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## The Crisis of Painting: Benjamin, Aragon, and the Challenge of Photography\*

RICARDO IBARLUCÍA

CONICET- Centro de Investigaciones Filosóficas and Universidad Nacional de San Martín (Argentina)  
ribarlucia@conicet.gov.ar

**Abstract.** This essay explores Walter Benjamin's engagement with Louis Aragon's intellectual activity throughout the 1930s, with a particular focus on his 1936 essay *Pariser Brief [II]. Malerei und Photographie*. It examines Benjamin's commentaries on Aragon's writings within the context of the aesthetic debates surrounding Socialist Realism after the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. The essay is structured in four sections. First, it discusses the decline in painting's social and political function and how Aragon and Benjamin interpreted Gisèle Freund's sociological analysis of the evolution of photography as an art form. The second section traces the development of collage, from Cubism to Dadaism and Surrealism, as discussed by Aragon. The third section focuses on Aragon and Benjamin's observations on John Heartfield's antifascist photomontages. Finally, the essay analyzes Benjamin's interest in Antoine Wiertz's views on painting and photography, the response of Argentine artist Antonio Berni to Aragon's survey *Où va la peinture?*, and the influence of photographic techniques on Latin American muralism, particularly in the work of Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who viewed painting as an instrument of revolutionary agitation and propaganda.

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**Keywords.** Social function of painting, easel painting, Dadaist collage, Socialist Realism, Latin American muralism.

The role of *Le paysan de Paris* (1926) in the genesis of the *Passagenarbeit* has been analyzed from various perspectives. Walter Benjamin's praise of a previous text by Louis Aragon, *Une vague de rêves* (1924), has also been considered, though to a lesser extent. Benjamin commented on this opuscule in *Traumkitsch* (1927), in some notes of *Pariser Passagen I* written between June 1927 and December 1929, and in *Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers* (1934). However, despite their prominent role in some texts on modern art written during his years of Parisian exile, Benjamin's affinity with Aragon's aesthetic ideas after the latter's rupture with Surrealism and alignment with the Parti communiste français (PCF) has been rarely assessed to this day, even if mentioned in Benjamin studies.

The study of said intellectual affinity faces some unfortunately insurmountable obstacles. The documents that attest to a personal link between Benjamin and Aragon in Paris are, in fact, scarce. Their relationship precedes Benjamin's exile and could date back to his third visit to the French capital, between April and July 1927. During this stay, Benjamin met Aragon and first read *Le paysan de Paris*, of which he translated four fragments later published in the weekly "Die literarische Welt" in June 1928 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: Spl. I, 16-33; see Eiland, Jennings [2014]: 335). An allusion in Benjamin's *Pariser Tagebuch*, which appeared two years later in the same magazine, shows that they met during his stay in Paris from December 1929 to February 1930 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: IV, 568; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 1, 337-338). Furthermore, Aragon has a prominent place in the curriculum Benjamin presented around May 1938 when applying for French citizenship. Aragon topped the list of «personalities who supported» his request, followed by the names of André Gide; Jean-Richard Bloch, editor of the Communist daily *Ce Soir*; anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl; bookseller and writer Adrienne Monnier; Jean Paulhan, director of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*; Jules Romains; Paul Valéry; and other notable intellectuals Benjamin had met in France since 1933 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: IV, 25).

My purpose in the following pages is to explore Benjamin's engagement with Aragon's intellectual activity throughout the 1930s, focusing particularly on his *Pariser Brief [II]. Malerei und Photographie*, written in 1936, after the publication of the French version of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* in the journal of the Institut für Sozialforschung in exile. The research begins with a study of Aragon's various publications – essays, articles, conferences, collections, surveys – commented on by Benjamin in the context of the aesthetic debates within the French Left after the adoption of the Socialist Realism doctrine at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, held in Moscow in August 1934. It is structured in four parts. First, I address the problem of paint-

ing's loss of function and discuss how Aragon and Benjamin interpreted Gisèle Freund's sociological analyses of the evolution of photography as an art form. Second, I briefly reconstruct the stages in the history of collage, from Cubism to Dadaism and Surrealism, as outlined in a previous text by Aragon mentioned by Benjamin. The third section is dedicated to their observations on John Heartfield's political photomontages. Finally, I examine Benjamin's interest in Antoine Wiertz's ideas about painting and photography, the response of Argentine painter Antonio Berni to Aragon's survey *Où va la peinture?*, organized by Aragon for the magazine "Commune" in 1935, and the influence of photographic techniques on Latin American muralism through Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros' theory of painting as an instrument of revolutionary agitation and propaganda.

### *Painting and its social function*

In the spring of 1936, Benjamin was involved in several projects. During a visit to Bertolt Brecht in Skovsbostrand, Denmark, he had just completed *Pariser Brief [II]. André Gide und sein neuer Gegner*, which he defined as «an essay on the fascist theory of art» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 507). He then planned to publish, in "Das Wort" – the literary journal of German exiles in Moscow, to which Brecht contributed –, a series of similar texts on the Parisian intellectual debates. Additionally, he intended to prepare a revised and expanded German version of *Das Kunstwerk*, of which he already had about «60-70 typed pages» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 284; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 353-359)<sup>1</sup>. Benjamin began working on *Pariser Brief [II]* in San Remo, in September 1936, then continued in Paris throughout October and November, and, after returning to San Remo, sent the final version to Brecht before the end of the year, hoping for a swift publication (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 384, 387, 411, 444-445; see also Benjamin [2011]: 580). As Benjamin explained to Alfred Cohn, his intention was to «delve deeper into the current debate on the foundations of painting, developing the prognosis» he had formulated in his essay on the work of art «regarding the loss of usefulness of easel painting» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 411). For apparently editorial reasons, none of the two writings was ever published.

In the first paragraphs of *Pariser Brief [II]*, Benjamin examines the volume *L'art et la réalité. L'art et l'État*, published in 1935 by the International Institute

1 *Pariser Brief [II]* appeared in "Das Wort" 5, November 1936, pp. 86-95 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 482-507; [2011]: 470-485). With certain deletions and changes, a French version of *Das Kunstwerk*, translated by Pierre Klossowski and supervised by Benjamin, had been published some months before in "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung": *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée* 1, 1936, pp. 40-67 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 709-739; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 164-206).

of Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations. This collection, which included contributions by numerous European artists, writers, historians, and art critics (André Lhote, Le Corbusier, Alexandre Cingria, Thomas Mann, Johnny Roosval, Hans Tietze, and Waldemar George, among others), was presented during the congress held in Venice from July 25 to 28, 1934. The event was organized by the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation and the Italian National Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, with the support of the International Art Biennale (VV.AA. [1935]: 7)<sup>2</sup>. Despite the overt fascist demonstrations of some exhibitors, the absence of German painters, and the lack of representation from the Soviet Union, Benjamin gave a relatively positive assessment of this meeting, «which, of course, was an international event», contrasting it with the two days of debates held by the Association des Peintres et Sculpteurs de la Maison de la Culture in Paris on May 16 and 31, 1936. These interventions – recounted in the collective volume *La querelle du réalisme*, which Benjamin catalogued as number 1584 in his list of read texts around the winter of 1936 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: VII, 472) –, concerned the French artistic scene: while the Venice conference, according to Benjamin, presented «considered, thoughtful reflections on the situation of art», not all participants in the debates at the Maison de la Culture «were able to keep the debate entirely free of stereotypes» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 496-497; Benjamin [2011]: 556; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 237)<sup>3</sup>.

