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## Dreamlike Objects. Surrealistic Kitsch in Benjamin and Buñuel

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**Abstract.** Benjamin's reflection on kitsch fits with strong traits of originality into the more overall focus on this category developing in Germany in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. This survey will be summarily divided into three steps. Initially, an analysis of the essay *Traumkitsch* (Dream Kitsch), an inevitable starting point; an analysis that is not textual but aimed at emphasizing certain perspective points and taking into account the observations on kitsch contained in the *Passages*. This part will be followed by the consideration of a possible placement of Benjamin's kitsch within the debate of the time, and finally, the connection with Surrealism will be explored not by relating Benjamin's theses to Breton's canonical texts but rather to some of Buñuel's reflections on the psychology of the inanimate, a dimension that not coincidentally serves as a critical undercurrent in Benjamin's kitsch as well.

**Keywords:** Dreamlike kitsch, Walter Benjamin, Luis Buñuel, Surrealism, fetishism.

Benjamin's reflection on kitsch, which fits with strong traits of originality into the more overall focus on this category developing in Germany in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, proves being somewhat problematic for a reason that is fairly simple to identify. Benja-



min avoids including the phenomenon of kitsch in those taxonomies of bad taste and pseudo-art that had shaped the debate on this newly emerging category. Disentangling himself from the prevailing hermeneutic, Benjamin places kitsch in an opaque territory of ubiquity, in which he superimposes popular art, mass art, and the avant-garde (in this case, Surrealism). With this seemingly contradictory, if not chaotic operation, Benjamin does not attempt to offer any tout court definition of kitsch – although in the *Passages* we can find a fairly clear – cut one; on the contrary, he draws a process of dialectical assimilation of kitsch within twentieth-century culture and shows its less recognizable implications in that construction of a «critical modernism» (Desideri [2022]: LXI) that runs through his more strictly aesthetic thought.

This survey will be summarily divided into three steps. Initially, an analysis of the essay *Traumkitsch* (*Dream Kitsch*), an inevitable starting point; an analysis that is not textual but aimed at emphasizing certain perspective points and taking into account the observations on kitsch contained in the *Passages*. This part will be followed by the consideration of a possible placement of Benjamin's kitsch within the debate of the time, and finally, the connection with Surrealism will be explored not by relating Benjamin's theses to Breton's canonical texts but rather to some of Buñuel's reflections on the psychology of the inanimate, a dimension that not coincidentally serves as a critical undercurrent in Benjamin's kitsch as well.

Assuming kitsch dialectically – this is Benjamin's decisive move – that means codifying it through a precise comparison with the three expressions of modern artistic *techné*: mass art as technology (and here the proximity to Buñuel would be readable by recalling cinema as an exemplary form of the art-technology nexus); popular art or in an extensive sense an aesthetics of the everyday that permeates the experiences of subjects; the avant-gardes and specifically Surrealism in which the theme of oneiric morphology of psychoanalytic matrix emerges.

The triple relationship between kitsch, technology and mass art is a focus that engages Benjamin in the *Passages*<sup>1</sup>. And, oddly enough, we are offered fairly clear indications. In analyzing Haussmann's urbanistic work, Benjamin states «Haussmann's predilection for perspectives, for long open vistas, represents an attempt to dictate art forms to technology (the technology of city planning). This always results in kitsch» (Benjamin [1999]: 124). We have here an established interpretive leitmotif of kitsch: the art-technology nexus potentially has a problematic, not to say negative, characterization. A mimetic relationship is produced that is capable of originating a mismanaged aesthetics, a formal hybridization that spills over onto the very contents it is intended

1 For a survey at once comprehensive and analytical of some of the points we are discussing see Montanelli (2022): 153-173.



to bring to expression. In a broad sense Benjamin aligns himself here with the aesthetics of German functionalism, which from the Deutscher Werkbund to the Bauhaus had conducted a bitter polemic precisely against that repeated intrusion of the artistic element into industrial production, an intrusion now identifiable with kitsch. The issue, often obsessive in the great protagonists of the functionalist season (from Muthesius to Behrens, from Loos to Gropius), was to reconsider the very ontology of modern *techné*, seeking to transcend the dichotomy that Western culture had produced between fine and applied arts. The design of an aesthetics of the everyday, of an aesthetics constantly implicated in the social processes of individual and collective life, a theme alluded to repeatedly by Benjamin himself in the *Passages* and which remains one of the decisive features of the modern at least since Baudelaire, is formulated by functionalism in the search for a balance, probably utopian and always to come, between the artistic side (form) and the technical side (function). The disconnection or non-communication of these two poles leads to the mixed and therefore modernly inauthentic poetics of kitsch.

