

Standstill in Utopia: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and the Ban on Images

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Benjamin's paradoxical and mysterious-sounding formulation of dialectics at a standstill is inextricably linked to his conception of dialectical images. These ideas permeate his late work and lead to the center of Benjamin's philosophy of history. In this, utopia and theology intertwine in a fruitful way: This occurs against the backdrop of Benjamin's thought seeking to undermine the linear conception of history. Finally, it becomes apparent that a certain understanding of the ban on images¹ is also present and effective in his late philosophy of history. This article discusses the connection between a certain understanding of the ban on images in Benjamin's late work and his conception of history. It starts with a brief description of what dialectical images are and how their mode of construction operates. The following two sections examine the elements that confront and come together in dialectical images: The destructiveness and suffering, which is subsumed (*aufgehoben*) in history but invisible, buried under the idea of progress, and the other side that is connected to the

1 This term refers to the second commandment, which was directed against the practice of idolatry: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them" (Exodus 20: 4–6). If the German term "Bilderverbot" is translated here as "ban on images," it is because this is also the translation of the term in a passage from Adorno's "Negative Dialectics." Here, the connection between "Bilderverbot," which is transferred from its religious context into materialist thinking, and utopia becomes apparent: "The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology" (Adorno 2004: 207).

idea of a messianic time, which is present but hidden. The conclusion shows that the confrontation of those elements causes a standstill, which leads to the appearance of a utopian force. The central role of theology in general and the ban on images in particular in the concept of dialectics at a standstill will be presented, which also points to the topicality of Benjamin's philosophy of history.

On the Construction of Dialectical Images

It is hard to give a clear definition of Benjamin's idea of a dialectical image. Its composition and the elements from which it is constructed are as complex as what it is supposed to express. Benjamin's dialectical images emerge in a specific situation characterized by upheaval: the time of the industrial revolution of so-called high capitalism, characterized by an enormous increase in production possibilities and also an attempt at radical upheaval on a political level. The contradictions between the economic and political possibilities and their actual development gives room for the construction of a dialectical image. This is particularly evident in the structure of Benjamin's *Arcade Project*: using the development of Paris in the 19th century, Benjamin makes generalizations about capitalist development. Against the backdrop of urban development under Baron Haussmann and the emergence of the arcades, the city seems to condense into an image of the time. The luxury goods in the arcades appear to be within reach, while at the same time the city itself is permeated by the contradictions of struggle, misery, splendor, and decay. This is condensed in the significance of the commodity and its character as something that makes a statement about the nature of the whole. In this sense, the dialectical image replaces allegorical observation, which previously had a similar function for Benjamin: "The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension." (Benjamin 2006: 165) Where allegory, as Benjamin shows in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in an attempt to rehabilitate it, says something about the world as a whole as a monad in a kind of miniature, the commodity becomes the representative of capitalism. Its basic features and contradictions – that social mediation functions via value, that an excess of goods is produced while misery continues to exist – all of this is subsumed in the commodity. The

commodity thus exemplifies the dream-filled sleep² into which the people of the highly industrialized and capitalized Europe of the middle and late 19th century have fallen. In dreams of luxury, truth and lies are inextricably linked.³ This reveals a dialectical image of the present.⁴

Central to the construction of dialectical images is that, for Benjamin, the past is not understood as something completed in the process of history, which is constantly moving forward. A philosophy of history as he represents it is opposed to such a linear understanding of time and history. The potential that exists in the past to break open the seemingly unstoppable, unalterable course of history should be ignited in the present. This is the connection between past and present practice. In Benjamin's time, this course was not only the commodity-producing capitalism that had spread throughout the world and, in alliance with the nationalist elites, had caused the mass slaughter of the first World War twenty years earlier. He also refers to the rise of fascism, especially its specific German variant, National Socialism.

