Forum for Modern Language Studies Vol. 61, No. 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqaf039
Advance Access Publication 7 November 2025

THINKING WITH LAUGHTER: NOTES ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S HUMOUR

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> 'Nur nebenbei sei angemerkt, daß es fürs Denken gar keinen besseren Start gibt als das Lachen. Und insbesondere bietet die Erschütterung des Zwerchfells dem Gedanken gewöhnlich bessere Chancen dar als die der Seele'.[1]
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> ['It may be noted, incidentally, that there is no better trigger for thinking than laughter. In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul'.][2]

At first sight, Walter Benjamin and laughter may seem to be an unlikely connection, particularly when humour is understood as a personal disposition, a receptivity for the comic.[3] The image of Benjamin ingrained in collective memory is undoubtedly that of the melancholic intellectual. This is how he appears in the iconic photos taken of him by Germaine Krull and Gisèle Freund: deeply immersed in thought, often with his head resting on his fist or absorbed in old folios at the Bibliothèque Nationale. It is tempting to describe these images as surrounded by an aura, whose decay Benjamin even saw at work in portrait photography. Such auratic perception would be partly due to self-staging, partly to the œuvre's reception. On the one hand, the images convey something of a 'secretiveness bordering on eccentricity' that Benjamin is said to have cultivated around his person.[4] On the other hand, scholarship has identified a hidden self-portrait in Benjamin's preoccupation with the melancholy figure of the allegorist.[5]

There is, however, a photograph from 1931 contrasting with this well-known image. It depicts the author in the company of Margot von Brentano, Valentina Kurella, Gustav Glück, Bianca Minotti, Bernard von Brentano and Elisabeth Hauptmann (Figure 1). This snapshot captures Benjamin in a moment of merriment. The group is huddled together; it seems to be more reclining in relaxed fashion than simply sitting. What distinguishes this photograph is boisterous laughter shared among friends. But does Benjamin's thinking and writing also exhibit a sense of humour – perhaps even something that resembles the 'Reiz der Unentschiedenheit' ['charm of indecision'] Jean Paul describes as the central source of comic pleasure, and that refers to the comic of incompatibility, of inadequacy, of contrast?[6]

Figure 1: Margot von Brentano, Valentina Kurella, Walter Benjamin, Gustav Glück, Bianca Minotti, Bernard von Brentano, Elisabeth Hauptmann (from left), Berlin (1931) © Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Elisabeth-Hauptmann-Archiv 758.

Once we confront such questions, a wide range of perspectives emerge, often disparate and kaleidoscopic. While some passages explicitly reflect on humour or the comic, others suggest a more subtle and implicit engagement. What Benjamin noted in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [*Origin of the German Trauerspiel*] about the comic and the tragic applies equally to his thoughts on humour, comedy, wit and laughter: they are 'nicht Inbegriffe von Regeln' ['not simply the sum total of certain sets of rules'].[7] These phenomena elude the classification routines in literary studies and cannot be reduced to fixed types or genres. Benjamin's reflections on humour are always situated within concrete historical debates, intellectual constellations and discursive frameworks: his is a way of thinking aligned with a trend in today's literary and cultural studies, that is an increasing emphasis on cultural context considered within an interdisciplinary perspective. Mikhail Bakhtin's studies on the medieval culture of carnival were an essential source of inspiration for this approach.[8] While

earlier research was rather seeking unified categories or normative definitions, this contemporary approach concentrates on different cultures of laughter along with their variable genealogies and specific discursive framings.[9] It underscores changes in cultural phenomena, understood as dynamic processes requiring continuous reinterpretation and actualization.

This special issue's purpose is not to uncover or reconstruct a humour-focused theory in Benjamin's writing that has been obscured, overlooked or fragmented; his work contains no such theory. Humour, laughter, mirth, wit and comedy mostly remain discreetly veiled, showing themselves in small forms or signalling themselves to the reader *en passant*. Benjamin provides an apt image for this mode of appearance in his *Trauerspiel* book when he describes comedy as 'die obligate Innenseite der Trauer' ['the essential inner side of mourning'], occasionally revealing itself 'wie das Futter eines Kleides im Saum oder Revers' ['like the lining of a dress in the hem or lapel'].[10] Here the latent presence of comedy, intertwined with melancholy, is evident in the figure of the intriguer. As a central actor in baroque drama, the intriguer demonstrates how closely the straightforward joke is related to what is cruel. There is thus no dichotomy between humour and melancholy, which Benjamin examines as a formative symptom of a specific seventeenth-century experience of time. In Benjamin's work, humour is neither a counterpart to the much-discussed interweaving of melancholy and the allegorical form of perception nor an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is an integral part of a complex, often ambivalent structure of tension; as such it is consistently entangled with elements of melancholy, seriousness and darkness.[11]

Nowhere is this more evident than in Benjamin's essay on the Swiss author Gottfried Keller. In Benjamin's view, Keller's humour is by no means a 'goldne Politur der Oberfläche' ['a superficial gilded polish'],[12] rather arising from a melancholy way of seeing that Benjamin characterizes as 'baroque'. He notes that the '"stille Grundtrauer", die er bekennt, ist die Brunnentiefe, in welcher immer wieder der humor sich sammelt' ['"quiet underlying sadness" to which he [Keller] confesses is the bottom of the well in which his *humor* collects again and again'.][13] As with the *Trauerspiel* book, here, too, melancholy's darkness is intertwined with humour's light. Drawing on humoral theory of the four bodily fluids, we also might describe this entanglement as a specific mixture of temperaments. Benjamin suggests that Keller's humour carries a historical-philosophical signature fed by the nineteenth century's specific historical constellations shaped by industrialization, political revolutions and the transition from metaphysical philosophy of history to a rational and empirical way of thinking, based on the natural sciences. Such a historical focus characterizes Benjamin's overall approach to humour, laughter, cultures, wit and the grotesque. Benjamin is not concerned with fundamental anthropological patterns of a universal human condition; rather, his focus is on concrete historical constellations, these possessing specific expressive forms for capturing the experience of contemporary history.

Just as Benjamin does not formulate a systematic theory of humour, his reflections are based on a range of sources. Classical theories of comedy from antiquity stand

alongside significant eighteenth- to twentieth-century ideas, especially those of Jean Paul and Freud's psychoanalytical insights concerning wit. Benjamin also draws on both humourist doctrine from antiquity and the avant-garde grotesque and is drawn toward iconic popular-culture characters such as Mickey Mouse. His writing also includes reflections on Paul Scheerbart's cosmic fantasies, Salomo Friedlaender's grotesques, Karl Kraus's satirical critique and the humour found in works of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and Johann Peter Hebel, along with Keller. Furthermore, consideration of different forms of cheerfulness and laughter also plays a pivotal role in Benjamin's insights on children's modes of perception and expression, in his discussions of Charlie Chaplin's silent films and in his account of his own experiments with hashish.

Finally, it is important to recall Benjamin's political juxtaposition between the 'Heiterkeit des Kommunismus' [cheerfulness of communism] and the 'tierischen Ernst des Faschismus' [beastly seriousness of fascism] in the notes on *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*].[14] The juxtaposition is closely connected with the idea of a successful reception of technology – with the idea that the destructive side of industrial technologies and humanism's petty-bourgeois notion of 'man' can be overcome by the collective body's technical reorganization. To some extent, even collective cinematic laughter (such as in Chaplin's *Modern Times* [1936]) illustrates the metamorphic potential of cheerful technology-reception. Benjamin also directly reflects on various media that convey humour – novels, the radio, satirical journal-literature, caricatures, film and fashion – and examines their relevance for historical-materialist historiography.

The principle underlying Benjamin's reflections on humour, wit, comedy and laughter is also evident in other concepts, motifs and figures of thought he employs. He consistently revisits and reinterprets ideas, placing them in new contexts and repurposing them. In line with this approach, Benjamin was concerned with opportunities for laughter throughout his work and kept returning to them. For instance, sketches of humour he initially developed in 1917 and 1918 found their way into the *Passagen-Werk* [*Arcades Project*]. Hence, humour and related phenomena should be grasped as a significant 'work layer' in Benjamin's writing.[15] Even though his discussions in this area vary considerably at times, we can identify four central fields of argument that illuminate various interacting facets of his approach.

1. Criticism, language and the art of distinction

In a letter to his friend Herbert Blumenthal written as early as 1916, Benjamin asserts, emphatically, that '[n]ur im Humor kann die Sprache kritisch sein' [only in humour can language be critical].[16] With this remarkable gesture of exclusivity, Benjamin here assigns humour to an art of distinction (*χρινω*, *krinō*), operating 'wie ein chemischer Stoff' [like a chemical substance] that dissects another substance, unveiling its true nature without annihilating it.[17] Benjamin compares this operation to that of light and claims that everything coming into contact with its rays

disintegrates. What remains are ashes, which Benjamin describes as 'das Echte' [the genuine] that makes us laugh.[18] In humour as a modus operandi of genuine criticism, things and ideas are not destroyed but revealed and illuminated. This process involves less a satirical gesture of exposure, and more the 'Mortifikation der Werke' ['mortification of works'] that Benjamin later describes as the critic's task.[19] By this term, he means 'settling' knowledge in works of art through interpretation, which uncovers both the connections between them and the history integrated into each work.[20]

This connection between humour and the two central pillars of Benjamin's thought, language and criticism, indicates a more profound engagement, particularly since the letter refers to a text that he has just written in 1916, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* [*On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*]. Humour thus seems to be at the intersection of Benjamin's early linguistic-philosophical reflections and the ensuing development of an understanding of criticism as a specific form of knowledge. Through this intersection, Benjamin eventually gained new insights into humour, which he recorded in the fragment 'Der Humor' ['Humour'] around 1917 and 1918. This fragment has received little attention until now; a first translation of the fragment into English, by Joel Golb, is included in this special issue.