Again, in the *Passages* Benjamin touches on another pivotal, and well-established, point in the polemic on kitsch: its being an expression of the commodification of aesthetic experience, i.e., that fate proper to industrial civilization – and thus a consequence of the art-technology relationship – that is the link between art and consumption. Significantly, the passage is embedded in a broader discussion on cinema, the mass art par excellence, and precisely on the political significance of cinema and is, just as significantly, introduced by a formula, «heart's ease», which enters into that sentimentalist dimension proper to kitsch which, besides being a caricatured drift of romantic sentiment, is also a strategy of immediate consensus, both aesthetic and commercial. The heart, or rather its tyranny – as Kundera would have said – symbolically assigning to it the anthropological genesis of all kinds of kitsch, is what makes art organic to consumption: kitsch in fact is «nothing more than an art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption» (Benjamin [1999]: 395). Benjamin goes on to note the opposition, typically modernist, between kitsch and art. However, he does not neglect the proximity, if not the affinity of these two poles: in fact, both have an organicity to consumption and «something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening» (Benjamin [1999]: 395). Beyond the overlap, which is not only strategically rhetorical, between kitsch and happiness<sup>2</sup>, it is worth noting the not obvious

- 2 Abraham Moles interpreted kitsch from exactly this perspective: a happiness, that of kitsch, constitutively embedded in the processes of the capitalist consumer ethic. To the *frêle bonheur* of Rousseauian memory, the precarious natural configuration of the feeling of humanity that the modern discovers as the almost ontological root of his own subjectivity, the *art de bonheur*, the formulation of an everyday gratification generated by the consumption of late industrial civilization, responds: «If kitsch is not an art, it is at least the aesthetic mode of



kinship promoted by Benjamin, between kitsch and the avant-garde, a move that makes this pairing less oppositional than it would seem and allows Benjamin to bring the mass arts, cinema above all, into this unexpected convergence.

The cliché of the absolute incommunicability between kitsch and the avant-garde, chargeable to the authoritative modernist orthodoxy of Clement Greenberg, which effectively defined the premises of any interpretation of kitsch at least until the postmodern clearances, hides a more opaque history. A few years earlier Curt Glaser (1920) had significantly and controversially assumed a criterion not of opposition but of contiguity. The perspective is totally the reverse of Benjamin's, but Glaser's operation of inserting the avant-garde into kitsch remains significant. The German art historian and critic opposes kitsch not to the avant-garde, but to art in general, where «quality» is made mimetic. The avant-garde in Glaser's conservative perspective is nothing more than a modern way of generating forms of non-quality. Thus, there are two formal ontologies of kitsch: «the sweet kitsch» (*süßer Kitsch*) and the «sour kitsch» (*saurer Kitsch*). In the first case we have all the gregarious art that in a manifest way exhibits its absence of artistic quality; in the second case, and this is the thornier one, the art produced by the avant-garde: the brutal staging of art that, consciously negative (ideologically and aesthetically), arrogates to itself the right to establish, in a radical way, what art is.

Glaser's scheme of a bipolar kitsch is, as mentioned, totally alien to Benjamin's approach, which investigates more the links that, problematically, overlap the categories in play (mass art, avant-garde, kitsch), seeking a synthesis in that uniquely modern expression that is cinema, able by virtue of its technological nature of accounting for all these declinations. Evoked in the final part of the passage on kitsch, cinema is both a process of dialectical assimilation of kitsch – as it is of the avant-garde if we keep in mind the thematization of it in the essay on the Work of Art – and its «providential site», a sort of *incunabulum*, morphological and ideological, of a «material», kitsch precisely, that remains «strange and perhaps formerly unknown» (Benjamin [1999]: 396).