It is in this context that Benjamin writes in his reflections on the concept of history: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." (Benjamin 2007: 255) This is not only a criticism of historicism and its positivist historiography, which believes that the truth about history is contained in a series of objective facts. In this passage, Benjamin rather proposes a view of history that does not accept the blurring of the traces of violence and that they also become invisible. The actualization of memory in the moment of danger is described by Benjamin as an empowerment in the face of that danger. It establishes a connection to those who were exposed to this danger, which is still understood as an acute threat. The interweaving of

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- 2 Benjamin refers with that term to the connection between capitalism as something historically created and its appearance as something like nature, something that has always been there: "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces" (Benjamin 1999: 391).
 - 3 As is also crystallized in the concept of phantasmagoria: "The metaphor of phantasmagoria makes it possible to focus on tensions and contradictions without using modern critical topoi" (Blättler 2021: 106, trans. LT).
 - 4 For Benjamin, Baudelaire becomes an exemplary witness of this time: "If it can be said that for Baudelaire modern life is the reservoir of dialectical images, this implies that he stood in the same relation to modern life as the seventeenth century did to antiquity" (Benjamin 2006: 134).

these initially seemingly divergent elements ultimately converges in the formulation of dialectics at a standstill: "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill." (Benjamin 1999: 462)

In this context, Benjamin defines images as something that is meant to be read, rather than viewed. This legibility is bound to a certain time, not only the time to which they belong, but also the time in which they first become truly legible. Benjamin describes this as the "historical index of the images" (ibid: 462). The legibility is linked to a "movement at their interior" (ibid: 462). This movement is rooted in the constellated character of such images, which do not address a static object but processes. It is precisely this movement that leads to the coming together of the past and the present. This is not only a specific element of cognition, but also the formulation of dialectics at a standstill: The past stands in a dialectical relationship to the present, which is why it communicates something to the latter in its images. Thus, through this dialectical movement, in the very moment of realization that such a connection exists, the dialectical element creates this connection and in it a brief moment of interruption of the present. Dialectical images are the conception which might allow such a constellation and only in this way can the past and present be related to each other and intertwined. This would not be possible in a static image.

Elsewhere, Benjamin specifies the relationship between such an image and the question of time: "All in all, the temporal momentum (*das Zeitmoment*) in the dialectical image can be determined only through confrontation with another concept. This concept is the »now of recognizability« (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*)." (ibid: 867) This formulation suggests that for Benjamin there is a distinction between the present, i.e. the now, and the now of recognizability, which is then not a mere temporal moment in a linear sequence, where the present is precisely that which is located between the past and the future. The now of recognizability does not mean the actual present. Rather, it is the connection between the past and now-time, which makes it possible to recognize the past, but which is only possible in this very now. Thus, the now of recognizability is the coming together of past and present as a constellation. Something from and in the past becomes recognizable in the present and thus all these elements together become the now of recognizability. For Benjamin, this is the reason for the disruptive effect of a dialectical-materialistic view of history – in contrast to a linear one, as in historicism, for example. That is why he says:

“The dialectical penetration and actualization of former contexts puts the truth of all present action to the test.” (ibid: 857) The dialectical standstill of events opens the continuity of the presence through a practice oriented in this way, which then actually points beyond the apparent immutability of the present and the apparent closure of the past. This is made possible by the fact that, according to Benjamin, the materialist theorist refers to the apparent harmonization of contradictions in the present. On the other hand, he also looks at the contradictions in the past that have become invisible, thereby drawing attention to the possibility of a different course of history. These contradictions became invisible because the history written by the victors was able to present itself retrospectively as the only possible course. Benjamin describes his process accordingly: “Here, this occurs through the ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the manifest imaging of dialectic, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image.” (ibid: 10) It is noteworthy at this point that Benjamin does not conceive of utopia as lying in the future, i.e. a goal that is moved forward in time in action. Instead, the place of and for the utopian is opened at a standstill. On the one hand, this refers to the utopian aspect of the idea of stopping and thus halting the events of the present, which are seen as destructive. On the other hand, it also recalls the utopian content of the past, which can be found in the interstices, contradictions, and ambiguities. Instead of shifting utopias into the future, Benjamin points to the necessity of understanding the past as the scene of lost battles for this future, as well as a place where unfulfilled promises await redemption. This points to the great importance of theological thinking, especially for Benjamin in the 1930s, who was committed to materialism.