According to Benjamin, «the interest of the Venice debate lay in the contributions of those who uncompromisingly described the crisis of painting» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 498; Benjamin [2011]: 558-559); Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238). One such figure was Lhote, a painter and art theorist, and a contributor to the “*Nouvelle Revue Française*”; another was the Austrian art historian Tietze, a representative of the *Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*. In their speeches, one should seek «the Archimedean point of the debate» on the crisis, namely, the problem of painting’s «usefulness» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: 498; Benjamin [2011]: 558; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238). Strictly speaking, the issue did not concern the «usefulness [of the image] in relation to painting or the enjoyment of art», nor did it involve «the direct use a work might have through its subject» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 498; Benjamin [2011]: 558-559; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238). History shows that, since primeval times, painting has fulfilled

2 The translations of the French texts cited in this paper belong to the author.

3 André Derain, who had initially confirmed his presence at the Maison de la Culture, refused to assist at the last moment and sent a letter wherein he stated that he was «unwilling to discuss or participate, neither closely nor from afar, in such actions», which he considered «at once futile and ill-fated» (VV.AA. [1936]: 9). For the historical-political context of these debates, see Racine (2003: 113-131), as well as the German edition and the French reissue of these documents: Klein (2001) and VV.AA. (1987).

social roles, an extra-artistic function with indirect effects, either by contributing to the understanding of reality or by imposing conventions on visual perception, as was decisively the case in the Renaissance with the invention of perspective. Yet, even if the usefulness of such «achievements in painting» did not imply, as one might argue, an improvement in perception, but only a «more or less expressive reproduction» of reality, they have undoubtedly had an impact «through numerous channels – commercial drawings and advertising images, popular and scientific illustrations – which influence the standard of production and education within society itself» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 498; Benjamin [2011]: 559; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239).

However, the effect of photography on the crisis of painting and, more generally, on the expansion of the image's social function was not addressed at the Venice congress. In contrast, Aragon compensated for this omission with the meetings at the Maison de la Culture, held at the *Le Matin* cinema in Paris, which included participants such as Jean Lurçat, Marcel Gromaire, Édouard Goerg, Edmond Küss, Fernand Léger, Jean Labasque, Jean Cassou, and André Malraux<sup>4</sup>. Also present were Lhote and Le Corbusier, who had already participated in the Venetian debates. During the first meeting, on May 16, 1936, just a few weeks after the victory of the Front Populaire in the French national elections, Aragon proposed a hypothesis with significant implications for the formulation of a revolutionary art policy: «to found ideas about the history of painting on the history of photography» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 499; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239). Indeed, in a passage from his speech reproduced in *La querelle du réalisme*, we read:

I also thought that, to study what is happening in the field of painting, it would be necessary to consider the evolution of photography, so that we might shed some light on it. There is still too often a tendency to believe that painting issues can be explained by themselves, and by themselves only, that painting constitutes a closed world, incomprehensible even to those who are not painters. [...] As for me, I cannot believe that painting can evolve in contradiction with the other creative activities of man, or that, for example, instead of contributing to the expansion of human knowledge, it can tend to regress toward forms of pure, simple magical enchantment. (VV.AA. [1936]: 57-58)

According to the chronicle published by Aragon in “Commune” – the official journal of the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), of which he and Paul Nizan were editors-in-chief<sup>5</sup> –, many painters in attendance

4 André Malraux did not provide for publication in *La querelle du réalisme* the speech he improvised during these journeys. See Aragon's explanation in his account of the meeting (Aragon [1936]: 21).

5 The editorial board included Henri Barbusse, André Gide, Romain Rolland, and Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier.

were affronted by the attempt to «found ideas about the history of painting on the history of photography». They particularly resented that the proposal should come from a writer deemed to have no right to speak about painting. «Imagine a physicist being offended because someone talks to him about chemistry»: thus translates Benjamin the analogy used by Aragon to evince both the proximity and the distance between the two art forms (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238; Aragon [1936]: 23).

The history of photography had begun to be written only a decade earlier. In this short period, several works had been published about its early days and first masters. Among these were the writings of Helmuth Theodor Bossert and Heinrich Guttman, Camille Recht, and Heinrich Schwarz, along with the works of pioneers such as André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri and Nadar, all of them very important for Benjamin and his *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* (1931). However, it was only with his friend Gisèle Freund's recent doctoral thesis, *La photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (1936), that the history of photography was addressed «in conjunction with the history of painting» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239). Benjamin, who had supervised her thesis defense at the Sorbonne, recognized in this work the «highly original perspectives» that emerged from applying the method of «dialectical materialism» to this field of study (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239)<sup>6</sup>.

In his first intervention in the Paris debates, Aragon states that Freund's book is «eventful in its contribution to the history of art» and acknowledges that he based his presentation «in more than one aspect» on her text (VV.AA. [1936]: 58-59). The circulation of ideas should be highlighted: Benjamin, who comments on Aragon's speech, is explicitly cited by Freund in a footnote to the third chapter of *La photographie en France*, dedicated to the first photographers (Freund [1936]: 48). Benjamin notes that Freund «describes the rise of photography in tandem with the rise of the bourgeoisie; the connection is exemplified in a particularly successful way by the history of the portrait» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500-501; Benjamin [2011]: 560-561; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239). «The book's method is based on dialectical materialism», he would write in the review published in 1938, in issue 7 of the “Zeitschrift

6 Benjamin met Freund (and Klossowski) at Franz Hessel's house (Eiland, Jennings [2014]: 260). Freund had begun her doctoral thesis under the supervision of Karl Mannheim at the University of Frankfurt. During her exile in Paris, since 1933, Charles Lalo, professor of aesthetics at the Sorbonne, became her supervisor. In July 1941, after spending almost a year underground in Saint-Sozy, Dordogne, to avoid the Gestapo's lists, Freund emigrated to Buenos Aires, invited by the Argentine writer, translator, and patron Victoria Ocampo, director of “Sur” magazine. Her portraits of Benjamin and Aragon date from 1938-1939. For more details on her career as a photographer and her personal life, see Freund (1970) and (1977).

für Sozialforschung" (Benjamin [1972-1986]: III, 543; Benjamin [2011]: 794; Benjamin [1996-2003]: IV, 121). After describing the various procedures which, around 1780, sixty years before the invention of photography, accelerated its creation, making it cheaper and more widespread, Freund showed how through photography «technical development in art converged with the general technical standard of society» and the portrait became accessible to broader sectors of the bourgeoisie (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 501; Benjamin [2011]: 562; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239).