Having attested to what we have defined as an unexpected convergence, we understand how the investigations of kitsch, which Benjamin had developed ten years earlier, had already made explicit the need for tools other than the already worn-out aesthetic-sociological analysis. Modernity cannot resolve itself solely in the iconoclasm of the avant-garde. Modernism, in order to be critical and non-ideological, must recover perspectives that make unexpected convergences unprecedented morphologies. Recourse to the category of the «dreamlike» is what allows Benjamin to draw a red thread between the avant-garde and mass

the everyday; it rejects transcendence and settles in the majority, in the average, in the most probable distribution. Kitsch, we say, is like Happiness, for everyday» (Moles [1971]: 231).



and/or popular art, and cinema. In its much-abused proximity to the dream, that category is the translation of these confluences: kitsch becomes «dreamlike», *Traumkitsch*.

Before addressing the essay *Dream Kitsch* (Benjamin [2008a]) however, it is worth noting how Benjamin interweaves kitsch, dream, and folk art. As a whole, folk art shows itself as a boundless psychology of the inanimate: a mapping, the one traced by Benjamin, a labyrinthine, showing a further identity of the modern, since, as it is stated in the 1929 fragment *Some Remarks on Folk Art*, «folk art and kitsch ought for once to be regarded as a single great movement» (Benjamin [2008b]: 254). The sphere of the dream flows unceasingly – this is the Benjamin's insight – in the evocation of childhood, in toys, in picture books, but also in furnishings, in the *intérieur*, where the seemingly insignificant becomes lived-in. Kitsch is the aesthetics of this uniquely modern staging and the dreamlike, the state in which the unconscious and inanimate meet. A process that Benjamin will see not only in Surrealism where it is explicitly stated, but especially in that unmanageable experience of the self, such as recollection, dreaming, and the perceptual lability of the world. This condition is peculiar to folk art and kitsch, which travel parallel paths to that of art, almost revealing different intensities and, probably, even functions that are not totally equivalent: «Art teaches us to see into things. Folk art and kitsch allow us to see outward from within things» (Benjamin [2008b]: 255). Here we see the character of the objective interiority of kitsch, the interior of objects, the psychology of the inanimate that refers us back to the celebrated Benjamin's formula of the «sex appeal of the inorganic» (Benjamin [1999]: 8). In the *Passages* Benjamin records the opacity into which the notion of kitsch enters and precisely by alluding to this vagueness documents its connection to a prehistory of the self and its projections. In the section of the *Passages* devoted to the *intérieur* Benjamin can only say that we «seek the totemic tree of objects within thicket of original history. The very last – the topmost – face on the totem pole is that of kitsch» (Benjamin [1999]: 212). And immediately afterwards an excerpt that is useful to quote in its entirety.

Hessel speaks of the “dreamy epoch of bad taste”. Yes, this epoch was wholly adapted to the dream, was furnished in dreams. The alternation in styles – Gothic, Persian, Renaissance, and so on – signified: that over the interior of the middle-class dining room spreads a banquet room of Cesare Borgia's, or that out the boudoir of the mistress a Gothic chapel arises, or that the master's study, in its iridescence, is transformed into the chamber of a Persian prince. The photomontage that fixes such images for us corresponds to the most primitive perceptual tendency of these generations. Only gradually have the images among which they lived detached themselves and settled on signs, labels, posters as the figures of advertising. (Benjamin [1999]: 213).



There are some points that have to be emphasized in these decisive remarks. The “dreamlike style” is taken as a morphological paradigm of almost fractal alternating styles: the chaos, always programmatic, of nineteenth-century eclecticism’s design. Without great philological problems one can tie Benjamin’s insight to that unsurpassed formula that Baudelaire coined for Brussels architecture: “the toy style”. At the very genesis of the modern, it is a formula that is already able of tracing the premises of its overcoming. Indeed, too great is the temptation to mirror descriptions of the Belgian capital with postmodern descriptions of Las Vegas to be dismissed merely as coincidence. What links Brussels of the mid-nineteenth century and the Las Vegas of a century later is precisely the kitsch caught in the two pivotal moments of its history: on the one hand, its own birth and, on the other, its postmodern legitimization. The dreamlike style is in fact the aestheticological focus of the toy style, a formulation in which decisive elements come into play for the configuration of an ontology of kitsch that is not hastily linked to bad taste, namely, the sphere of the unconscious (the dreamlike) and that of childhood (the toy).