In his notes, Benjamin states that 'Der Humor ist die Rechtsprechung ohne Urteil, d.h. ohne Wort. Während Witz essentiell auf dem Wort beruht – daher seine von Schlegel betonte Verwandtschaft mit der Mystik – beruht der Humor auf der Vollstreckung' ['Humour is jurisdiction without a verdict, i.e. without a word. While wit is, in essence, based on the word – hence its affinity with mysticism, emphasized by Schlegel – humour is based on execution'].[21] This definition is particularly illuminating since it is evidently propelled by Benjamin's earlier essay *Über Sprache überhaupt*. This essay understands the history of human language as, simply, part of the broader history of language *per se*. A speculative interpretation of the Fall leads Benjamin to conclude that 'das menschliche Wort' ['the human word'], from which humour detaches itself, only came into being after the expulsion from paradise.[22] In contrast to God's creative word, the human word has become subject to the 'Magie des Urteils' ['magic of judgment'] and been transformed into the 'richtende Wort' ['judging word'].[23] In this language genealogy, which draws on the biblical creation story, the human word's emergence marks the true 'Sündenfall des Sprachgeistes' ['Fall of the spirit of language'] because knowledge of good and evil only arises through the word.[24] Language consequently loses its original, concrete function of designation and turns into an abstract sign-system. The judging word reduces language to a mere cognitive instrument while simultaneously pointing to the 'mythischen Ursprung des Rechtes' ['mythic origin of law'].[25] The epistemic ability to discern moral distinctions becomes the certain *something* that the word communicates beyond itself; it serves as the foundation for all judgment. The word thus assumes its judgmental character by falling out of the paradisiacal state of 'perfect knowledge'.[26]

It is important to note that some theories, even in modern times, link the comic to that same origin that Benjamin associates with language – the story of the Fall.[27] Charles Baudelaire examines the Christian theological schema at work here in *De l'essence du rire* [*The Essence of Laughter*] (1855) – in that essay he approaches laughter as something that was absent from paradise and merely emerged as a result of human suffering. He argues that the wise man, filled with God's spirit, is afraid to laugh and never does so without trembling, since he knows that 'le comique est un élément damnable et d'origine diabolique' ['the comic is a damnable element born of diabolical parentage'].[28] Benjamin registered this idea in his *Passagen-Werk*.[29] Yet he also remembered well that Baudelaire's contemporaries had ascribed the satanic laughter that the poet theorized about to Baudelaire.[30] The poet states that

> le rire humain est intimement lié à l'accident d'une chute ancienne, d'une dégradation physique et morale. Le rire et la douleur s'expriment par les organes où résident le commandement et la science du bien et du mal: les yeux et la bouche.[31]
>
> [human laughter is intimately connected with the accident of an original fall, of a degradation both of the body and mind. Laughter and grief are both expressed through the medium of those organs which are the seat of authority and the knowledge of good and evil – the eyes and the mouth].[32]

But these same organs fail when it comes to controlling laughter and crying. One crucial point here is the corporeality and inherent creatureliness of human beings; another is the distinction between good and evil – that is, the basis of the judging word in Benjamin's sense – which temporarily breaks down in laughter.

The humour fragment supports the need to distinguish between language and the word because it highlights their difference through the example of profanities. Benjamin observes that certain expressions can lose their *Wortcharakter* ['word character'] and judicial power on the way to execution, for instance when ellipsis points take their place.[33] Although, from Benjamin's perspective, humour operates without words, this does not mean it also operates without language. As outlined in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin's philosophy of language revolves around a fundamental conflict of articulation – the conflict 'des Ausgesprochenen und Aussprechbaren mit dem Unaussprechlichen und Unausgesprochenen' ['between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed'].[34] This inexpressible entity, situated amidst language but having no word character, points to *Offenbarung* ['revelation'] as well as those 'metaphysischen Erscheinungen welche nicht primär sprachlich auftreten können' [metaphysical phenomena that cannot appear primarily linguistically].[35]

Seen from this perspective, the wordless quality of humour recalls other figures in Benjamin's thinking associated with the recurring topos of the ineffable, strongly shaped by his early metaphysical mode of expression – for example, 'das Ausdruckslose' ['the expressionless'] in *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Goethe's Elective Affinities*] and the 'Sphäre des Wortlosen' [sphere of the wordless] in a programmatic letter to Martin Buber written in 1916.[36] These terms function as threshold concepts in the atrium of the inexpressible, capable of causing disruption. In his essay on

Goethe, Benjamin conceives of the expressionless as a form of 'kritische Gewalt' ['critical violence'] preventing ethical questions from seamlessly mingling within the aesthetic sphere, as a caesura that prevents aesthetic transformation from creating the semblance of a purely immanent solution to moral problems.[37] In Benjamin's letter to Buber, the sphere of wordlessness is meant to test a purposively rational way of defining the relation between language and political action – an approach to something the word is unable to express.[38] Both concepts – the expressionless and the sphere of the wordless – ultimately highlight the fundamental nature of language as a medium, a point Benjamin emphasizes in his opposition to a judgmental, rational and instrumental understanding of language. This opposition was sharpened by the engagement with different traditions of linguistic mysticism that, as Winfried Menninghaus has shown, play a crucial role in Benjamin's approach to everyday language. Magic, as a 'nichtsignifikative[s] Sprachmoment' [a non-significative linguistic moment],[39] aims to achieve a form of power immediately effective in reality, its agency being incomprehensible within the logic of instrumental reason.[40] This power is not articulated *through* what is spoken as verbal content; it is realized as the direct communication *in* language, manifesting as something linguistically present without being predicated.

In this context, Cornelia Zumbusch has drawn attention to Benjamin's distinction between language's communicative and symbolic functions.[41] Since Benjamin associates the symbolic function with what is noncommunicable, Zumbusch sees the mystical topos of ineffability as occupying the heart of his theory of symbols.[42] She argues that in Benjamin's case the topos is neither part of the tradition of negative theology (with its theme of divine ineffability) nor an anticipation of a deconstructive gesture leading to endlessly deferred signification; rather, she argues, it involves a 'Sinnerfüllung im Symbol' [a realization of meaning in the symbol].[43] But rather than revealing the presence of a transparent meaning, Benjamin's symbol points towards sensitive deictic functions. The nonverbal essence of humour is intertwined with precarious linguistic gestures such as indicating, pointing, hinting, witnessing and referring. It often comes into play in the space where words can no longer convey meaning or, at best, do so 'in einer tiefen Verhüllung' [in a deep veiling].[44]

However distant language is from serving as an information-transmitting instrument in Benjamin's thinking, Benjamin's concept of humour is irreducible to a cheerful mood or to a theory of the comedic such as contrast or incongruity theory. That concept is closely related to his sense of the essence of language as pure communicability. In this context, humour emerges as a vital interface revealing the paradoxical relationship between language and law. Language here appears both as law's mythic origin and the medium of a wordless justice moving past the law. In its condemnatory form – as the judging word – it carries within it law's mythical violence, in that it judges, sanctions and establishes order, thus being entangled in a logic of guilt and punishment. Meanwhile, humour acts as a process of wordless execution not ending in judgment but pointing to a different form of justice. Instead of negating the law through verbal pronouncements, it interrupts the legal order in the midst of language, offering a reference to the ineffable that does not dissolve in

linguistic mediation. In other words: in suspending the word's judicial power, humour opens up a space for a justice that does not consist in the magic of judgment but in its withdrawal. Language thus reveals both its own mythical entanglement in law and its capacity to untie the entanglement through wordlessness. In this sense, body-oriented justice is not linguistically mediated but a caesura interrupting both the instrumental linguistic function and the legal order of things.

Benjamin's fragment ends rather abruptly with an invitation to examine the relationship between laughter and the judging word. The provisional nature of the text is evident here, yet its openness suggests connections with other notes from the same period. For example, in another fragment on the form of the artwork, Benjamin reflects on how laughter relates to the creative word and metaphysical phenomena that lie beyond the linguistic realm.[45] In other words, humour's tension emerges between two poles: the judging (human) word on the one hand; the creative (divine) word on the other. Humour in this way captures the tension between the expressible and inexpressible, a latent figure located between the two sides of a polarity bringing us to what Benjamin describes as humour's 'tiefste Problematik' ['most profound problematics'];[46] this polarity invites us to a decidedly media-theoretical consideration of the phenomenon. Within a media-theoretical perspective, our focus shifts from the question of the media in which humour is manifest (a rather content-related approach) to that of the cultural techniques serving as humour's foundation: for example, to linguistic articulation and ontological and aesthetic operations producing or blurring distinctions.[47] From an ontological vantage, Benjamin's understanding of humour appears to process foundational distinctions such as those between the animate and the inanimate, nature and culture, different genders and the anthropological difference between human beings and animals. His approach to humour's theatrical quality, its visionary aspects and its connection to the grotesque can all furnish us with aesthetically significant insight. Of these three reflective dimensions, the question of humour's relation to theatre invites first consideration, as it meaningfully relates to both language and jurisdiction.

2. Theatricality and jurisdiction

Benjamin's interest in humour is closely linked to his critique of violence and law. On the one hand, the judging word points to the mythical origin of the law and encapsulates an instrumental conception of language. Benjamin's early philosophy of language takes on this reductive view by emphasizing the mediality of language as such. On the other hand, the essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* [*Critique of Violence*] sharply attacks the logic of ends and means as well. The humour fragment thus functions as a channel between Benjamin's reflections on the philosophy of language and his critique of law.

In the fragment, Benjamin defines the humorous 'act' (*Akt*) as one of 'urteilslose Vollstreckung' ['judgment-free execution'].[48] What immediately catches one's eye here is the ambiguous word *Akt*, which can mean a deed, in both the legal sense of an official document (*Akte*) and the ordinary-language sense of 'action', and with this,

a form of conduct or a measure taken. Alternatively, it can refer, like the English counterpart, to the act in a play, and to a circus act. In ancient rhetoric, *actio* signifies the physical presentation of a lecture, encompassing voice, facial expressions, movements, gestures and signs. This equivocation highlights both the legal and theatrical qualities of humour and emphasizes the physicality underpinning its non-verbal expressions.

