

ON SOME POSTHUMAN MOTIFS IN WALTER BENJAMIN:
MICKEY MOUSE, BARBARISM AND
TECHNOLOGICAL INNERVATION

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In this article I will argue that Walter Benjamin's critique of bourgeois humanism, and more specifically his writings on film on the same theme, can be considered a precursor of recent critical accounts of posthumanism. Recently Benjamin scholars such as Sami Khatib, Matthew Charles and Carlo Salzani have recognized that some creatures he devised, namely the barbarian (*Barbar*) and the inhuman (*Unmensch*), could be considered predecessors of the posthuman.¹ In this article I will focus on these and other posthuman themes in Benjamin's writings on film, especially those which emerged during the period of the "destructive character" (1931-1933), in which he heavily criticized the centrality of the individual, bourgeois subject that made its first appearance with the Enlightenment.

For the last thirty years, posthumanism has attempted to de-centre the traditional model of the human devised according to the principles of the Cartesian subject. This model has been criticized for positing a white, European, male, liberal self. Posthumanism thus begins from the premise that "We are not all humans if by humans we understand the creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy."² This primary critique has led to a broader criticism of the understanding of the human as the measure of all things – that is, to the detriment of other life forms. Through a closer engagement with science and technology, posthumanism has argued that the traditional binary opposition between nature and culture has been blurred and, in addition, has claimed that the incorporation of technology into the human body is already changing the parameters of how human nature should be understood. From these premises, posthumanism has generated many – often contradictory – theories about what posthumans should look like. By bringing Benjamin into dialogue with recent literature on posthumanism, I will argue that his writings on technology in general, and on film in particular, contain similar concerns to those of posthumanism, especially in regard to the way that nature (including human nature) and technology interweave.

In this article I will analyse Benjamin's writings on cinema in relation to his "anthropological-materialist" idea of the creation of a collective techno-body. From his early anthropological texts of the late 1910s and early 1920s, Benjamin devised the idea of the creation of a collective body *in* and *through* technology. He thought that human beings could adapt technologies, as simple as they might be, into their bodies as limbs. In essays such as "Poverty and Experience" (1933) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-39) Benjamin envisaged cinema as an exemplary space in which a technological innervation into the body of the audience could be produced. Film figures such as Mickey Mouse were examples of what human beings would resemble once they had merged with technology. Thus, I will argue that his theories around technology, the human body and cinema are useful in reconsidering our relationship with nature and technology in a (desirable, rather than actual) posthuman condition.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL MATERIALISM AND THE NEW MATERIALISMS

Benjamin introduced the concept of "anthropological materialism" in his essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929). He defined this new brand of materialism as a fusion of political materialism and physical creatureliness. In opposition to the "metaphysical materialism" of authors such as Georgi Plekhanov and Nikolai Bukharin, Benjamin aimed to produce a type of materialism that would focus on the materiality of the body, be it individual or collective. Adorno, however, disapproved of Benjamin's anthropological materialism as "an undialectical ontology of the body."³ For Adorno, the human body cannot represent the measure of all concreteness, as Benjamin wanted to convey. Notwithstanding Adorno's criticism, Benjamin's conception of the body is hardly to be understood ontologically. Anthropological materialism aimed to bring materialism closer to the human body as it develops *historically* in its relationship with nature and other human beings. For that reason, Benjamin takes technology as the medium to (re)organize the interplay between humans and nature.

This article aims to bring Benjamin's "anthropological materialism," his own brand of materialism and the basis for his theories around the incorporation of technology into the body, into dialogue with the new materialisms. Through this dialogue, I will claim that

Benjamin provides a highly interesting insight into reconsidering not only the way we think of our relation to technology, but also other material elements. I will also explore how Benjamin problematized the binary opposition between nature and culture, which is a common concern of both the new materialisms and posthumanism. Benjamin's interest in the materiality of the human body is thus echoed by the increasing academic interest in matter. This revival of materialism can arguably be dated back to the turn to the body in 1990s feminism, although this had become more matter-oriented by the following decade. Indeed, this interest – primarily a reaction to the privileged position of language to the detriment of the material in poststructuralism – has entered the posthuman agenda in recent years. According to Francesca Ferrando, the new materialisms try to problematize the apparent opposition between language and matter: “biology is culturally mediated as much as culture is materialistically constructed.”⁴

Diana Coole and Samantha Frost have argued that this renewal of materialism means “taking heed of developments in the natural sciences as well as attending to transformations in the ways we currently produce, reproduce, and consume our material environment.” For that reason, the new materialisms reconsider the human's material practices with regard to “the ways we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature.”⁵ This critique is shared with posthumanism, which rejects the domination of human beings over other life forms. According to Pramod K. Nayar, critical posthumanism studies and criticizes the “power relations and discourses that have historically situated the human *above* other life forms, and in control of them.”⁶ I will argue that Benjamin introduces a relevant critique of this domination of nature by human beings and of the role of technology in this uneven power relation, which is according to him self-destructive.