Benjamin’s excerpt must therefore be inserted into a larger story; it is the transition point – we repeat – between an embryonic modernity and a mature post-modernity. Between what Baudelaire wrote in his never-completed project for a book on Belgium – «A pot and a rider on a roof are the most prominent evidence of extravagant taste in architecture. A horse on a roof! A pot on a pediment! That refers to what I call the *toy style*» (Baudelaire [2019]: 157) – and what is stated in *Learning from Las Vegas* – «Miami Moroccan, International Jet Set Style; Arte Moderne Hollywood Orgasmic, Organic behind; Yamasaki Bernini cum Roman Orgiastic; Niemeyer Moorish; Moorish Tudor (Arabian Knights); Bauhaus Hawaiian Bauhaus» (Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour [1977]: 80) – an alternative parable of modernism and to modernism in which kitsch is both form and content<sup>3</sup>. An immediate consequence, recorded by Benjamin, is the configuration of metropolitan space in the sign of a more or less forced, but also undoubtedly appealing, childhood regression, and of the domestic environment in the perspective of the “furnished man”. And it is precisely in this direction that it is possible to trace a further aesthetic-anthropological genealogy of kitsch in which the paradigm of the dreamlike style is profiled<sup>4</sup>.

In the formula “furnished man”, that closes the essay *Dream Kitsch*, Benjamin traces in the kitsch that dimension, akin to the dream, that renders evanescent the boundaries between nineteenth-century *intérieur* and commodity: the proximity of things in consumption runs parallel to the dreamlike. The

3 Allow me to refer on these issues to Mecacci (2023).

4 This is what I tried to develop in an essay of mine linking Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Il’ič* to the Benjamin’s dream kitsch: Mecacci [2020].



commodity, that is the infinite accessories that make up this dramatization of living space, represents the way in which the inorganic asserts itself over that which is vital. A sinister, funereal coupling that binds «the living body to the inorganic world. To the living it defends the rights of the corpse» (Benjamin [1999]: 8). The dream kitsch will be for Benjamin, on the contrary, the mode in which the commodity, the removed objects of the past, is rehabilitated by giving new life to the inanimate in that threshold dimension that is the dream: it is the Surrealism, the re-legitimization of what has been discarded by use, condemned by taste and ghettoized by the psychological experience of the subjects. The dreamlike style that connotes nineteenth century living, this historical time, which was «like no other century, was addicted to dwelling», conceived of living not as living in a house, but in a «shell», interpreted the home as a «receptacle» (Benjamin [1999]: 220). Hence the nineteenth-century obsession with coverings, linings, cases, a culture of the envelope to the bitter end in which all transparency is banished: in these dwellings, Benjamin seems to suggest, no light ever filters through.

A further note should be added. The *Passages* excerpt on kitsch concludes by alluding to a pervasive communicative dimension of this category, to its ability to make itself an iconic element of the bourgeois imagination, the future advertising process of mass culture. It is precisely the underlining of this specificity of kitsch that makes Benjamin's analysis close to certain typifications of kitsch already acquired by the early twentieth-century debate. Gustav Pazaurek, a member of the Deutscher Werkbund, in his 1912 text *Guter und schlechter Geschmack im Kunstgewerbe*, indicated five general frames in which kitsch took shape (Pazaurek [1912]: 348-365). Patriotic kitsch, religious kitsch, gift kitsch, advertising kitsch, and social kitsch. And it is obviously the penultimate point that is of interest here. This advertising kitsch, which heralds the media kitsch of contemporaneity, is the kitsch that is offered not so much in objects as in their symbolic-communicative projection: that which takes shape in theaters, in early films, in circuses, in the entertainment industry in general, but also and above all, as Benjamin will assert, in posters, signs, and packaging. But if in Pazaurek this process reveals nothing more than the enormous effort of the most calculating industry to convince that «muck costs as much as tasteful product» (Pazaurek [1912]: 353), in Benjamin the discourse seems to lead elsewhere. The images that are released in the unprecedented morphology of the contemporary – where communicative form and advertising figure coincide – are not so much the symptom of an affirmation of bad taste, as Pazaurek's functionalist diagnosis seems to attest, but the staging of a new horizon of meaning, in which the dreamlike looms as a new hermeneutic paradigm. A hypnotic, if not narcotic, forest of signs that recalls, perhaps not coincidentally, the noble father of the Surrealist movement, namely Rimbaud, who precisely in the Surrealists' fetish text, *Alchemy*