For Benjamin, humour cannot exist without laughter, and a humorous act seems to require more than just a dyad: 'Man lacht im Humor nicht *über* einen Menschen: vielmehr gehört das Gelächter, und zwar das laute, in den Humor hinein. Es ist Teilnahme am Vollstreckungsakt' ['In humour, we don't laugh *about* a person: rather laughter – namely loud laughter – belongs within humour. It is participation in the executive act'].[49] In addition to humour's subject and object, an audience is essential, engaging physically and affectively in this special form of jurisdiction. As one of Benjamin's most important informants on laughter, Baudelaire states that the comic primarily resides in and is executed by the spectator, who laughs.[50] Humour transcends a linear communication model, creating a theatrical situation in which feedback is constitutive. Consequently, laughter functions as a recursive component in Benjamin's humour. Moreover, it subverts a core function of jurisdiction, namely articulation.

In the convolute on Baudelaire in the *Passagen-Werk*, we read, 'Gelächter ist zerschlagene Artikulation' ['Laughter is shattered articulation'].[51] By pointing to the disruption of words in the comic, this aphorism points to the disrupted order of things in law. According to Cornelia Vismann, the lynchpin of the legal process is verbalization itself. For the ancient Germanic tribes, to judge (*richten*) meant nothing other than allowing the subject of the dispute, i.e., 'das Ding, das entzweit' [the thing that divides], to become a subject of negotiation.[52] Initially, judges were not responsible for making decisions. Instead, their role was to articulate the issue at stake, facilitating the 'Konversion von Tat in Wort' [conversion from deed to word].[53] Vismann observes that court and judgment only became synonymous in the nineteenth century. Over time, the historical dimension of judgment as a practice that involves a nurturing process – including verbalization and staging – has gradually disappeared. From a genealogical perspective, the fact that law is spoken and that the issues at stake in a legal dispute must pass through the eye of the needle of language is fundamental. And the issue of articulation is highly dependent on staging.

Within the system of ordinary courts, in Vismann's words, 'Gerichthalten heißt Theater veranstalten' [To convene a court is to stage a play].[54] To be sure, this theatre is anything but a game without consequences or an accessory to a law intent on representation; it is an indispensable and non-circumventable dimension of jurisdiction.[55] This necessity arises from the crime itself, which has disrupted the ontological order. As it fell outside the symbolic order, it led to an 'Auseinanderklaffen von Wort und Tat' [rift between word and deed], which demands re-enactment on the stage of justice.[56] As Vismann explains, only the act's representation in the theatre of justice and the re-enactment of the event in language can repair the word-deed rift, allowing the deed to become a legal matter (*Sache*).

Two observations are called for against this culture-historical background. First, the emphasis on staging in jurisprudence highlights the theatrical quality of humour that Benjamin foregrounds. In his writings on Johann Peter Hebel, he defines humour more precisely as 'angewandte Gerechtigkeit' [applied justice].[57] Benjamin points out that Hebel does not pursue non-judgmental execution through abstract moral principles or norms. Far from an exercise of justice based on judgment and punishment, applied justice emerges in Hebel's stories through graphic narration, composition and a scenic dramaturgy, animated by small rogues and swindlers and enriched by an abundance of details and props. In discussing the lithographs accompanying an 1842 edition of Hebel's *Schwänke des rheinischen Hausfreundes*, Benjamin praises Hebel's ability to depict action with such vividness that it renders illustrations redundant.[58] Benjamin sees this kind of justice as also present in Keller's work, which focuses on portraying small and unassuming aspects of life. The approach he focuses on thus values microscopic humour: humour avoiding grand gestures and operating at the level of concretion.

Second, given the semantic distinctions at work between concrete things and abstract matters in the realm of jurisdiction, the question arises of the scope of justice aimed at in Benjamin's notion of humour. As his scattered reflections suggest, this humour goes beyond human affairs. It reaches deep into both the material realm and that of creaturely nature. In a brief note on 'Humor und Recht' [Humour and Law], Benjamin ponders how humour judges people as matters (*Sachen*) rather than persons.[59] Humour opens up a realm of execution without verdicts, because it gives human beings as little an account of its judgment as would be the case if they were themselves objects.[60] Benjamin points in the same direction in his fragment 'Der Humor', stating that 'im Humor läßt man dem Objekt als *solchem* Gerechtigkeit widerfahren. Es ist der paradoxe Fall einer Rechtsprechung die das Recht ohne Beachtung des Wesens der Person überhaupt, gegen Personloses, wortlos vollzieht' ['In humour, we do justice to the object as *such*. It is the paradoxical case of jurisdiction enacting law wordlessly, without at all considering the essence of the person, aimed at something non-personal'].[61] However, the observed paradox only makes sense if we move past a common-sense reading. Such a reading would likely amount to focusing on the principle of equality before the law and the age-old demand always to judge without regard to the person.[62] But this would fail to account for Benjamin's reasoning on law.

In the essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, Benjamin is more than sceptical about so-called 'equal' rights. He even attests to the demonic ambiguity of such rights, arguing that 'unter dem Gesichtspunkt der Gewalt, welche das Recht allein garantieren kann, gibt es keine Gleichheit, sondern bestenfalls gleich große Gewalten' ['from the point of view of violence, which alone can guarantee law, there is no equality, but at the most equally great violence'].[63] In this respect, Axel Honneth has commented that for Benjamin, law in general represents 'eine problematische, ja pathologische Einrichtung, [weil es] als solches Zwecken dient, derartige Zwecksetzungen aber auf Interessen zurückgehen, die wiederum Ausdruck der egoistischen Natur des Menschen sind' ['a problematic, even pathological, institution because it replaces

social living conditions with a means-ends schema that, in the end, serves egoistic individual interests'].[64] And since Benjamin considers law a pathological institution rooted in violence and instrumental logic, his understanding of humour in terms of law points to its likely entanglement with the same problematic aspects, too. To get to the heart of this problem, we have to examine the *dramatis personae* in the fragment.

Benjamin identifies two ideal subjects of humour: first, the despot because in this case 'Urteil und Vollstreckung vereint liegen' ['verdict and execution are one'], and second, 'das Volk, oder besser die Masse als ganze' ['the populace, or better the masses in their entirety'], to which superior individuals can only gain access in the sphere of humour.[65] To illustrate how the access to the masses might work, he sketches a slapstick-like scene that evokes Charlie Chaplin's and Buster Keaton's running gags: 'Es ist prinzipiell nichts Ungebildetes daran zu lachen über die wortlose Vollstreckung, wenn einem Mann der Wind den Hut fortbläst' ['In principle, there's nothing uncultivated in laughing about wordless execution when wind blows away someone's hat'].[66] The wordless comedy of flying hats opens up the associative space of cinema, which we will discuss later. For now, we will focus on the somewhat puzzling choice of these ideal subjects of humour. On the one hand, despotism denotes tyranny, arbitrary rule, the degeneration of an autocratic exercise of power. In Greek antiquity, despotic authority characterized the household rule of masters over enslaved persons, which was deemed perverted when it extended beyond the *oikos* and encroached on free citizens of the polis.[67] On the other hand, the masses seem associated with uncultivated reaction. Benjamin views the masses from an elitist cultural perspective he will abandon later. In the end, his understanding of humour in the fragment is neither democratic nor nonviolent. Moreover, these ideal subjects are reminiscent of the bearers of pure violence in the essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*: God and the proletariat equipped with revolutionary potential. Their pure violence is 'purer Ausdruck von Gerechtigkeit' [the 'pure expression of justice'] since it is not a means to an end but a manifestation 'eines Willens oder einer Empfindung' ['of a will or a feeling'].[68]

Ultimately, the wordlessness of humour aims to free it from the instrumental scheme of law in a pathological present and locate it in the realm of a higher morality in a coming, better era. Laughter offers the opportunity to escape the fatal means-ends schema and thus has eminently political qualities. In Benjamin's early fragment, humour follows a path like the one Vismann describes for courtroom proceedings: it is highly theatrical and amounts to re-enactment, like the scene with the blown-off hat. Yet what is comically re-enacted is not reintegrated into the symbolic order of moral judgment. Rather, it arrives at the site of a much older fissure – the paradisiacal fissure between language and word as a means. At this site, precisely, a space is opening up for things of an animate or inanimate nature and for a higher creative or constructive capacity, as it may manifest in technology.

This comically induced opening indicates an eminently material (or 'thingly') dimension, making it worthwhile to revisit the *Trauerspiel* book. Here, Benjamin traces the medieval amalgamation of matter (*Materie*) with the devil and its mirth, which reveals itself to the allegorist as the shrill 'Hohngelächter der Hölle' ['scornful

laughter of hell'].[69] In this laughter, the creaturely world of things, to which Benjamin explicitly adds human beings, overcomes its muteness. By far outstripping language or (allegorical) significance, it reaches the madness of absolute spirituality – knowledge as 'die eigenste Daseinsform des Bösen' ['the most characteristic mode of existence of evil'].[70]

But despite its devilish attributions, laughter holds the potential for salvation. This potential is expressed in Baudelaire's essay, which distinguishes between *comique significatif* and *comique absolu* [the significantly and the absolutely comic].[71] While the former refers to imitation, to a mimetic form of the comic, often seen in caricature and satire, the latter exists in the realm of the grotesque and equals a creative act. Baudelaire recognized that the laughter of the grotesque expresses a joy free from all purpose or utility; Benjamin carefully noted this difference and likely approved of it.[72] Laughter of the grotesque is a deep, elemental, sudden laughter untroubled by *Schadenfreude* at the misfortune, weakness or inferiority of others.

What must have intrigued Benjamin was this liberated form of laughter. Freedom from utilitarian purpose is an essential element in his understanding of the aesthetics and politics of humour – as well as those of architecture and technology. Benjamin saw this ideal manifest in various forms, such as the construction of the planetary tower in Paul Scheerbart's novel *Lesabéndio* (1913) and the Eiffel Tower.

In line with this ideal, Benjamin's comments on humour sometimes culminate in making a case for chance and contingency. In his review of Alfred Polgar's collection of sketches and glosses *Ich bin Zeuge* (1929) [*I Am a Witness*], Benjamin argues that all humour originates in a kind of justice 'die den Menschen nicht wichtig nimmt, sondern die Sachen, sodass ihr die sittliche Ordnung [...] in einer rechten, geglückten Verfassung der Welt oder vielmehr im nicht minder entscheidenden Aufbau des einzelnen Falles – des Zufalles – erscheint' [that does not take people seriously, but things, so that the moral order appears [...] in a just, successful constitution of the world or, rather, in the no less decisive construction of the particular case – of chance].[73] What comes to the fore here is the ethical dimension of humour. Benjamin emphasizes that humour does not pass moral judgment on individuals but turns attention to life's configurations, circumstances and contingencies. In doing so, humour discloses an alternative vision of justice. Instead of relying on a universal moral system, this vision arises from the lucky arrangement or alignment of the world, especially of singular events, and chance.

