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Walter Benjamin and the Homeopathic Paradigm*

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Abstract. This article explores Walter Benjamin's theories on the therapeutic value of representations, revealing a homeopathic paradigm. Benjamin's notions of psychic vaccination and training can be clarified through the debate on Aristotelian catharsis, which distinguished homeopathic («like cures like») and allopathic («opposite cures opposite») readings. While most scholars accept a homeopathic interpretation of classical catharsis, the principle is largely absent from modern aesthetics. Joachim Ritter explains the allopathic dimension of aesthetic experience, arising from the separation of *veritas logica* and *veritas aesthetica*. Autonomous art compensates for science's limits but, as something external to life, cannot act homeopathically. By reintroducing a homeopathic dimension, Benjamin departs from traditional aesthetics of disinterestedness, reconceiving art in a mimetic and playful sense. He reimagines catharsis in relation to the shock effect of laughter, framing it as training of perception in the technological age. Finally, three

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case studies illustrate how contemporary audiovisual practices inherit and actualize Benjamin's homeopathic model.

Keywords. Therapy, catharsis, mimesis, Joachim Ritter, immunization.

1. *The Therapeutic Value of Representation in Walter Benjamin*

Walter Benjamin's work contains several references to the therapeutic value of aesthetic experience, from narration to photography and film. In the *Thought Figure* «Storytelling and Healing», he compares the stories mothers tell their sick children with those patients recount to their doctors, suggesting they «can become the first stage in the healing process» (Benjamin [1933d]: 724). Whether narrated or heard, a story provides «the right climate and the most favorable precondition» (*Ibid.*) for processing distress.

How does Benjamin conceive healing? In fragment L 2, 6 of the *Arcades Project*, he defines it as «a *rite de passage*, a transition experience» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 409). Both in *Storytelling and Healing* and in this fragment, healing is associated with images of water: the flow of a river or a watering place. It is a fluid process, and Benjamin pointedly describes it in the same terms he uses for the concept of threshold (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 494).

In another fragment, *Soteriologie und Medizin* (Benjamin [1922]: 87-88), he compares health with salvation – concepts that in Latin share the same term, *salus*. For Benjamin, complete healing is only possible in the context of soteriology: the redemption from social conditions. Medicine, by contrast, operates through healing, but its true achievement is help. Thus, «not everything that is ill requires healing – let alone can be healed» (*Ibid.*)[1]. In line with the *Theological-Political Fragment* (likely from the same period), complete healing, like redemption, cannot be realized within the profane world. What remains available to us is only the therapeutic process, understood as the elaboration of the conditions of healing within a transitional space: a threshold between illness and health, pain and oblivion, but also body and spirit, individuality and collectivity. This elaboration unfolds not only through self-narration but also through certain forms of art.

On a few occasions, Benjamin refers to a therapeutic dimension in surrealism. In the *Pariser Tagebuch* (Benjamin [1929-1930]: 585), the esotericism of surrealist poetry is seen, in contrast to *l'art pour l'art*, as a «salutary practice», akin to a «medical recipe». Surrealist photography, too, appears to have a healing

1 All quotations from works in the original language have been translated by me.

effect, producing «a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings» (Benjamin [1931a]: 519).

Cinema, however, is the art form whose therapeutic dimension Benjamin most strongly emphasizes. In the chapter on Chaplin and Mickey Mouse in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (3rd version *WuN*), he asserts that «American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 118).

Benjamin describes this effect in terms that could be called pharmacologic or homeopathic. He uses the term *Impfung*, often translated as «immunization» but literally meaning «vaccination»: the deliberate induction of infection to activate the natural immune system (Lindner [2004]: 152). In this sense, Chaplin and Disney's films might exert a therapeutic power against the mass psychoses of contemporary society. What particularly interests Benjamin is that the very phenomenon causing these social pathologies – technologization (*Technisierung*) – also provides the means through which therapy becomes possible.

> If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large-tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization has created the possibility of psychic immunization [*psychischer Impfung*] against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 118)

Benjamin identifies a connection between the psychic unconscious and what he calls the optical unconscious – that sphere of the sensible world not perceived, or at least not noticed, by the natural human eye, but which film can reveal through techniques such as slow motion and close-ups. This connection enables the therapeutic use of films in addressing mass psychosis: «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. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception» (*Ibid.*).

The metaphor of vaccination recurs throughout Benjamin's work. In an early fragment of the *Arcades Project* (H°, 18) he writes of a «vaccination with apparitions» and of optical illusions [*Trugbilder*] as «the other prophylaxis [*Schutzmittel*]» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 845)[2]. In his essay *Toys and*

2 Casetti identifies *phantasmagoria* – ghostly apparitions and hallucinations – as «protective media». He also describes Benjamin's model of immunity as a «strategy of mitigation» and notes a similar principle in McLuhan's conception of art (Casetti [2023]: 154-158). On the

Play (Benjamin [1928b]: 120) he emphasizes the pedagogical value of play, through which habits are «instilled» (*eingeimpft*, literally «injected like a vaccination»). On one occasion, he recounts of a practice of «dream vaccination» [*Traumimpfung*] from an Irish farmer who learned it from the Fang people in Africa: the habit of visualizing frightening images before sleep to prevent nightmares (Benjamin [1933a]: 750). Benjamin himself practiced a similar technique of self-immunization through imagery: in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* he describes how, as a German refugee in France, he deliberately recalled nostalgic childhood memories to mitigate his homesickness.