*of the Word*, captures the dreamlikeness of the modern urban landscape, a view marked by the continuous alternation of real and subconscious images, in which, as in Benjamin, it is popular art (childish, consumer, deliberately low) that is the center of gravity: «What I liked were absurd paintings, decorations over doorways, stage scenery, travelling fairs' backcloths, inn-signs, cheap coloured prints; literature gone out of fashion, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling, novels our grandmothers used to read, fairy-tales, little books for children, old operas, meaningless refrains, crude rhythms» (Rimbaud [2001]: 235).

*Kitschtraum* condenses in itself all these themes, which will now be appropriate to understand verbatim<sup>5</sup>. The essay began as a study of three Surrealist productions that focus on the overall poetics of the movement at its inception: Breton's *Manifesto*, Aragon's text *A Wave of Dreams*, both from 1924, and Eluard's poetic collection *Repetitions*, illustrated by Ernst, from two years earlier. Benjamin's initial move is to focus on the theme of dreams, of course. Indeed, the incipit directly recalls one of the symbols of Romantic aesthetics, Novalis' Blue Flower. But pointing out the genetic filiation of Surrealism with Romanticism – and not coincidentally Hermann Broch will do the same with kitsch – by highlighting the theme of the dream and what the Romantic dreamlike implies, from the nocturnal space to the sphere of the unconscious, all this leads Benjamin down an alternative path. The intent, the first real thesis of the short paper, is to trace a history of the dream, but in a way that reverses precisely the Romantic perspective. If Romanticism had assumed the dream as the prerogative access to the unconditioned – just think of what Novalis wrote in 1798 in *Pollen*: «We seek the Unconditioned everywhere and only ever find things» (Novalis [1997]: 23)<sup>6</sup> – Benjamin can direct the discourse to the opposite level. Not the level of the unconditioned (*Unbedingte*), but the level of the conditioned (*Bedingt*), where the constraint to the everyday objectivity of things (*Dinge*) is shown in its full tangibility: dreams are now a shortcut to banality» (Benjamin [2008a]: 236). Benjamin perfectly understands the chiasmus that comes to pass in the modern: the exile from the absolute and the frustration of its access spill over into its own opposite. The dream, far from being the way to «a blue horizon», grasps on the contrary «objects at their most threadbare and timeworn point» and, in turn, the world of objects is projected into the dream giving rise to kitsch: «the side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch» (Benjamin [2008a]: 236).

Benjamin's kitsch, while respecting its Romantic lineage, is removed from the hermeneutic cage of bad taste and referred to a precise sphere, that of childhood. Kitsch is thus not the translation of adult sentimentality, but the dimension

5 For a textual analysis we will use Ibarlucía [2020]: 127-145, which updates and recontextualizes his earlier study expressly devoted to *Kitschtraum*, see Ibarlucía [1998].