Given the outlined emphasis on the aspects of materiality and contingency, one crucial point becomes increasingly apparent. What is at stake in humour's jurisdiction is not equality among human beings; it is equality between people and nature's things and beings, both meeting on the common ground of creatureliness.[74] When the articulation of distinctions is shattered in laughter, an ontological symmetry among animate and inanimate entities, as well as among human and non-human creatures, may arise.

Three contributions in this issue converge on this central theme. In his essay focused on Viennese satire, Sebastian Kugler shows how Benjamin sharpened his concept of justice based on Alfred Polgar's thoughts on nature, presenting it from the

perspective of the creature as a planetary affair. From the perspective of Viennese satire, which Kugler calls 'planetary defeatism', even historical experience appears under the sign of a dehumanized nature – as a landscape of material traces, the contemplation of which might open the viewer's eye to the future. Ulrich Gerr offers a different point of view on the correspondences between nature and the creature, namely by following the eerie laughter of Kafka's Odradek and Benjamin's 'Bucklicht Männlein', two ambivalent figures who translate their speechlessness into the sound of humour. When these creatures ask to be included in human prayers, their request also highlights the decentralized position of their intercessors. Mattias Engling's essay sheds light on the trait of creatureliness by reading Brecht's learning play *Die Maßnahme* as an almost literal staging of Benjamin's definition of humour. Brecht's controversial piece indeed deals with the assisted death of a young agitator as an execution without a verdict. Here, a judgment seems unattainable because the decision-making process and the sovereignty of the subjects themselves are undermined by their creatureliness. What remains is the play itself, which unfolds its didactic potential only if the spectators turn into players who act out the eponymous measure taken again and again. Benjamin recognizes laughter's opportunities in contexts where conventional distinctions, shaped by humanism, become unstable, revealing themselves beyond a purely means-ends framework: a process whose aesthetic and political implications now invite some consideration. Crucial in regard to aesthetics is the unique connection between a Benjaminian sense of humour and the staging of new ontologies, particularly as presented in the grotesque. Building on that connection, we can then explore Benjamin's vision of a collective transformation and its political and revolutionary potential.

3. On caricature and the grotesque: Prisms of thought and writing

New ontologies demand inventive aesthetics. Benjamin found these in various sources, from fashion to radio plays to literary and pictorial satire. When drafting his philosophy of history, he thoroughly examined Eduard Fuchs's volumes on caricature. Fuchs read caricature within a historical perspective on the great conflicts of modernity, such as the revolutions of 1848, class struggle, the women's movement, free speech or moral history. His books reveal the special quality of this visual form as a liminal phenomenon with metamorphic power. In the case of caricature, the general laws of life do not apply because here 'Tiergestalt mischt sich mit Menschengestalt, das Leben mit dem Unorganischen. Technische Vorrichtungen erscheinen als Glieder des menschlichen Körpers, eine Nase wird zur Flinte, ein Baumast zum unheimlich langen Arm und ein ganzer Mensch zum mächtigen Suppentopf' [Animal form mixes with human form, life with the non-organic. Technical devices appear as limbs of the human body; a nose becomes a shotgun, a tree branch an eerily long arm and a whole human being a mighty soup pot].[75] Fuchs's collections indeed provide vivid examples of a 'just', which is to say ontologically symmetrical, constitution of the world – and this world is filled with hybrid creatures of all kinds.

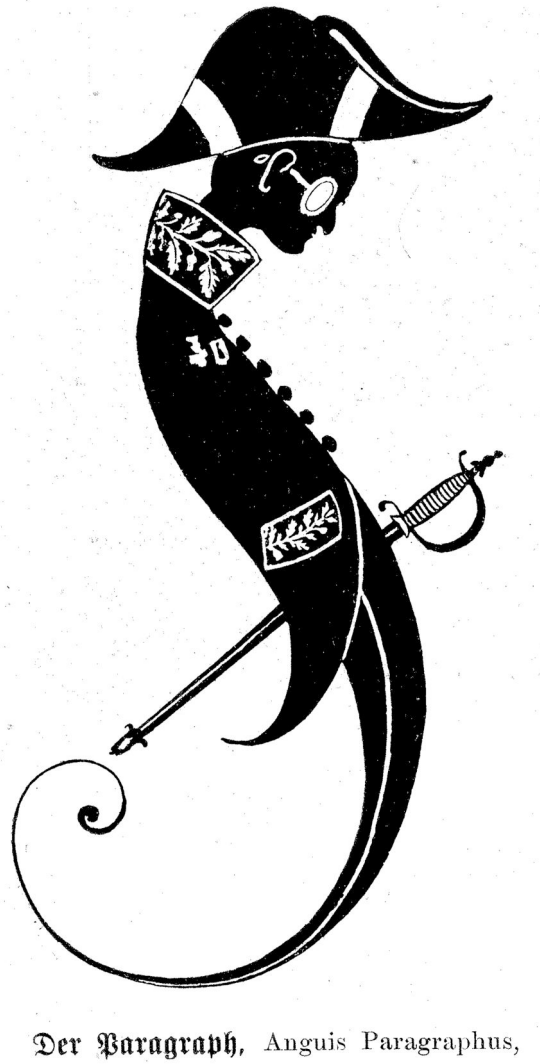

Figure 2: Caricature of the 'Anguis Paragraphus', *Eulenspiegel*, 1848 (Berlin, A. Hofmann & Comp.).

For instance, a picture from the satirical magazine *Eulenspiegel* of 1848 mocks bureaucracy by designing a composite being called *Anguis Paragraphus* – a half-man, half-serpent wearing spectacles and dressed in a military uniform complete with a bicorne hat and sabre (Figure 2). The visual presentation already blurs the boundaries between signs, animals and humans, and their respective modes of being. Yet the caption takes this hybridization even further, explaining that the *Anguis Paragraphus* is

regarded as 'der Galgen der Gerechtigkeit' [the gallows of justice] in many regions of Europe.

Es findet sich auf allen Gerichts-, Amts- und Schreibstuben, in deren Stickluft er vortrefflich gedeiht und durch seine ungeheure Vermehrung längst zur Landplage geworden ist. Sowohl wegen seines Körperbaues als seinen Eigenschaften wird er mit Recht den Schlangen beigezählt. Er ist, wie diese [...], hinterlistig, giftig, geschmeidig und glatt und lässt sich nur mit Mühe fangen. Letzteres Geschäft ist ein einträglicher Gewerbszweig und ausschließliches Privilegium der Advokaten, die man deshalb auch schon Paragraphenbändiger genannt hat, weil sie [...] unglaubliche [...] Kunststücke mit unsern einheimischen Paragraphen [machen], und [gewohnt] sind [...], für ihre Produktionen gut bezahlt zu werden.[76]

[It is found in all courtrooms, offices and writing rooms, where it thrives splendidly in the stuffy air and has long since become a plague due to its enormous reproduction. Because of its physique and characteristics, it is rightly counted among the snakes. Like them, [...] it is insidious, venomous, lithe and smooth and can only be caught with difficulty. The latter business is a lucrative trade and the exclusive privilege of advocates, called 'paragraph tamers' because they [...] do incredible stunts with our domestic paragraphs and [...] are accustomed to being well paid for their productions.]

Fuchs sees caricature as an archive of social struggles that makes the dialectic of power and resistance visible. Caricature can be a medium for criticizing and exposing ideology by using the grotesque and the satirical as political tools. In line with this ideological-critical point of view, the figure of the serpentine paragraph appears alongside Fuchs's discussion of censorship during the pre-March period. The connection with institutional control over speech and the suppression of expression highlights humour's bordering function – which is to say both its operation at the intersection of aesthetics and politics and the latency between what can be expressed and what remains ineffable. Yet Fuchs also recognized that caricature can serve as a potent vehicle for expressing and amplifying resentment. Using the Dreyfus Affair as an example, he discussed how the pictorially unleashed fanaticism of nationalists and anti-Semites silenced clear thinking and stifled the law.[77] Without anticipating that Dreyfus-caricatures' visual language would later provide a blueprint for *Der Stürmer*, he noted that French satirical journals (i.e., *Pssst…* and *Le Sifflet*) would become essential documents for anyone seeking to explore the psychological aspects of that period in historiography.[78]

In approaching humour as a critical force in the class struggle in his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* [*On the Concept of History*], Benjamin relies heavily on his earlier essay on Fuchs.[79] By reflecting on Fuchs's pioneering practice as a collector of mass art and as a keen observer of reproduction techniques and iconography, he can outline – in a somewhat patronizing way – the educational efforts necessary to inform the proletariat about its circumstances and establish the foundations for its self-emancipation.[80] After all, art and science are not solely the products of great geniuses; they also arise from 'der namenlosen Fron ihrer Zeitgenossen' ['the anonymous toil of their contemporaries'].[81] It is thus essential to maintain critical distance from a

bourgeois conception of art and its interest in beautiful semblance, harmony and the unity of the manifold – a distance that humour, in particular, can help create.