Benjamin's critique of the instrumental mastery of nature is most clearly introduced in the last section of his book of aphorisms *One-Way Street* (1928), “To the Planetarium.”⁷ There, he denounces what he calls the “imperialist-capitalist conception of technology,” which is the human use of technology in order to dominate nature. Benjamin argues that, because of its lust for profit, the ruling class has followed and endorsed this conception, thus betraying the positive potential of technology. For him, the domination of nature also entails the domination of any life form, human beings included. For that reason, he claims that such a conception of technology has led to a bloodbath, referring first of all to the First World War and its deployment of warfare technology. Benjamin claims that our relationship with nature should be one of interplay and technology should be used to

enhance an equal relationship between humans and nature. In other words, technology should be used to improve our relationship with nature, instead of using it as a form of (self-)abuse.

From his first anthropological texts, Benjamin promoted a union with nature that would incorporate both living and non-living matter. In “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem” (1922-1923), he claims that humankind can create a collective body through the incorporation of nature – the nonliving, plants and animals – into the body of mankind “by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed.”⁸ Benjamin thereby suggests that technology functions as the medium in which humanity can form a single body with the other elements of nature – because the human is itself nature. He also argues that everything that completes humanity’s happiness should be considered as part of this bodily life, as its organs. For that reason, Benjamin suggests in “Theories of German Fascism” (1930) that technology should be conceived of as a key to happiness.⁹ He resumes this idea in “To the Planetarium,” and argues that technology is organizing a new *physis*, or collective body for mankind, different to previous configurations of humanity such as families and nations. In this way, he claims that technology is already changing the way human beings relate to each other and organize collectively. Although in that same text he had prefigured a miscarried reception of technology, epitomized by the use of chemical warfare in the First World War, Benjamin believed that the new collective *physis* organised by technology could still be rescued and adopted by humankind. Once the recovery of this techno-body was complete, mankind would take a new step in its development towards a better relation to nature and to itself.

Benjamin thus introduces an environmentalist concern for our conception and reception of technology which may be pertinent to a reconsideration of the posthuman interaction with nature. However, one need only look at the language used by Benjamin in this passage to understand that his theory is hardly scientific. The Marxist environmentalist scholar John Bellamy Foster has for example criticized the “ecologic critique” developed by the Frankfurt School for being “almost entirely culturalist in form, lacking any knowledge of ecological science.” By way of contrast, he compares such a critique to Marx, whose theory of the metabolic rift was based on the work of Justus von Liebig, the founder of organic chemistry, and entailed an analysis of the real, material alienation of nature.¹⁰ Any criticism of Benjamin emerging from the new materialisms would undoubtedly point out his unscientific approach to this question.

The problem with the new materialisms, however, is that they go as far as to provide (inert) matter with a form of vitalism. Thus, new materialists argue that science has revealed that matter has its own modes of self-transformation and self-organization and, therefore, should not be conceived of as purely inert or passive, but as having its own agency. This conception, they argue, disputes that only humans have an agency “and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature.”¹¹ Although the conclusion is well-aimed, this view is dangerous in the sense that it equates human agency with that of nature and, therefore, also a politically, ethically-bounded agency to a natural one. As I will show later, Benjamin’s call for a new, more real humanism criticizes the bourgeois, imperialist idea that humans have the right to master nature without adopting the dangerously anti-humanist belief that any material element, either inert or alive, should have the same rights as human beings.

Benjamin’s unscientific, but socially and politically pertinent, theory on the relationship of society and nature would perhaps be perfected through incorporating the contributions of scholars such as Manuel Sacristán, James O’Connor, John Bellamy Foster, Marina Fischer-Kowalsky, Michael Löwy and Paul Burkett, who have addressed ecological problems from a Marxist point of view with a more scientific base. Nonetheless, I argue that his sensitivity to the way we relate to nature – which he extends to animals, as I will show later – is highly relevant in reconsidering our conceptions of science and technology and the social consequences they may entail.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE

If technology is the medium by which to reorganize and establish a better relationship between humanity and nature, cinema is the arena wherein the correct interplay between nature and humans is rehearsed. As I will expand below, the space of cinema reception appears as a training ground for the incorporation of “second technology” into the collective body of mankind – in this case represented by the audience. Benjamin gives some clues as to how this technological interpenetration of film image and body should take place in essays such as “Surrealism,” “Experience and Poverty” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” In the first essay, Benjamin argues that the praxis of the surrealists opens up a space in which the “energies of intoxication”