6 The translation was changed in only one point, choosing to literally translate *Unbedingte* with *Unconditioned* rather than with the word *Absolute*.



proper to the childlike recreation of objects, and its connection to the mimetic freedom of Surrealism is therefore understandable: indeed, the child, Benjamin asserts, does not grasp a glass, but puts his hand in it. As the dream reformulates the ontology of the real, so childhood enables the object toward other uses that the logic of consumption, the exclusive prerogative of the adult world, censors. Similarly, dream kitsch is a kitsch that discovers itself beyond bad taste: children have no bad taste with which to judge the world around them. Banality and good – and here Benjamin unexpectedly seems to be following Rousseau – are marked, in childhood, by absolute adjacency. Childhood deposes its metaphorical status and becomes a paradigm, a reference. Just as the artist in Baudelaire discovers his own genius in a condition of estrangement from the real – what Baudelaire calls “rediscovered childhood” – activating a virgin attitude to the world, perceiving it as perpetually new, so the Benjamin’s adult is referred back to a kind of prehistory of the self: «the repetition of childhood experience gives us pause» (Benjamin [2008a]: 236).

Adult feeling, as Schiller had already shown, feels the object uniquely in a condition of separation, just as does art that looks at things from the outside, the contemplative dimension in which Benjamin does not include popular art and kitsch. The criterion of difference, the motor of the subject making a judgment of taste and allowing the configuration of a negative judgment (bad taste and/or kitsch), is unknown to childhood. A naïve age, in Schiller’s sense, childhood makes experience and object coincide and it is the dream that allows this transfiguration, but one could also add that specific anthropological dimension preeminent in childhood (the broom that becomes a horse, the classic example that even Benjamin mentions in one of his essays on the toy) – that is the play. It is precisely the sphere of the naïve, which, as Schiller had always asserted, remains a perpetual enigma into itself, that is the irreducibly other condition with respect to modern (male) subjectivity: it is in fact the ancient, the feminine, the infantile and the inanimate.

According to Benjamin, the repressed of modern adult subjectivity had two processes of (re)discovery: psychoanalysis and Surrealism. However, shared by the dream process, psychoanalysis and Surrealism privileged different fields of action. If Freud investigated the soul, deconstructing the self, Breton reformulated things, undoing the logic of their function. He rehabilitated the banal – «previously disqualified objects *drawn at random*» (Breton [2002]: 27) – by contravening the imperatives of the ideology of taste and emancipating it from the sort of cultural expulsion perpetrated by the logics of the aesthetics of beauty and the functional-capitalist logic of use value and, consequently, exchange value. The «disqualified», tasteless and useless object is also the «drawn at random» chance object that elevates as its own criterion the symbolic value that is elaborated in the unconscious, definitively undermining the traditional distinction between beauty and utility.



Oscillating between an object of disinterested contemplation – dreaming inevitably makes kitsch an aesthetic experience – and an object of massified consumption, Benjamin's kitsch can be placed in the coeval debate and specifically, because of the dreamlike declension, to Hanns Sachs' essay *Kitsch* (1932). For Sachs, too, kitsch is an exclusively modern phenomenon and originates from the absence of specificity that modern aesthetic culture exhibits by becoming precisely the specific trait of this aesthetic culture. Cinema exemplifies this kitsch character of the modern in its techno-expressive aspects, that is, in form and content. Sachs links cinema, the quintessential mass art form, to psychoanalysis in its ability not so much to investigate the self but the mass. The condition of daydreaming – the dream/wake dialectic, a Benjamin's paradigm for understanding Surrealism – is transposed by Sachs to the mass enjoyment of cinema, which does nothing more than illustrate processes of gratification, individual and social, that the mass remains denied in real life. Hollywood cinema, the "dream factory", constructs kitsch not only as a mimetic device through the strategies of borrowing and imitation, but above all as a concealment of alienation in a *mise-en-scene* that turns out to be a mere process of sublimation. Cinematic kitsch masks – and here we understand psychoanalytic praxis – true spiritual instances with false aesthetic responses. Modernity, Sachs seems to suggest, must commit itself to deconstructing this mechanism of continuous simulation of one's identity that sees mass art as one of its main engines.