Furthermore, Freund touches on the core of the mid-19th century dispute between painting and photography, when she argues that «photography's claim to be an art was contemporaneous with its emergence as a commodity» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 501; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 240). In the paragraph referenced by Benjamin, Freund quotes *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* to argue that, at the beginning of its development, photography enjoyed an artistic recognition that became significantly diminished with its industrialization. Nevertheless, these early photographers had no artistic pretensions; they worked for themselves, and their works were known only within a small circle of friends: «This artistic claim was manifested by photography merchants, because as the quality of their work diminished and lost all artistic character, they hoped that, by labeling their goods as art, they could better attract the public» (Freund [1936]: 49). Benjamin, after translating this observation elliptically into German, comments:

This circumstance is not without its dialectical irony: the very procedure which was later to call into question the concept of the artwork itself, by accentuating its commodity character through reproduction, claimed to be artistic. (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 501-502; Benjamin [2011]: 562; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 240)

The next phase in the history of photography, according to Benjamin, began with André Disdéri. He not only understood that photography was another commodity in capitalist society; he was also the first to use photographic techniques to circulate objects – primarily, works of art – that had previously remained relatively outside the market, securing a state monopoly on reproductions from the Louvre Museum. The subsequent evolution of photography, which exceeds the chronological framework in Freund's book, concerns the time when photography began its triumphant progress under the monarchy of Louis-Philippe: «It is the epoch of the *juste milieu*» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 502; Benjamin [2011]: 563; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 240). The artists of this school were towed along by photography, which came to realize their pictorial ideal. Their adversary was Gustave Courbet, creator of *La Vague* (1869), a painting in which the relationship between painter and photographer is temporarily reversed. This painting represented, in fact, a «photographic subject

discovered through painting». With this work, which anticipated «an expedition to explore a world of forms and structures which were not captured on the photographic plate until a decade later», Courbet distinguished himself as «the last who could attempt to surpass photography» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 503; Benjamin [2011]: 564; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). Later painters, especially the Impressionists, avoided a direct confrontation with photography. The painted image emancipated itself from drawing, found refuge in color, and, in a way, managed to avoid competing with the camera, as evidenced by the fact that, at the turn of the century, even pictorial photography sought to imitate Impressionism.

However, the complete rejection of photography was far from being a solution for the post-Impressionist and Cubist painters, suggests Benjamin. He then translates some parts of Aragon's provocative reflection during the first Parisian meeting:

Painters, confronted with photography, have adopted different attitudes. Initially, contempt, followed by imitation and then panic. They saw the camera as a competitor. They regarded it as 19th-century workers regarded machines. They blamed it for their perils. They tried not to do things the way it did. That was their great idea. But to refuse in this way to recognize an important achievement of mankind, a tool capable of expanding the field of knowledge, naturally pushed them toward the denial of knowledge, in other words, toward a reactionary behavior. Painters, even the most gifted of them, and in proportion to their talent, became true ignoramuses. They wanted their painting to represent, to signify less and less. They became lost in the ecstasy of technique, of matter. They drifted into abstraction. In their works, nothing human remained. They contented themselves with showcasing the technical problems of painting. They ceased to paint for men and painted for none other than painters. Moreover, and I am speaking here of the best, the financial means of the speculator granted the great masters of painting, in the times we had reached, a relatively comfortable living, driving them every day further in this direction. They lost sight of life because, like big children, they lived off their wealthy parents, the art dealers. (VV.AA. [1936]: 64; Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 503-504; Benjamin [2011]: 564-565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241)

### *From Dadaist collage to political photomontage*

Aragon, as Benjamin recalls in the final part of *Pariser Brief [II]*, first addressed the problem of the crisis of painting in 1930, in an essay entitled *La peinture au défi* (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). In his Paris speech, the French writer himself mentioned it as a text which, though not equally valid today in every aspect, is still very coherent overall with his thesis that «painting, at a certain time, was faced with a challenge: the challenge of photography» (VV.AA. [1936]: 57). From Aragon's perspective, this rivalry unfolded in three phases: modern painters proposed to

abandon «the path of imitating nature, the prime form of realism», invoking «the uselessness of competing with the camera», after photography had stimulated, at some point, «the realism of a Courbet, for example»; then came a period that went from Naturalism to Impressionism, in which painting sought to depict things even more realistically than photography, capturing what drawing and black-and-white images could not; finally, Cubist painters like Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso no longer desired to «imitate nature but to compete with it» (VV.AA. [1936]: 57).

*La peinture au défi* is Aragon's preface for the catalog of a March 1930 collage exhibition at the Goemans Gallery, which featured Braque, Picasso, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, André Derain, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, El Lissitzky, René Magritte, Man Ray, Francis Picabia, Alexander Rodchenko, Yves Tanguy, and Joan Miró. Aragon's essay, published as a brochure by the José Corti publishing house, opens with a meditation on the history of the marvelous as a proto-phenomenon of Surrealism. The marvelous arises not only «from the rejection of a reality» but also from the discovery and development of «a new reality set free by such rejection»: the relationship that stems from the rejection of reality in favor of the marvelous «is essentially ethical in nature, and the marvelous is always the materialization of a moral symbol violently opposed to the morality of the world in which it emerges» (Aragon [1993]: 32). The Greeks and Romans, who did not suffer the moral repression imposed by Christianity, knew the marvelous only in the form of the exceptional: incomparable beauty, unique strength, incest, metamorphoses, the apparition of monsters, chimeras, and other supernatural beings that animated life. When man's instincts were condemned to Hell by the Inquisition, everything that lost the right of self-expression became part of another world, the supernatural, a great enchanted forest inhabited by elves, fairies, witches, and giants: «The entire human imagination took refuge in that legendary land, inaccessible to anything that pertained to everyday life» (Ibid.: 33).

