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The Reverse of *Thanatos* and the Art of Repetition

Marina Montanelli
Università degli Studi di Firenze
marina.montanelli@unifi.it

Abstract. This contribution investigates the link between aesthetics and therapy, starting from a notion that is central to psychoanalysis, philosophy and anthropology: that of repetition. The starting point is the metapsychological definition arrived at by Sigmund Freud – obviously passing through the clinical definition – with the elaboration of *Todestrieb*. But already in Freud, an ambivalence intrinsic to repetition emerges: it can be the negative compulsion to repeat, but also the positive source of childhood activity, particularly play. The article then explores the relationship between childhood play and repetition through an author who has devoted important pages to this problem, albeit never in a systematic way: Walter Benjamin. With Benjamin, starting from the fundamental polarity between ritual and play, and therefore between repetition of the same and repetition of the new, other authors are then called upon, such as Jean Piaget, Johan Huizinga, Émile Benveniste and Roger Caillois. Playful repetition emerges as a constructive and profane principle with respect to the sphere of the sacred, of myth, but also to that of biological-adaptive behaviour; as the primary source of human experimentation and creativity. Play and its repetition – the opposite of *Thanatos* – have to do with the perfective mimesis of Aristotelian memory. In conclusion, the article addresses the problem of the transformation of our perception from modernity and the advent of technical reproducibility to the present day, with the challenges posed by digital technologies. Contemporary alienations, the affirmation of a psychotic paradigm

through widespread processes of hypersensorialisation and disconnection of sensory data, through mechanisms of decoupling between language and imagination – and recent studies in phenomenological psychiatry provide fundamental tools in this regard – once again call into question the repetition of *Thanatos*, of an unbridled Id. The essay then closes with a question addressed to aesthetics as a theory of perception: what is the revolution of sensibility that we need to think about today in order to reaffirm not only an aesthetic, but also a politics animated by *Eros* and not by *Thanatos*?

Keywords. Repetition, eros/thanatos, play, theory of perception, symbolic mediation.

Introduction

The centrality of repetition, of the compulsion to repeat trauma – or the compulsion of trauma to repeat itself – is well known in psychoanalysis. Freud saw in it a *beyond the pleasure principle*: *Thanatos*, the death drive, as counterpoint or even as a drive more original than *Eros*. Repetition, therefore, as a deep seated principle that calls into question the human, the organisation and functioning of our psyche – as we will see, not only our unconscious, but also, and not secondarily, our *aisthesis*, our perception, the acquisition of habits.

Walter Benjamin is one of the most useful authors when attempting to address the problem of repetition (see Montanelli [2017] and [2018]). Benjamin is, indeed, an important thinker of repetition, not only of its infernal version – the eternal return of the same (the conceptual constellation of myth, destiny, late capitalism) – but also and above all, though never systematically, of a *differential* version, of a constructive, innovative repetition, a source of possible alternative anthropological forms. More specifically, Benjamin is among the great thinkers who investigated the constitutive ambivalence of the human animal.

Focusing here on the aesthetic–anthropological side of the question, I will draw first on some reflections by Benjamin – and then call upon other authors – that link repetition to a fundamental *polarity*, that between play and appearance, or rather, following the wording of the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (third version), between *play* and *ritual* (or myth, that which hides behind appearance). Here these two categories emerge as paradigmatic: as two connected yet different ways of relating to being as a whole; again, as two constitutive phenomena of the human, where both are bound up with the human need for orientation and protection, with the institution of what we call "world". The prevailing of one pole over the other brings with it antithetical responses to such a need, a different relationship with nature, with technology, with one's fellow human beings, with time, a different way of shaping the world.

1. Before we begin, let us recall that the mythical dimension appears to Benjamin as a totality of meaning that absorbs everything, that admits no out-

side, and that because of this constitutes the immediate dimension of destiny. The rule of *ananke* governs the world of myth (Benjamin [1915]: 22). It is this binding character that forms the violent aspect of the mythical structure: among beings, what dominates is the «chain of guilt and atonement», which condemns them to the eternal repetition of the same (Benjamin [1919]: 203). It is not a dead structure, typical only of archaic societies, on the contrary, its remains are visible in the contemporary world. According to Benjamin, moreover, law is mythical in that, by setting its boundaries, it always assigns a destiny (see Benjamin [1921a]), as in the infinite circularity triggered by the *dispositif* of debt and commodity production in advanced capitalism (see Benjamin [1921b]).

