's work on the *idea* of tragedy found in his essays of the 1920s and in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Before moving to an explication of how interruption figures in Benjamin's theory of the idea of tragedy, an elucidation of Benjamin's 'theory of ideas' will start this paper. Without a fuller notion of the "Benjaminian idea", precisely that which allows for the constellation of revolutionary moments to appear in the now of their recognisability, the idea of tragedy will be left at the level of description and no sense of how the idea of tragedy *works* to interrupt tradition will be attained.

Benjamin's methodological and philosophical task in the 'theory of ideas' section of the *Trauerspiel* book is to explicate how his particular art criticism takes into account both the

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p.397.

² Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p.116.

realm of the phenomena whilst also retaining a critical appeal to the realm of truth and ideas—of which separate literary-historical or theatrical periods play a crucial part. Benjamin's concept of the idea should be taken as a quasi-Platonic and Leibnizian philosophy of the idea: a philosophy in which both 'pre-existent' and 'pre-stabilised'³ monadic ideas can remain dialectically related, through a process of trans-historical 'absorption', to the immanent phenomena that 'reside within' these ideas.⁴ That is, individual works of art do not become the pure or distorted mimetic representations of ideas, and ideas do not simply become a gathering of features common to a group of heterogeneous sources. Benjamin writes of the idea of the tragic and the comic:

For although it is clearly futile to assemble a series of works of art with certain features in common if the intention is to establish their essential quality [...] it is equally inconceivable that the philosophy of art will ever divest itself of some of its most fruitful ideas, such as the tragic or the comic. For these ideas [...] are themselves structures, at the very least equal in consistency and substance to any and every drama.⁵

Benjamin's concept of the idea therefore maintains concomitantly the separation as well as the equality of ideas and phenomena in the uncovering of the 'truth-content' of art.

In two early fragments, 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy', and 'On the Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy', Benjamin distinguishes the *idea* of tragedy from the *idea* of Trauerspiel (this paper will concentrate solely on the idea of tragedy) in relation to their differing reflections on 'historical time' and its effect on 'tradition' and 'authenticity'. Benjamin writes: 'Tragedy may be distinguished from Trauerspiel through the different ways they relate to historical time'.⁶ As Howard Caygill points out in his essay 'Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Destruction of Tradition', Benjamin's argument regarding 'historical time' reads as an implicit critique of Heidegger's claim concerning historical time's connection to 'tradition' and 'authenticity'.⁷ Benjamin's main contention with Heidegger is that the concept of 'historical time', taken by Caygill to signify 'tradition', cannot fulfil an authentic category of time. Benjamin writes: 'Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment.'⁸ 'Tradition', for Benjamin, cannot produce an 'authentic' notion of history, with 'authenticity' defined as the truth of history revealed fully in its totality.⁹

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009), p. 30.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 47

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and J. Michael Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 67.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), p. 49. Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger, and Tradition," in *Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Clinamen Press, 2000), p. 59.

⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, p. 56

⁹ An example of this totality is criticism's relationship to the pre- and post-history of art.