In the 20th century, «traversed by contradictory currents», there is a persistent battle for the liberation of fantasy: on one side, the heirs of Romanticism, who still dream of that «land of escape» with its cathedrals and legends; on the other, Surrealism, representing the «modern marvelous», born from the «great reaction after the French Revolution», whose highest expression is found «within the boundaries of an oeuvre and a life, in the Rimbaudian marvelous (Aragon [1934]: 34). Rimbaud's escape into something absolutely new «summarizes and negates what came before», echoing the voice of Sade, who «desired the triumph of crime (*It immortalizes me, it must be made to reign in the world*) and of the Devil (*a being more powerful than that wretch, God*)» (Aragon [1993]: 33, italics in the original)<sup>7</sup>. The true initiator was Lautréamont, who wrote in *Les chants*

7 Aragon cites the edition by Guillaume Apollinaire (see Sade [1909]: 9, 164).

*de Maldoror* (1868): «Beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella» (Ibid.<sup>8</sup>). Since the modern marvelous, «that offensive return of the devil», is no longer «the privilege of a far-removed, fairy-tale world», but of this earthly one, it «animates what surrounds us, sits next to us in the bar, politely asking us to pass the sugar» (Ibid.: 34-35).

The modern marvelous, argues Aragon, is characterized less by surprise than by «an exceptional bewilderment», «an unexpected disorder», «a staggering disproportion» (Ibid.: 37). In this sense, it is the negation of the real, and once accepted, it is put forward as «the reconciliation of the real and the marvelous»: «The new relationship thus established is the surreal, a thousand times defined and always definable in different ways; that real line that connects all the virtual images surrounding us» (Ibid.). According to Aragon, the technique of *papier collé*, developed by the Cubist painters, by Braque and Picasso, was only the first phase in the evolution of collage, «which recalls more the operations of magic than those of painting» and challenges the notions of «personality», «talent», or «artistic property» (Ibid.). From those first collages, two very diverse categories of works emerged: «some in which the pasted element serves as form, or more precisely for the representation of the object, and others where it is incorporated as a material» (Ibid.: 40). These latter works are almost always pictorial, and what is at stake in them is «a problem of color», aiming at «an enrichment» or «a critique of the palette»; the former, on the other hand, anticipate photomontage: using pieces of wood, paper, sand, sandpaper, and mirror fragments as a plastic pretext, the painters who systematically applied this technique were unknowingly moving «from white magic to black magic» and getting in position to deny painting itself (Ibid.: 40-41).

The second phase begins with Dada, or more precisely, with its precursors: Duchamp signs a urinal (1917) or decorates the Mona Lisa with a mustache (1919); Picabia gives the title of *La Sainte Vierge* (1919) to an ink blot. These actions are «logical consequences of the initial gesture of collage» and push the painting process to the extreme of «negating technique» and the artist's personality: «A manufactured object can very well be incorporated into a painting or even constitute the painting itself» (Aragon [1993]: 43). Collage entails «an essential critique of painting from its invention to the present day»; indeed, painting has not always existed; it has gone through periods of splendor and decline, and, being historically determined, «it has an end just like any other concept» (Ibid.: 44). Although it would be too optimistic to believe that someday people will no longer paint, it is possible to hypothesize that painting, «with the whole set of superstitions it involves», such as originality, uniqueness, the treatment

8 The source, in this case, is likely the edition of Isidore Ducasse's complete works by Philippe Soupault (Lautréamont [1927]: 306).

of eternal and universal themes, its functional autonomy, and its role in shaping good taste, «will soon be considered a boring pastime reserved for girls and old provincials, much like versification today and novel writing tomorrow» (Ibid.). This assertion is not a prophecy, but merely a reflection on the development of the arts. Poets «have understood that the word “literature”» can now only be used in a pejorative sense; painters, on the other hand, are not yet fully aware of this transformation, and despite their discoveries, they are still attached to this practice, ready to return to the «old religion» like Giorgio de Chirico, even if their works pictorially imitate «the effect of collages» or are «the reproduction of discoveries made with scissors and glue» (Ibid.: 45-46).

Aragon argues that Isidore Ducasse's dictum in *Poésies II* – «Poetry must be made by everyone. Not by one» – can also apply to painting. All that seemed a prank in avant-garde productions should be seen as «the prophetic expression of an upheaval», of which contemporary artists are the «blind workers»: «*Art has truly ceased to be individual*» (Ibid., italics in the original)<sup>9</sup>. Whether it was invented in Germany or Switzerland around 1914-1915, modern collage «restores the authentic meaning of the old painting process, preventing the painter from falling into narcissism, into art for art's sake, bringing them back to the magical practices that originate and justify plastic representations, defended by many religions» (Ibid.: 48). Bourgeois society has condemned painters to a state of servitude similar to that which they had been reduced to in 16th-century Venice, but with one difference: today's patrons no longer commission portraits or compositions that exalt their war exploits, but works that match their furniture, that decorate the walls of bourgeois apartments:

Painting has long been leading a comfortable life; it flatters the cultured connoisseur who pays for it. It is a luxury article. The painting is a jewel. Still, artists can be seen emancipating themselves from domestication by money. Collage is poor. And its value will go unrecognized for a long time to come. It is considered to be reproducible at will. Everyone believes they can do it the same way. (Ibid.: 48-49)

When quoting this passage in *Pariser Brief [II]*, Benjamin omits the last two sentences, perhaps because they imply a notion of reproducibility that does not fully align with that of *Das Kunstwerk*. His focus was primarily on the «events that led painting, which hitherto had avoided a collision with photography, to confront it head on» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565-566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). Aragon's text explains how this occurred

9 The source is presumably the afore mentioned edition Lautréamont (1927): 386. The hand-written booklets of *Poésies I* and *Poésies II*, transcribed by Breton from the copies kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, were first published in 1919 in the magazine “Littérature” 2-3, edited by Aragon, Breton and Soupault, pp. 1-13, 8-24.

in relation to the works of «his Surrealist friends» and outlines some of their procedures, particularly those used by Ernst: «the photographic element; the cut-out image incorporated into a painting or another image; the pure and simple composition of objects rendered incomprehensible by photography» (Aragon [1993]: 52-53)<sup>10</sup>. Benjamin paraphrases this without mentioning Ernst, who occupies a central place in Aragon's argument. Other methods, he adds on his own behalf, include cutting out reproductions, for example, «into the shape of something other than what they represent. (A locomotive can be cut out of a photograph of a rose)», and he argues that «Aragon saw this technique, which has a clear connection to Dadaism, as proof of the revolutionary energy of the new art» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241).