supplied by surrealism can set off a revolutionary discharge through the bodily innervations of the collective. He thinks that, in their practice, the surrealists had succeeded in bringing together what he calls image-space (*Bildraum*) and body-space (*Leibraum*), challenging the traditional conception of art, in which the viewer stands at a distance of two metres from the artwork. Reading the “Surrealism” essay in connection with Benjamin’s writings on film, Miriam Hansen argues that the technologies of reproduction had also opened an expanding image-space which had become – as the surrealists recognized – the habitat of the collective.¹² Benjamin understood that in this space, opened up by technology, a new *physis* could be re-appropriated and embodied by the collective. The collision between body- and image-space in cinemas could supply the necessary energies to innervate and, therefore, empower the collective body in a revolutionary way, as he demanded at the end of the essay on surrealism. Uwe Steiner argues that the specific conditions of the film medium led Benjamin to perceive the creation of a collective body. In this way, the interaction of human beings with technology in that space appears as a rehearsal for a revolution that pursues the innervation of the technological organs of the collective. “What is merely practiced in the cinema,” says Steiner, “exists for real in the revolution,” when the collective attempts to gain mastery over the new techno-body.¹³ Benjamin uses the Freudian term “innervation” here, which means “a rush of energy through the nervous system” to stress, on the one hand, the corporeality of the collective *physis* to which technology adapts itself and, on the other, the energy which, according to Benjamin, is deployed by technology — an energy which can be both advantageous and destructive, depending on whether the technology is put to humane use or, on the contrary, strips human needs.

It may seem at first sight that, for Benjamin, cinema automatically enables a (positive) collective technological innervation. Nonetheless, in all his writings on film he demands, on the one hand, a political effort to bring a liberated film technology closer to the audience and, on the other, a critical and de-mystified representation of technology. Thus, while he denounces the fact that film capital uses the revolutionary potentials of film for counterrevolutionary purposes – for example, by adding a cultic character to the movie star – he praises Soviet films like Vertov’s *Three Songs of Lenin* (*Tri pesni o Lenine*, 1934) and Eisenstein’s *The General Line* (*Staroye i novoye*, 1929) for providing a new use of the camera and using amateur actors. In “On the Present Situation of Russian Film” (1927), he also celebrates the use of traveling cinemas to arrive at the remotest regions of the Soviet

Union and provide historical, political and technical information to the peasants.¹⁴ For Benjamin, these efforts to expose such audiences to film and radio were the biggest mass-psychological experiments hitherto undertaken and turned the Soviet Union into a grandiose laboratory for technological innervation. However, he also considers that the Soviet “new man” is not critical enough to appreciate irony and scepticism in technical matters.¹⁵ Benjamin bases this on his abhorrence of the Russian comic actor Igor Iljinsky, who he considers a bad imitator of Chaplin, and the fact that American slapstick has not succeeded in the Soviet Union. Certainly he held American slapstick, and Chaplin in particular, in greater esteem. Through his characteristically syncopated gestures, Chaplin allegorically represented the alienation of his contemporaries in their everyday interaction with technology. Through his films, Benjamin argued, the audience could perform a more therapeutic reception of technology, resulting in a kind of catharsis via which spectators were able to receive a psychic immunization against the tensions engendered by the rapid technologization of society.

It is in “Experience and Poverty” that Benjamin explains how, in cinema reception, the audience can collectively embody and innervate the energy supplied by films. Mickey Mouse and his friends appear here as paradigmatic figures which show new, possible rearrangements of technology into the human body.

Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and prosecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged.¹⁶

Benjamin returns here to the image of an electric discharge introduced in the “Surrealism” essay to refer to the empowering quality of art on a collective body. In the reception of Mickey Mouse films, Benjamin argues that a similar interpenetration between image- and body-space takes place. Indeed, in a note written in relation to “Experience and Poverty,” “*Erfahrungsarmut*,” Benjamin states that these films may be

incomprehensible to an individual, but not to an entire audience, since Mickey Mouse governs the whole public rhythmically.¹⁷ The reactions to these images are therefore regrouped and concentrated into a mass, which acts as a body precisely because technology has been so interpenetrated into the audience that it moves according to the rhythm set up by the cartoons. This reading, however, would miss the relevance of representation. What Benjamin appreciates in Mickey Mouse cartoons is that they hyperbolize the promises of technology and, at the same time, improvise out of them a regime of play and dance. Technology does not appear as a mechanization or ossification of the body, as many contemporary critiques of technology depicted it, but as if technology had already been adapted and embodied by the characters – that is to say, as if technology had become their own nature. This interpenetration between nature and technology which occurs in Mickey Mouse films and in the cinema audience is a constant in Benjamin's oeuvre, as well as in contemporary debates on posthumanism.

THE *NATUR/KULTUR* DEBATE

One of the most important achievements of posthumanism is to have called into question the traditional dualism between nature and culture. Scholars on posthumanism such as Rosi Braidotti have argued that, due to scientific and technological advances, the borders between nature and culture have been blurred.¹⁸ This idea was already present in Donna Haraway's seminal text "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1983), in which she claimed that, because of the reconception of organism and machine, "the certainty of what counts as nature is undermined, probably fatally."¹⁹ Benjamin was already aware of the blurring boundaries between nature and culture – or, at least, between nature and *Kultur* or civilization – and thus criticized the traditional dualism between them through the concepts of "natural history" and "second nature."