> Several times in my inner life, I had already experienced the process of inoculation as something salutary. In this situation, too, I resolved to follow suit, and I deliberately called to mind those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood. My assumption was that the feeling of longing would no more gain mastery over my spirit than a vaccine does over a healthy body. I sought to limit its effect through insight into the irretrievability – not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability – of the past. (Benjamin [1938a]: 344)

Like the painful images of the past, the shock experiences produced by new technological apparatuses in industrial society can be addressed through a form of immunization. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin introduces the concept of *training*: the idea, inspired by Freud's theory of traumatic neurosis, that certain experiences must be inoculated as habits to organize the reception of new stimuli. Just as the body is trained to bear greater weights, perception and imagination must be trained to elaborate and internalize radically new experiences.

> The reception of shocks is facilitated by training in coping with stimuli; if need be, dreams as well as recollection may be enlisted. As a rule, however – so Freud assumes – this training devolves upon the wakeful consciousness, located in a part of the cortex which is «so frayed by the effect of the stimulus» that it offers the most favorable situation for the reception of stimuli. That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], in the strict sense. If it were incorporated directly in the register of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience [*Erfahrung*]. (Benjamin [1940]: 318)

This training can operate through poetry, but film produces a stronger effect, as its rhythm mirrors the «rhythm of production on a conveyor belt»: «thus,

prophylactic function of ludic illusions against demagogic deception, see the artistic research project ESCI – *Exoterical Society of Critical Illusionism* by the collective ATI (Tomatis [2022]; Agati *et al*. [2022]).

technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training» (Benjamin [1940]: 328)[3].

Like psychic vaccination, the paradigm of training has a pharmacologic dimension, in the Greek sense of *pharmakon*, which denotes both poison and medicine[4]. In the *Laws*, for example, Plato describes wine as a pharmakon: it can induce drunkenness but also serve as a beneficial educational aid by rendering the mind more ductile. Yet, a further distinction can be made: a pharmakon is *homeopathic*[5] when it acts on the same pathology it can induce, and *allopathic* when its therapeutic effect targets a different pathology. Wine, for instance, is homeopathic if used to train against the negative effects of drunkenness, and allopathic if employed to counteract overthinking.

This distinction first arose in debates on the therapeutic value of Aristotle's tragic catharsis. This is significant given Benjamin's reference to the «cathartic» effect of film, without which its social significance «even – and especially – in its most positive form, is inconceivable» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 104). In this sense, a homeopathic dimension may be discerned in Benjamin's theories of immunization and training, suggesting that engaging with the debate on homeopathy and allopathy could be fruitful.

2. *The homeopathic interpretation of tragic catharsis*

The terms homeopathy and allopathy were not used in ancient Greek thought; they were introduced only in modern scholarship to describe the positions of Italian Renaissance humanists in the debate on Aristotle's theory of tragic catharsis (Belfiore [1992]: 261). In his *Poetics*, Aristotle mentions catharsis only once, in his definition of tragedy: «a representation of an action […] through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions» (Aristotle [1987]: 37). *Katharsis* was a common term in Greek medical and ritual vocabularies, with varying meanings, but Aristotle does not clarify whether he employs one of the traditional senses or introduces a new one. The debate remains open today, and scholars only agree on one point: Aristotle's precise meaning cannot be known for certain. Key issues concern the *process* – whether catharsis is a purgation (medical tradition) or a purification (ritual tra-

3 Benjamin appears to suggest a dialectical dimension of this training: on the one hand it has a salutary, prophylactic value; on the other, it serves a functional role within the economic apparatus.

4 In this sense, the term has been used in contemporary thought by Derrida (1968) and Stiegler (2008); see Vignola (2024).

5 This specific meaning should not be confused with modern homeopathic medicine, developed in the early 19th century by Samuel Hahnemann.

dition) – and its *object* – whether pity and fear effect catharsis of themselves, of similar passions, or of entirely different ones.

In 1548, Francesco Robortello interpreted catharsis homeopathically, as a form of inoculation against pain: experiencing negative passions such as pity and fear allows us to «get accustomed to grieving, fearing and pitying» (Belfiore [1992]: 274). By exposing ourselves to the suffering of others, we reduce our sensitivity to pity and fear in our own lives. Lionel Trilling compared this interpretation to Freud's theory of traumatic neurosis, describing it as a «mithridatic function», like the king who drank small doses of poison to immunize himself. In this view, «tragedy is used as the homeopathic administration of pain to inure ourselves to the greater pain which life will force upon us» (Trilling [1948]: 181).

Halliwell ([1986]: 350-356) identifies three main conceptions within this homeopathic tradition. The first, from Robortello and Minturno to Batteux, holds that only an excess of passions is pathological, and the aim of tragedy is to cultivate resistance to passions, ideally leading to an almost Stoic – rather than Aristotelian – indifference. The second conception, advanced by Lessing and supported by Halliwell, treats both excess and deficiency of passion as pathological. Here, tragic catharsis aims at *attunement* rather than *reduction*. Drawing on Aristotle's notion of the «mean», this interpretation sees the arousal of fear and pity as a way to purify the same passions: not to eliminate or purge them, but to regulate and process them. One becomes immune to the harmful effects of passions, not to the passions themselves.