In *La peinture au défi*, Aragon states that collage finally found its true language with Surrealism and that, «despite the attempts of many rush-hour Dadaists, homage must be paid to Ernst, at least regarding the two forms of collage that differ the most from the principle of *papier collé*: photographic collage and illustration collage» (Aragon [1993]: 51). The DADA/Max Ernst Exposition, inaugurated in Paris in May 1921, promised «drawings, mechanoplastics, plasto-plastics, picto-pictures, ana-plastics, anatomicals, antizymics, aerographics, antiphonaries, irrigables, and republicans», which aspired to be projected «beyond painting» (Aragon, Breton, Soupault [1921]). It is said that no works by the German artist were sold during the month-long exhibition at the gallery of the publisher Au sans Pareil, but Ernst's collages garnered the unanimous admiration of the members of the magazine *Littérature*. Evoking the incomparable emotion, they experienced when, on the eve of the opening, they first saw Ernst's works recently brought from Cologne, André Breton would later say, in *Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme* (1941), that Surrealism found in them its first objective realization in the field of plastic arts. The «purely virgin» visual organization of these paintings paralleled what Lautréamont and Arthur Rimbaud had sought in poetry: «The external object had detached itself from its common field, its constituent parts had become emancipated in such a way as to maintain completely new relationships with other elements, escaping the principle of reality but not thereby having any less consequence on the real plane» (Breton [1979]: 91).

Ernst's first exhibition in Paris raised awareness of «the resources and the thousand means of an entirely new art» (Aragon [1993]: 52). Painting as it had been known no longer seemed valid before a technique used by Cubists, Dadaists, and a proto-Surrealist like Jacques Vaché, who around 1916, in Nantes,

10 Benjamin translates: «A piece of a photograph was glued into a painting or a drawing or something was drawn or painted on a photograph» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). In a footnote, Aragon marks: «Do not forget the written element» (Aragon [1993]: 53).

«made collages with pieces of fabric, on 12-unit postcards he sold for two francs each, depicting scenes of contemporary military life, with very elegant characters, very *Vie parisienne* women» (Ibid.: 47)<sup>11</sup>. Not only Ernst continued to use this technique until *La femme 100 Têtes* (1929) – most painters deemed as Surrealists did as well: Hans Arp, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Georges Malkine, André Masson, René Magritte, Picasso himself, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí. A paraphrase of Ducasse's previously cited aphorism «explains and determines», according to Aragon, this phenomenon: «The marvelous must be made by everyone, and not by one alone» (Ibid.: 61).

### *Revolutionary beauty*

Benjamin believed that Aragon would have hardly supported this point of view in 1936. In fact, a few years after his first trip to the Soviet Union and the controversial publication of the poem *The Red Front* (1931), Aragon distanced himself from the Surrealist movement. He even disavowed *Le paysan de Paris*, describing it as a book written during a period of his life when he preferred «error to its opposite» (Aragon [1935a]: 807), and he joined the French section of the Communist International. Long past seems his praise of Surrealist collage, which he once described as «a means of expression of unknown force and scope» (Aragon [1993]: 48). The reasons for this change of opinion, however, are not purely political. In a few years, comments Benjamin, «the Surrealists' attempt to master photography by “artistic” means has failed» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241).

In this sense, it is interesting to compare Aragon's remarks on Man Ray's work in *La peinture au défi* with his commentary during the first debate at the Maison de la Culture. «Man Ray is engaged in a rather unique challenge», Aragon said in 1930: «imitating photography with painting, and imitating painting with photography, thus going from *Vu* to Renoir» (Aragon [1993]: 59). Six years later, Aragon stated that, from Man Ray's work for the illustrated weekly magazine edited by Lucien Vogel<sup>12</sup> to his more recent photomontages, passing through the black and white rayographs of *Les champs délicieux* (1922) – obtained by directly printing on plates without the use of equipment<sup>13</sup> –, «his photography, with

11 Aragon alludes to the cultural magazine “*La Vie Parisienne*”, founded in Paris in 1863 by the illustrator and engraver Émile Planat, known under his pseudonym Marcellin.

12 *Vu* featured contributions from Man Ray, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai, Robert Capa, and Gaston Paris, among other emerging photographers, since 1928.

13 In June 1924, Benjamin translated into German Tristan Tzara's prologue for this photo album, *Man Ray, la photographie à l'envers*, “G-Zeitschrift zur elementare Gestaltung” 3 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: Spl. I, 8-11).

remarkable virtuosity, succeeds in reproducing the *manière* of modern painters», something that in Manet, Seurat, the pointillists, or Picasso «seemed meant, above anything, to challenge the lens, the camera» (Ibid.: 60). According to him, with Man Ray photography «thus becomes a kind of new critique of painting that spares nothing, not even Surrealism»; paradoxically, however, it suffers from the very sterility that had once affected painting: «It is an art» detached from life and «eminently static», «which perfectly captures the relative social equilibrium of the period when the Treaty of Versailles was not yet fully undermined, and where *prosperity* offered the experimenter a relative tranquility, as reflected in the beautiful, flawless female faces without a trace of misery» (Aragon [1936]: 60).

Aragon's reading of Man Ray's trajectory clarifies the paragraph in *Paris-er Brief [II]* where Benjamin argues that the Surrealists' mistake was that of «industrial art photographers [*kunstgewerblichen Photographen*]], with their «petit-bourgeois creed», encapsulated in the title *Der Welt ist schön* (1928), the album by Albert Renger-Patzsch, a pioneer of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*: «They failed to recognize the social impact of photography, and therefore the importance of inscription – the fuse guiding the critical spark to the image mass (as is seen best in [John] Heartfield)» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504-505; Benjamin [2011]: 566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). Benjamin had already referred to Renger-Patzsch in *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, denouncing the sense of a photography that pretends to be artistic but submits to fashion and masks «the reification of human relations» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 384; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 526). To this «creative photography», Benjamin contrasts «constructive photography», of which the Surrealists themselves were precursors. In a subsequent phase, this line was developed by Soviet filmmakers, who produced their great films in a society where photography «sets out not to charm or persuade, but to experiment and instruct» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 384; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 526).

Benjamin observes that Aragon had recently discussed Heartfield's work, taking other opportunities to «point to the critical element in photography» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 505; Benjamin [2011]: 566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241-242). In a footnote, he references *John Heartfield et la beauté révolutionnaire*, a lecture given by Aragon during the opening of the Berlin artists' exhibition at the Maison de la Culture, which was published in the May issue of “Commune”. This writing, also included in Aragon's book *Pour un réalisme socialiste* (1935) – cited by Benjamin under number 1571 in his list of texts read before his stay in Skovsbostrand, in the spring of 1936 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: VII, 471) –, repeats a phrase four times like a refrain: «John Heartfield now knows how to greet beauty» (Aragon [1935b]: 988, 990-991; Aragon [1935c]: 41, 45, 47, italics in the original). The expression comes from the conclusion of *Alchimie du verbe*, the second of the *Délires* in Arthur Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* (1871): «Cela

s'est passé. Je sais aujourd'hui saluer la beauté (*That's over. Now I know how to greet beauty*)» (Rimbaud [1972]: 112). Applied to Heartfield's photomontages, this expression means that the artist no longer plays with appearances like the avant-garde artists who, «in their critique of painting», tended to use photography for «new poetic purposes», diverting it «from its imitative meaning for expressive uses» (Aragon [1935c]: 987, 990). Heartfield no longer disfigures beauty; «he knows how to create images that represent the very beauty of our time, because they are the cry of the masses [...] His art is an art that follows Lenin, because it is a weapon in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat» (Ibid.: 990).

