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## From the Sublime to the Cosmic. Walter Benjamin's Planetarium

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**Abstract.** This contribution surveys the presence of Walter Benjamin's philosophy in the environmental humanities. As I argue, Benjamin's philosophy emerged in the debate on the temporality of climate change and instantiated a *cosmic predicament*. To clarify the meaning of the cosmic predicament, first, I reconstruct the terms of the debate; second, I analyze Benjamin's aphorism *To the Planetarium* that concludes the experimental prose collection *One-Way Street* (1928). By reading the aphorism closely, I emphasize Benjamin's quite explicit critique of Kantian modernity, which is defined as *domination over nature*, as Benjamin's text posits. Through the scientific formulation of natural laws, morality, and the feeling of the sublime, according to Benjamin, modernity has relinquished a performative approach to nature, which, in turn, can reconfigure nature as an experience of cosmic trance (*Rausch*).

**Keywords.** Planetarium, cosmic, *Rausch*, *kairos*, climate change.

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## 1. Walter Benjamin and the Temporality of Climate Change

Literature that questions the temporal perception of climate change<sup>1</sup> often evokes some of Walter Benjamin's most famous catchphrases.

As postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in his own theses on history, the temporality of the climate is a «negative universal history» that «flashes up in the moment of danger» (Chakrabarty [2009]: 222). Elsewhere, in the *climate blues* of Mark Levene, climate change entails «a *kairotic* time: a time to strive for what the kabbalists call *tikkun olam*, some healing of our condition on this earth and thereby, with it, some measure of cosmic repair» (Levene [2013]: 164). To Elizabeth Callaway this same cosmic temporality is too often represented as «a time out of joint»: «The figures of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change depict a disjointed present [...]. Every figure is either a reconstruction of the past climate or a projection of the future climate – never a reconstruction of the past that moves through the present and projects the future» (Callaway [2014]: 13).

Benjamin's notion of *kairos* is a precious tool to conceptualize historical changes in relation to the present. The concept envisions a nonteleological relationship among past, present, and future (there is a right time for doing the right thing, the famous *Jetztzeit* or now-time of Benjamin's late thought)<sup>2</sup>. In this framework, time is a form of action distributed through objects, places, technologies, and works of art as a set of «temporal affordances» (Wells [2022]).

As Callaway proposes, the Hamletic *time out of joint* that institutional reports exemplify leaves blank the present situation. This is rendered either completely banal, or so incremental and so vast that it resists conceptualization. In other words, public rhetoric imposes a scale of action that exceeds individual engagement with temporality. It demands new ways to describe planetary affects, i.e., as shared feelings of presence.

Temporality deprived of individual free will can hence be considered, on the one hand, as Callaway suggests, an *operational time* (see Agamben [2000]), or

1 For empiricist perspectives on the temporality of climate change, see Kolbert (2015); Dürbeck (2017); Wallace-Wells (2019). For an early fundamental sociology of temporal language in the context of climate change philosophy, see Clark (2005).

2 Fabrizio Desideri has proposed a translation of *Jetztzeit* as time *in actu*, in Italian, *tempo attuale*, namely, timely time, rather than now-time. Considered as the opposite of mourning, of lamentation, the *Jetztzeit*, or *tempo attuale* is a *differential time* defined as the interim space between symbol and allegory in perception (Desideri [2018]: 113). For Desideri, this interstitial perception of truth *qua* time entails a messianic and hence paradoxical restauration, which inserts what has never happened into the fabric of historical occurrence. For a detailed interpretation of how the *Jetztzeit* is imaginal, dialectical, i.e., *dialectics under arrest*, and a «temporal index» of image-like ideas' incoming dissolution, as these attributes emerge from the *Theses on the Concept of History* (1942) and the related preparatory notes, see Desideri (2018): 111-114.

«the structure of messianic time as the measure of the disconnection of oneself from one's image of time» as Jenny Doussan claims in her study of presence through Giorgio Agamben's critique of deconstruction (Doussan [2013]: 199).

Disconnecting from temporal representations does not deny the existence of chronological time, or the need to represent time in the sciences. But the "disconnection" uncovers the fold of the represented through language. It discloses an existential temporality that is apt to rethink the gap between the time we have and the time we are<sup>3</sup>. As Agamben's stance seems to promise, this existential maneuver should turn perception of represented and exponential change into the experience of presence, that is, being structurally *out of sync* with the course of history.