In Fuchs's collecting practice, Benjamin recognizes a materialist historiography *avant la lettre*. Instead of collecting items solely for antiquarian purposes, Fuchs perceives a distinct type of historical knowledge as present in the imagistic sphere. This view corresponds with Benjamin's articulation of a specific materialist *Bilddenken*, a thinking-in-images serving as an epistemological model for historical knowledge. While Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image does not focus on concrete images, his interest in Fuchs's work suggests a material foundation closely linked to his interest in humour. In caricature, social tensions are condensed into images. Moreover, the fact that such condensation stimulates Benjamin's dialectical *Bilddenken* suggests that he attributes a genuine dialectical force to humour in his later historical reflections. Benjamin insists that humour produces an effect differing from the Hegelian notion of linear progression through the dialectical mediation of opposites. In that respect, he aligns himself with Marx's high regard for Charles Fourier's humour as an alternative mode of criticism. For Fourier's idea of an *anéantissement humoristique* ['humorous annihilation'] allows for a genuine critique of social structures and bourgeois morality while also paving the way for a real transformation of living conditions.[82] Bearing in mind that Benjamin speaks of the dialectical image as a 'von Spannung gesättigten Konstellation' ['constellation saturated with tensions'], humour emerges as a moment of destruction releasing revolutionary energy. This reading is consonant with Benjamin's reference to Fourier's concept of liberation, of the harmonious interplay of human passions, as an 'explosion'.[83]

While Benjamin greatly appreciates these aspects of Fuchs's work, he also criticizes his teleological view of history, which, he believes, leads to an unreflective belief in progress. While Fuchs interprets the caricature as an expression of constant progress in the fight against oppression, Benjamin insists on a more complex, dialectical reading, thus introducing a perspective at work in humour that is in fact critical of progress. Marx is convinced that history systematically goes through many stages as it buries its old form; he suggests that its course runs from tragedy to comedy. Benjamin shares this view. He wishes humanity could leave its past behind while reconciling with it, possibly even laughingly, because '*eine* Form des Versöhntseins ist Heiterkeit' ['*one* form of reconciliation is gaiety'].[84]

Just as tragedy and comedy are not diametrically opposed but are simply different stages in an engagement with world history, for Benjamin humour and melancholy are threads woven into the same fabric. Perhaps that is why at so many points his references to humour touch on the aesthetic category of the grotesque. Baudelaire and Fuchs may have had a formative influence here. But Benjamin's most revealing discussion of the grotesque is in his essay on Gottfried Keller. Benjamin aims to present Keller precisely at the critical moment when *Heimat* literature threatened his work with drowning.[85] Benjamin emphasizes Keller's modernity, which is to say his unsparing view of contemporary bourgeois morality, values and legal norms. This leads to an ambivalent image of Keller: on the one hand, as a civil servant in the Zurich canton, firmly integrated into bourgeois society; on the other hand, writing

works that expose the fragile foundations of the very society he works for – and doing so with a particular sense of humour, which Benjamin goes as far as to define, implicitly, in terms of the etymology of the term *Groteske* (Ital. *grottesco*, from *grotta*, 'cave'):

> Aber hier eben wölbt sich die Schwelle des 'bedenklichen' Grotten- und Höhlensystems, welches, je tiefer es in Keller selbst hineingleitet, desto unmerklicher die Rhythmik des bürgerlichen Stimmen- und Meinungslärms verschränkt und endlich verdrängt mit den kosmischen Rhythmen, die es im Innern der Erde auffängt. Suchen wir für dies Grotten- und Höhlenwunder den Namen, so heißt es: Humor.[86]
>
> [But this is precisely the point at which we cross the threshold into that 'questionable' system of grottoes and caverns that by imperceptible stages tends – the more deeply it enters into Keller himself – to constrain and ultimately to repress the rhythmic babble of bourgeois voices and opinions in favor of the cosmic rhythms it captures within the bowels of the earth. If we seek a name for this miracle of grottoes and caves, it can be none other than 'humor'.][87]

Benjamin reckons Keller's work to be among the 'zweideutigsten und gefährlichsten Produkten' [most ambiguous and dangerous products] in literature, mainly due to its abysmal humour.[88] Echoing his early humour fragment, he defines this work as presenting a 'Welt der urteilslosen Vollstreckung, in der Verdikt und Gnade im Gelächter laut wird' ['a world of enforcement without verdict, a world in which both verdict and pardon express themselves through laughter'].[89] His definition highlights the threshold nature of Keller's humour, which neither idealizes nor entirely rejects the bourgeois order, instead revealing its contradictions.

For Benjamin, this stance of Keller is especially evident in his critique of Jeremias Gotthelf, whom Keller accuses of engaging in a polemic against the bourgeois-democratic Zeitgeist through use of nostalgically idealized and anachronistic imagery. Keller counters such backwards-looking idealization by emphasizing the past's irreversibility: 'Aber alle Formen wechseln auf Erden, und ebendieser Wechsel ist es, welcher das Vergangene mit einem verklärenden Lichte bestrahlt [...]. Hin ist hin!' [But all forms change on earth, and it is precisely this change that illuminates the past with a transfiguring light [...]. Gone is gone!'].[90] In Keller's writing, Benjamin argues, a relentless commitment to the present is intertwined with constant reflection on its transience. Through an entanglement of humour and melancholy Keller cultivates a detached and disillusioned attitude, fostering an awareness of finitude and modernity's experience of contingency.

Benjamin's consideration of the grotesque highlights the dark and destructive side of his concept of humour, along with its transformative nature. Wolfgang Kayser has observed that in its use of grotesque imagery, Renaissance painting already combines the playful, light-hearted and fantastic with the sinister, uncanny and demonic. Grotesque intertwinements have been actualized in phases of historical upheaval and crises, intertwinements staging a world whose order has come apart at the seams. In such circumstances, the clear separation between the realms of artefacts, plants, animals and human beings is at stake – as is the order of symmetry and

natural proportions.[91] Benjamin's tendency to detect humour in works or authors revealing a penchant for uncanny metamorphoses (of, for instance, a sexual, therianthropic or technical-organic nature) also corresponds to an undermining of classical ordering structures and ontological separations.

The grotesques of Mynona (Salomo Friedlaender's pseudonym as a writer), which Benjamin identifies as the genre's pinnacle, revolve around the depiction of 'dehumanizing' metamorphoses. The anthology *Rosa, die schöne Schutzmannsfrau* [*Rosa, the Beautiful Policeman's Wife*] (1913) provides excellent examples, especially since some stories can be interpreted as a poetic testing of Friedlaender's concept of 'schöpferische Indifferenz' [creative indifference].[92] In the grotesque tale *Die betrunkenen Blumen und der geflügelte Ottokar* [*The Drunken Flowers and the Winged Ottokar*], the protagonist, Ottokar, initially uses schnapps to revive a bunch of withered flowers in a glass. To his astonishment, they metamorphose into a girl named Theo – who stands for theory, as she explains. However, Ottokar soon murderously transforms Theo back to flower form, because he perceives himself as a bunch of withered flowers, too, and admits being not a man but 'ein Weib, von Möglichkeiten schwanger, und doch – und doch so verzweifelt unfruchtbar' [a woman, pregnant with possibilities [...] – and yet so desperately barren].[93] To escape this barren existence and the dirty trick of sexuality and its consequences, Ottokar chooses suicide by prussic acid. After a moment of great tension and heightened mental presence, he escapes his body like escaping an old snake skin and finds himself in the winged body of a fly. The theatrical transition from embodied theory to creative practice playfully crosses the constitutive oppositions of gender and anthropological difference (such as woman vs man, plant vs human, human vs animal), in this way presenting a philosophical concept in literary action. 'Die Natur müsste sich ändern' [nature would have to change], proclaims Friedlaender, and explains the principle of creative indifference: nature's actual shape will not become recognizable as long as subjects regard themselves as individuals instead of as the creative principle on which all distinction depends.[94]

Benjamin's interpretations of Friedlaender's work provide instructive examples of his outlined approach to humour, which consistently relies on a historical constellation of contemporary findings. Within this framework, we can trace the key theme of transformation in humour back to Benjamin's readings of Jean Paul. This transformation encompasses three main factors 'die im Humoristen zusammentreten: das Ausquartiertsein aus dem eigenen Leib, die Versatilität des Ich, das in jedem Fremden Quartier beziehen kann, und das Denken, das Rahmen und Inhalt dieses Vorgangs zugleich ist' [that come together in the humourist: being evicted from one's own body, the versatility of the self, which can take up quarters in any stranger, and thinking, which is both the framework and the content of this process].[95] All three factors appear in Mynona's story. Ottokar's body is a relay to other ways of being, like the *exuviae* that certain animals leave behind at the end of a life cycle. And (philosophical) thought that gives space to these transitions emerges in Theo, as the personified object of itself.

To understand Mynona's radical questioning of fundamental ontological differences, we need to move past a reduction of the grotesque to the two dominant grand theories: the first conveyed in Wolfgang Kayser's focus on existentialist perception, the second in Mikhail Bakhtin's focus on subversive potential. As Günter Oesterle has indicated, between 1911 and 1928 Mynona explored the entire range of grotesque-comic possibilities.[96] This formed the basis for Benjamin's own movement past Mynona's grotesque fantasies. Benjamin was especially drawn to the idiosyncratic writing style of an author who described himself as 'ernsthafte[r] Philosoph und Humorist in Personal-Union' [a serious philosopher and humourist in personal union].[97] Mynona's genre-shifting writing style, characterized by its intricate and grotesque simultaneity of aesthetic image-production and philosophical reasoning – by an interplay between philosophical reflection and literary composition, in a dynamic involving sensuality and reason, intuition and thought, together with image and concept – made a lasting and openly expressed impression on Benjamin's own writing practice: on his own, epistemologically grounded preference for a presentational mode integrating aesthetic forms with non-propositional, philosophically constitutive forms of expression. In his portraits of authors such as Gottfried Keller, Kafka, Hebel, Proust and Karl Kraus, Benjamin repeatedly emphasizes this aesthetic dimension of humour. The focus is not only on comic content: Benjamin is concerned with a *mode of perception* based on humour and articulating itself in writing. In the Weimar Republic period, such writing took forms ranging from slapstick comedy to sharp satire; it mainly thrived in periodicals. Magazines such as *Simplicissimus*, *Ulk*, *Uhu*, *Lachen Links* and *Die Weltbühne* were significantly shaping the culture of laughter through their unique mix of satire, grotesque imagery and playful, often ironic, commentary on the social and political climate. Lotta Ruppenthal has examined how the interaction between text and medial framework in these periodicals produced comedic effects. In her analysis of Benjamin's *Miszlowicz ~~Braunschweig [Hbf.]~~ Marseille. Die Geschichte eines Haschisch-Rausches* [*The Story of a Hashish Intoxication*], she shows how the humorous portrayal of a hashish experiment playfully engages with its concrete material environment. Published in *Uhu* in 1930, the story resonates with the magazine's advertisements, resulting in unexpected comedic outcomes.