The photomontages Aragon refers to are some of those created by Heartfield for “Die Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung” (AIZ) after Hitler's rise to power in 1933<sup>14</sup>. In *Der Autor als Produzent*, a lecture delivered by Benjamin at the Institut pour l'Étude du Fascisme (INFA) in Paris, on April 27, 1934, he referred to these works as a development of what he had already found in germ in Dada: «The revolutionary strength of Dadaism consisted in testing art for its authenticity. A still life might have been put together from tickets, spools of cotton, and cigarette butts, all of which were combined with painted elements. The whole thing was put in a frame. And thereby the public was shown» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 692; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 774).

In this way, the goal was to assert temporality, the historical sign, over eternity, material reality over artistic transfiguration: «the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life» is more eloquent than painting, just as «the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book» is more revealing than the text itself: «Much of this revolutionary content has gone into photomontage. You need only think of the work of John Heartfield, whose technique made the book cover into a political instrument» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 692-693; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 774-775). The «revolutionary use value» that Heartfield gives to the captions on his photographs thus stands in stark contrast to the aestheticization inherent in the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, whose landscapes of factories, abandoned lands, railway tracks, and quarries turn «even abject poverty into an object of enjoyment», representing it in a refined, perfectly fashionable way (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 693; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 775).

In the concluding pages of *Der Autor als Produzent*, Benjamin praises two statements by Aragon, formulated in different contexts but both aimed at clarifying the commitment that artists and writers should take toward the proletariat's revolutionary struggle. In the penultimate paragraph, he extensively translates the gloss of René Maublanc's response to the inquiry *Pour qui écrivez-vous?*,

14 Founded by Willi Münzenberg, the “AIZ” was published weekly in Berlin from 1921 to 1933, and subsequently in exile in Prague until 1938. For Heartfield's photomontages against National Socialism, see Willett (1997: 111-163).

published in “Commune” in January 1934. In this note, Aragon praises the attitude of Soviet writers «who came from the Russian bourgeoisie and nevertheless became pioneers in the building of socialism» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 700; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 780; VV.AA. [1934]: 581).

Complementarily, in the final paragraph, Benjamin paraphrases a reflection by Aragon on communist intellectuals, taken from the article *Le Surréalisme et le devenir révolutionnaire*, published in the magazine “Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution” in December 1931, before his break with Breton: «It is not that we deny our bourgeois origin, but the dialectical movement of our development has already placed us in opposition to this very origin. This is what properly constitutes the position of revolutionary writers, who, though bourgeois in origin, essentially present themselves as *traitors to their class of origin*» (Aragon [1931]: 6, italics in the original). Presumably citing from memory, Benjamin writes: «The revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 701; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 780).

The main objectives of the INFA, the venue for the lecture *Der Autor als Produzent*, were the organization of an archive and the development of research aimed at identifying, documenting, and analyzing both established and emerging forms of fascism. The institute was sponsored by prestigious European figures from the scientific, legal, literary, and artistic fields – among them Lévy-Brül, André Malraux, Victor Marguerite, Edgard Milhaud, Vincent de Moro-Giaffari, Jean Painlevé, Carlo Rosselli, Frans Masereel, and Paul Signac. Initially, it meant bringing together leftist intellectuals, both communists and non-communists (socialists, radicals, and even anarchists), in the spirit of the Front Commun contre le Fascisme (FC), founded in 1933 (see Kambas [1983]: 26). Benjamin seems to have established contacts with some INFA members during the first year of his exile in France, after reading, in the March 1934 issue of the magazine “Die Sammlung”, a call in support of the institute’s creation, written by another former Surrealist, Philippe Soupault. Among the supporters was Dr. Jean Dalsace, a member of the Parti Communiste Français and promoter of the international committee for the liberation of the German marxist leader Ernst Thälmann and other political prisoners of Hitlerism. Dalsace is known to have organized literary gatherings at his *Maison de Verre* – designed by Pierre Chareau – on Rue Saint-Guillaume, which were attended by Aragon, Paul Éluard, Jean Cocteau, Tanguy, Joan Miró, and Max Jacob (see Maria Gough [2002]: 55). Benjamin, in his correspondence with Gershom Scholem, Bertolt Brecht, and Gretel Adorno, refers to the preparation of a complete series of lectures in French, to be held at Dalsace’s house, focused on the «German avant-garde» and including «the novel (Kafka)», «the essay (Bloch)», «the theater (Brecht)», and «journalism (Kraus)» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: 357, 362, 367).

### *Socialist Realism and Latin American Muralism*

The volume *La querelle du réalisme*, which contained the debates held at the Maison de la Culture, included an appendix with a survey curated by Aragon in collaboration with Cassou and René Crével, who had just broken with André Breton and joined the AEAR. It was originally published in the May and June 1935 issues of “Commune”, with the title *Où va la peinture?* (Aragon et al. [1935]: 937-960, 1118-1134; VV.AA. [1936]: 158-201). Included alongside a piece by Léon Moussinac, *Les peintres devant le “sujet”*, and excerpts from a lecture by Crevel, *Discours aux peintres* (delivered at the Maison de la Culture on May 9, 1935), the survey collected responses from renowned modern painters such as Amédée Ozenfant, Léger, Marie Laurencin, Ernst, Lhote, Tanguy, Robert Delaunay, and Alberto Giacometti (who sent a drawing), along with definitions by three old masters of 19th-century French Realism: Honoré Daumier, Horace Vernet, and Gustave Courbet. Benjamin refers to this appendix in a footnote, without specifying it; there he alludes to a «malicious assertion» by Derain: «The great danger for art is an excess of culture. The true artist is an uncultured person» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 247; Aragon et al. [1935]: 21, 942; VV.AA. [1936]: 163). Identifying this source is important for yet another text, not mentioned by Benjamin, that traces a history of technical reproducibility from a Marxist perspective, and which acquires particular significance in relation to *Das Kunstwerk*. This text is the contribution of a young Argentine artist, Antonio Berni, still unknown in those years but destined to become a prominent figure in Latin American avant-garde circles<sup>15</sup>.