What the existential approaches to planetary temporality have in common is the critique of linear time. Therefore, perceiving the several processes that compose climate change as kairotic means dissolving the old model of progressive linearity to be later sublated in a theological and revolutionary doctrine (which is the site of Benjamin's philosophy of history, when elaborating on the ancient notion of *kairos*)<sup>4</sup>.

Instead of grounding planetary affects – that is, shared feelings of presence that embody attunement with nonhuman temporality – in the theological and revolutionary experience, as the concept of kairotic time implies, in my contribution, I reconstruct Benjamin's planetary metaphor. I want to show that this metaphor conveys a stringent characterization of post-individual temporal

3 The concept comes from Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of the Christian body in *Corpus* (Nancy [1992]). The place of Giorgio Agamben's development of the corporeal manifold in the light of "cairology", however, is *The Time That Remains* (Agamben [2000]), in which Agamben takes operational time as an analogue for messianic time: «In every representation we make of time and in every discourse by means of which we define and represent time, another time is implied that is not entirely consumed by representation. It is as though man, insofar as he is a thinking and speaking being, produced an additional time with regard to chronological time, a time that prevented him from perfectly coinciding with the time out of which he could make images and representations. This ulterior time, nevertheless, is not another time, it is not a supplementary time added on from outside of chronological time. Rather it is something like a time within time – not ulterior but interior – which only measures my disconnection with regard to it, my being out of synch and in noncoincidence with regard to my representation of time, but precisely because of this, allows for my achieving and taking hold of it» (Agamben [2000]: 67).

4 The secondary literature on Benjamin's elaboration of the link between theology, politics and history is incredibly vast. For this reason, every genealogy will be a partial restitution that I run the risk of undertaking only to frame the context of this paper. As an overview of historicist and anglophone research on Benjamin's early philosophy of history, see Newman (2011). For a comprehensive introduction to Benjamin's conceptual entanglements of aesthetics and theology in Italian see Baldi, Desideri (2008) and, above all, Desideri (1995) and Desideri (2018). For a philologically grounded reconstruction of the Theses' conceptual framework as an alternative to Agamben's interpretation see, in particular, Desideri (2018): 132-133. For a thematic approach to Benjamin's philosophy (and bibliography), see Pinotti (2018).

apprehension related to the Planet, a characterization that has not received the attention it deserves. Before and next to the (theological and revolutionary) *Jetztzeit*<sup>5</sup>, there is a (cosmological and performative) notion of *cosmic experience* as it is described in the text *Zum Planetarium* [To the Planetarium] in *Einbahnstraße* (Benjamin [1928]).

In what follows, first, I highlight Benjamin's configuration of the Planet as an anti-modern stance<sup>6</sup>. Second, I render the characterization of cosmic experience as an effect of writerly practices. Literary landscapes such as those crafted through geographical writing, as Jason Groves argued by focusing on Benjamin's *Ibizenkische Folge* [Ibizan Suite] (1932), peculiarly translate the geo-affectivity of the Earth's movement under the steps of someone who writes while walking (Groves [2020]). As for our case, the planetarium, literary and kinesthetic landscapes of this sort can offer a valid metaphor to formulate a cosmic predicament, that is, the possibility of perceiving nature immediately albeit technologically, therefore accepting even the contemporary IPCC image of the present left blank.

Unraveling into Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History*, where Callaway, Levene, and Chakrabarty find food for thought in the wake of climate change, might be the most obvious pathway to time-travelers who want to figure out how the language of tradition has articulated planetary temporality: the *Jetztzeit* or kairotic time is the concept Benjamin offers to a subjectivity in crisis; it promises conceptual vertigo; it foresees a reconciliation of experience and memory (see Desideri [1995]); the redemption of and from the major illusion of history, that is, the perceived perfection or *perfectum* (completion, pastness, irrefutable conclusion) of events recollected and remembered (Desideri [2018]: 101-111)<sup>7</sup>.

My reading rests on this same basis, that is, the need to restore the critical power of theology upon history. Theology is apt to question received historical representations, as Benjamin's endeavor has made clear to many. But the same critical function can be exercised by literature, specifically, profane literature that Benjamin has devoted to landscapes and environments. Departing from theological critical agency, in my reading, I emphasize "metaphorical critical agency" as one of the several pathways to process history not so much as a progress and a

5 For another relevant articulation of temporal experience in Benjamin's philosophy, that is, *repetition*, between the concepts of construction and eternal recurrence, see Montanelli (2017).