A third homeopathic conception, developed in the early 19th century by Jacob Bernays, was highly influential, though now largely rejected. In contrast to the didactic and moralistic views of the Renaissance and Neoclassicism, Bernays understood catharsis as a strictly medical process of emotional release. Only the accumulation of emotions was considered problematic; catharsis thus functioned as a means of satisfying a physiological need, with tragic pleasure arising primarily from physical relief.

Vincenzo Maggi (1550) can be considered the originator of the allopathic interpretation. He argued that pity and fear are useful social passions meant to purge dangerous ones, such as wrath, avarice, and lust. The allopathic view is primarily moralistic or didactic, though it can incorporate medical elements. This conception, widespread in the Renaissance and Neoclassicism, is now supported by a minority of scholars (Belfiore [1992]: 260). In *Tragic Pleasures*, Belfiore strongly defends an allopathic reading of catharsis based on three arguments. First, most examples of homeopathic therapy can also be interpreted as allopathic if one considers that similar things invariably differ in certain respects. Second, Aristotle's phrase *ton toiouton pathematon* («of such emotions») seems to refer to passions other than pity and fear. Third, Greek medical tradition is largely founded on the principle of opposites, an allopathic principle.

Belfiore not only interprets tragic catharsis as allopathic, in contrast to other forms of therapy, but also questions the very existence of a homeopathic principle[6]. Yet interpreting tragic catharsis as allopathic or homeopathic only makes sense relative to an alternative mode.

In the allopathic interpretation, pity and fear act on other emotions precisely because they are opposed to them: fear compensates for fearlessness, and pity counteracts indifference. According to Carnes Lord, the term *toiouton* might encompass other emotions as well, but pity and fear influence them due to their affinity. The training in fear and pity provided by tragedy enables mastery over other *spirited passions* – those based on *thymos*, such as indignation, anger, competition, and shame – which are essential to social life yet potentially harmful if lacking due measure. Thus, even though pity and fear act on different emotions, «tragic catharsis can be regarded as loosely analogous to a homoeopathic catharsis by the fact that passion is cured by passion» (Lord [1982]: 164). Similarly, Guastini notes that *toiouton* typically denotes a genus; thus Aristotle does not only refer to pity and fear, nor to their opposites, but to passions of the same genus: those that admit a mean (*mesotes*) and can be trained – unlike wholly negative affects (Guastini [2010]: 173-174).

Belfiore's strongest argument for allopathy is its continuity with the Greek tradition. Unlike Plato, Aristotle rarely opposed tradition, and Greek medical culture appears predominantly allopathic. According to the principle of opposites, an excess of a warm element can be countered with a cold one, and vice versa. Even proponents of the homeopathic interpretation acknowledge that Greek medicine is largely allopathic (Lord [1982]: 124; Halliwell [1986]: 193). However, according to Lord, the main source of tragic catharsis lies not in medicine but in the religious-ritual tradition, which was primarily homeopathic: «If it is Dionysus who visits men with the madness of bacchic frenzy, it is also Dionysus who can best release men from that madness: Dionysus Baccheios and Dionysus Lysios are aspects of the same godhead» (Lord [1982]: 124). Just as blood was used in ancient rituals to purify blood-pollution, frenetic corybantic music could purify frenzy, and tragic passions could purify civic passions. This does not imply that Aristotle considered tragic catharsis a religious ritual, but that rituality and poetics shared the same underlying principle.

Conceiving tragic catharsis as distinct from a medical process does not imply it was purely spiritual or psychological. In the Aristotelian view, body and soul, matter and form, are inseparable: a psychological process necessarily has a physiological dimension[7]. Lord's critique of Bernays' medical interpretation does not

6 For instance, Belfiore argues that even vaccination is allopathic, as it aims «to produce antibodies that combat the disease» (Belfiore [1992]: 268).

7 Gadamer sought to account for the haptic dimension of catharsis through unorthodox translations of *phobos* (fear) and *eleos* (pity), rendered respectively as «cold shudder» (*Kälteschauer*) and «misery» (*Jammer*) (Gadamer [1960]: 126; see Cecchi [2025]: 148).

deny catharsis' therapeutic and haptic aspects, but emphasizes that it should not be limited to a physiological process addressing only pathological cases. Unlike musical catharsis (Aristotle [1984]: 240), intended solely for those suffering from «enthusiasm», tragic catharsis was universal, with ethical, pedagogical, and political implications. While it may have had a strictly therapeutic impact for those with pathological imbalances of passion, its primary effect was preventive or prophylactic, an attunement we might loosely describe as social therapy.

One final objection to the homeopathic interpretation, at least in its «attunement» version, concerns the apparent tension between the long-term nature of training and the suddenness of cathartic pleasure, which seems more consistent with the relief of a purge or a compensation (Belfiore [1992]: 371). This tension may be resolved if we consider catharsis as a condition for training. According to Guastini ([2003a]: 108-110), catharsis should be understood through Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*: the re-presentation of an *eidos* – the essential form that makes something what it is – within a context that facilitates its apprehension. We are more inclined to study a corpse or a hideous animal in representation than in reality (Aristotle [1987]: 34), as the distance reduces the discomfort that would otherwise impede attention[8]. Mimetic pleasure perfects activity, playing a cognitive role in the practical sphere and intensifying lived moments, which fosters mastery and progress in that activity (Aristotle [2019]: 188). If mimesis produces pleasure even when imitating harmful or painful things, tragic catharsis can be understood as the conversion of pain into pleasure (Guastini [2010]: 160-171)[9]. Only this change in disposition enables spectators to engage with tragic passions and re-elaborate them, achieving a training that has practical effects in real life.