Adorno was probably the most perceptive author to assert the centrality of these two concepts to Benjamin's philosophy. I will, in fact, draw on Adorno's reworking of Benjamin's concepts to claim their relevance for the present discussion. Adorno first used Benjamin's concept of "natural history" in his 1932 lecture "The Idea of Natural History," in which he aimed "to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history."²⁰ This was directed particularly against the tradition of subjectivistic idealism, which

understood nature in opposition to spirit and history, and the ontological interpretation of history proposed by Martin Heidegger in his *Being and Time* (1927).²¹ Adorno argued that history and nature each have two poles: one dynamic and the other static. Nature has thus a double character: on the one hand, a positive, materialist pole, referring to concrete, existing living beings and, on the other, a negative, mythical one, in which nature is understood as the world not yet incorporated into history, not penetrated by reason. In this latter pole, nature is out of human control and mythically understood as “what is eternally there.” History, similarly, insofar as it was determined by the fact that it was only reproducing the same social relations, could be conceived of as natural rather than historical. Adorno wanted to maintain these two poles, i.e. transitoriness and myth, for his project of negative dialectics. Otherwise, if nature and history were posited as theoretical ontological principles, the double character of both nature and history would be lost and thus either social conditions would be affirmed to be “natural” or the historical process would ontologically be posited as “essential.” The irrational material suffering of history could therefore be understood as mere contingency, as in the case of Hegel, or as something essential to history, as in Heidegger. The result, argues Susan Buck-Morss, would always be “the ideological justification of the given social order.”²² This concept, in conclusion, is particularly useful in opposing the traditional dualistic understanding of nature vs. culture, as well as nature vs. history and civilization.

Benjamin’s division of nature into “first” and “second nature” in the first version of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935) follows a similar dialectical structure. It was in fact Adorno who suggested to him in a letter that he use this term.²³ “Second nature” can be understood as the world of human convention or man-made structures, in opposition to “first nature,” an untouched nature that develops independently of the agency of man. In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin describes film technology, that is, a technology liberated from a ritual function, as a “second nature.” Benjamin points out that this “second nature” now stands in relation to society as elemental as “first nature” once stood to primeval society: “Humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront; they are thus just as compelled to undertake an apprenticeship as they were once when confronted with first nature.”²⁴ He argues that although people do not have the capacity to control that “second nature,” as Lukács put it in *The Theory of the Novel* (1914-15) and “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (1923), they can at least take up an

apprenticeship and learn how to confront it. Film comes into play here: “art once again places itself at the service of such an apprenticeship—and in particular film.”²⁵ Film is therefore the medium through which the audience, collectively, can better understand that “second nature” that, in Lukács’s words, appears incomprehensible to the individual. This is what Benjamin means in a fragment of his article on *Battleship Potemkin*, “Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz” (1927), which he later repeats almost verbatim in the “Work of Art” essay:

To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions of a second, so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins.²⁶

This function, however, not only has to do with historically adapting human perception to the chaotic, fragmentary reality of modernity, as he seems to suggest in the “Work of Art” essay.²⁷ It is also a question of incorporating that “second nature” into the collective audience, which is understood as a body, through a rush of energy. For that very reason, Benjamin claims: “To make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation—that is the historical task in whose service film finds its true meaning.”²⁸

AN EMANCIPATED TECHNOLOGY

Benjamin’s embrace of the incorporation of “second nature” and technology into the (collective) human body may seem uncritical. I will show, however, that Benjamin is calling for an adaptation to a specific type of technology; a technology which is liberated from its mythical pole and is conceived as promoting a positive relationship with nature. For that reason, he divides technology into “first technology,” which corresponds to the capitalist-imperialist conception of technology and exists in fusion with ritual, and

“second technology,” which aims at the correct interplay between humanity and nature. Sami Khatib has described this “second technology” as “an emancipated technology which would open up a new *Spielraum*, field of action, beyond domination and instrumental means-ends-relationships between nature and man.” Not surprisingly, he refers to this new relation of interplay as a “post-humanist constellation of nature and humankind.”²⁹ Through “second technology,” in short, Benjamin attempts to escape from the imperialist understanding of technology as the mastery of nature (and other human beings) by man.³⁰ Benjamin was aware that social relations are embedded in technology. Thus, technology should not be taken as a type of determinism; it should rather be understood historically as a system that depends upon social structures and relations among people. Indeed, Benjamin thought that technology had great potential to rearrange and reorganize social relations. Esther Leslie argues that for Benjamin there was an elective affinity between technology and humanity and that art was the space where this elective affinity could be played out. For that reason, his writings on the politics of art “attempt to compensate for deficiencies in the social organization of *Technik*.”³¹ These deficiencies had led to a misuse of technology. In the “Work of Art” essay Benjamin analyses this use of technology, and claims that if the property system continues to impede the natural use of productive forces, the energy deployed by technology will press towards unnatural ends, that is, war and human annihilation.³² Art, and particularly film, as an emancipated “second technology,” acts as the medium through which humanity should perform a salutary collective adaptation of technology and help gain mastery over the new techno-body.