6 The most important site of confrontation with the theme of modernity, however, remains Benjamin's copious materials for the uncomplete and only partially published *Passagenwerk*. To explore recent research on modernity, imperialism, urban environments, modern politics and historical temporality related to this work, see Montanelli (2022).

7 For an alternative interpretation in which the power of totality is performed by the language of names rather than by the idea of history, see Carchia (2010).

cycle, but rather, as a fragment. «Metaphorical agency translates oblivion in the time of memory, and eternity in the (messianic) time of fulfillment» (Desideri [2018]: 116), which, according to Fabrizio Desideri, is an (always) fragmentary, catastrophic, and intermittent temporal modality, without end of times, without final resolution.

As Desideri posits in *Walter Benjamin e la percezione dell'arte* (2018), in continuity with Hannah Arendt's profile of Benjamin as a cultural critic (Arendt [1968]), the critical power of metaphors can be rescued (against Brecht's dissatisfaction with Benjamin's fondness for theology when it comes to revolutionary practice):

Of this unutterable in-stant of his thought (nothing other than a quiet dwelling in the in-stant, in the *Ein-stand*, in the temporal arrest: in the *Jetztzeit*) the *Theses* are the most limpid expression. Their decisive *Methaphorik*, which Brecht seems to disavow when attempting a "constructive" consideration of the *Theses*, lies on the effort to connect politics and theology under the Idea of historical time: on the one hand, a kind of politics, whose subjects live in the most radical crisis, on the other, a kind of theology, whose objects are enclosed in negation (once theology has dimmed its revealing symbols). In the horizon of the *Theses*, however, metaphor and construction are not mutually exclusive: the metaphorical disclosure is a window inside the monadic constitution that is crystallized by thought, when the process of thought operates according to the constructive principle; their tension identifies the regressive movement of constructivity toward the un-constructable site of the origin. (Desideri [2018]: 116)<sup>8</sup>

I suggest that we trace the planetary fact through the metaphor of the planetarium. This means a consideration of time beyond the question of historical time and toward the question of spatial intensity – something Desideri has also examined through the Origenian idea of *apokatastasis*: the idea of «a world of strict discontinuity; what is always again new is not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same, crossed by countless intermittences» (Desideri [2016]: 177; see also Montanelli [2022]: 259-276).

Searching for fragments that can express the exorbitance of climate change – and the intermittence of climate action – metaphorically, I propose to read Benjamin's less explicit meditations on time, *To the Planetarium*, the text that concludes the experimental prose collection *One-Way Street*. Here, planetary perception is configured through the metaphor of a kinesthetic optical device, the planetarium: a kind of cinema in which images of planets, stars, moons, asteroids and other celestial bodies are projected on a dome. Planetaria spread all over Europe by the end of the 19th century, often built around pre-existent zoos or natural history museums, as showed by the cases, respectively, of Berlin and Milan.

8 My translation from the Italian text.

## 2. *Walter Benjamin's Planetarium*

*To the Planetarium* marks the final entry among Benjamin's brief essays and aphorisms comprising *One-Way Street*, his inaugural editorial project on urban experience and the thought-images (*Denkbilder*) urban environments record.

As the text begins:

If one had to expound the doctrine of antiquity with utmost brevity while standing on one leg, as did Hillel that of the Jews, it could only be in this sentence: 'They alone shall possess the earth who live from the powers of the cosmos.' Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods. Its waning is marked by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age. Kepler, Copernicus, and Tycho Brahe were certainly not driven by scientific impulses alone. All the same, the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led, contained a portent of what was to come. The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other (Benjamin [1928]: 80).

From the use of a Kantian lexicon disseminated through the text (i.e., beautiful starry nights, *Schwärmerei* or fanaticism, reference to Copernicus and modern astronomical discoveries, to high mountains or Southern seas as places characterized by epiphanies of finitude), above all, in the context of a discussion on the openness or closure of the immediate, suprasensible experience of nature – a peculiarly Kantian theme – one can infer that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant does represent the implicit critical target of Benjamin's *Denkbild* here.