3. *Art as allopathic therapy in the modern age*

If we follow Lord and Halliwell, the homeopathic principle played a central role in the therapeutic dimension of Greek poetics. Can a similar principle be traced in later poetic and visual cultures? According to church historian Luigi Canetti, instances of homeopathic use of representations appear in early Christianity, both in biblical texts and in folklore (Canetti [2024]: 18-19). Certain healing rituals of the Middle Ages involved the incorporation of negative alterity: poisonous snakes and demonic possessions were not only expelled but at times

8 In his 1969 experimental film on the effects of napalm in the Vietnam War (*Nicht Löschbares Feuer*), Harun Farocki poses a similar question: How can I show you a painful story without prompting you to close your eyes? (min. 1:17-2:02).

9 For Guastini, Aristotelian catharsis is neither allopathic nor strictly homeopathic, as it acts not upon the passions themselves but upon their attendant pleasure or pain (Guastini [2010]: 168; [2003b]: VIII).

integrated into the healing process. For example, the protector against the plague was Saint Roch – himself afflicted by the plague and depicted with a sore on his leg – rather than the angel who healed him (Mâle [1908]: 181-185).

This homeopathic dimension was possible because images, performances, and poetics remained closely tied both to religious ritual and to science and knowledge[10]. In the modern age, science and medicine gradually separated from religion and art, which became autonomous. In this new context, spiritual salvation, physical healing, and aesthetic pleasure came to belong to distinct realms, each governed by different logics. But does this mean that modern art has lost all therapeutic potential?

In a series of lectures, Joachim Ritter (1946-1962) examined the differences between the ancient and modern worldviews regarding the relationship among art, science, and metaphysics. Categories such as creativity and imagination belong to a modern, subjective approach to aesthetic experience and were unthinkable in antiquity. In ancient times there was no aesthetics in the modern sense: beauty was ontologically grounded and thus studied by metaphysics, while art was treated within practical philosophy, as it was not yet distinguished from other artisanal activities. Until the Late Middle Ages, art and philosophy shared the same object: *veritas una stabilis*, the one stable truth. Philosophy sought to acquire it, while art sought to represent it; the same content could be expressed in poetic, metaphysical, or theological form.

In the modern age, scientific thought assumes responsibility for knowledge. Yet, in order to attain maximum clarity and certainty, rational thought must renounce certain dimensions of reality – its efficacy depends on reduction and self-limitation. This renunciation created a void that called for compensation[11], leading to a reorganization of the traditional roles of philosophy and art. The result was a separation (*Entzweiung*) of ancient metaphysical truth into two complementary modern spheres: a scientific truth (*veritas logica*) grounded in intellect, and an aesthetic truth (*veritas aesthetica*) grounded in sensibility. Science can represent aspects of the world inaccessible to art, while art can express perspectives and experiences that lie beyond the reach of science. Thus, landscapes belong to a different order of knowledge than the objects studied by the natural sciences.

Autonomous art and modern aesthetic experience cannot exert a homeopathic therapeutic effect, since homeopathy presupposes similarity between the cure

10 In the early 16th century, Paracelsus's principle of *similia similibus* («like cures like») remained rooted in the ancient idea that everything in the universe was interconnected, and that practical medicine could not be separated from philosophy, virtue, alchemy, and astronomy (Cosmacini [2011]: 242-244).

11 For a Ritterian reading of the concept of compensation, see Marquard (1989) and Griffero (2021).

and its object, whereas autonomous art always presents the other side – what is absent from the functional order of life. In ancient Greek tragedy, passions could serve as the medium of catharsis because they were central to political, ethical, and even contemplative life. By contrast, in modernity, feelings became the domain of art precisely because they were excluded – or presumed irrelevant – in the judgments of science, administration, and work. Ancient poetics, grounded in mimetic repetition, were thus compatible with a homeopathic model; modern art, grounded in creativity and originality, necessarily addresses what is lacking and compensates for it. In this sense, autonomous art is ill-suited to a homeopathic therapy, but it may still carry an allopathic therapeutic value.

Several modern artists and thinkers have recognized the salutary role of aesthetic experience as compensation. Ritter highlights philosophers who advocated for a healthier balance between intellect and sensibility – most notably Kant[12] and Schiller – as well as those who lamented the loss of unity and longed for a forgotten era in which a sense of wholeness remained accessible, from Vico, Herder, and Schlegel to Bachofen and Nietzsche. In the Romantic age, art was conceived as the aesthetic *restitution* of what had been lost: the sacred, the metaphysical, or even the primordial sense of nature.

In his review of the Salon of 1767, Diderot argued that gardens and landscape paintings compensate for our loss of nature: «There, for a moment, we will play the savage; for a moment, we […] will enact the pantomime of natural man» (Diderot [1767]: 139). A similar compensatory function of art appears in the writings of Carus, physician and painter, who saw his landscape practice as a form of recreation that enhanced his psychic stability (Carus [1831]; Bätschmann [2002]). Leopardi viewed poetry – and poetic thought more broadly – as a remedy against the primacy of cold, geometric reason and the suppression of sensibility in our «foolish century» (Valentini [2025]). Goethe likewise promoted the cultivation of an «exact sensory imagination» (*exakte sinnliche Phantasy*) as a counterbalance to the dominance of the exact sciences (Goethe [1824]). Even in the 20th century, Adorno, engaging with the concept of exact phantasy (Nicholsen [1997]), maintained that «art completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge» (Adorno [1970]: 54).