As for play, the conceptual range of this notion in Benjamin is quite broad: it stretches from childhood to the scenes of the baroque *Trauerspiel*, to gambling in capitalist modernity. What is of interest here is children's play, considered as the keystone for understanding how the mythical compulsion to repeat can be reversed into differential repetition. The writings on childhood, composed mostly in the second half of the 1920s (thus prior to *Berlin Childhood around 1900* itself), must be read in the context of a reflection on the possible foundation of a new «Marxist dialectical anthropology» (Benjamin [1929a]: 275).

In the more general *impulse to play*, Benjamin envisages something that is decisive for the comprehension of humanity in his entirety (see Benjamin [1928a]: 28). The teaching comes from Friedrich Schiller: «Man plays» – this is from his letters collected in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* – «only when he is a man in the full sense of the word, and *he is only a complete man when he plays*» (Schiller [1795]: 85)[1].

What matters to Benjamin in children's play is its intrinsically constructive quality. More precisely, the destructive and, at the same time (or perhaps precisely for this reason), transformative capacity which operates in its purest and most powerful form in children's play. In play what unfolds is a combinatory capacity, an ability to assemble, to continuously break down and reconfigure objects. Its essence lies in this very *constructive principle*: not a simple imitation of the adult world, but a creative *mimesis* that, by incorporating things, simultaneously learns to know them in their variegated characteristics and boundaries[2].

1 In Schiller, the drive to play holds a central role precisely because it serves to connect and unify the other two drives, the sensuous and the rational, thereby defining that *intermediate space* (which is above all an aesthetic space) between matter and form, necessity and freedom, nature and history, in which what is properly human takes shape; on this, see also Desideri (2013a): 185-196.

2 In the essay *On the Mimetic Faculty* Benjamin defines childhood play as the «school» of the mimetic faculty (see Benjamin [1933]: 720).

When children play, they create «a world appropriate to their size» (Benjamin [1928a]: 100); they are attracted by «detritus generated by buildings, gardening, housework, tailoring», by waste products, by «things that are being visibly worked on» (Benjamin [1926]: 449), so as to create a relationship between these materials in ways that are always new and unforeseeable.

What is at issue here is neither individual genius nor the «false analogies with the creativity of adult artists». Children have not yet constructed their own subjectivity, because there is still no clear separation between self and the world. Things are expressed «through the self», each time dismantled, reassembled, and thus learned and defined in their multiple facets (see Benjamin [1929b]: 229). Play is therefore what makes possible the very constitution of subjectivity and of the world of objects.

However, Benjamin also writes: «the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play» is «the law of repetition (*das Gesetz der Wiederholung*)» (Benjamin [1928b]: 120).

> We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to "Do it again!" The obscure urge to repeat things is scarcely less powerful in play, scarcely less cunning in its workings, than the sexual impulse in love. It is no accident that Freud imagined he could detect an impulse "beyond the pleasure principle" in it. (Ibid.)

Repetition is *the* rule, the essence, the «inner structure» – as Huizinga (1938: 10) also claimed – of the ludic gesture. As the principle that underpins *Spielen*, it does not appear as a negative *compulsion to repeat*, not as a *death drive*, but rather as something bound up with what makes life possible: with the construction of experience, of all those habits that form the condition of possibility of all types of orientation within existence. «For play and nothing else is the mother of every habit» Benjamin writes in *Toys and Play* (Benjamin [1928b]: 120).

And toys, for every man or woman, are precisely the «things which occasioned more lasting habits than other things», thanks to which «those capabilities which helped to determine the course of his [or her] life» are formed (Benjamin [1938]: 395-396). The repetition of children's play does not, in this sense, repeat the identical, on the contrary, it is a movement that entails variations within itself, *clinamina*. Jean Piaget's reflections on this point are helpful: if at first sight play seems to repeat in a mechanical way «part of the adaptive behaviours», it actually goes «beyond the limits of adaptation». It repeats «schemas already established for a non-ludic end», but it applies them to new objects, which are not necessarily connected to the contingencies of the surrounding environment, thus producing continuous deviations in the repetition, series of combinations that are always different. Play enacts a kind of *ritualisation* of subjective patterns, but at the very moment in which it *repeats* them outside the physiological

sphere, *it separates from ritual*: it gives rise to the symbolic process (Piaget [1945]: 89, 95). The deviations it produces, which coincide with the formation of habits, are therefore not only concerned with the acquisition and consolidation of biological-adaptive functions, but above all with the construction of the symbolic sphere.