Notwithstanding the importance of the Kantian connection, the aim of this contribution is to clarify Benjamin's approach to planetary temporal perception, that is, the disclosure of that cosmic experience banned by representational engagements with the temporality of climate change. For this reason, Kant's complex aesthetics will assume a merely contextual relevance to identify Benjamin's critique to (Kantian) modernity. The center of my focus is Benjamin's cosmic predicament, because Benjamin's temporal concepts are frequently appropriated through the environmental humanities, with the notable exception of an affective, or better, geo-affective approach to planetary temporality. By affective, I mean here the situated feeling of being in contact with one's history, language, memory, place, and epoche, rather than with an intellectual apprehension of universals.

As an overview, at the heart of *To the Planetarium* lies a stark antithesis: the modern versus the ancient. Benjamin constructs a dichotomy between the man of antiquity and his modern counterpart, each defined by a distinct relationship to nature. Whereas the modern places faith in astronomy to orient humanity's place on Earth, the ancient aspires to merge with the elemental forces of the

cosmos. To grasp this shift – and the potential it unlocks for those critical of modernity – Benjamin urges attention to cultural practices of *Rausch* (polysemic of intoxication, trance, ritual dance), which he describes as an affect of cosmic distance: being there, reaching out, at once, to the closest and to the furthest point in space. It is through ecstatic trance «that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other» (Benjamin [1928]: 81). Such experiences, imagined to be typical of Dionysian antiquity, are supposed to be inaccessible to modern cosmologists like Kepler, Copernicus, or Tycho Brahe. They become possible, however, through the technological innovations of the current epoque, a motif that Benjamin elaborates on shortly thereafter.

The convergence of cosmic forces with the human body – both individual and collective – is most strikingly illustrated in what Benjamin calls «the technological convulsion of the human frame provoked by the war» (Benjamin [1928]: 82). This convulsion, or *Schauer* (paroxysm), gestures toward performed temporalities that exceed the scientific gaze, which Benjamin associates with an *optical*, i.e., representational conception of nature – one rooted in the Kantian project, for, in a pointed middle passage of the aphorism, Benjamin ironizes «beautiful starry nights», a figure Kant famously employed to circumscribe reason's access to the suprasensible to the moral law<sup>9</sup>, whereby nature is reduced to the domain of sensibility, an object for the intellect to process – its transcendent dimensions foreclosed.

[...] this means that man can communicate through trance with the cosmos and only communally. It is the threatening aberration of the newer ones to consider this experience as trivial, as avoidable, and to entrust it to the individual as a rapture (*Schwärmerei*) in beautiful starry nights. (Benjamin [1928]: 81)

As the text unfolds, Benjamin identifies the *domain* of sensibility with the *domination* of reason upon the senses and hence upon nature itself (*Naturbeherrschung* or mastery on nature), as the primary – mistakenly so – aim of modern cosmology. By contrast, Benjamin argues that unity with the cosmos is, first, accessible; second, it is a form of collective experience; third, it has assumed catastrophic contours through the war, because of what he defines as an imperialist articulation of technology, which, nonetheless, has disclosed a *planetary* temporal dimension; fourth, attempting a non-destructive cosmic experience requires the development of a new political body: the species. The four lines of the

9 See the lemma *Categorical Imperative* by Konstantin Pollok: «In the famous words of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” (CPrR, 5:161/CEPP:269)» (*The Cambridge Kant Lexicon* [2021]: 86).



argument are written in a fast, cinematic style, like a scene grasped both from above and from the inside, like in a planetarium:

[Cosmic experience] strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers. Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology. But because the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. The mastery of nature, so the imperialists teach, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education above all the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery, if we are to use this term, of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and man. Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families. One need recall only the experience of velocities by virtue of which mankind is now preparing to embark on incalculable journeys into the interior of time, to encounter there rhythms from which the sick shall draw strength as they did earlier on high mountains or at Southern seas. (Benjamin [1928]: 82)

Communion with cosmic forces is inherently collective. This ecstatic experience, embodied in trance-like rituals, cannot be dismissed as madness or *Schwärmerei* – a term Kant uses frequently in the sense of fanaticism to exclude suprasensible experience from legitimate thought<sup>10</sup>.