The therapeutic potential of art against the excesses of rationality is even more explicit in the writings of Vilém Flusser, who described the pathological effects of modern logocentrism as «textolatry» (Flusser [1983]) or «paranoia» (Flusser [1979]), understood as a distortion of the intellect (nous).

12 Among the philosophers of modernity, Kant is perhaps the one who most persistently sought to integrate intellect and sensibility – well beyond mere compensation – through his theory of imagination, which plays a role in both aesthetic experience and scientific inquiry. It is no accident that, for Kant, «the errors of the imagination» (Feloj [2015]; Desideri [1999]) are to be corrected through an almost homeopathic cultivation of the imagination itself.

Photography, film, and other «technical images» owe part of their success to the therapeutic role they play rebalancing the conceptual and imaginative faculties. Yet technical images do more than compensate for the dominance of conceptualization fostered by written culture – they tend to replace it. The compensatory role of traditional autonomous art, confined to museums, was insufficient. To avert the risks associated with the predominance of scientific reason, a profound reorganization of its relationship with sensibility is needed – an integration of science and art[13]. In other words, this requires overcoming the autonomy of art. According to Flusser and Benjamin, something akin to this reintegration appears to have taken its first steps during the 20th century. In parallel, the emergence of scientific psychology in the late 19th century led to a new interest in homeopathic therapeutic practices[14]. It is within this context that the resurgence of a homeopathic potential of representation can also be understood.

4. *The retrieval of the homeopathic principle*

In *The Author as Producer*, Benjamin evokes an earlier, happier age when science and *belles-lettres* «fertilized one another» (Benjamin [1934b]: 771). He laments that, in the modern era, they have become «insoluble antinomies», yet he notes a tendency in contemporary avant-garde literature to bridge the gaps between researcher and popularizer, author and audience, politics and culture, writing and image. As Benjamin writes in the *exposé* of the *Arcades Project*, «the new» distances itself from the «recent past» and interpenetrates with the «primal past» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 4), suggesting that antiquity may be closer to the present than modernity. In the final version of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, he observes that the increased analyzability of film «tends to foster the interpenetration of art and science» (Benjamin [1936-1939]: 265). Architectural historian Sigfried Giedion noted a similar phenomenon: «Where does science end, where does art begin, what is applied technology, what belongs to pure knowledge? Fields permeate and fertilize each other as they overlap» (Giedion [1928]: 87).

13 According to Flusser, images can rebalance our cognitive faculties only if they become capable of performing the same functions ordinarily carried out by texts – that is, only if we can do science, medicine, politics, and philosophy with images. Technical images make this possible because they are conceptually manipulable yet sensibly experienceable. See Montani ([2024]: 17-26).

14 In the field of somatic medicine, only Samuel Hahnemann's pseudoscientific theories pursued this direction. A homeopathic dimension, however, can be found in both the psychoanalytic concept of working-through (Freud [1914]) and the behaviorist method of exposure therapy (Foa, Kozak [1986]).

The tendency to overcome the autonomy of art, which Benjamin observes in film and appears to endorse, was rejected by Adorno (Bürger [1974]). Significantly, Adorno also opposed the homeopathic aspects of Benjamin's thought, such as the use of concepts like «test» and «distraction», or the role assigned to audience laughter in Chaplin's films (Adorno [1935-1938]: 123). While Adorno views autonomous art as an allopathic remedy against the culture industry, Benjamin seems to argue that only art capable of appropriating the techniques of the mass culture can effectively counteract the alienation generated by that very apparatus. The shock experiences depicted in films and produced through montage mirror those endured in factories and public transportation, which lead to an «intensification of nervous stimulation» (Simmel [1903]: 410). Similarly, the dreamlike sequences of surrealist cinema elaborate on the same images present in the phantasmagoria of advertisements and commodities.

Is this homeopathic affinity enough to suggest that Benjamin endorses a return of classical tragic catharsis? In one of his essays on Brecht, Benjamin explicitly distances himself from tragic catharsis, which he defines as «the discharge of affects through empathy with the emotional fate of the hero» (Benjamin [1938b]: 331). From one perspective, Benjamin's distrust may stem from a misunderstanding of Aristotelian catharsis, possibly influenced by Brecht. In this definition, and in some anti-Aristotelian passages of the *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin appears to read tragic catharsis as a sentimentalist theory of empathy. The celebration of passion and identification was particularly strong in the tradition of aesthetics from the 16th to the 19th centuries, where appeals to Aristotelian catharsis justified a theater conceived as a «factory of affects», designed to compensate for the dominance of rationality in modern society. In other words, Benjamin associates empathy with auratic art, which, with questionable pretension, aimed to replace ancient metaphysics or religion – Ritter's notion of art as *restitution*.

Although Benjamin uses the concept of catharsis positively in other texts, he clearly does not center his concern on the passions of pity and fear. According to both Lord and Belfiore, fear and pity were specific to the political culture of the classical Greek polis, linked to fundamental concepts such as *thymos* (the desire for honor and superiority) and *aidos* (the fear of wrongdoing and loss of reputation). What later traditions interpreted as universal, supra-historical values were in fact tied to a specific cultural and social context. *Phobos* and *eleos* served as a pharmakon for the citizens of the classical Greek *poleis*; a different society, with different dysfunctions, requires a different remedy. It is therefore fitting that Benjamin focuses on the transformation of perception in the age of Fordist capitalism. His conception of a homeopathic potential in representation does not entail a direct revival of Aristotelian tragic catharsis, but rather reflects his engagement with the social pathologies of his own century.