Suffering and Catastrophe

In his dissertation, Benjamin already speaks of an “ideology of progress” (Benjamin 1996b: 168), referring to Schlegel’s early critique of Romanticism, according to which this concept had lost its meaning at the beginning of the 19th century and had thus become empty. The increasing questioning of the rule of the nobility on a political level corresponded to the spirit of the Enlightenment in philosophy, the climax of which was reached in Hegel’s philosophy, which also placed the concept of progress at its center. According to Benjamin, the climax is also the beginning of the decline. With the rise to power of the bourgeoisie

and the hypostatization of progress, it became an empty concept rather than a critical one: “The concept of progress had to run counter to the critical theory of history from the moment it ceased to be applied as a criterion to specific historical developments and instead was required to measure the span between a legendary inception and a legendary end of history.” (Benjamin 1999: 478) Everything was characterized by progress, which primarily meant technical achievements, but not social conditions. There is therefore a close connection between the concept of progress and its supposed negative: “Overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of one and the same thing.” (ibid: 460) If Benjamin parallels these concepts, it is because neither has room for the countless victims of history: these do not decide on a characterization of time as one of progress or decay. They are merely extras.

Benjamin puts this in the following context in a famous formulation: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given.” (Benjamin 2006: 161) Decay and eternal progress are two expressions of the same point of view because they are based on the same destructive principle: that there is something higher than the human individual and that the majority of those individuals are only significant as cogs in a process that serves that higher purpose. Such a view of history knows no individual victim, but only the sacrifice made by the individual in the service of the greater good. The idea of being in league with history and the most drastic demonstration of the narcotic effect of “how it actually was” is made fatally clear by the attitude of the German working class in the Weimar Republic, which was oriented towards social democracy: “Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current.” (Benjamin 2007: 258) Benjamin also has a concept of progress in mind here, which he describes in the same passage as “vulgar-Marxist” (ibid: 259). Basically, he is attacking the evolutionary socialists, i.e. the social democracy of the Second International, as well as Stalinism, which believes it must walk over dead bodies in the name of supposed progress. What they have in common is that, for different reasons, they devalue the individual in the process in favor of an idea of progress that takes on the traits of idolization. Progress is stylized into a force whose content does not need to be proven by anything but is on the right side for itself and as the quality of being progress.

Against this backdrop, the victims become invisible and with them the immense suffering in the past: this has no place in the story of progress, either

because it clouds this narrative or because it is no longer perceived at all. Instead, it appears to be so self-evident that it takes on the status of a natural order. The extras of history bring their share so that progress can shine in the guise of the rulers. Benjamin, on the other hand, demands a different view of what we call history: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.” (ibid: 257) At this point, Benjamin refers to Paul Klee’s well-known painting *Angelus Novus*, whose fame is linked to Benjamin’s use of it. In the angel of history that Benjamin recognizes in it, the contours of a concept of history that he calls for converge, which corresponds to the state of exception in which the oppressed have always lived:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (ibid: 257–258)

The talk of paradise here connects Benjamin’s early essay on language, where the loss of the paradise is a strong motif, with his last text *On the Concept of History*: Out of the lost paradise comes the storm, for as long as the problem is not solved, of which the expulsion from paradise is the remembrance, the storm will rage. And it will rage more violently, unstoppably into a future from which nothing can be expected. Rolf Tiedemann interpreted the angel’s averted gaze as “the ban on images in theology and its transformation into profanity: Marx’s refusal to paint the communist society in detail” (Tiedemann 1983: 104, trans. LT).

Marx’s⁵ refusal to draw a concrete picture of communist society was based on the viewpoint that the development of society was fundamentally heading

5 This refers to a sentence in the epilogue to the second edition of the first volume of *Das Kapital*. There, Marx takes up the accusation that he would limit himself to “the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes (Comtist ones?) for the cook-shops of the future” (Marx 1982: 99).