Alternative technics for attuning nature to cosmic communication are not mere vestiges of antiquity either, as Benjamin asserts. They reemerge with the

10 As Robert Clewis reconstructs «Kant discusses *Schwärmerei* or fanaticism in his pre-Critical works, in lectures and notes, and in his Critical writings on metaphysics, theology, and ethics. According to the third Critique, fanaticism is «a delusion of being able to see something beyond all bounds of sensibility, i.e., to dream in accordance with principles (to rave with reason)» (Kant [1790]: 275). According to *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, it is «a pious brazenness» occasioned by a certain pride or overconfidence in oneself «to come closer to the heavenly natures» and to «elevate» oneself by an «astonishing flight above the usual and prescribed order». The fanatic speaks only of «immediate inspiration». Kant occasionally associates fanaticism with mental disorder (hence one could sometimes translate the term with “delirium”). Kant attributes “fevered brains” to “deluded” fanatics. A fanatic has «wild figments of the imagination» and fantasies of the afterlife. Fanaticism, generally, is an overstepping of the bounds of human reason undertaken on principles. It promises an extension of concepts by means of supersensible intuition or feelings». For further reference see the full lemma *Schwärmerei* (*The Cambridge Kant Lexicon* [2021]: 186-187).



total war. Crucially, the text proclaims that commonality – the shared trance, the collective convulsion – ushers in a new political concept: the species. This emerging category, Benjamin suggests, has the potential to rule out liberal signifiers of nations and family. Thus, a new *planetary* temporal perception finds its proper correlate through collective, impersonal, technological prowess.

Benjamin's anti-modern stance is based on the affect of *Rausch*. The meaning of *Rausch* is controversial, given its wide presence in the philosophy of Nietzsche as well as in the vitalist Nazi-leaning discourse. According to Nitzan Lebovic, Nietzsche took *Rausch* as one of his principal concepts, a thread that united all his writings, beginning with the theory of Dionysian *Rausch* versus Apollonian order in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and still much in evidence in *The Twilight of the Gods* (1889), written in his final year of sanity (Lebovic [2004]).

In the posthumously published *Nachgelassene Fragmente* (written 1884–1885), *Rausch* is «the result of all great enthusiasms... all the extreme movements; the *Rausch* of destruction, the *Rausch* of cruelty; the *Rausch* of meteorological influence, for example, the *Rausch* of spring, or the influence of narcotics» (Lebovic [2004]: 4). The *Rausch* (also, flow as in today's psychology of meditation), has hence several markers: individual *and* group ecstatic experiences; the vanishing of personal self; instinctive understanding; intense technical activity.

Cosmic trance as Benjamin describes it – experienced as *Rausch* and unleashed, exemplarily, through military techniques – can righteously be considered as the predominant aesthetic value of nature appreciation *after* modernity, a value that replaces the experience of the sublime. For Benjamin, sublime landscapes such as «high mountains or Southern seas» that used to prepare «journeys to the interior of time» are replaced with another non-landscape experience<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. From the Sublime to the Cosmic

In a 1979 English translation of Benjamin's text prefaced by Susan Sontag and reprinted in the 2021 Verso editions of *One-Way Street*, Sontag defines Benjamin's *Denkbild* as «a pean to the technological wooing of nature and to sexual ecstasy» (Sontag [1979]: 12). Nothing could be more stylistically divergent than Walter Benjamin's orgiastic conceptual sketch and Immanuel Kant's elegant argument around the sublime in the third *Critique* (Kant [1790]). As said, conspic-

11 For a detailed account of how contemporary philosophies of landscape have challenged a visual understanding of landscape and introduced synesthetic and kinesthetic models see D'Angelo (2021).

uous references in Benjamin's text to the *Schwermärei* (madness, fanaticism) to which the moderns have reduced corporeal trance and disavowed its cognitive productivity as well as further references to the placid «starry nights» the moderns seek (Benjamin [1928]: 80-81) are famous quotations of Kant's critical project. In fact, ecstasy or transcendence of the embodied mind, of the projective quality of the mind (Monod [1970]), for Benjamin is not entirely immediate. Perhaps it is mediated otherwise: by dancers performing the trance, by gardeners landscaping the land; more soundingly, by motors and fuels, new synthetic worlds (Leslie [2004]).

To better grasp the difference between this kind of connection to the cosmos (as in the manic state) and the Kantian disavowal of non-conceptual pathways to the suprasensible, we must consider the *Critique of Judgement*. Here, the feeling of the sublime consists in a feeling of the superiority of reason as a suprasensible faculty over nature (Kant [1790]: 250-262). Reason can extend itself beyond sensorial limits through feelings of infinity. The fact that we are capable, through reason, of thinking infinity as a whole, «indicates a faculty of the mind which surpasses every standard of sense» (Kant [1790]: 254).