4. Humour's utopia: Dehumanization and technological metamorphosis

In addition to serving as a critical force, humour also carries a great deal of political weight. Benjamin was convinced that humour 'macht [...] die Probe auf die Politik' ['puts politics to the test'] and examined its manifestation in various authors, from Charles Fourier to Paul Scheerbart.[98] Mickey Mouse also exercised considerable theoretical fascination on Benjamin. That cartoon character, he suggests, is suitable for preparing humankind to survive civilization.[99] After all, he observes, Disney's figure belongs to a collective dream, one manifest in shared laughter in cinema halls. In the artwork essay, Benjamin attributes a therapeutic effect to such collective laughter, since it can immunize audiences against the destructive forces of mass movements – at least in the short term:

Den vorzeitigen und heilsamen Ausbruch derartiger Massenpsychosen stellt das kollektive Gelächter dar. Die gewaltigen Mengen grotesken Geschehens, die im Film konsumiert werden, sind ein drastisches Anzeichen der Gefahren, die der Menschheit aus den Verdrängungen drohen, die die Zivilisation mit sich bringt. Die amerikanischen Groteskfilme und die Filme Disneys bewirken eine therapeutische Sprengung des Unbewußten.[100]

[Collective laughter is one such pre-emptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilisation. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies.][101]

Freud saw laughter in terms of an economic principle of relief – as an aid in alleviating repressed psychic energy. While Benjamin touches on this dimension of laughter, he goes further by connecting it to the technology of film. In his view, the cinematic staging of the grotesque offers a cathartic experience that counters the unrestrained eruption of destructive mass impulses. In this manner cinema emerges as a space effectively regulating the repressive dynamics of affect in modern mass society. In laughter, Benjamin identifies a fundamental shift in how technology transforms social modes of perception.

Mickey Mouse already plays a significant role in the programmatic essay *Erfahrung und Armut* [*Experience and Poverty*], presented here as the heraldic figure in an alternative anthropology to traditional humanism. Benjamin discredits that tradition, viewed as petty bourgeois, for several reasons, but mainly because of its instrumental approach and positivist reception of a technology embedded in the epochal shock of World War I. Benjamin argues that society's relationship to technology requires a fresh and radical start, completely new models. He views both Mickey Mouse and the figure's cinematic audience as inhabiting a highly mechanized universe; but at the same time, the figure exemplifies a relationship to technology no longer rooted in the exploitation of nature. The utopian vision in Benjamin's reflections is, then, ultimately centred on liberating technology from instrumental logic. The fantastic metamorphoses various Disney characters undergo – for instance, turning into stairs, propellers, airplanes in the short film *Plane Crazy* (1929) – demonstrate new forms of organic interaction between nature and technology. In this way the inherent tension between technology's destructive and constructive powers becomes manifest. Viewers recognize their own lives in Mickey Mouse because, in the Disney films, a transformation takes place in which 'Natur und Technik, Primitivität und Komfort' ['nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort'] completely fuse together.[102] This is why, in Benjamin's thinking, Mickey Mouse can serve as a blueprint for a new concept of human beings based on creatureliness: the only concept appropriate for a technological age in which the humanistic notion of *Menschenähnlichkeit* [human-likeness] is outdated, no longer applies.[103]

In the theme of dehumanization, Benjamin revisits earlier thoughts on the transformative nature of childlike imagination. In the 1920–21 period, he has described imagination as an endless process of 'Entstaltung des Gestalteten' [unshaping the shaped],[104] a process aligned with the way children perceive the world. While adult

perception is rooted in conceptual thinking and representational logic, children's perception, Benjamin maintains, relies on the pure medium of colour. Offering a contrast with adult categorical judgement, a child's vision operates within gradual relations of intensity, allowing for infinite transitions and transformations. Where adults establish a rigid order of things by clearly demarcating different objective forms, children experience the world as a dynamic continuum, one marked by constant changes of form over space and time. The blurred transitions in a child's view of colour echo a central feature of the comic in Jean Paul, which is characterized by smooth 'gliding': 'das Komische gleitet ohne Friktionen (Reibungen) der Vernunft und des Herzens vorüber, und der Verstand bewegt sich in einem weiten luftigen Reiche frei umher, ohne sich an etwa zu stoßen' ['the comic glides without friction past the reason and the heart, and the understanding ranges freely in a broad airy realm without meeting any obstacle'].[105] In addition to childlike perception, metamorphic figurations also point to Benjamin's speculative reflections on the mimetic potential of language. In her essay, Gabriella Moreno thus describes how Benjamin's account of a butterfly hunt in *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* [*Berlin Childhood around 1900*] inserts humour in the space between word and image. While the hunting boy (Benjamin) adapts to the butterfly as a moving image, that child's mimetic capacity reaches an ontological extreme: to catch the prey, the hunter must become the other.

These two aspects, imagination as 'unshaping the shaped' and as a smooth gliding between forms, come together in Benjamin's engagement with Paul Scheerbart's work. It is no coincidence that Benjamin locates Scheerbart and his peculiar humour in the tradition of Jean Paul.[106] This intertextual constellation becomes apparent in Benjamin's enthusiastic discussion of Scheerbart's asteroid novel *Lesabéndio* (1913), which he understands as a genuinely humorous project.[107] Scheerbart's novel revolves around the planet Pallas and its inhabitants, the Pallasians. The central concern of the Pallasians is the architectural and scenic embellishment of their planet. However, this idea of a joint, harmonious design is challenged by the vision of the main character, Lesabéndio. He not only discovers that planet Pallas is part of a larger cosmic order instead of existing in isolation but also draws the conclusion that a connection to higher spheres is only possible through a vast technical structure: a giant steel tower. Constructing this tower will require a tremendous collective effort and all the planet's resources; this endeavour is initially met with great reservations. Lesabéndio must first convince the other inhabitants of Pallas. The Pallasians convene a general assembly to address the issue, using a model to aid their deliberations and hopefully reach a consensus. But they only achieve unanimous agreement after a remarkable performance by Lesabéndio, who self-catapults into the interior of the model tower prompting everyone to laugh. This wordless laughter facilitates the Pallasians' agreement, which will continue to shape their perspective on the tower's construction, even in the face of the pain and critical debates accompanying the project. In moments like this, Scheerbart's laughter comes together with Benjamin's notion of a non-violent 'Technik ziviler Übereinkunft' ['technique of civil agreement'].[108] Benjamin's

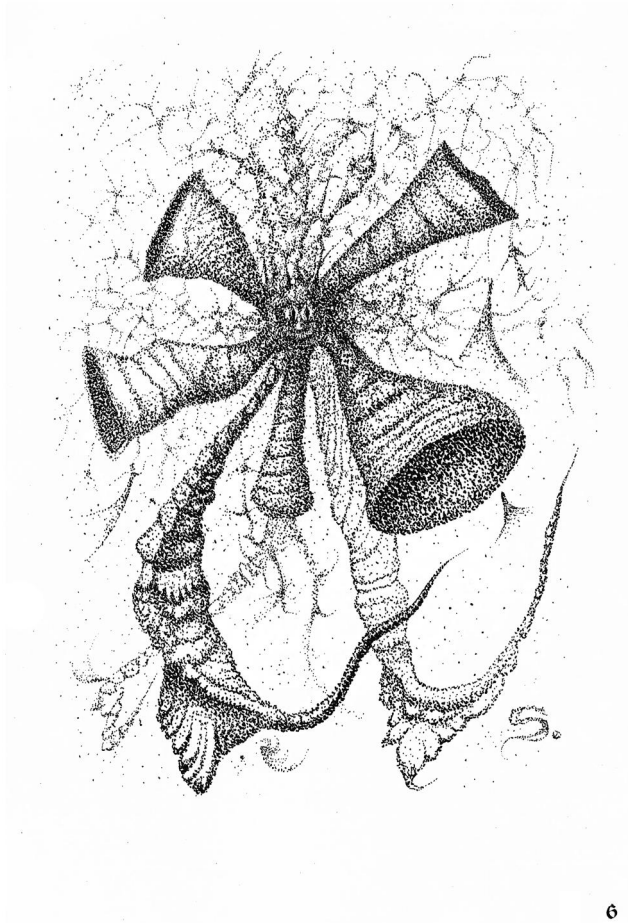

Figure 3: Paul Scheerbart, Drawing of an extraterrestrial creature with tubular limbs, *Jenseits-Galerie*, 1907 (Berlin, Oesterheld & Co.).

critique of an instrumental reason treating violence as a means to an end here encounters a technological vision that manifests itself in humour.[109]

The novel recounts the success of this bold architectural project and offers a range of innovations tied to corporeality (Figure 3). The Pallasian body consists of a kind of sucker foot that allows jumping; Pallasian eyes can be used for both microscopic and telescopic viewing. In that corporeal context, Benjamin mainly locates the poles of shaping and unshaping in birth and death. But Pallasians do not, in fact, really die in the sense of ceasing to exist. Rather, they eventually get tired, then ask one of their comrades to absorb them. But in the course of this assimilation, they *reshape* the body, soul and mindset of their hosts. A principle of infinite metamorphosis thus replaces death on Pallas. These extraordinary ontological transformations provide a

first clue as to what may have particularly intrigued Benjamin in the novel. For the idea of infinite metamorphosis is central to his early notes on imagination.

The process of birth makes this connection even more evident; it also introduces the dimension of humour. Before birth, all Pallasians are encased in nuts buried in the ore-veins of their home planet; birth consists of a cracking open of the nutshells. Freshly cracked creatures are named based on their first words, such as Biba, Dex or Labu. In *Erfahrung und Armut* [*Experience and Poverty*], Benjamin is enthusiastic about this linguistic practice. He sees it as having a basically barbaric and arbitrary constructive feature and draws a parallel to the 'entmenschte' ['dehumanized'] names used by Russians, who name their children after the month of the Russian Revolution, or after an airline.[110] For Benjamin, the constructive feature is mostly evident in Scheerbart's approach, which takes technology seriously by asking how 'unser Teleskop, unsere Flugzeuge und Luftraketen aus den ehemaligen Menschen für gänzlich neue sehens- und liebenswerte Geschöpfe machen' ['our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures'].[111]

Scheerbart's writing has a dual function in Benjamin's thought, taking in both a symptomatic and a prognostic-utopian dimension of humour. On the one hand, Benjamin regards that writing as a symptom of the cultural rupture brought about by the tremendous technological advances emerging in and from World War I, particularly from the battle-exercise of industrial warfare. In this historical context, Benjamin identifies an entirely new form of poverty that has struck humanity, marked by the obsolescence of traditional forms of experience, storytelling and tradition. Even before the war, Scheerbart's writings, especially those focused on glass architecture, reflect this technology-driven change; they reveal a disillusioned awareness of altered conditions.