Nonetheless, a cathartic dimension is present in Benjamin's thought, even if it cannot be equated with Aristotelian tragic catharsis. According to Halliwell, classical Greece knew multiple forms of catharsis – medical, ritual, Pythagorean, Corybantic, tragic, and possibly even comic (Halliwell [1986]: 274-275)[15].

In some respects, the category of comic catharsis aligns closely with Benjamin's description of Chaplin and Disney films, which «trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 118). Rather than arousing pity and fear, these films evoke a «collective laughter»[16], conceived as a «preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis» (*Ibid.*). Comedy functions here as a dialectic, subversive incorporation of the negative, producing a form of immunization. In an unpublished essay in which he compares Hitler to Chaplin, written six years before *The Great Dictator*, Benjamin writes: «Chaplin has become the greatest comic because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries» (Benjamin [1934a]: 792). Mickey Mouse is repeatedly described by Benjamin, in analogy with surrealist poetry and cinema, as embodying the paradoxical fusion of organic body and inorganic machine produced in the factory (Salzani [2014]). As Miriam Hansen observes, Disney films enact «an emancipatory incorporation of technology» or a «self-sublation of technology», condensing the «homeopathic relation between the technical media and other technologies» and prefiguring «the utopian potential of technology for reorganizing the relations between human beings and nature» (Hansen [1993]: 42).

Ernst Bloch similarly recognized an emancipatory potential in comedy. In his book on Hegel, *Subjekt-Objekt*, he suggests that comedy, rather than tragedy, may be the most dialectical genre. Bloch views humor as an art of dissolution, capable of freeing humanity from the illusory world of beauty. While irony merely destroys claims to objectivity to assert subjective wit, true humor enacts a dialectical negation: the «annihilation of what is nothing before the idea» (Bloch [1949]: 293). Humor possesses a destructive power toward outdated figures, «so that mankind may take leave of its past gaily» (*Ibid.*). Notably, in this sentence Bloch quotes Marx on comedy – a passage also cited by Benjamin in fragment N 5a, 2 of the *Arcades Project*, where he adds: «A reconciled humanity will take leave of its past – and one form of reconciliation is *gaiety*. […] Surrealism is the death of the nineteenth century in comedy» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 467). It is likely in this sense that Benjamin's notion of destructive catharsis in film should be understood: «The social significance

15 Lord ([1982]: 175-176) mentions the possibility of an Aristotelian theory of comic catharsis in the supposedly lost second book of the *Poetics* but considers it unlikely. On laughter in the Greek tradition see Halliwell (2008).

16 In the first version of his essay, Benjamin referred to it as «revolutionary laughter» (Ibarlucía [2019]: 137).

of film, even – and especially – in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 104)[17].

Alongside the comic form of catharsis, some elements in Benjamin's thought point toward a medical dimension. The phrase «therapeutic release [*Sprengung*] of unconscious energies» evokes Bernays' outlet theory. A prevalent 19th-century psychological theory explained the impulse to play as a means of relieving surplus energy (Groos [1899]: 362)[18]. In an unpublished fragment, Benjamin similarly notes that «distraction, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon» (Benjamin [1936]: 141). The corporeal dimension is central for Benjamin: in the *Kunstwerk* essay, he contrasts the stronger «physical shock effect» of film with the milder «moral shock effect» of Dadaism (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 119). However, Halliwell notes that other interpretations of catharsis may also carry physiological and medical implications. The distinctiveness of Bernays' medical reading lies in its exclusive focus on the physiological, neglecting pedagogical, ethical, or political dimensions – a view Benjamin would not endorse. For him, the therapeutic potential of representation integrates ethical, political, aesthetic, and physiological aspects. It is precisely in opposition to auratic conceptions, which separated the sentimental and medical dimensions, that Benjamin emphasizes the bodily dimension of the process.

The haptic dimension of film perception is closely linked to Benjamin's concept of innervation, drawn from Freud's early writings (Freud [1899]: 539). The term refers both to the distribution of nerves throughout the body and to the stimulation of activity in an organ. Benjamin, however, adopts a social perspective, speaking of «efforts at innervation» to describe revolutions and the way in which «the new, historically unique collective» integrates new technologies as its organs (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 124). This concept entails both a sudden jolt and the repeated playful training that renders a learned bodily gesture natural. To conceive of revolutions as innervations is thus to suggest not only that they involve a reorganization of technological relations, but also that this reorganization operates as a form of homeopathic training.

It is now clear that Benjamin's «destructive» catharsis should not be understood as a purge or reduced to a medical form. Its aim is not to channel our technological impulses into cinema in order to live in a world free from technology. Rather, it seeks to dismantle the current configuration of technology, based on

17 For the destructive character, see Benjamin (1931b) and Costa (2008). For discussions of laughter in Benjamin, see also Vidauskytė, Sodeika (2018) and Beasley-Murray (2007), where his theories are compared to Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais.