Within posthumanism, there are different, often divergent, trends regarding the relationship of (post)humans with nature. Transhumanism, normally considered to be a different phenomenon to posthumanism, but often introduced as part of the same project, defends human enhancement through the incorporation of science and technology. For transhumanism, this incorporation is inscribed in a biological and technological evolution that is already changing the notion of the human. Francesca Ferrando has criticized transhumanism because in it “technology becomes a hierarchical project, based on rational thought, driven towards progression.”³³ In other words, this trend is still rooted in the Enlightenment and in the model of rational humanism. For that reason, Ferrando refers to it as “ultra-humanism.” Benjamin’s theory is particularly useful here in order to denounce this uncritical embrace of technology by transhumanism. This trend does not

take into account the fact that specific conceptions of technology and science embed a relation of exploitation to other elements of nature – i.e. other humans, animals and the natural environment – and, therefore, their adoption into our own nature may support and encourage those exploitative relations.

Critical posthumanism has nonetheless generally embraced environmentalism as a way of thinking about the world beyond the merely human. Braidotti, for example, has celebrated the link made by environmentalist theory “between the humanistic emphasis on Man as the measure of all things and the domination and exploitation of nature,” as well as its condemnation of “the abuses of science and technology.”³⁴ I claim that Benjamin provides a more complex and interesting alternative to understanding *what* and *when* technology should be incorporated by humanity, inviting us to reconsider and rearrange our own relationship to the other elements of his broad conception of nature – which includes the human-made “second nature.”

BARBARISM

Benjamin’s most important contribution to posthumanism comes nonetheless from his open battle with traditional, bourgeois humanism – although I argue that this cannot be understood without his previous texts on technology and anthropology. His critique of humanism took a programmatic character in a number of texts he wrote in the period ranging from 1931 to 1933, notably “The Destructive Character” (1931), “Karl Kraus” (1931) and “Experience and Poverty” (1933), but also his note on Mickey Mouse from 1931. In these texts, Benjamin reflects on the consequences of the Great War on long, vital experience (*Erfahrung*). Taking advantage of a situation that he refers to as a poverty of experience and culture, Benjamin calls for a programmatic rupture with tradition and for a “new, positive barbarism” that breaks with the cultural heritage of the past. According to Maria Boletsi, this poverty should not be understood as lack, but rather as excess: “an excess of ideas and styles and an oppressive overload of culture in which people are swamped.” Thus, Boletsi argues that “the answer to this new poverty should not be sought through an attempt to reconnect with the great past traditions, but by professing this poverty in order to explore new modes of being.”³⁵ This break is first announced in “The Destructive Character,” an article that Benjamin wrote for the

Frankfurter Zeitung in November 1931. In this text, he praises the need for a “destructive character” which cleared away and rooted out the traces of that age. Only by separating itself from traditional, bourgeois notions of humanism, argues Benjamin, will a real humanism arise.

In “Experience and Poverty,” Benjamin claims that, especially because of the monstrous events of the First World War and its deployment of warfare technology, experience has fallen in value and is no longer passed from one generation to the next. In a Germany blighted by economic crisis, economic poverty was thus joined to a poverty of experience. Long, vital experience (*Erfahrung*), as true experience, was no longer possible, as he suggests in a fragment that he repeats in “The Storyteller” (1936), which focuses on the inability of the soldiers who returned from the First World War to tell stories about their experiences on the battlefield. The new world that emerged from it was, therefore, experientially empty. Benjamin argues that humanity should be honest enough to admit bankruptcy and to acknowledge that such a stage is “a new kind of barbarism.” In this way, once it is realized that culture and human experience are now part of a new kind of barbarism, says Benjamin, we can introduce “a new, positive concept of barbarism.”³⁶ The positive barbarian appears here as a posthuman figure able to make that new start, to begin from scratch with a little and build up further.

In contrast to the common understanding of barbarism as the opposite of civilization and *Kultur*, Benjamin famously stated that there is no document of culture free from barbarism.³⁷ In similar terms to the non-dualistic relation of nature and culture, here Benjamin highlights the blurring distinction, and inherent interpenetration, of the two terms. Although Boletsi frames Benjamin’s programme of positive barbarism in the context of the threat of fascism, Khatib points out more accurately that it is not only fascism that Benjamin opposed. The point, claims Khatib, is that for Benjamin “bourgeois culture and Western civilization ... are inherently barbaric.”³⁸ Thus, he suggests that Benjamin’s project in this age of (experiential, cultural and economic) poverty was to shatter the “fantasies of capitalist progress, perfectibility and sustainability.”³⁹ Coherent with his fierce battle against understanding history teleologically as a continuum, Benjamin suggests that the idea of progress through the intensification and growth of the productive forces of capitalism is incompatible with a positive technological reordering of the relation of nature and humankind. Benjamin’s strategy, says Khatib, involves the radicalization of “the experience of capitalist alienation and impoverishment” to the point

of “exceed[ing] the horizon of bourgeois-liberal humanism.”⁴⁰ At the time Benjamin wrote this article, Europe was faced by either the barbarism of capitalism or that of fascism. He was aware that barbarism could not be fought from an opposing position because culture and civilization are so deeply interwoven with barbarism that any effective critique must be made immanently, from within, adapting thinking to the impoverished reality it aims to change.