What children's play enacts is a virtuous relationship between repetition and the *novum*. The repetition of the same gesture, performed by the child's hands, becomes the repetition of the *unicum*: «doing the same thing over and over again ([*das*] [*N*]*och einmal*)» is «a doing anew (*ein Immer-wieder-tun*)» (Benjamin [1928b]: 120), guided by the «genius of variation» (Benjamin [1929c]: 205).

2. Benjamin writes that certainly Freud was the first to provide a «grand interpretation […] of childhood superiority» (Benjamin [1930a]: 294), offering the «scientific premises» for understanding the nature of the experience of play (Benjamin [1930b]: 292). Above all, he was the first to bring to light repetition as a fundamental law not only of children's play, but of the psychic unconscious itself.

Freud presented the first formulation of the concept of compulsion to repeat in 1914, in *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*. Clinical observation had brought something peculiar to his attention:

> the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it. […] As long as the patient is in the treatment he cannot escape from this "compulsion to repeat". (Freud [1914]: 150)

The trauma or the repressed is continually repeated in present action. The *illness* is precisely this «present-day force», endlessly repeating what was (and still is) a source of pain (Ibid.: 151). The analyst should therefore attempt to «curb» such a «compulsion to repeat», bringing the patient's past back into the psychic sphere of «remembering in the old manner» (Ibid.: 153). Such *working-through* is only possible if two processes succeed: *transference*, which, by replacing «ordinary neurosis» with «transference-neurosis», should ensure that the symptoms, though *repeated*, acquire a new *meaning* precisely through transference; and secondly, «one must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through* it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work» (Ibid.: 155). The possibility of deactivating the compulsion to repeat therefore lies in the very same repetitive mechanism: only by *persisting* in the place of origin of the resistance, only by re-enacting the symptoms in the context of the analytic work, can variations in the repetition occur and the trauma be displaced into the sphere of memory.

If in this text Freud is still operating solely within the clinical sphere, later, in *The Uncanny* (1919) and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), the order of discourse becomes *metapsychological*. This marks a decisive shift for psychoanalytic science as a whole: its very foundations are profoundly redefined. Already in the 1919 essay the question is reformulated in the following way:

> […] For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a "compulsion to repeat" proceeding from the drive impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the drives – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle. (Freud [1919]: 238; transl. mod.)[3]

The compulsion to repeat is now situated within the sphere of the drives, where its importance in the psychic economy is such that it calls into question the primacy of the pleasure principle. Neurotics who constantly «repeat all of these unwanted situations and painful emotions», as noted in the 1921 essay, are a striking example (Freud [1921]: 21). Their dreams, which simply lead them back to the situation in which the trauma occurred, do not in fact respond to the function assigned to them by the pleasure principle, «the fulfilment of wishes», brought about in a «hallucinatory manner» (Ibid.: 32). Again, it is «in the impulses of small children», and in particular in *play*, that the compulsion to repeat is «very clearly expressed» (Freud [1919]: 238): a well-known example is that of Freud's grandson and his «tirelessly repeated» game of throwing a reel and making it disappear, only to pull it back again shortly after, with which the boy was reiterating (and symbolising) a distressing experience – his mother leaving (Freud [1921]: 14-15). All these cases reveal a psychic sphere not governed by the pleasure principle, but by a «more primitive» drive (Ibid.: 28), the death drive, aimed at restoring an «earlier state». Freud's conclusion is well known: «the aim of all life is death» (Ibid.: 38). The common reading holds that what is at stake in the compulsion to repeat is the mastering of loss, but the most radical psychoanalysis confronts something else: a *drive satisfaction* that is *immediately pleasurable* and that arises from the continual return to the site of trauma (see Ibid.: 23). An unrelenting push to reach, through the medium of the symptom, the «source of the wound», that is, the separation from the first Other (the maternal; which brings into play the relation to the feminine), brought about by entry into the symbolic universe. A push that thus seeks to «restore a mythical absolute enjoyment» (Cimino [2020]: 66). What is ultimately disquieting is the fact that *Thanatos* turns out to be the extreme version, the most obstinate face, of *Eros*. If pleasure, as its *Prinzip* dictates, is the reduction of tension, of stimuli, then the *Todestrieb* seeks the greatest pleasure of all: the definitive annulment of