in the direction of such a future. Benjamin's angel, on the other hand, is confronted with the ruins that the actual course of history has produced. He turns his gaze away, out of horror, but also to focus it on something else. Instead of a linear conception of time, the reference to an element of the ban on images also stands for the warning and reminder that this course of history was not the only conceivable one. There is a passage in the notes to *On the Concept of History* that explicates and illuminates this connection: "The existence of the classless society cannot be thought at the same time that the struggle for it is thought. But the concept of the present, in its binding sense for the historian, is necessarily defined by these two temporal orders." (Benjamin 2003: 407) The ban on images thus also stands for a critical movement as an intrusion into an idea of history that only knows a linear course. Benjamin vehemently criticizes this view and the angel's refusal to look into such a future is also an attempt not to lose sight of something else. Benjamin concludes his criticism of such a view of history together with its corrective. In doing so, he creates a dialectical image in which utopia is also given a place, as Susann Buck-Morss explains following a note from *Konvolute N*:⁶ "Today's bomb-dropping airplanes are the dialectical antitheses of Da Vinci's utopian anticipation. When the philosophical gaze scrutinizes the juxtaposition of these images, utopian and real, it is compelled not only to recognize technical nature's original state of innocence, but to study empirical history for the reasons why technology nonetheless came to terrorize humanity." (Buck-Morss 1989: 245)

Benjamin's view of history should be understood as an attempt to focus on precisely this: to look at the actual course of events from the point of view that it was not only a destructive one, but also to raise the question of why. At the same time, the possibility of a different course that the development could have taken (but did not for reasons that need to be explained) must be present in the background. Benjamin is therefore not only concerned with questioning the myth of eternal progress, but also with questioning the mythological narrative of a natural progression of human development towards a capitalist society without alternative: "That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been." (Benjamin 1999: 458) In this borrowing from Ernst Bloch,⁷ he aims to relate his approach of releasing

6 Buck-Morss takes up a quote from Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, which Benjamin included in his notes (cf. Benjamin 1999: 486).

7 In distinction to Sigmund Freud's Unconscious, which is connected to the past, the Not-Yet-Conscious in Bloch's works is one of the foundations of utopian thinking,

the potentials of utopia to the past in this double movement of real destruction and possible utopian anticipation. At this point, the ban on images stands in the way of an escape into the future, but this does not mean merely opposing the present with a different image of the future:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (Benjamin 2007: 264)

Benjamin draws on the idea of the dawning of messianic time, which is not simply in the future, but signifies a different idea of time, in which different temporal levels and elements intertwine.

Messianism and Remembrance

Benjamin's reference to a paradise before the beginning of time, as echoed in his talk of a classless primordial society,⁸ is not only related to theology due to its Old Testament origins: a kind of prehistory tells of an original unity between humans and nature that was lost.⁹ Jewish messianism, as Benjamin claims it,

linked to something which is not, but could be: "For only in the discovery of the Not-Yet-Conscious does expectation, above all positive expectation, attain its proper status: the status of a utopian function, in emotions as well as in ideas and in thoughts" (Bloch 1986: 113).

- 8 He wrote in the draft to the Arcades Project of 1935: "In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history '*Urgeschichte*' that is, to elements of a classless society" (Benjamin 1999: 4).
- 9 This is also the approach taken in Benjamin's early text "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." The Genesis narrative of paradise lost is the starting point for a reflection on language. This falls apart from the one language of the name into a multitude of languages: "There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as 'overnaming' – the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of View of the thing) for all deliberate muteness." (Benjamin 1996a: 73) This sadness is therefore also a reaction to the loss of the paradise.

is basically a way of thinking between the religious and the profane, in that it takes up the prehistoric-religious narrative of paradise but relates it to events in the empirically profane world. Benjamin's thinking is strongly influenced by the understanding of rabbinical messianism, which, according to Gershom Scholem, is characterized by the fact that it contains both a restorative and a utopian element:

There is a common ground of Messianic hope. The utopianism which presents the Jew of that epoch with the vision of an ideal as he would like to see it realized, itself falls naturally into two categories. It can take on the radical form of the vision of a new content which is to be realized in a future that will in fact be nothing other than the restoration of what is ancient, bringing back that which had been lost; the ideal content of the past at the same time delivers the basis for the vision of the future. However, knowingly or unknowingly, certain elements creep into such a restoratively oriented utopianism which are not in the least restorative and which derive from the vision of a completely new state of the Messianic world. The completely new order has elements of the completely old, but even this old order does not consist of the actual past; rather, it is a past transformed and transfigured in a dream brightened by the rays of utopianism. (Scholem 1971: 4)