Born in the city of Rosario in 1907, Berni had studied painting in Paris and joined Surrealism after attending Giorgio de Chirico's retrospective, inaugurated at the Galerie Surréaliste in February 1928, whose catalog included a *Préface-Pamphlet* by the author of *Le Paysan de Paris* (Aragon [1981]: 20-22). A friend of Henri Lefebvre, from whom he had acquired a humanist vision of Marxism, Berni had been affiliated with the Communist Party and, by the early 1930s, experienced a shift toward what he defined as a «New Realism» in line with the Socialist Realism promoted in France by Aragon, while maintaining an originality irreducible to it (see Berni [1999]: 74-95; Viñals [1976]: 49-50). In his contribution to the survey *Où va la peinture?*, Berni mentioned his participation in the mural project *Ejercicio plástico* (1933) by the Mexican David Alfaro

15 We have pointed out the relevance of Berni's response for the first time in Ibarlucía (2020): 266-268. The compilation also featured texts by Christian Bérard, Jean-Louis Garcin, Jean Carlu, Jacques-Émile Blanche, André Marchand, Paul Signac, Frans Masereel, Jean-François Laglenne, Valentine Hugo, Jean Lurçat, Raoul Dufy, Georges-André Klein, Pierre Vérité, Édouard Goerg, René Mendès-France, and Marcel Gromaire.

Siqueiros (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1132; VV.AA. [1936]: 198). The work was created in the basement of the Los Granados villa, owned by publishing magnate Natalio Botana and located on the outskirts of Buenos Aires<sup>16</sup>. Berni was part of the so-called *Executing Polygraphic Team* alongside Argentine painters Lino Enea Spilimbergo and Juan Carlos Castagnino, and the Uruguayan scenographer Enrique Lázaro (see Berni [1999]: 202-208). In this immersive large-scale fresco, as Berni himself explains in detail in his response, they sought to fully exploit the latest chemical discoveries and technical innovations: the use of mechanical brushes, the application of lacquers and sodium silicate, and the use of photographs and electric projectors (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1132-1133; VV.AA. [1936]: 198-199).

Berni's response to the survey *Où va la peinture?* was republished in French more than half a century after its first appearance (VV.AA. [1987]) and remains unpublished in Spanish. If Benjamin had read it, it is surely that Berni's reflections on the historical-social relations between art and technique in the field of graphic arts – presented in the first two paragraphs – would have caught his attention, given their affinity with the theme he would address only a few months later in *Das Kunstwerk*, his new work after *Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, which he started around October 1935 (see Benjamin [1935-1936]: 320-296). Berni writes:

Every era and every class has had its own technical means of artistic expression in accordance with its feelings, concepts, and dominant ideology.

In ancient Greece and Rome, painters preferred wax and tempera. In the Middle Ages, feudalism found in fresco painting a formidable means of religious propaganda for the masses. The Renaissance, with oil painting, discovered a new vehicle perfectly suited to the new demands of plastic expression, which became the technique par excellence of bourgeois society. Around the middle of the last century, coinciding with the final stages of the individualist technique of easel painting, a great revolution occurred that changed the landscape of the world of graphic arts. Photography, photoengraving, and the great development of the graphic arts significantly expanded the field of plastic expression. Since then, the traditional elements for aesthetic and documentary work have lost ground to new techniques. (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1132; VV.AA. [1936]: 197)

It is certainly plausible that Benjamin, a regular reader of “Commune”, had access to Berni's text before its inclusion in the appendix of *La querelle du réalisme* toward the end of 1936. He may have read it directly in the pages of the magazine, where it was published in June 1935, in the next issue in which

16 Restored by a team of Mexican and Argentine specialists from the National Institute of Fine Arts and the Tarea-Center of the current School of Art and Heritage at the National University of San Martín, the mural has been housed since December 2010 at the Museum of the Bicentennial of the Casa Rosada, Argentina. On the restoration work, see Barrio and Wechsler (2014).

Aragon's lecture on Heartfield, mentioned in *Pariser Passagen II*, was reproduced. In any case, the relevant point here is not to suggest a presumed dependency, but rather to highlight the convergence of both approaches, namely, the shared concerns about technical transformations in the field of visual arts in general. Following a Marxist historical framework akin to Berni's, Benjamin presents two complementary theses in *Das Kunstwerk*. The first, present both in the first provisional version of the essay (presumably from September 1935) and in its three subsequent drafts (including the French translation published in the "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung" in 1936), contrasts the perfection of classical art with the «capacity for improvement [*Verbesserungsfähigkeit*]» of the «assembled artwork» to demonstrate that aesthetic value is based on the material conditions of production and the degree of technical development achieved in a given era: «*The state of their technology*», writes Benjamin, «*compelled the Greeks to produce eternal values in their art*» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 446-447, 719 and VII, 361-362; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 31-32, 65-66, 111-112, 176; Benjamin [1996-2003]: 108-109)<sup>17</sup>. Since they «had only two ways of technologically reproducing works of art: casting and stamping», coins and terracotta figures were the only works that could be technically reproduced; all others had to be created as unique, unrepeatable pieces (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 446, 719 and VII, 361; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 31, 65, 111, 176; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 108).

On the other hand, in the first section, originally titled *Technische Reproduzierbarkeit*, the text of which is preserved with minor variations in the fifth and final draft of the essay, Benjamin argues that graphic art became reproducible in the Middle Ages, with the introduction of wood engraving. This technique was later complemented by copper engraving and etching. At the beginning of the 19th century, with the advent of lithography, the technical reproducibility of art reached «a fundamentally new stage» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 436, 474, 709 and VII, 351; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 54, 97, 164, 209; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 102). Lithography allowed images to reach a mass market for the first time and, with the development of the illustrated newspaper, to keep pace with print. Yet, a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography: «For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction – tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 436, 474, 709 and VII, 351; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 54, 97, 164, 209; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 102). With the advent of cinematic art, entirely determined by technical reproducibility, aesthetic value stands in direct opposition to that consecrated by Greek art. Capacity

17 This sentence is not underlined in the first version. The French translation published in May 1936 has a slightly different formulation.

for improvement, which in Antiquity would have been the least essential artistic quality, has now become decisive. Film, in fact, constitutes «*the artwork most capable of improvement*», and this capability is directly «*linked to its radical renunciation of eternal value*»; it is no coincidence that «*the decline of sculpture*», whose canonical creations are «*all of a piece*», seems inevitable in the era of the «*assembled artwork*» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 436, 474, 709 and VII, 351; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 34, 66, 112, 176; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 109).

The comparison between Berni's response to the *Où va la peinture?* survey and this passage from *Das Kunstwerk* is not meant to suggest that Benjamin was inspired by the Argentine artist. What it seeks to show is that technical reproducibility was a significant concern among revolutionary artists of the time and, as a result, could only be a central theme in the debates promoted by Aragon through the pages of “*Commune*”, the *Maison de la Culture* meetings, and other cultural spaces associated with the *Front populaire*. As we have noted, Aragon's thesis in *La querelle du réalisme* – the need to consider the history of photography as a basis to reflect on painting – piqued Benjamin's interest, as did the thesis on the evolution from Dadaist collage to photomontage and its political use by Heartfield. Aragon's perspective not only aligns with Benjamin's theory of art but is also explicitly based on Freund's study on the social history of portraiture in 19th-century France, which in turn cites Benjamin's *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*. Thus, materialist aesthetics forms a circle: Benjamin comments on Aragon, who is inspired by Freund, who in turn cites Benjamin.