3 James Strachey translated *Trieb* as "instinct", here I have chosen to use the more appropriate "drive".

every excitation. It is the «desire for an impossible reunification with an absolute Other» (Ibid.: 64). Not a desire for death as such, but a desire for «non-life», a return to the primordial One (Ibid.: 65). *Thanatos*, like every mythical and ritual repetition of the same, thus takes on the role of protecting against life exposed, life open to variation, life that therefore leans into the abyss. Symptoms, after all, also provide a niche – a painful one, which is, however, a shelter. The task of clinical work, but also more broadly of the aesthetic, social, and political sphere, will be to stimulate and sustain the work of *Eros*, to support its playful deviations, its multiple possible variations, contrasting the replication of the identical, while never ceasing to gaze into the abyss. To quote Rilke, we might say that the task is to sustain «an ecstatic openness to the world» (Ibid.: 31). To dwell in the in-between, where «All other creatures look into the Open / with their whole eyes» (Rilke [1923]: 55).

If Freud, in the compulsion to repeat, envisaged a drive that is a directed «expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance» (Freud [1921]: 36), with children's repetition Benjamin sought above all to highlight the human impulse towards innovation. Repetition, in the words of Jacques Lacan, who revisited both the theme and the notion, «demands the new», and does not reside «in the natural», within the realm of need or the magical circle of myth, but opens an escape route from both: «the […] radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself» is «the true secret of the ludic» (Lacan [1964]: 61). In other words, it entails thinking of the unconscious itself as a potential dimension, where something other, something not yet realised, «demands to be realized» (it pulsates in dreams, in slips, in puns, in symptoms) (Ibid.: 25). The investigation of this unconscious and of the questions raised by its repetition is a challenge in the context of the *repressive desublimation* (Marcuse [1955]) that governs our societies: that is, in the context governed by the *compulsion to discharge-enjoy*, by the infernal repetition of the *unbridled Id*, which entails the *annihilation of desire* and its intrinsic constructive power, as well as of symbolic mediation itself.

3. From an ontogenetic perspective, Benjamin sees the principle of montage at work in childhood. Let us then return to his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* and to the polarity between appearance and play inherent in *mimesis* as the «primal phenomenon of all artistic activity» (Benjamin [1936]: 127).

The auratic work of art, in which the pole of appearance prevails, is based on cult. Such a work therefore has a ritual function; it serves as an instrument for transmitting tradition (ritual serves to establish and consolidate communities, institutions, and symbolic systems, ensuring their continuity over time). Within this framework, technique exists «only in fusion with ritual» (Ibid.: 107), its primary purpose being to tame and dominate the forces of nature, perceived, in

the words of Ernesto De Martino (1948), as a threat to one's own «presence». Forms of exorcism against nature – from the earliest creations «in the service of magic» (Benjamin [1936]: 106), to the most brutal and destructive acts of war and the worst environmental and human exploitation (the aestheticisation of politics is linked to the resurgence of cultic value). This technique and the cult-based artistic production present a temporal paradox: the unique, singular, unrepeatable work is inscribed within the temporal paradigm of myth, ritual, the cycle of eternal return, or secularised infernal repetition; it functions as a means of legitimising this circularity and its structural relations.