18 For Groos, however, the physiological explanation must be complemented by an aesthetic one grounded in the mimetic principle. Groos' *The Play of Man* is cited by Benjamin (Benjamin [1928b]: 119).

domination, and transform it into a new arrangement grounded in play – what Benjamin calls «second technology». In the same chapter, he writes: «The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 117). Just as, according to Halliwell, Aristotelian catharsis attunes passions by restoring them to the proper mean rather than silencing them, Benjamin's catharsis attunes technical forms of life within a liberated collectivity, whose organs reside in second technology. However, a crucial difference remains: in Aristotelian catharsis, the proper mean is ontologically grounded – restoring what is already given – whereas in Benjamin, it is a configuration yet to be constructed.

The analogy between catharsis and distraction, proposed in a preparatory fragment[19], helps clarify its destructive character as a form of conversion. Film distracts us from the train of our thoughts and surprises us. Distraction here is not understood allopathically, as a temporary relief from our concerns, but as a derailment that compels us to immerse ourselves homeopathically in the representation of the disturbance. Like catharsis, distraction operates at the deeper level of involuntary memory, habit, and automatic associations – realms beyond rational control. Yet we can choose to watch a film and expose ourselves to these disruptions, much like taking a drug to alter perception. Significantly, Benjamin uses the term catharsis twice to describe his own experiments with drugs (Benjamin [1927-1932]: 561, 606)[20].

Finally, as is Greek catharsis, Benjamin's homeopathic approach is connected to a mimetic dimension. He writes of a «mimetic faculty», which he defines as the ability to discern and produce «nonsensuous similarities» (Benjamin [1933c]: 722) – a capacity that is trainable, since Benjamin describes play as a «schooling in mimetic» (Benjamin [1933b]: 694). Yet Benjamin's mimetic faculty should not be confused with Aristotelian *mimesis*: whereas the latter rests on the identity between the essence of what is represented and that of the representation – differing only in matter, not in form – Benjamin's conception relies on a notion of similarity grounded in correspondences between singularities that remain ultimately irreducible to one another. In this sense, Benjamin's *mimesis* has been associated with the doctrine of similarities in magical and Renaissance traditions, more specifically with Frazer's theory of sympathy (Halliwell [2002]: 371)[21] and

19 «The values of distraction should be defined with regard to film, just as the values of catharsis are defined with regard to tragedy» (Benjamin [1936]: 141).

20 Drugs, when taken as medicine, operate allopathically; here, however, they are used in experiments on perceptual alteration as part of a homeopathic strategy for mastering the social and historical transformations of perception.

21 In his *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, Halliwell mentions Benjamin's theory of mimesis among the broader modern interpretations. His «quasi-anthropological view» would be closely linked to a «homeopathic-imitative-mimetic» approach, which also appears in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (*Ibid.*).

to Böhme's doctrine of *signatura rerum* (Agamben [2008]: 71): a non-semiotic element through which two entities – interpretable as sign and referent – mutually qualify one another and thereby confer reality upon each other[22]. Without entering into the details of the differences among these various forms of *mimesis*, which would fall outside the scope of this study, it can be observed that both ancient and medieval or Renaissance mimetic forms implied a metaphysical stance and a holistic view of the universe in which everything is interconnected – including the domains of knowledge such as science, poetics, and philosophy. Even in Benjamin, the mimetic faculty appears grounded in a conception of the world that seeks to overcome rigid disciplinary boundaries, where the poetic arts and the sciences interpenetrate and mutually fertilize one another.

For this reason, ancient, early modern, and contemporary forms of *mimesis* alike enable a homeopathic process by revealing – or producing – the similarity between illness and cure: the mimetic re-presentation of a problematic situation allows it to be elaborated within a safe and distanced context. In ancient *mimesis*, this protective space is the ritual space of *poiesis*; in modern *mimesis*, it is play (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 127). Ritual and play share a comparable separation from the functional contexts of life while still mimetically repeating them (Montanelli [2018]; Huizinga [1944]). Many modern games can be seen as secularized outcomes of ancient rituals (Caillois [1958]: 57-59; Benveniste [1947]). Although the connection between representation and ritual that once underpinned homeopathic treatment in antiquity has been lost, a ludic conception of representation now provides a new foundation for homeopathy.

5. *The homeopathic approach in contemporary therapeutic audiovisual practices*

Benjamin's homeopathic approach can be considered therapeutic only in a broad sense, as it primarily addresses social pathologies. The rarity of the term «therapy» likely reflects his distrust of psychotherapy's individual focus; for him, personal problems cannot be resolved outside one's relationships within the collectivity. Nevertheless, his reflections are useful for understanding the homeopathic use of representations in contemporary psychotherapeutic practice. In recent decades, performative and visual storytelling, along with self-narrative methods, have increasingly been integrated into therapy (Cohen &

22 Benjamin refers to Böhme in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* ([1928a]: 217-220). The doctrine of signatures was first elaborated by Paracelsus, who also defended a homeopathic conception of medicine. For discussions of Böhme and his reception, see Muratori (2012). It is also significant that both Böhme's *signatures* and Benjamin's *nonsensuous similarities* (or *historical indices*) have an operational dimension: they do not merely represent correspondences but establish them.

Johnson [2015]). Most of these methods are not intended to allopathically counteract symptoms with their opposites but to provide a safe space for elaborating experiences, emotions, and conflicts. Patients – or clients, as in art therapy – may take on the roles of spectators, actors, or authors in these enactments (Sabatino, Saladino [2024]: 42-68). In conclusion, I intend to briefly present three cases – VR-based therapy, documentary videotherapy, and therapeutic filmmaking – to highlight their homeopathic character. In each one of the examples presented here, we can recognize many of the elements identified in Benjamin's homeopathic paradigm – a paradigm that can now be reduced to four main features: (1) a mimetic connection between the problem to be addressed and its remedy; (2) a playful space that ensures distance and safe dosing, allowing for controlled exposure; (3) a form of training that acts on habit through repetition, enabling the elaboration and internalization of traumatic experience; and (4) participation within a relational context that takes into account the collective dimension of healing.