Tradition, described here in its historical and temporal sense, denotes the movement of the 'past' into the 'present', a movement that inescapably consigns the past to the historical category of tradition through the gesture of 'handing down.' For a fuller definition, and one closer to Benjamin's use, Adorno writes, 'Tradition coming from *tradere*: to hand down [...] recalls the continuity of generations, what is handed down by one member to another.'¹⁰ Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, likewise defines tradition, and writes that 'tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence.'¹¹ From these formulations I define tradition to be the concurrent establishment *and* reestablishment of the past as 'self-evident' both *for* and *in* the present. The maintenance of tradition therefore rests on its elaboration in historical time in time thought historically, and history thought as chronological and sequential time. In its dual process of 'carrying over' the past into present whilst simultaneously opening 'intervals' that mark this present, Heidegger suggests that historical time possesses the capacity to both 'enable' and 'undermine' history.¹² Consequently, tradition's capacity to undermine history 'stakes out the positive possibilities of that tradition.'¹³ The capacity for history to be undermined through the same process that enables it leads Heidegger to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that tradition can 'combat' history for the sake of 'authenticity.'¹⁴ The capacity to 'combat' history's 'inauthenticity' realises tradition's positive potential. As Caygill writes, 'tradition is both [...] [the] vehicle of truth and its greatest threat.'¹⁵ For Heidegger, then, 'tradition', thought of as the appearance of 'intervals' or 'interruptions' in historical time, retains the capacity to gather history in order to fulfil it. Notably, Heidegger likewise devises his own concept of now-time, a concept which takes the same German compound word as Benjamin, *Jetztzeit*. Entirely if not diametrically opposed to Benjamin's own use of the term, Heidegger conceives of now-time as a so-called 'ordinary conception of time.' This ordinary conception of time is taken by Heidegger to mean a 'sequence of "nows"' which are continuously present-at-hand. As Osborne writes, these "nows" 'simultaneously pass away and come along in an uninterrupted flow.'¹⁶ Now-time in Heidegger thus defines a sequential movement of time comparable to that of the rosary beads in *On the Concept of History*: a sequence which Benjamin's own now-time radically disrupts, a concept which could be formulated as a now-time of now-time.

Benjamin's oppositional position on historical time, although likewise an elaboration of tradition's 'self-evidence', develops aesthetically into the demarcation between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*. For Benjamin, it is the *idea* of tragedy that possesses the capacity to fulfil history and not Heidegger's notion of tradition. Benjamin writes, 'At specific and crucial points in its trajectory, historical time passes over into tragic time; such points occur in the

¹⁰ 'Tradition comes from *tradere*: to hand down. It recalls the continuity of generations, what is handed down by one member to another'. Theodor Adorno, "On Tradition," *Symposium on The Past in Ruins*, in *Telos* 94 (1992), 75-82, (p. 75).

¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 43.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p.44.

¹⁴ Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger, and Tradition," p. 7.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. 64.

actions of great individuals.’¹⁷ These great individuals for Benjamin are tragic heroes. In tragedy, the death of the tragic hero fulfils time. It marks the moment in which the truth of history reveals its unified totality. Tragedy is comparable to the ‘authentic time of redemption.’¹⁸ Through the hero’s death, the truly *new* appears as fulfilment from the empty unfulfilled time of tradition.

To define ‘fulfilled time’, Benjamin introduces a further modality of time: the idea of ‘messianic time.’ Benjamin writes, ‘the idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time.’¹⁹ The idea of fulfilled messianic time is equivalent to the idea of tragic time. The use of this idea to define these modalities of time precedes Benjamin’s ‘theory of ideas’ in the *Trauerspiel* book but can be seen as an important precursor to Benjamin’s later development of the concept. The concept of messianic time and its connection to tragic time also precursors Benjamin’s elaboration of now-time. As now-time is precisely that which is shot through with splinters of messianic time, it is possible to locate the germ of now-time in tragic time, messianic time’s early equivalent. Messianic and tragic time therefore act accordingly to the philosophical principles of ideas as well as that of now-time. They possess the capacity to ‘interrupt the temporal order’ of tradition since they gather history in order to fulfil it.²⁰ The ideas of messianic and tragic time are therefore comparable to the process of criticism as the re-unification of fragments in the idea. The process of this gathering is neither historical, in a universal sequential sense, nor teleological. Messianic time and tragic time are hence ahistorical. Similar to criticism’s relationship to the content of art, tragic time interrupts the false unity of empty, flat, chronological time in order for authenticity to appear.

To further the comparison between tragic time and messianic time, Benjamin refers to *Oedipus Rex* and the tragic moment of revelation in Greek tragedy, and writes: ‘When the tragic development suddenly makes its incomprehensible appearance, when the smallest false step leads to guilt...then we are witnessing the effect of the hero’s time.’²¹ ‘Hero’s time’, or tragic time, is as ‘incomprehensible’ as it is sudden. This incomprehensibility derives its meaning from the disruption of the temporal order, a disruption that, although occurring *immanently* because of the action of the hero, concludes in a tragic moment that appears as ahistorical or distinct from history as chronology. It is therefore incomprehensible to this logic. Benjamin writes: ‘Every speech in tragedy is tragically decisive.’²² The decisive and sudden process of tragic appearance is what defines the *emergence of the new* as the singular, as an *Einmaligkeit*.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, p. 55.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 56.