With the advent of technical reproducibility, «for the first time in world history» the work of art becomes emancipated «from its parasitic subservience to ritual» (Ibid.). Artworks, exposed to an «ubiquitous and non-linear actualization», are no longer characterised by the here and now of their origin (Desideri [2013b]: 39; see also Desideri [2018]: 75-99). This brings about a shift of the centre of gravity towards the pole of play, away from that of appearance (see Benjamin [1936]: 127-128, *note* 22). A shift that leads to a «qualitative transformation» not only of the relationship between human being, nature and technique, but of humanity itself as well as nature: it is an anthropological passage, because what corresponds to a «second technology» (Ibid..: 107) is itself a «second nature» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 63). What characterises this second technology is not an attempt to dominate, but «an interplay» – *harmonien*, *passionnée*, following the Fourierian inspiration – «between nature and humanity». Moreover, for the first time we witness *human beings distancing themselves from nature*. From nature understood as danger to be tamed and domesticated, conceived of in dichotomic terms with respect to history, to technical artefacts (Benjamin [1936]: 107, 124-125; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 173-174). Technique becomes a means of potential human and social emancipation, as well as emancipation of nature itself. The «nature […] of the second degree» that emerges with technical reproducibility, the result of the montage principle, well exemplified by the film editing process, is located on the threshold between natural and artificial, at the point of continuous passage from one to the other (Benjamin [1936]: 115).

We now understand the intrinsic political nature of Benjamin's reflection on childhood: in childhood ludic activity, the *profanatory* gesture is already present, able to tear objects from their traditional and auratic context, in order to return them to the sphere of *use*, experimentation and emendation. Play is «the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures» of the second technology (Benjamin [1936]: 127; on this, see also Leslie [2018]), its *mimesis* is «perfective» (*eine vollendende Mimesis*) (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 155), it improves nature (where what resonates here is the Aristotelian interpretation of the concept).

After all, from a historical perspective, Benjamin tells us in *Toys and Play that* «the oldest toys […] are in a certain sense imposed on […] [a child] as cult implements that became toys only afterward» (Benjamin [1928b]: 118). The idea that some games are what remains of the most ancient magical practices is the starting point of almost all studies dedicated to the relationship between play and ritual (see e.g. Huizinga [1938]; Benveniste [1947]; Fink [1957]; Caillois [1958]). In particular, Roger Caillois and Émile Benveniste insisted precisely on the profanatory element of play in relation to ritual. In other words, play alienates the ritual from its function: that of being an institution and re-legitimation of an order, whether cosmic, religious, social, or political. What in the cultic sphere is treated with reverent subjection, in playful activity is not only experienced with enjoyment but, above all, is subjected to a process of radical *dis-simulation*, *de-sacralisation*, and *consumption* (see Caillois [1967]: 3-10). Benveniste, in his *Le Jeu comme structure*, described play as an *inverted ritual*: although play originates in the sacred sphere of ritual, it nonetheless reflects an «inverted image» of it at its essential point. The effectiveness of ritual is in fact founded on myth, that is, on the «storytelling of resonant words that provide actions with meaning», with legitimacy; the power of sacred action lies «precisely in the conjunction between the *myth* that recounts the story and the *ritual* that reproduces it». The playful gesture shatters this very mythological fabric; play is essentially a radical «desacralizing» activity, which brings transcendence back into the *human sphere* – the sphere of *use*, of variation (Benveniste [1947]: 165; on play as profanation and use, see also Agamben [2005]). *Das Einmal ist keinmal*, is an expression belonging to children's play as much as it belongs to the second technology (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 108; Benjamin [1936]: 107). Childhood is the first opening of «scope for play (*Spiel-Raum*) […] which is allied to the second technology» (Ibid.: 127, *note* 22; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 121).

4. One should not, however, take this polarity between play and ritual as a rigid opposition. The historical shift that brought play to the fore as the predominant pole did not in itself entail the condition of liberation, as demonstrated by the aestheticisation of politics in its most horrible historical forms. The potential of the second technology may also be harnessed in the direction of the first.

In this respect, when looking at the upheaval of the human sensorium brought about by technical reproducibility, I would like, in conclusion, to dwell on a crucial passage from the essay on *The Work of Art*, where Benjamin – anticipating both philosophical poststructuralism (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) and psychoanalytic poststructuralism (Jacques Lacan) – understands that the psycho-sensorial configuration of the subject of the so-called second modernity (that is, the modernity inaugurated by large-scale

industry and, therefore, by capitalism at the onset of its advanced stage) is not so much (or not primarily) neurosis, but psychosis. This is the well-known chapter on the *optical unconscious*, where he writes that the camera, besides having torn to pieces the familiar «prison-world» and unleashed a gnoseological revolution, profoundly altered the *normal* functioning of human perception:

> […] in most cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions (*ausserhalb eines* normalen *Spektrums der Sinneswahrnehmungen*). Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. (Benjamin [1936]: 117-118; see also Benjamin [1935-1936]: 130-131; author's italics)