The first case is *Virtual Iraq*, a software program developed to treat American soldiers suffering from post-deployment trauma (Rizzo *et al*. [2014])[23]. In Harun Farocki's *Immersion*, part of the *Serious Games* series (2010), we see a patient[24] wearing a head-mounted display while revisiting a 3D simulation of a street in Baghdad, co-narrating (4) the traumatic events that took place there in response to the therapist's questions (Frohne [2016]). Here the mimetic dimension (1) appears in the form of virtual simulation, while the clinical setting and the framing typical of VR – the removable headset and the "magic circle" that limits the participant's movements – provide a playful, ritualized framework (2) in which exposure is contained and modulated. Notably, a similar software is used to train (3) soldiers for their mission to Iraq, as shown in the first episode of *Serious Games*. More than the connection between virtual space and memory space, it is the overlap between training and therapeutic software that exposes the pharmacological, homeopathic character of gamification. In the fourth episode, *A Sun with No Shadow*, Farocki himself pointed out a small yet telling difference: in the therapeutic version, shadows are absent. «The system for remembering is a little cheaper than the one for training», reads the caption. Yet perhaps this absence is

23 The 2007 project was redeveloped in 2011 in a new version titled *Bravemind*. On the therapeutic use of VR, see Cavaletti (2023: 217-226) and Cavaletti, Grossi (2020), who distinguish between programs based on *isolation* from the distressing environment and those based on *exposure* to it. The former can be read in allopathic terms – for instance, immersing oneself in a calming underwater simulation to counteract stress (*Deep*, 2014) – whereas the latter recalls the homeopathic tradition, as in simulations that treat acrophobia by gradually exposing the patient to challenges of increasing difficulty (*ZeroPhobia – Fear of Heights*, 2019).

24 At the end of the film, we discover that the supposed veteran is in fact another therapist, role-playing as a patient in order to demonstrate the new software.

not merely economic: by leaving something unbuilt, the system opens a space for imagination to intervene, reactivating a process that trauma had arrested.

The second case is the documentary videotherapy project *Memofilm*, carried out in Bologna between 2007 and 2013 to support individuals affected by dementia. The films are written and produced with the help of family members, combining new footage with old home movies, and then «administered» to patients. Rather than simply showing reality to counteract delusions, these films attempt to weave present experiences together with the fragments of memory to which patients cling. They homeopathically engage images already charged with symbolic investment, selected for their emotional rather than cognitive value (Feyles [2017]: 4). One *memofilm* was made for a woman who persistently searched for «her home», despite having lived in the same apartment for 25 years. It interlaced a family lunch with found footage, photographs, and interviews, intertwining present moments with past memories. Instead of insisting that she acknowledge she was already home, the film helped her recognize that her current home was not her «true home» – her «house of memory» – yet still a place worth inhabiting (Grosso [2013]: 70-73). This can be considered an instance of Benjamin's mimetic *repetition of the new*, where the very images that expressed distress acquire renewed meaning through representation (1). The home video setting allows the films to be playfully enjoyed as entertainment, ensuring a safe distance that does not trigger defense mechanisms (2). The memofilms are administered repeatedly over the course of a month, as they are meant to act on the level of habit (3). Finally, the project involves the entire family, as well as carers and medical staff, taking into account the collective dimension of the therapeutic process (4).

The third case is *Videopharmakon*, a therapeutic filmmaking project for adolescents on the autism spectrum, in which participants become authors, actors, and ultimately spectators of their own filmic narratives (Sabatino, Saladino [2024]: 119-161). The practice usually involves two adolescents working together on a film, alongside their families in a context of collaboration and inclusion. In one such experiment, two boys who struggled to describe themselves in preliminary interviews were able to share their stories and expectations while developing the storyboard of their film. The playful setting enabled them to reenact situations they found most difficult – such as sleeping alone in the dark – and to confront these challenges while linking them to visualizations of their desired selves. The enjoyment of play, together with the self-esteem fostered by their new authorial role, provided a cathartic pleasure that helped them process unease and elaborate even their most painful experiences. Once again, the working-through of the problematic situation occurs through its reenactment (1), made possible by a playful setting (2) and sustained by long-term training involving multiple sessions, including follow-ups (3). Significantly, alongside the film made by the two

adolescents, a second film is produced by the videotherapeutic team, documenting the entire process and incorporating all types of collected footage through intermedial editing. Here the dynamics between the adolescents, their families, and the team come to the fore, attesting to the intersubjective nature of the therapeutic process (4).

The extraction of a theory of therapy from Benjamin's scattered reflections on vaccination, training, distraction, catharsis, and laughter has thus allowed us to develop both a historical and an operational argument. On the one hand, it enables a reconsideration of the relevance of the premodern homeopathic paradigm within contemporary society, in which new technologies – and the epistemological contexts they generate – are contributing to the overcoming of the predominance of the artistic function of images. On the other, it provides criteria for the design of therapeutic media that are homeopathic in the sense that they engage the very disturbances they seek to treat, but only under conditions that render the representations of those disturbances imaginable, repeatable, and shareable.

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