Benjamin starts from a kind of prehistoric idea that refers to something like utopia. But not because he actually considers the Genesis narrative to be true history that really happened, but because it represents a counternarrative that is as old as the development of human history itself. Michael Löwy describes the connection between messianism and utopia as follows: “The elective affinity between the two was also based on their common restorative/utopian structure: that of the redeemed future as a restoration of paradise lost (Tikkun).” (Löwy 2022: 184, trans. LT) The restitutionist¹⁰ aspect of this is the approach of understanding such thinking not as having suddenly emerged, but as having

10 The extent to which Benjamin's early language essay represents this utopian core can be seen in the drafts of the history text, where he sees the universal language rising again in the messianic age: “The messianic world is the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history. This festival is purified of all celebration. There are no festive songs. Its language is liberated prose-prose which has burst the fetters of script [*Schrift*] and is understood by all people (as the language of birds is understood by Sunday's children)” (Benjamin 2003: 405–406).

always been present. Also the *Tikkun Olam*, the kabbalistic idea of repairing of the broken vessels, is more a utopian idea in the sense that it is more about changing the current state of the world than restoring a lost one:

The world of *tikkun*, the re-establishment of the harmonious condition of the world, which in the Lurianic Kabbalah is the Messianic world, still contains a strictly utopian impulse. That harmony which it reconstitutes does not at all correspond to any condition of things that has ever existed even in Paradise, but at most to a plan contained in the divine idea of Creation. (Scholem 1971: 13)

By drawing on such motifs, Benjamin is able to counter the universal history of the victors, the lack of alternatives of how-it-really-has-been, with a different principle:

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. (Benjamin 2007: 262)

The irruption of the theological figure of messianism is this constructive principle, or more specifically the irruption of messianic time.

The fact that Benjamin is not concerned with the intervention of a real Messiah and thus the fulfillment of a religious promise of salvation can be seen in his reference to Marx in connection with messianic thinking: “In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing.” (Benjamin 2003: 401) The idea of liberation, of transforming the possibility of an end to destruction, oppression, and suffering from its religious-theological connotation into a real task in the here and now is central to this: a different state no longer lies in the hereafter or a lost past but seems possible in the present. Buck-Morss has expressed impressively and vividly what actualization means here:

The Messianic Age as “actual,” that is, as potentially present, is the temporal dimension that charges images in the collective unconscious with explosive power in the political sense. Plotting the events of empirical history in relation to this time register provides the third axis in the coordinate structure

of dialectical images – the crucial axis for both the political *and* the philosophical power of the project. (Buck-Morss 1989: 243–244)

The other two axes she names are transcendence, which is represented by theology, and empirical history, which is represented by Marxism (cf. Buck-Morss 1989: 304). Messianic time is therefore not something that waits in the future (or even the past), but something that is present. The confrontation of the empirical and transcendental axes results in the point at which the dialectical images in turn unfold their effect or even condense and crystallize. What emerges and refers to the concepts of remembrance and redemption is “the idea of a solidarity of humanity across time (between generations) and not merely across spatial boundaries (in one’s own time).” (Kompridis 2013: 32, trans. LT) This idea is related to the weak messianic power that also points to the past. This conception of dialectical images that subvert linear time for the initially paradoxical-sounding movement of dialectics at a standstill expresses the historical-philosophical explosive force of Benjamin’s thinking, which is characterized in particular by its reference to theological motifs.

The importance of theology for materialism is already emphasized in Benjamin’s first thesis on the concept of history in the famous image of the chess automaton. There, Benjamin postulates a connection between theology and materialism, as otherwise the latter threatens to succumb to destructive forces (here Benjamin has fascism in particular in mind) in the struggle for the liberation of humanity. Benjamin describes his method of stillness with explicit reference to the category of the messianic:

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (Benjamin 2007: 262–263)

Here, cessation must be explicitly understood as a countermovement to forgetting. He sees this as being rooted in the fact that the victors write history and, accordingly, the defeated become invisible and forgotten. In the face of this destructive violence, which passes over all those who stand in the way, Benjamin calls for a messianic halt: messianic because something awakens in it, and something is to be redeemed. In the destruction, Benjamin thus discov-

ers something that points to the presence of something different, something better. The shock as a blast; the blasting out of an element from the supposedly linear universal history of progress is then the constructive principle – constructive not only because it arranges the elements as a constellation, but also constructive in contrast to destructive, because it wants to point to something better.