²⁰ Caygill, “Benjamin Heidegger and Tradition,” p. 10. See also, Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. 115: ‘Benjamin’s aim was to refigure the interruptive temporality of modernity as the standpoint of redemption and thereby to perform a dialectical redemption of the destruction of tradition by the new.’

²¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writing 1*, p. 56

²² *ibid.* p. 60.

In the *Trauerspiel* book, the idea of tragic interruption reappears explicitly regarding the concept of *the new* and thus implies a thinking-through of modernity. Benjamin argues that in ancient Greek tragedy the tragic sacrifice of the hero acts as both a ‘first and final sacrifice.’²³ This final sacrifice, offered to the old Gods of Olympia, both atones the ancient right of the gods whilst allowing for ‘new aspects of the life of the nation [to] become manifest.’²⁴ The moment of tragic death both ‘invalidates’ the ancient rights of the Olympians, but also offers up the hero as ‘first fruit to a new harvest of humanity.’²⁵ The death of the hero does justice to the old laws whilst it is also ‘patently clad in the form of new conceptions.’²⁶ Tragic death becomes ‘salvation’ (*Rettung*) because the hero’s death refers not to a divine command but inwardly to the life of the hero. The content of the tragic hero’s life and death belongs entirely to the emergence of *the new* community, where ‘his soul finds refuge.’²⁷ The idea of tragedy therefore possesses a ‘dual power [*Doppelkraft*].’²⁸ This dual tragic power is particularly evident in Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* and Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, which Benjamin argues are exemplary in their depiction of this power. Andrew Benjamin, in *Working with Walter Benjamin*, states that in the Greek world if there is ‘a figure whose project is to bring an end to the temporality of fate as that which organises both law and subjectivity [...] it is Athena.’²⁹ Athena’s appearance at the end of the *Oresteia* marks the moment of tragic time. She is the proto-messianic figure who undoes the cycle of historical time by interrupting the temporal order. She marks the moment when Orestes’s mythically, indeed traditionally, legitimatised suffering at the expense of the furies’ ends. The trial of Orestes also concludes with the arrival of a new ethical and political community by the overcoming and cessation of mythic law in the name of justice. Benjamin writes, ‘the profound Aeschylean impulse to justice inspires the anti-Olympians prophecy of tragic poetry.’³⁰ In tragedy, the death of the tragic hero determines the *emergence of the new* and marks a break between the pre-historical age of mythical laws and *the new* ethical and political community that emerges. In this sense, tragedy is eschatological. It marks the moment of historical fulfilment through the destruction of tradition. This interruption defines the process of the idea of tragedy as one side of Benjamin’s essentialist dialectic. The idea of the tragic determines the *emergence of the new* as *Einmaligkeit*.

The interpretation that this paper has offered of the importance of theatre, in particular tragedy in Benjamin’s work, should be conceived of, or framed in such a way, that it continues to question the problem of how we, now, in our present age, can think and actualise interruption. In particular, the ways in which the theatre either represents or even actualises such an interruption. To a certain extent this has followed the Hegelian line that if

²³ Benjamin, *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, p.106.

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 107.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 109.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, band 1/ 1, ed. By Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 286.

²⁹ Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 82.

³⁰ Benjamin, *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, p. 109.

the definition of philosophy is to be determined, then it must be determined as *its own time comprehended in thought*. To think our own time, as not only present time but as now-time, is therefore always to think its difference with the time of tradition. This thinking then stages, in the sense that it prepares the stage for, the overcoming of this tradition. Philosophy thus interrupts through thinking and the locus of that interruption is the present.

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