POSTHUMAN CREATURES: *BARBAREN* AND *UNMENSCHEN*

As part of his programmatic barbarism, Benjamin argued that art must be mobilized in the creation of a new culture. The select group of barbarians that Benjamin chooses for his own project are mainly modernist artists such as the playwright Bertolt Brecht, the science-fiction writer Paul Scheerbart, the painter Paul Klee and the architect Adolf Loos, but also, as a representative of popular culture and the motion pictures, Mickey Mouse.

Benjamin appreciated in the early, anarchistic figure of Mickey Mouse a playful and ironic relationship with technology. In “Experience and Poverty,” he hails the fact that, in these cartoons, the characters imbricate technology into themselves, but they do so without mechanizing their bodies as a result, they rather improvise technology out of them.⁴¹ Benjamin’s first text on Mickey Mouse was a collection of notes he wrote in 1931 after a conversation with his friend, the banker Gustav Glück, and Brecht’s regular composer Kurt Weill. Benjamin welcomed the fact that Mickey Mouse characters throw off all human resemblance. For him, their non-resemblance to humans disrupts the hierarchy of the animal kingdom which supposedly culminates in mankind.⁴² This is, obviously, a new link with posthumanism and, more specifically, with its brand of animalism, for Benjamin criticizes the traditional understanding of the human as being on the top of an evolutionary pyramid that justifies their mastery over animals and other elements of nature. In that respect, Braidotti argues that critical posthumanism proposes a move beyond anthropocentrism and expands the notion of life towards the non-human or zoe.⁴³ Benjamin stresses a similar point with regard to other positive barbarians, Scheerbart’s characters in his science-fiction novel *Lesabéndio* (1913), because they reject the principle of humanism, that is, humanlikeness.⁴⁴ These characters, the inhabitants of the asteroid Pallas, have no gender, control the decision to increase or reduce their species

and are absorbed by younger Pallasians when dying. As good posthumans, they can also incorporate technology into their own bodies: they are able to transform their eyes into microscopes, incorporate magnifying lenses to their own photographic apparatuses and contort themselves into radio receivers because of the electrical qualities of their bodies. The fact that Scheerbart's creatures have no gender – and no origin, since they have lived previously in other worlds – can also be understood as a posthuman quality. Along these lines, Haraway associates her cyborg dream with “the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end.”⁴⁵ Miriam Hansen attempted to find in Benjamin's writings on Mickey Mouse a similar complication of sexual difference, since he referred to the character with the feminine pronoun *sie* (because the German word “*Maus*” is feminine). In order to keep this gender confusion, Hansen translates it as he/she/it.⁴⁶ Even if Benjamin consciously attempted to reflect this sexual ambiguity in Mickey Mouse cartoons, I am however reluctant to accept it, since they in fact project traditional gender roles onto animals.

If Benjamin can hardly be regarded as a feminist author (some comments and attitudes point rather to the opposite),⁴⁷ some of his utopian ideas about a new society yet to come contain interesting aspects regarding the re-organization of gender. These ideas were actually influenced by the proto-feminism of authors such as Fourier, Bachofen and Bebel – all of whom were significantly male. However precarious it may seem, an analogy can be established between Benjamin's reconfiguration of gender relations and feminist posthuman theory. In her cyborg manifesto, Haraway dreamed of a hybrid of machine and organism that would give rise to a world without gender, where nature would not be distinct from the artificially-constructed world, we would fuse with animals and machines, avoiding any form of primacy, and would take science and technology seriously, as a tool at the service of a feminist-socialist political programme.⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the obvious differences between Haraway's feminist-socialist programme and Benjamin's heterodox Marxism, both recall an interpenetration of technology and nature that would change the organic organization of civilization into families. Haraway says: “The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family.”⁴⁹ In this sense, it is similar to Benjamin's project, since his idea of developing a positive relationship with nature takes technology as the indispensable medium with which to reorganize social relations and break with the traditional organization of humanity into families (as well as nations).

Besides the barbarian, Carlo Salzani has also linked Mickey Mouse to the inhuman or *Unmensch*, the third figure that Benjamin introduces in his essay on Karl Kraus, depicted as the messenger of a “more real humanism.” Salzani argues that the hybrid and inhuman figure of Mickey Mouse dismisses and destroys the eternal values of the false universalism of bourgeois humanism.⁵⁰ This link can, in fact, be traced back to the 1931 note on Mickey Mouse, in which Benjamin argued that “In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.”⁵¹ This is indeed a turn of phrase from his essay on Karl Kraus written earlier that year. In that essay, Benjamin claimed that in Kraus’s satiric, journalistic and theatrical work “civilization prepares to survive.”⁵² In order to step onto the new stage, Benjamin claims that humankind will have to merge with technology, unlike the average European, who “has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, because he has clung to the ideology of creative existence.”⁵³ Benjamin associates this “creative existence” with a dilettante indulging in his creation. By contrast, he argues that a more real humanism will prove itself only through destruction. Benjamin detects in the anarchistic, destructive frenzy of the early Mickey Mouse the potential to radicalize the experience of capitalism and its technologization of all aspects of everyday life to the point of exceeding the model of the human constructed and defended by liberal humanism. Only in this way, and not by means of the myth of creativity, will humanity create through technology a new model of the (post)human.