Particularly relevant, also for the question of the ban on images, is Benjamin's interweaving of memory as a practice of mourning and his attempt to create a constructive way of thinking history. Here, his rejection of the narrative of history as a series of facts, the "how it really was," combines a Marxist-inspired critique of ideology with a theologically tinged practice of memory, which is always also an expression of mourning. Remembrance here is the recognition of what was lost in the course of history: the invisible, forgotten victims of this history. It is mourning for these as well as for the loss of what could have been.

In an early draft for the Arcades Project, Benjamin talks about a special form of remembering that would not necessarily be associated with it at first glance. There he says: "[A]wakening is the great exemplar of memory." (Benjamin 1999: 883) While memory is perceived as something directed backwards, into the past, awakening appears to be an act directed towards or related to the present. Waking up from a dream, for example, ends the state of sleep. One can awaken from a memory by locating oneself in the present again, by returning from wallowing in the past. For Benjamin, however, awakening has a dialectical character, and he links this to a far-reaching assumption: "Dialectical structure of awakening: remembering and awaking are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance '*Eingedenken*.'" (Benjamin 1999: 884)

In Benjamin's thinking, the influence of the Jewish tradition is combined with the materialist critique of ideology, particularly in the concept of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) itself. Burkhard Schmidt writes about dialectics at a standstill that "its ambiguity cannot be due to anything other than the intertwining of utopia and ideology." (Schmidt 1988: 92, trans. LT) Schmidt's point is that the dialectical image shows the false world of reification and the deceptive glitter of commodities on the one hand, but also the flip side, the possible realization of utopia. This is an appearance of ambiguity in the image. However, the question of catastrophe, of the oppressed, the forgotten, the defeated, the victims of history is not just a question of ideology or utopia. Depending on the understanding of what ideology means, this history of vio-

lence cannot be subsumed under this term without further ado and, above all, completely. This is why the dialectical image is not only the coming together of these two elements, but also raises a central question that does not simply settle in the middle, the contradiction between ideology and utopia: How can there be a moment of awakening in the mourning of loss, in the remembrance of the victims, in the unraveling of history, in the opening to the messianic?

Dialectics at a Standstill: The Moment of Awakening

The aforementioned sentence about the connection between awakening and memory is explicated by Benjamin in that he also takes up another of Bloch's motifs, but instead of focusing on the dimension of the future as Bloch does, Benjamin's gaze is directed towards the past: "[W]hat Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of *what has been*: its advancement has the structure of awakening." (Benjamin 1999: 883)

The not-yet-unconscious knowledge of what has been is the practice of memory as mourning as well as the practice of recognizing what is lost and could have been. It is an awakening because it is a realization of the present as a false state – and thus the awakening from a nightmare, a subjugation to a seemingly natural state and thus the opposite of conscious action. Remembering as a form of this practice connects these moments. It is the “enslaved ancestors” (Benjamin 2007: 260) who are mourned on the one hand in order not to abandon them to oblivion, but in the mourning lies a power that points to the necessity and determination for liberation. This is why Benjamin brings this into play as a motivation, as a driving force of liberation, and not the “image [...] of liberated grandchildren” (Benjamin 2007: 260). The remembrance refers directly to a second motif of Judaism or, without it, is virtually powerless in Benjamin's reflection: messianism, especially in the form of a weak messianic power.

The following formulation can be found in the drafts of *On the Concept of History*: “The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.” (Benjamin 2003: 403) Such a memory is involuntary because what has happened is not presented to it as a mere sequence, but as an image: “The involuntary memory – this is what distinguishes it from the arbitrary memory – is never presented with a course but only with an image.”