In this metamorphosis, what is at stake is a process of *hypersensorialisation* and, at the same time, of fixation and domination of *unrelated perceptual data*. Here the notes for the *Arcades Project* are illuminating: in describing the reconfiguration of the collective sensory dimension of the nineteenth century – brought about by the invention of new devices for vision and observation (see Crary [1990]), by the transformation of modes and relations of production, and by the rise of metropolitan life – Benjamin speaks of a «sharpened receptivity (*geschärfte Aufnahmefähigkeit*)», as when in the dream world or in psychosis parts of the body, organs, noises – «blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, muscle sensation» – dissociate, become autonomous, and «become individually (*einzeln*) perceptible». Which means *the connections break down* (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 842). The other pathological reference for Benjamin is that of trauma: an intensification of nervous activity caused by shocks, tears, ruptures, «intermittence» – which, in fact, is also «the measure of time in film» (Ibid.: 843; on shock, see also Benjamin [1939]). The fact is, as we have seen, that the rhythmic register of shocks and trauma is repetition. We thus return to the unconscious and to repetition – that of the unbridled Id, where symbolic mediation collapses. Which seems highly relevant from the point of view of *aisthesis*, of aesthetics understood as a «theory of perception» (Benjamin [1936]: 120).

We are assisted here by some decisive studies in phenomenological psychiatry: in psychosis what emerges is the awakening and violent predominance of an «original sensory trace» – that is, one referring back to the very earliest object relations – so powerful it obstructs its own «representative-mental duplication» and its location within a context of shared meaning. It is a «basic level of perception» that precedes both internal representation (the fantasme) and

the symbolic mediation of language (Correale [2021]: 22, 27)[4]. We consider this to be a highly political matter, one that forces aesthetics to confront particularly complex challenges: digital technologies, in fact, not only substitute the synthetic activities with which we organise sensory data – in line with the well-known pages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno, Horkheimer [1944]: 98-100) – with algorithmic production, but, more importantly, appear to be moving ever further towards the decoupling of imagination and language, not in order to renew the relationship between the two, but rather enhancing the crystallisation of this divergence.

To rethink repetition, play, and emancipation within this framework means asking what kind of revolution is required today in the realm of sensibility: a return to the "roots" of the human (Marx [1843-1844]: p. 251)[5], to the roots of the psyche and of desire, in order to renew both the theory and practice of a politics animated by *Eros* (Marcuse [1955]; see also Marcuse [1969]). It means contacting, in a different way, the originary dimension of sensoriality, re-establishing broken connections. Extending the references further, we could say it involves reconnecting with what Donald Winnicott (1971), in speaking of play, called the «transitional area», the «potential space» – the place of origin of human creativity: the area in which, through play itself, the infant first transitions from one to two; two, as in the two poles of the primary relationship; two, as in the separation and connection between self and world; ontogenetically, once again, the beginning of symbolic activity. This is the kind of play able to dissolve fixed, hallucinatory, "sacralised" images. It is not the relativistic play of the postmodern *collage*, but one capable of reconstructing connections, of giving *form* to sensory data, reinserting them in a shared context of meaning, setting them in motion again.

From the standpoint of aesthetics, this is precisely the problem of form, of the relation between pleasure and critique, or, in Aristotelian terms, between *mimesis* and knowledge.

4 Pietro Montani has recently shed important light on this aspect by analysing the activity of dream imagination: in dreaming, imagination regresses to a stage prior to its encounter with language; to a level he also describes as «more primeval», namely the «perceptual». Borrowing from Kant, we may say this corresponds to *schematising without a concept* (since conceptualisation is governed by language). It is an activity of fundamental regeneration – from the standpoint of the organism and of the functioning of our faculties – of the very relation between imagination and verbal language; a return to the *in-fancy* of imagination, a process of de-structuring and de-autonomising acquired schemas, so that the very capacity to combine images and words can be revitalised, renewed (Montani [2017]: 58-97). The possibility of such a continuous «unprecedented re-assortment» (Ibid.: 77) is the very condition of human creativity.

5 I am referring here to the well-know claim by Marx, according to whom radical politics consists in grasping «things by the root», where «the root is man himself» (Marx [1843-1844]: 251).

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