For Benjamin, Scheerbart thus becomes a chronicler of the modern crisis of experience: a chronicler who not only reflects on the upheaval endured by traditional experience and aesthetic perception but also comes to terms with it productively. But alongside this symptomatological reading, Benjamin also sees a utopian perspective in Scheerbart's work. By fully embracing the new barbarism, Scheerbart offers an alternative aesthetic position tending towards what is arbitrarily constructive.[112] Benjamin emphasizes that Scheerbart's renunciation of traditional education's benefits is neither resigned nor nostalgic – but marked by laughter.[113] In humour as a unique modus operandi of criticism, of language *and* of construction, his literary texts aim for the 'Veränderung der Wirklichkeit, nicht ihrer Beschreibung' ['changing reality instead of describing it'].[114] It is only through laughter, Benjamin seems to suggest, that Scheerbart draws the radical aesthetic consequences from contemporary historical experience, such as the technological transformations of his time.

The motif of technically modified, dehumanized human creatures is recurrent in Benjamin's writing. In his work from the 1930s, the body becomes the site of a new collective organizational form, one put into practice through technology. Scheerbart's enormous relevance for Benjamin lies in the fact that Lesabéndio masters the interplay between humans (or more-than-human beings) and technology by

integrating both old mimetic corporeal practices and the new mechanical forces of architecture.[115] For Benjamin, this bridging is the epitome of a revolution; it amounts to 'Innervation der technischen Organe des Kollektivs' ['innervation of the technical organs of the collective'].[116]

Benjamin revisits the revolutionary impulse in Scheerbart's technological vision in an interview with *Večernjaja Moskva*, given during his stay in Moscow 1926. Here he suggests that this seldom-read German author is more relevant than ever, particularly in light of the Soviet shift of revolutionary effort into the technical sphere.[117] In her essay, Sophia Buck moves past post-revolutionary everyday life in Russia. By reading Benjamin's review of Mikhail Zoshchenko's *So lacht Russland!* (1927) from a multi-sensory perspective, she approaches Benjamin's concept of *nachtönendes Gelächter* [echoing/resounding laughter] as the setting for a pre-revolutionary economy of cultural affect. At the same time, she also emphasizes that this journalistic work on the relationship between laughter and politics is dedicated, once again, to Benjamin's ongoing project of cross-cultural and literary criticism.

Exploring the diverse contexts and historical constellations of humour in Benjamin's work underscores the opportunities for thinking with laughter. The approach taken to such opportunities in this issue is far from exhaustive. In their different conclusions, our contributors touch on additional problems raised by Benjamin's aesthetics and politics of humour: problems that, in what is meant as a first, foundational effort, could not be explored with the depth they merit. They point to one issue in particular, an issue that has been emphasized throughout this essay: humour in Benjamin is neither democratic, nor non-violent, nor innocent. This prompts our final question: at whose expense is laughter gained in terms of gender, race and class? To assess the answer to this field of enquiry remains a desideratum; Benjamin's humour is a new way of critically entering that intriguing terrain.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This issue on Benjamin's humour is the outcome of a workshop held at the Walter Benjamin Archive and the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Berlin in April 2023. The financial support, as well as the encouragement, that we received from both these institutions, as well as from the International Walter Benjamin Society, has made our work possible. We are especially grateful to Eva Axer (ZfL Berlin), Ursula Marx, Julia Bernhard and Erdmut Wizisla (WBA) for their assistance. In addition, we want to thank all

those involved in the Berlin workshop for the joint readings and lively and cheerful discussions, and for the participants' patient willingness to elaborate on their ideas. We thank Joel Golb for translating the humour fragment and the Benjamin Archive for making available manuscript scans. We are also extremely grateful to this issue's highly dedicated reviewers, and to the editorial team of the journal, who have welcomed this publication and provided outstanding editorial support. Open access funding was provided by University of Vienna.

NOTES

[1] Walter Benjamin, 'Der Autor als Produzent', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, 7th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), II. 2, pp. 683–701 (p. 699).

[2] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Garry Smith, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), II. 2, pp. 768–81 (p. 779). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the authors.

[3] Tom Kindt, 'Humor', in *Komik: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. by Uwe Wirth (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), pp. 7–11 (p. 7).

[4] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p. 23.

[5] Burkhardt Lindner, 'Allegorie', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), I, pp. 50–94 (p. 82).

[6] Jean Paul, 'Vorschule der Ästhetik', in *Werke*, ed. by Norbert Miller, 6 vols, 4th edn (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1980), v, pp. 7–514 (p. 123); Jean Paul, *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics*, intro. and trans. by Margaret R. Hale (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 87.

[7] Walter Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, I. 1, pp. 203–430 (p. 224); Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 44.

[8] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[9] See *Komik*, ed. by Wirth, and *Das Komische in der Kultur*, ed. by Hajo Diekmannshenke, Stefan Neuhaus and Uta Schaffers (Marburg: Tectum, 2015).

[10] Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels', p. 304; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 125–26.

[11] Marleen Stoessel, who was the first to write about humour in Benjamin, providing instructive suggestions for its place in Benjamin's thought, takes a similar position, starting from a 'melancholisch "gebrochene[n]" Humor, [der] eher lächeln als lachen macht' [melancholy, 'broken' humour that makes one smile rather than laugh]; Marleen Stoessel, 'Löwenpastete: Humor und Geistesgegenwart im Werk von Walter Benjamin', in *Lettre International*, 79 (2007), pp. 85–88 (p. 85).

[12] Walter Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 1, pp. 283–95 (p. 287); Walter Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jennings, Eiland and Smith, II. 1, pp. 51–61 (p. 54).

[13] Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', p. 292; Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', p. 58.

[14] Walter Benjamin, '*Paralipomena* und *Varia* zur zweiten Fassung von *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, I. 3, pp. 1044–45 (p. 1045).

[15] The term 'work-layer' (*Werkschicht*), was coined by Norbert Otto Eke for the sake of developing an alternative to the 'idealtypischen Konstruktion relativ konsistenter und ästhetisch-thematisch kohärenter Phasen' [ideal-typical construction of relatively consistent, aesthetically and thematically

coherent phases] in a body of work. The concept of layers has two significant advantages: it allows for a 'chronologisch offene[s] Rezeptionsmodell' [chronologically open model of reception]; and it allows the creation of an ensemble of intra- and intertextual references not necessarily leading to the notion of a unified work based on an evolutionary point of view. Norbert Otto Eke, *Heiner Müller: Apokalypse und Utopie* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989), pp. 14–15.

[16] Walter Benjamin, letter to Herbert Blumenthal, late 1916, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 6 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), I, pp. 348–51 (p. 349).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Walter Benjamin, letter to Florens Christian Rang, 9 December 1923, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. by Gödde and Lonitz, II, pp. 390–97 (p. 393); Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Florens Christian Rang', December 9, 1923, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), I, pp. 387–90 (p. 389).

[20] Ibid. See also Daniel Weidner, 'Geschichte zerfällt: Walter Benjamins Historisierung', in *KulturPoetik*, 22.1, pp. 28–44 (p. 32).

[21] Walter Benjamin, 'Der Humor ‹fr 103›', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VI, p. 130. [Walter Benjamin, 'Humour', trans. by Joel Golb, in this special issue].

[22] Walter Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 1, pp. 140–57 (p. 153); Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Bullock and Jennings, I, pp. 62–74 (p. 71–72).

[23] Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 153; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', pp. 71–72.

[24] Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 153; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', p. 71.

[25] Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 154; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', p. 72.

[26] Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 153; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', p. 71.

[27] This moralistic view of laughter, its connection to the Fall, was primarily a characteristic of the Christian Middle Ages, although elements of it can still be found in Hobbes's and Henri Bergson's philosophy. However, since the English Enlightenment, laughter and the comic have been increasingly valued. See Achim Geisenhanslüke, 'Philosophie', in *Komik*, ed. by Wirth, pp. 68–77 (p. 69) and Christiane Voss, 'Lachen', in *Komik*, ed. by Wirth, pp. 47–51 (p. 47). Baudelaire thus seems to be a late exponent of a premodern point of view.

[28] Charles Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les art plastiques* (Paris: Édition René Kieffer, 1925), p. 25; Charles Baudelaire, 'The Essence of Laughter', trans. by Gerard Hopkins, in *The Essence of Laughter and Other Essays, Journals, and Letters*, ed. by Peter Quennell (New York: Meridian, 1956), pp. 107–30 (p. 113), translation modified.

[29] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, V. 1, p. 363; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, London: Belknap 2002), p. 285.

[30] Walter Benjamin, 'Zentralpark', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, I. 2, pp. 655–90 (p. 680); Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jennings, Bullock, Eiland and Smith, IV, pp. 161–99 (p. 182).

[31] Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, p. 24.

[32] Baudelaire, 'The Essence of Laughter', p. 112–13, translation modified.

[33] Benjamin, 'Der Humor', p. 130; Benjamin, 'Humour'.

[34] Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 146; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', p. 66.

[35] Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 147; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', p. 66; Walter Benjamin, 'Die Form und der Gehalt ‹fr 92›', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VI, pp. 125–26 (p. 125).

[36] Walter Benjamin, 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, I. 1, pp. 122–201 (p. 181); Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', trans. by Stanley Corngold, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Bullock and Jennings, I, pp. 297–360 (p. 340); Walter Benjamin to Martin Buber, 17 July 1916, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. by Gödde and Lonitz, I, pp. 325–27 (p. 326).

[37] Benjamin, 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften', p. 181; 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', p. 340.

[38] Benjamin, letter to Buber, p. 326.

[39] Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 15.

[40] Ibid., p. 17–18.

[41] See Benjamin, 'Über Sprache überhaupt', p. 156; Benjamin, 'On Language as Such', p. 74.