As Hannah Ginsborg commented, while Kant's discussion of the mathematical sublime mentions monuments such as the Pyramids in Egypt and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, it is not clear if these are intended as examples of the sublime, for Kant claims explicitly that the most appropriate examples are of *things in nature*. The demarcation rules out animals connected with the idea of biological function, but includes mountains and the sea, the concepts of which do not connect to any teleological drive (although they nourish the feeling of infinity). Episodes of the mathematical sublime are hence occasioned by visions of mountains and the sea mainly. For Kant, large and inanimate as it is (thus, non-teleological like animals are), the surface of the Earth presents the reasonable man with the dynamical sublime when feelings of infinity become in fact the faculty of dominion upon nature (*Kraft* being polysemic of ability, force, power, and right). Nature is thus redefined as «a power that has no dominion over us» (Kant [1790]: 260). The experience of natural things as fearful turns into the certainty that *we* are in a position of safety and hence not really threatened by natural powers:

The irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature [...] whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion. (Kant [1790]: 261-262)

As the excerpt suggests, judgement overcomes fear, addressed now as inhuman or nonhuman. We recognize we belong to nature, but in this recog-

nitition, we also gain a *superior* and *independent* standpoint on both contingency and greatness<sup>12</sup>.

Kant's examples of judgements that let us overcome the narrow limits of our naturality while submitting to it (by gaining an external view from the right distance) include visions of overhanging cliffs, thunder clouds, volcanoes, and hurricanes. These geological formations and phenomena are scenarios in a literal sense. They constitute the background, the landscape of reason<sup>13</sup>, on the backdrop of which our humanity takes shape.

This is neither the place to engage in a detailed account of what humanity means for Kant in relation to the sublime (therefore see Brady [1998] and Brady [2013]), nor the place to assess how climate change in fact challenges modern, non-catastrophic assumptions of landscape aesthetics (also, see Brady [2022]). This is the place of considering, instead, how the vision of geological landscapes can perform (affirm, restore, and consolidate) the boundaries of the self, while the opposite, manic vision of Benjamin, so often enveloped by the messianic correction to the *time out of joint* of IPCC representations, disperses the self within the world. While the Kantian dominion on nature constitutes a moment of clear delimitation between the self and the world, Benjamin's trance or *Rausch* performs identity with nature.

After detecting the centrality of ecstatic affects such as *Rausch* and *Schwärmerei* to define Benjamin's cosmic predicament, this is the place to focus on a third element: the *paroxysm* «of genuine cosmic experience». Cosmic natures of Benjamin's kind now include machines, the war, the masses – a human/nonhuman collective body that «in the experience of the total war resembled the bliss of the epileptic» (Benjamin [1928]: 82). As the text goes: «The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call Nature» (Benjamin [1928]: 82). As stated earlier in Benjamin's text, mankind has long been a species naturally, but it has just started engineering the naturality of the species politically. To this extent, socialism is a cure to the *paroxysm* of the unskilled but mechanized body of the species, in which destruction and procreation (quite paradoxically) coincide.

As Jason Groves argued, paroxysm is the essential phenomenon explored in Walter Benjamin's *Ibiza Suite* (1932). Published in *Die literarische Welt*, the literary supplement to the Frankfurter Zeitung, the travelogue from Ibiza offers what Groves defines as the geo-morphism and geo-affectivity of the

12 For a defense of Kant's potentially "environmental" view of nature and further reference on *greening Kant* see Vereb (2024), i.e., issue of "Environmental Ethics" dedicated to Vogel (2015).

13 For a study on the intimate relation between landscaping and the metaphysical tradition, see Weiss (1995). For a recent study on the role of geography in the constitution of Kant's thought see Morawski (2024).

*Erschütterung* (tectonic tremor and somatic shudder, synonym of paroxysm, *Schauer*) as an aesthetics of and for the mineral imaginary, which is distinct from «the visual impressions and electrical discharges peculiar to the experience of moving through the modern city» (Groves [2020]: 93). The geomorphic shake or *Erschütterung*, induces immersive motorial schemes in response to a shaken, erratic subjectivity that identifies with the land, or rather, the landless of the geological surrounding. Behind the geo-semantics of *Erschütterung*, Groves discovers the footwork of the long walk. It is this rhythm of walking exposed, exposed to the harsh morphology of the landscape, that characterizes the somatic experience responsible for the structural syncopation of the text.