If the dreamlike in Sachs represents that condition of artificial suspension that the subject, as spectator, goes through while daydreaming in front of a screen, in Buñuel it takes on the features of a "moral". Benjamin's connections between dreaming, cinema/folk art and Surrealism can be found, with the appropriate caveats and with declinations that cannot be totally united, in Buñuel as well, although the Spanish director never mentions kitsch as a possible *trait d'union*. Surrealism represents for Buñuel a kind of personal biographical unconscious: in Surrealism he recognizes conceptual and aesthetic ways already active in him. It is a language that offers him a structure, not a content. Buñuel has always insisted that surrealism is not only a poetics as much as an ethos: «a revolutionary, poetic and *moral* movement» (Buñuel [1987]: 109). In this ethical meaning rests the overall failure of the movement, punctuated by individual triumphs – the fame of its interpreters («just a small group of insolent intellectuals who argued interminably in cafés and published a journal», Buñuel [1987]: 123) – that can do nothing before the objectivity of the defeat of the movement's great purpose, the utopia inherited from the Marx-Rimbaud duo: «to change the world, and transform the life itself» (Buñuel [1987]: 123). The element that likens Buñuel, beyond personal idiosyncrasies, to Surrealism is the dream dimension, that is, the possibility of relating to reality through an extra-rational option. Cinema resolves this option, makes it manifest, and in accents very similar to Benja-



min's, Buñuel states: «this kind of cinematographic hypnosis is no doubt due to the darkness of the theatre and to the rapidly changing scenes, light, and camera movements, which weaken the spectator's critical intelligence and exercise over him a kind of fascination. Sometimes, watching a movie is a bit like being raped» (Buñuel [1987]: 69)<sup>7</sup>.

Buñuel is surprisingly precise in indicating the principles that activate the articulation of this surrealist dreamlike morality that finds its own mimetic condition in cinematic art. There are three principles: chance, mystery and imagination. A tripartition that significantly departs by two-thirds from the modernist one of Ortega y Gasset for whom the subject is modulated through a dramatization of the self that unfolds in the relationship of three existential tensions: vocation (the ideal in which each person conceives his or her self), circumstance (the non-self that favors or hinders vocation), and chance (the irrational factor). Buñuel preserves only this last datum and it is precisely the chance principle that he will find in Surrealism and, notably, in Breton. Chance poses two related problems: on the one hand the aesthetic dimension, the theme of its representation, and on the other the historical-ethical significance. Civilization has done nothing but curb chance (or chaos, the formless), it has tried to institutionalize it (in culture, in form), a process of repression designed to make its anarchy manageable. The discovery of the unconscious is transformed in Buñuel, and in the avant-garde as a whole, into a passion for chaos, that is, the acceptance of the irrational, what the Spanish artist calls «mystery», from which derives atheism, a rejection of that ultimate answer to that mystery that is God. Mystery – «an essential element of every work of art» (Buñuel [2022]: 543) – turns out to be a close relative of the dreamlike in its opposition to the organizing devices of rationality, from religion to technology. Between chance and mystery lies the imagination, the space of freedom, the mimetic faculty par excellence that finds its expressive outlet in objects that disorient the ego's protagonism in two ways: by reifying the human and fetishizing its drives. Thus emerges, in all its complexity, the theme of the inanimate.

Subjectivity is first reified in the outrage of its physical integrity; mutilation becomes a bodily principle parallel to *découpage*, collage, and film montage. Subjected to a process of deconstruction, the rationality of the real is projected into a consequential process, its re-transduction into the irrationality of the superreal. As Buñuel states without equivocation in 1928: «the intuition of the film, the photogenic embryo, already palpitates in that operation called *découpage*. Segmentation. Creation. Splitting of one thing so that it may be transformed into another. What was not before, now is» (Buñuel [2022]: 416). The