[42] Cornelia Zumbusch, *Wissenschaft in Bildern: Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk* (Berlin: Akademie, 2004), p. 287.

[43] Ibid., p. 288.

[44] Benjamin, letter to Herbert Blumenthal, p. 349.

[45] Benjamin, 'Die Form und der Gehalt', p. 125.

[46] Benjamin, 'Der Humor', p. 130; Benjamin, 'Humour'.

[47] For Bernhard Siegert, 'the concept of cultural techniques [...] is designed [...] to relate the concept of media/mediums historically to ontological and aesthetic operations that process distinctions (and the blurring of distinctions) which are basic to the sense production of any specific culture'. Bernhard Siegert, 'The Map is the Territory', *Radical Philosophy*, 169 (September/October 2011), pp. 13–16 (p. 14).

[48] Benjamin, 'Der Humor', p. 130; Benjamin, 'Humour'.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, p. 50; 'The Essence of Laughter', p. 130.

[51] Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, v. 1, p. 410; *The Arcades Project*, p. 325.

[52] Cornelia Vismann, *Medien der Rechtsprechung*, ed. by Alexandra Kemmerer and Markus Krajewski (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2011), p. 19.

[53] Ibid., p. 28.

[54] Ibid., p. 30.

[55] Ibid., p. 19.

[56] Ibid., p. 31. Vismann's argument draws on Pierre Legendre's ideas in *Le Crime du caporal Lortie: Traité sur le Pere, Leçons VIII* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

[57] Walter Benjamin, 'J. P. Hebels Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 2, p. 628.

[58] Walter Benjamin, 'Johann Peter Hebel I. Zu seinem 100. Todestage', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 1, pp. 277–80 (p. 278–79).

[59] Benjamin, 'Humor und Recht', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 3, pp. 1107–08 (p. 1107). This note is part of the miscellaneous records for the essay on Karl Kraus, whose work Benjamin began to explore around 1916.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Benjamin, 'Der Humor', p. 130; Benjamin, 'Humour' (original emphasis).

[62] The Hebrew Bible already attests to the imperative to disregard the person in performing justice. In Deuteronomy 16. 19, the guidelines for independent judges are as follows: 'Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous', Deuteronomy 16. 19, in *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (Cambridge Edition, 1769; King James Bible Online, 2025), <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org> [accessed 25 March 2025].

[63] Walter Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 1, pp. 179–203 (p. 198); Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Bullock and Jennings, I, pp. 236–52 (p. 249).

[64] Axel Honneth, *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 132; Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. by James Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 104, translation modified.

[65] Benjamin, 'Der Humor', p. 130; Benjamin, 'Humour'.

[66] Benjamin, 'Der Humor', p. 130; Benjamin, 'Humour'.

[67] William G. Thalmann, 'Despotic Authority, Fear and Ideology of Slavery', in *Fear of Slaves – Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. by Anastasia Serghidou (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2007), pp. 193–205 (p. 199).

[68] Honneth, *Pathologien der Vernunft*, pp. 152–53; Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason*, p. 123.

[69] Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels', p. 401; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 227.

[70] Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels', p. 403; Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 230.

[71] Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, p. 39; Baudelaire, 'The Essence of Laughter', p. 121.

[72] Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, V. 1, p. 363; *The Arcades Project*, p. 285; Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, p. 39; 'The Essence of Laughter', p. 121.

[73] Walter Benjamin, 'Drei Bücher', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, III, pp. 107–13 (p. 110).

[74] This contradicts Baudelaire's perspective on the concept of the comic. Baudelaire believes that comedy is rooted in the idea of superiority. While the significantly comic fosters a sense of superiority over other people, the grotesque reflects human superiority over nature. See Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, p. 39; Baudelaire, 'The Essence of Laughter', p. 121.

[75] Eduard Fuchs, *Die Karikatur der europäischen Völker vom Altertum bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin: A. Hofmann & Comp., 1901), p. 1.

[76] Eduard Fuchs, *Die Karikatur der europäischen Völker vom Jahre 1848 bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: A. Hofmann & Comp. 1903), p. 4.

[77] Ibid., p. 369. On the Dreyfus Affair see pp. 364–74.

[78] Ibid., p. 374.

[79] Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, I. 2, pp. 691–704 (p. 694); Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', trans. by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jennings, Bullock, Eiland and Smith, IV, pp. 389–400 (p. 390).

[80] As Sophia Ebert has shown, this didactic impetus also shaped Benjamin's collaboration with Wilhelm Speyer, a successful writer in the Weimar Republic. Between 1929 and 1933 Benjamin contributed to three comedies of manners and a novel by Speyer. See Sophia Ebert, *Walter Benjamin und Wilhelm Speyer: Freundschaft und Zusammenarbeit* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2018). According to Ebert, the primary goal of this collaboration was to integrate criticism into the production of art and, in doing so, to 'refunction' art in the spirit of communism (ibid., pp. 131–33). Tellingly, humour is an integral part of this critical project. Under the Brechtian concept 'Die Umfunktionierung' [Refunctioning], Benjamin noted in the spring of 1934: 'Der Leser wird | nicht überzeugt sondern unterwiesen | nicht als Publikum sondern als Klasse erfasst | weniger aufgeregt als erheitert | weniger in seinem Bewusstsein als in seinem | Verhalten verändert' [The reader is not convinced but instructed, not grasped as an audience but as a class, less agitated than cheered up, less changed in his consciousness than in his behaviour]; Walter Benjamin, 'Die Umfunktionierung', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VI, p. 182.

[81] Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 2, pp. 465–505 (p. 476); Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian', trans. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Eiland and Jennings, III, pp. 260–302 (p. 267).

[82] Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capitale du XIXème siècle. Exposé', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, v. 1, pp. 60–77 (p. 64); Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Exposé ‹of 1939›', in *The Arcades Project*, pp. 14–26 (p. 17).

[83] Benjamin, 'Paris, Capitale du XIXème siècle. Exposé', p. 64; Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Exposé ‹of 1939›', p. 17.

[84] Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, v. 1, p. 583; *The Arcades Project*, p. 467 (original emphases).

[85] Emerging from late Romanticism, *Heimat* literature played a central role in the nineteenth century, particularly as a response to the massive upheavals and transformations of the era, such as revolutions and industrialization. This genre aimed to idealize and preserve the traditional values of the homeland by presenting an idyllic, pastoral vision of rural life and invoking a sense of (restorative) nostalgia. On Benjamin's reading of Keller's work in this context see Ursula Amrein, 'Walter Benjamins geschichtsphilosophische Lektüre', in *Gottfried Keller Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. by Ursula Amrein (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler 2018), pp. 404–07 (p. 404).

[86] Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', p. 287.

[87] Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', p. 54.

[88] Walter Benjamin, letter to Ernst Schoen, 9 November 1918, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. by Gödde and Lonitz, I, pp. 484–88 (p. 488).

[89] Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', p. 287; Benjamin, 'Gottfried Keller', p. 54, translation modified.

[90] Gottfried Keller, 'Jeremias Gotthelf', in *Sämtliche Werke: Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, 36 vols, *Aufsätze*, ed. by Thomas Binder (Basel: Stroemfeld 2012), XV, pp. 67–121 (p. 88).

[91] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1966), p. 21.

[92] Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona, 'Schöpferische Indifferenz', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Hartmut Geerken and Detlef Thiel (Norderstedt: Waitawhile/BoD, Books on Demand, 2009), X.

[93] Mynona, *Rosa, die schöne Schutzmannsfrau und andere Grotesken*, ed. by Ellen Otten (Zurich: Die Arche, 1965), p. 13.

[94] Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona, 'Schöpferische Indifferenz', p. 555.

[95] Walter Benjamin, 'Der eingetunkte Zauberstab. Zu Max Kommerells "Jean Paul"', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, III, pp. 409–17 (p. 412).

[96] Günter Oesterle, 'Das Groteskkomische', in *Komik*, ed. by Wirth, pp. 35–42 (p. 40).

[97] Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona, 'Briefwechsel III. Mai 1931 – Dezember 1934', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Geerken and Thiel, XXVI, p. 461.

[98] Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, v. 2, p. 781; *The Arcades Project*, p. 635.

[99] Walter Benjamin, 'Zu Micky-Maus ‹fr 119›', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VI, pp. 144–45 (p. 144); Walter Benjamin, 'Mickey Mouse', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jennings, Eiland and Smith, II, pp. 545–46 (p. 545).

[100] Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', Zweite Fassung, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VII. 1, pp. 350–84 (p. 377).

[101] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', Second Version, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Eiland and Jennings, III, pp. 101–33 (p. 118).

[102] Walter Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 1, pp. 213–19 (p. 218); Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jennings, Eiland and Smith, II. 2, pp. 731–36 (p. 735).

[103] Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 216; Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 733.

[104] Walter Benjamin, 'Phantasie ‹fr 82›', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VI, pp. 114–17 (p. 114).

[105] Jean Paul, 'Vorschule der Ästhetik', p. 122; Jean Paul, *Horn of Oberon*, p. 86.

106 Benjamin, 'Der eingetunkte Zauberstab', p. 412.

107 Walter Benjamin, 'Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, II. 2, pp. 618–20 (p. 619).

108 Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', p. 192; 'Critique of Violence', p. 244.

109 For a discussion of the utopian potential associated with humour, a potential Benjamin focuses on in Scheerbart's novel, see Kevin Drews, *Inmitten der Extreme: Ästhetik und Politik bei Walter Benjamin und Salomo Friedlaender* (Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2023), pp. 425–509.

110 Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 216; Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 733.

111 Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 216; Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 733.

112 Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', pp. 215–16; Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', pp. 732–33.

113 Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 219; Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 735.

114 Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 217; Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 733.

115 On the development of posthuman figurations and planetary architectures in Scheerbart's early work, see Szilvia Gellai, 'Scheerbart on the Beach: Visiting *The Sea Serpent*', trans. by Joel Golb, in *Moral Seascapes: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Maritime Emergency*, ed. by Henning Trüper, Burkhardt Wolf and Jonathan Stafford (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024), pp. 133–50.

116 Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, V. 2, p. 777; Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 631.

117 Walter Benjamin, 'Europäische und sowjetische Kunst', trans. by Michael Dewey, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, VII. 2, pp. 879–81.

Forum for Modern Language Studies, 2025, 61, 193–222
https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqaf039
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