From a perspective that retains the concept of individuality as an operator of Benjamin's philosophy, Jason Groves remarks that tracking the movement of the individual body always bears the mark of a larger political condition. It addresses but also exceeds the orogenetic, telluric, and tectonic experience of crossing a landscape individually:

The insistence on the essential solitude of this endeavor in "Downhill" would unduly isolate the shuddering mountaineer's body (*Körperbau*) from that revolting political body (*Gliederbau*) of "To the Planetarium," if Benjamin were not elsewhere insistent that even the most idiosyncratic gestures performed in solitude bear the mark of a historical conditioning. (Groves [2020]: 111)

In contrast to Groves' reading, I do not believe that we can rescue a notion of individuality to be cashed out from the aphorism. Attacking the modern moral pathway to the cosmos, *To the Planetarium* proposes «to live out of the force of the cosmos», that is, collectively rather than individually; to embrace the forces of the Earth unbound by technology; and, at last, to de-visualize the cosmology of the moderns that prioritized vision upon performativity. Thus, how and in which ways does the perception of *cosmic forces* dissolve the integrity of the individual self?

After recalling how the moderns had rejected the ecstatic bond between communities and the cosmos as a form of mere individual irrationality, the *Denkbild* engages with the last (fundamental) question, that is, the telos (*Sinn*) of technology. The ruling class has betrayed the possibilities of technology. It has imposed an ideology of *Naturbeherrschung*, dominion over nature, while the real essence of technology is in fact «dominion over the relation between humanity and nature» [*Beherrschung vom Verhältnis von Natur und Menschheit*] (Benjamin [1928]: 82).

The question at stake is how to define this «dominion over the relation between humanity and nature». At a first glance, the cosmic predicament seems to take an esoteric stance in favor of the German "secret science" valorizing the technological forces unleashed by the war, and the war as an eminent form of

collective trance that instantiates the new kind of *relational* domination. However, the new political concept, the species, differs from both *mankind* and *the ordering structure of the human* (*Gliederbau der Menschheit*) revealed by the war. The species represent a new project after the shipwreck of humanity as a political and aesthetic value. We need a post-humanity. As the text goes, through rhythms (both political phases and medial tempos), various technics organize their own nature(s) («a physis»). These natures are said to be time-folds and time-travels; sites of new pilgrimages and sanatoria. Through these technical sites where deep time is imagined and performed («unpredictable travels in the inside of time»), the text envisions the relational cosmos as impersonal perception of velocities (*die Erfahrung von Geschwindigkeiten*), as a territory where new velocities hence define the thinking rhythm of the species as much as the modern walks «on high mountains and Southern seas».

A last relevant aspect that Groove's study can illuminate is the strange beginning of our aphorism. At the beginning, we were invited to «think on one foot» like Hillel, the Jewish teacher (Benjamin [1928]: 80). Performing this peculiar footwork means to perform an Earth-story while reading: something that deviates from institutional natural history and produces, instead, an experience of the Earth both choreographically and *in aller Kürze*, at high speed. The distinct textual paroxysm produces a kind of reading that requires standing *out of balance*, on one foot. In this sense, the designated standpoint of modern landscapes is translated as a direct instruction for readers. The place where one stands remains kinesthetic, suggesting pathways to bodily movement and its perception, and performative, a place designed and engineered, like the planetarium.

#### 4. Conclusion

In revisiting Walter Benjamin's *To the Planetarium*, this paper has traced a fault line between two different cosmological orientations: one grounded in reason's mastery over nature, the other in the manic dissolution within it. If the first experience of the sublime reaffirms the boundary of the self, establishing judgment as the stabilizing force that allows humanity to transcend its natural limits while maintaining a distinct kind of sovereignty, in stark contrast, Benjamin's *Denkbild* stages a cosmic dramaturgy in which the individual is absorbed into collective affects, machinic rhythms, and geological forces. Here, technology is not the agent of domination over nature but the medium through which a new relational *physis* emerges – one that annuls partitions between nature and culture, subject and object, self and cosmos.

By centering paroxysm as inner tie of somatic tremor and tectonic shudder (as in the lexicon of *Schauer* and *Erschütterung*), Benjamin sketches a post-human

terrain where perception is no longer tethered to the sovereign individual but instead redistributed across species-being through geomorphic behaviors that can express our attunement with the temporality of the Planet. The planetarium, in this sense, is not an aesthetic object to be interpreted, but a metaphor to be used in literature as much as in life, for it produces affective, de-individuating, and intermittent historical times.

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