7 Note the lexical proximity of the perceptual effect the film causes in the viewer: rape in Buñuel, shock in Benjamin.



genealogical act of this process – in which material segments (the montage) and ideal segments (*découpage*) coexist – is the quintessentially cognitive amputation: the blinding, the cutting of the eye. There looms a struggle between blindness and vision that marks the West from Oedipus to the first frame of *Un chien andalou*, a development that also resolves the linear vision of the theatrical experience into the segmented, “edited” vision of cinema. The morphology of the dreamlike – Benjamin’s dream/wake dialectic – looms as the access to that other gaze (the eye of the object) that needs the negation of the cognitive eye. If Buñuel’s cinema can easily be taken as an «exercise in total voyeurism» (Fuentes [2017]: 99), it should never be overlooked that this is possible precisely because the act of viewing is an act close to blindness, to the darkness of the cinematographic room. Seeking a dreamlike blindness, which frees the imagination from the perceptual tyranny of assimilation of the real, the director has no problem recognizing himself in the primacy of the altered experience of aisthesis over the normativity of logos by stating: «I completely lack conceptual memory. For me there is only visual memory» (Fuentes [2017]: 99). The *mirada absente*, the blind gaze, is realized in the dreams of the repressed, in those dreamlike insertions that mark all Buñuel’s cinematography – one thinks only of the celebrated daydreams of Séverine/Catherine Deneuve in – or in the insistence on the topos of blindness – one need only recall two characters in *Los Olvidados*, the blind street musician and the child Ojitos (ojos – eyes), abandoned by his father.

There is also another theme in common with Benjamin: wrestling the object from its commodified use and discovering its other nature. In Benjamin this operation coincides with kitsch, in Buñuel with fetishism<sup>8</sup>, which configures the momentary exoneration of the object from the sphere of consumption, a fruition outside of economic voracity. Not only does the subject resolve himself in the inanimate, but he becomes its object, the roles are reversed: «the furniture, the parquet floor and the books in my room took pleasure in seeing me» (Buñuel [2022]: 201). The object, in its full logical chaoticity, is always caught in a perspective that seemingly material is always psychological. The object is no longer lyricalized or made the subject of philosophical reflection: the object is psychologized. This is the insight that Buñuel expounds in a youthful essay, *Tragedias inadvertidas como temas de un teatro novísimo* (1923): «The sphere of the inanimate will undoubtedly cause us considerable problems. One thing is certain: many times, voice was given to lifeless objects, which, however, spoke like human beings or surpassed in lyricism the best of poets. There is lyrical or

8 On fetishism in Benjamin see Desideri (2002: 105-132). «Benjamin senses with a Goethean eye the “original phenomenon” of Modernity as an age of fetishistic self-representation» (105).



philosophical expression, but not the psychological expression inherent in them: there is that tremendous and complex psychology yet to be studied» (Buñuel [2022]: 218). Freed from lyrical (feeling, taste) and conceptual (the subordinate universe of non-ego and *res extensa*) anthropomorphization, the object asserts itself as a subject other by bringing forth a new ontology. Imagination is the faculty deputed to operate this reversal of roles and, trite to say, not only in a process of formation, but also of deformation, entering that territory of the optical unconscious that Rosalind Krauss, borrowing from Benjamin, saw as the guiding principle of twentieth-century art.

Cinema, the point of convergence of Benjamin's and Buñuel's perspectives, fully accomplishes this process, since it is the artistic expression that «best imitates the functioning of the mind in a state of sleep» and configures, in a paradigmatic way, the dreamlike experience through a mimetic device: «the incursion through the night of the unconscious begins in the screen, and in man: images, as in the dream, appear and disappear amid fades and obscurations; time and space become flexible» (Buñuel [2022]: 544). Buñuel's insistence on the psycho-analytic character of the lens – complementary to Benjamin's already mentioned notion of the optical unconscious – cannot but target the metamorphosis of the nature of the banal object, the kitsch, elevating the insignificant to a construction of meaning, a dramatization of the repressed. In this project, however, an almost elegiac condition, of permanent loss of the subject, remains ever-present: the dream, which allows one to regain possession of what has vanished through the experience of that object, kitsch, banished from taste and use. This is the deep meaning of dream kitsch – does nothing more than transfer to objects what belongs to subjects. In this transition that makes paradoxical the acquired data of the real, whether perceptual or cultural, and in which, for example, it is legitimate to assert with all the iconoclasm of the case that «affectivity is a prerogative of the inanimate» (Buñuel [2022]: 222), kitsch becomes the possibility of intercepting not the periphery of the real world (the bad taste, the useless, the trivial), but the center of a psychic world (childhood, memory, dream) otherwise irretrievable: «it is the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves in dream and conversation, so as to take the energies of an outlived world of things» (Benjamin [2008a]: 238).

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