*Pariser Brief [II]* concludes with two reflections on the political function that painting continues to fulfill. The first is in line with the role Berni attributes to photography in expanding the expressive field of painting. Benjamin translates, with some omissions, an article published by the Belgian painter Antoine Wiertz on the first major photography exhibition, held at the 1855 Paris Exposition, included in his *Oeuvres littéraires* (1870). In a prophetic tone, Wiertz states that daguerreotypy has not come to suppress painting, but to merge with it: «Before a century has passed, this machine will be the paintbrush, the palette, the paints, the skill, the experience, the patience, the keen eye, the touch, the paste, the glaze, the *thread*, the modeling, the finishing, the result» (Wiertz [1870]: 309, italics in the original; Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 505; Benjamin [2011], 567; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242)<sup>18</sup>. Those familiar with Wiertz's grand paintings, Benjamin comments, know that, for him, the artistic genius is essentially «*a political one*» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 567; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242). The same paragraph is fully translated in *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, discussed in *Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, and cited in French in *Das Kunstwerk*, along with other excerpts

18 When citing this passage here, Benjamin omits «*the thread*».

from the edition of Wiertz's writings (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 384 and V, 49, 824; Benjamin [1996-2005]: II: 526-527; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 6, 671). Benjamin highlights «the particular importance» of the long caption of the triptych *Pensées et visions d'une tête coupée* (1853) (Benjamin [1972-1989]: V, 1028; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 859; see also Wiertz [1870]: 492-495) and notes what an anonymous contemporary wrote about the tendency of Wiertz's pictorial work:

If Wiertz had not been confined to the cold walls of an isolated studio but had access to the public monuments of modern civilization – railway stations, legislative chambers, university halls, markets, city halls (he even wanted to try with the theater) – who could say what new, living, dramatic, and picturesque world he would have depicted on the canvas? (Wiertz [1870]: 525-526; Benjamin [1972-1989]: V, 219; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 157)

If, by virtue of his large-format canvases, Wiertz was for Benjamin «the perfecter of the diorama» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: V, 1208; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 901), both from the perspective of exploring technical processes and materials, and from a social standpoint, one could say that his manifest political intentionality foreshadows the great achievements of Mexican muralism. It is uncertain whether Benjamin was familiar with the works of Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera, but it is unlikely that he knew, for example, Siqueiros's definitions in the lecture *Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva* given at The John Reed Club of Hollywood in the United States, in September 1932. According to Siqueiros, for the artists of the so-called Block of Mural Painters in Los Angeles, the camera and film, as well as other technical tools, represented «a reservoir of immense value for the very essence of plastic arts and the political painting of revolutionary agitation and propaganda» (Siqueiros [1932]: 1). In particular, «photogenic-borne painting, with precise and infinite reproducibility», was of great importance in achieving a «realistic objective», «pictorial-photographic», or «plastic-truthful» style of «reduced material proportions» and «mechanical execution, with greater circulatory capacity, that is, of the utmost multi-exemplarity» (Siqueiros [1932]: 5-6).

Concerning the European experience, Benjamin believes that the fusion prophesied by Wiertz did not come to pass. Some painters of Heartfield's generation became photographers owing to the political struggle, while others, like Georg Grosz or Otto Dix, demonstrated that painting «has not lost its function» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506; Benjamin [2011]: 567; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242). This function is eminently critical and cannot be reduced to what is usually understood as Socialist Realism, as Benjamin states in an earlier formulation of this passage from *Pariser Brief [II]*, preserved in one of the notes for the expanded version of *Das Kunstwerk*, which he had hoped to publish in “Das Wort”: «In fact, Socialist *Realism* is not only a matter of subject. It also means, for painting, a realistic assessment of its social circumstance» (Benjamin [1972-]

1989]: VII, 821; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 292; italic in the original). In the text finally sent to Moscow, Benjamin avoids explicitly referring to the official artistic doctrine of the Soviet Union and explains what, from his perspective, the role of painting should be in revolutionary struggles and the education of the masses. Painting might perhaps contribute to this task in Western democracies, where «works produced with sovereign freedom have a destructive, purifying effect», but not in fascist states, where social reality should instead provoke an opposite visual inspiration, «as is the case with the great caricaturists» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506; Benjamin [2011]: 568; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242).

In these latter countries, painting is alive insofar as it resists fascism. Not all painters are like the former Futurists, who joined the Royal Academy of Italy founded by Benito Mussolini, nor are they willing to collaborate freely with Hitlerism, as Raoul Dufy declared in the inquiry *Où va la peinture?* (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 507 and VII, 821; Benjamin [2011]: 568; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 292-293)<sup>19</sup>. In Germany, some painters (of whom nothing is said in the Venice and Paris debates), are forbidden from painting or exhibiting their works and frequently visited by the police, who come to check whether they have painted anything by night, with draped windows. «For them the temptation to paint “from nature” is slight. And the pallid landscapes of their paintings, populated by phantoms or monsters, are taken not from nature but from the class state» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 507; Benjamin [2011]: 568-569; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 243). These artists follow in the footsteps of Bosch, Hogarth, Goya, and Daumier. Their works present a world suffering from «corruption» and, in doing so, cast an accusation against those responsible; such is the case of so many masterpieces in the history of Western painting according to Crevel, in the lecture included in the appendix of *La querelle du réalisme*: «They know what is useful in the image today: every public or secret mark which demonstrates that within human beings fascism has come up against limits no less insuperable than those it has encountered across the globe» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506-507; Benjamin [2011]: 568-569; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 243)<sup>20</sup>.

19 «If I were German and had to paint the triumph of Hitlerism, I would do it as others who have once handled religious themes without faith» (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1124; VV.AA. [1936]: 187). Benjamin paraphrases the response in a footnote (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 507; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 568).

20 The passage from Crevel's lecture translated by Benjamin reads: «Among the most important works of painting [...] have always been those which, merely by pointing to corruption, indicted those responsible. [...] From Grünewald to Dalí, from the putrid Christ to the *Stinking Ass*, [...] painting has always been able to discover new truths which were not truths of painting alone» (VV.AA. [1936]: 154). Crevel refers to the famous *Crucifixion* (1512-1516) by Mathias Grünewald and *L'Âne pourri* (1928), a Surrealist painting by Salvador Dalí.

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