This posthuman model, argues Benjamin, is devised in opposition to both the “new man” and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*. Some authors on posthumanism have embraced Nietzsche as a potential source for their theories.⁵⁴ Such a reading is primarily based on the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Nietzsche claims that now God is dead, the human shall be overcome and replaced by the *Übermensch*, who will treat humans as the same laughingstock or cause of shame that apes are for humans.⁵⁵ In contrast to the heroic vision of the *Übermensch*, Benjamin scholars such as Uwe Steiner and Matthew Charles have already noted the imperfectness of Benjamin’s posthuman creatures. While, in the aphorism 900 in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche speaks of “another type of barbarian,” who “comes from the heights: a species of conquering and ruling natures, in search of material to mold,”⁵⁶ the image of the positive barbarian is diametrically opposed to this. Benjamin’s barbarian is antiheroic and words such as conquering or mastering are not in his vocabulary. As I have emphasized, Benjamin called for the

adoption of a technology that would produce a relation of interplay between humanity and nature, but never a relationship of domination of one over the other. The *Ummensch* and the barbarian, who unite their lives with technology, adopt precisely this type of technology, i.e. “second technology.” Steiner thus argues that, “For the perspective of technology, Benjamin’s positive barbarism is conceived as antiheroic.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, Steiner claims that his disconcerting definition of politics in “World and Time” (1919-1920) – “the fulfillment of an unimproved [*ungesteigerten*] humanity”⁵⁸ – can only be understood as “a turn of phrase in opposition to Nietzsche.”⁵⁹ In a fragment from the same time, “Capitalism as Religion” (1921), Benjamin reads the conception of the *Übermensch* as a “breaking open of the heavens by an intensified [*gesteigerte*] humanity.”⁶⁰ For Benjamin, the *Übermensch* is “the first to recognize the religion of capitalism and begin to bring it to fulfillment.”⁶¹ The *Ummensch* appears thus at the other pole of this posthuman submission to capitalism.⁶²

Matthew Charles understands this opposition between Benjamin’s and Nietzsche’s creatures as a critique of the individualism of the latter. He argues that Benjamin’s *Ummensch* is an inversion of Nietzsche’s superhuman, devised as a figure able to surpass the individualism of bourgeois humanism.⁶³ Benjamin thought that a positive adoption of technology would produce a collective body in which social relations could be rearranged and put to humane ends. For this to happen, Benjamin argued that, as he put it in the “Surrealism” essay, the dialectical annihilation of the bourgeois individual psyche was necessary, because only thus could the new, collective body organized in technology be born or reappropriated by the proletariat. This idea is taken further in a paralipomenon to the “Karl Kraus” essay, in which Benjamin states that humanity “must be abandoned on the level of individual existence so that it can come forth at the level of collective existence.”⁶⁴ Benjamin’s collective, imperfect *Ummensch* may thus provide a better posthuman model to oppose to the humanist prototype of the human as a white, male, individual, liberal self than Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* – more than anything because of its anticapitalist and anti-individualist stance. Furthermore, the *Ummensch* also stands in opposition to transhumanism, which has been criticized by Pramod K. Nayar for being “a hagiography of techno-modifications of the human,” since it believes in the perfectability of the human, considering the biological limitations of the body something to be transcended by technology.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

Mickey Mouse and the other creatures of his films do not engage with technology as an external force, but rather, as Miriam Hansen points out, “they hyperbolize the historical imbrications of nature and technology through humour and parody.”⁶⁶ In this way, these films accomplish the function that Benjamin assigned technological art, that is, to play out the affinity between technology and humanity, in this case through a humoristic and hyperbolic representation of the promises of technology. Mickey Mouse appears, then, as a posthuman figure who has blurred the boundaries between nature and technology, between man and animal. It is also worth noting that Benjamin’s programme of a “new, positive barbarism” aims to pursue a more real humanism – hence, far from an anti-humanism that would presuppose the death of man. His objective is rather to escape from the model of bourgeois humanism, which understands the human, first of all, as an individual, which, in turn, belongs to traditional (discriminatory) formations such as families and nations. I suggest that Benjamin’s programme should be complemented by other (feminist and postcolonial) posthumanist theories which have criticised this model for being based on a white, European male. Nonetheless, I hope that, in this article, I have demonstrated Benjamin’s relevance to current debates on posthumanism. It has been my intention to show that his philosophy may be especially relevant because it enfolds the traditional binary oppositions of nature and culture, human body and technology, barbarism and civilization into more complex constellations. Finally, I would like to argue that the creatures he devises in opposition to the bourgeois subject may also be highly appropriate in envisaging potential configurations of the posthuman.

¹ Sami Khatib, “A Positive Concept of Barbarism: Benjamin and the Consequences,” https://www.academia.edu/10235131/A_Positive_Concept_of_Barbarism_Benjamin_and_the_Consequences, accessed November 12, 2015 (Paper presented at MAMA Multimedijalni Institut, Zagreb, Croatia, February 27, 2015. A reedited version will be published in the journal *Historical Materialism*); Matthew Charles, “Walter Benjamin and the Inhumanities: Towards a Pedagogical Anti-Nietzscheanism,” in Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei, Adam Staley Groves and Nico Jenkins, eds., *Pedagogies of Disaster* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2013), 331-341; Carlo Salzani, “Introduzione: Sopravvivere alla civiltà con Mickey Mouse e una risata,” in Walter Benjamin, *Mickey Mouse*, trans. and ed. by Carlo Salzani (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2014), 5-33.

² Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 1.

³ Theodor W. Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence (1928-1940)*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 146.

⁴ Francesca Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations," *Existenz: A Journal of Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, 8 (2013), 31.

⁵ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in Coole and Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3-4.

⁶ Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 3-4. Italics in the original.

⁷ Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1 (1913-1926)*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 486-487.

⁸ "Outline of the Psychophysical Problem," SW1, 395.

⁹ "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, Edited by Ernst Jünger," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.2, part 1, 1927-1930, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 321

¹⁰ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 245.

¹¹ Coole and Frost, "Introducing," 10.

¹² Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October*, 109 (2004), 21.

¹³ Uwe Steiner, "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political," trans. by Colin Sample, *New German Critique*, 83 (2001), 84-85.

¹⁴ "On the Present Situation of Russian Film," SW1, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 734-735.

¹⁷ Benjamin, "Erfahrungsarmut," GS 2.3, 962.

¹⁸ Braidotti, *Posthumanism*, 2-3.

¹⁹ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152-153.

²⁰ Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*, 60 (1984), 111.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

²² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977), 54.

²³ Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 110.

²⁴ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]," trans. by Michael Jennings, in *Grey Room*, 39 (2010), 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," SW2, vol.1, 17.

²⁷ In the fourth thesis of the second version of the "Work of Art" essay (1936), Benjamin argues: "The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history," "Work of Art" (second version), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3 (1935-1938)*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 104.

²⁸ "Work of Art" (first version), 18-19.

²⁹ Khatib, "Positive Concept of Barbarism," 15.

³⁰ For a more thorough debate on "first" and "second technology" in Benjamin, see my article: Daniel Mourenza, "Dreams of a Better Nature: Walter Benjamin on the Creation of a Collective Techno-Body," *Teknokultura: Journal of Digital Culture and Social Movements*, 10.3 (2013), 693-718.

³¹ Benjamin always uses the word *Technik*, which means both technique and technology, instead of *Technologie*. *Technik* covers both the material hardware of machines and the social and political relations derived from them. To preserve that meaning, Leslie keeps the original term in her book. Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), 100.

³² "Work of Art," SW3, 121.

³³ Ferrando, "Posthumanism," 28.

³⁴ Braidotti, *Posthumanism*, 48.

³⁵ Maria Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 118.

³⁶ "Experience and Poverty," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2 (1931-1934)*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 732.

³⁷ In his VII thesis "On the Concept of History," Benjamin writes: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4 (1938-1940)*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

³⁸ Khatib, "Positive Concept of Barbarism," 3. Italics in the original.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2. For a critique of the contemporary uses of "sustainability" from a point of view of feminist posthumanism, see the perceptive article by Stacy Alaimo, "Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures," *PMLA*, 127.3 (2012), 558-564.

⁴⁰ Khatib, "Positive Concept of Barbarism," 2.

⁴¹ Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW2, 734.

⁴² Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse," SW2, 545.

⁴³ Braidotti, *Posthumanism*, 50.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW2, 733.

⁴⁵ Haraway, "Cyborg," 150.

⁴⁶ See Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (University of California Press: London, 2012), 167 and n331.

⁴⁷ There are infamously sexist passages in his oeuvre, such as the following. In a letter to Ernst Schoen from 1918, in which he speaks about the research he is doing for his dissertation on the concept of art criticism in German Romanticism, he criticizes the book *Gedanken Platons in der deutschen Romantik* by Luise Zurlinden and claims: "The horror that grips you when women want to play a crucial role in discussing such matters is indescribable." Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1910-1940)*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 133.

⁴⁸ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

⁴⁹ Haraway, "Cyborg," 151.

⁵⁰ Salzani, "Introduzione," 13-14.

⁵¹ Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse," SW2, 545.

⁵² Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," SW2, 448.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 456.

⁵⁴ Stefan Herbrechter, for example, takes Nietzsche as a referent to develop his own notion of posthumanism and, at the same time, criticize "the current widespread post-humanist techno-euphoria." Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 479.

⁵⁷ Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, trans. by Michael Winkler (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 127.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, "World and Time," SW1, 226.

⁵⁹ Steiner, "The True Politician," 62.

⁶⁰ Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," SW1, 289.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² In a note kept in the Walter Benjamin Archiv in the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, there is a graphic scheme dealing with anthropology in which the prefixes *Un-* and *Über-* appear on either side of the word "human" (*menschlich*). This is, in turn, under the heading of "person," between the individual and the divine, body and language, the daemonic and the law. See Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, trans. by Esther Leslie (London and New York: Verson, 2007), 240-241.

⁶³ Charles, "Walter Benjamin and the Inhumanities," 336.

⁶⁴ Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 2, Part 3*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 1102. Quoted in Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*, 102.

⁶⁵ Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 6.

⁶⁶ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 174.