(Benjamin 2010: 129, trans. LT) That is why it is also a standstill, but a dialectic that stands still and thus the opposite of something static. Such a thing would be the mere stringing together of events, which then present themselves as a progression with a necessary end point in the present. Thus, the task formulated here by Benjamin in view of the dialectical image focuses on those things that seem forgotten but refer to the demand for redemption and detaches them from the supposedly homogeneous course of linear time. The task is to “take up the broken dialectic of past testimonies of history and culture in a new way, in other words to ‘redeem’ those moments of history.” (Hillach 2011: 223, trans. LT) By using such a procedure, Benjamin suddenly gives the past an actuality by pointing to the necessary redemption, a connection is created between the people of the past and those of the present. This is the “secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.” (Benjamin 2007: 254)

The past has a claim to this power because what has happened cannot simply be allowed to pass, to lie in the distant past, to be irrelevant to the present and ultimately forgotten. This is the secret agreement of which the present generation can, or rather must, become aware and which can develop the explosive force that is capable of blowing up the continuum of history. Stefan Gandler also refers to this connection in *Materialismus und Messianismus* when he emphasizes “that the past is present in the present in a completely different way than we generally assume: ‘We [have] been expected on earth’ by the preceding generations” (Gandler 2008: 12, trans. LT). At the moment of defeat, they hope those who follow will not simply resign themselves to this defeat, but keep alive the hope that the last word in the development of humanity has not yet been spoken. This last word has so far been destructiveness, suffering, violence. In the first thesis, Benjamin therefore refers directly to the role, or rather importance, of theologians for materialism. Gandler expresses this lesson from theology as follows and also refers to the context in which Benjamin’s reflections arose:

What visibly exists today is not the totality, is not the last word of history, there is something outside this destructive force that is almost omnipresent in Benjamin’s present. It is the hopelessness that, according to many testimonies, prevailed among non-fascists and non-National Socialists in this epoch, against which Benjamin takes up the old theological idea of hope

again, even if he forbids himself to do so with the immediacy of Bloch. (Gandler 2008: 18–19, trans. LT)

This outside is not to be understood as outside this world, but as outside the seemingly unchangeable course of the world and our entanglement in it. The weak but nonetheless existing power to be drawn from this creates a political messianism that never thinks of liberation in such a way that every sacrifice must be accepted for it, but which draws its justification from the remembrance of the victims of the past. Benjamin's messianism is thus a backward-looking one, but not in a reactionary sense. Rather in the sense that he does not make a promise about a redeemed future but demands the fulfillment of a promise to the past in the present. So, what is the connection with the ban on images?

The world is damaged, incomplete, and in need of redemption. Therefore, any complete image of the world would be a false one or would promote the false which already exists. This idea is based on a philosophy of history that does not believe in the end of history, in which destructive tendencies have triumphed. Rather, the hope for change is necessary and in force as long as the world has not changed for the better. Benjamin insists on this with his theses. That is why he points out the state of the world and, instead of looking ahead, focuses on the suffering and victims behind us. They must not be consigned to oblivion; the weak messianic power can then be perceived in connection with them. "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope" (Benjamin 1996c: 356) is the last sentence from his essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities." He insists that hope can only ever be cherished for someone else, never for oneself. A source of hope thus lies in the act of remembering, here explicitly understood as part of the dialectical image. Not by showing something that is not, but that there is a force that does not cease to demand this possible other by not being prepared to forget and at least accept the victims in the name of a logic of progress. If the present only becomes recognizable when it becomes the past and a secret, invisible connection exists between the people of the past and those of the present, then the angel of history must also look back. He then stands for the reference to the ban on images and it is not without reason that Benjamin's reference to the prohibition on investigating the future, which stems from Jewish monotheism, is accompanied by the complementary commandment of remembrance.

The ban on images thus points to the past: or rather, it is the grief over the suffering of the past and the catastrophe of the present that reminds us not to

look only to the future (which is why this problem cannot simply be countered with utopian thinking), especially since the past, together with its unfulfilled promises, is, in Benjamin's words, awaiting redemption. The angel also looks towards the past because only by overcoming the past, by settling the unfinished business from there, does a future seem possible that is not catastrophic and therefore deserves its name. The weak messianic power in the present also exists because the past has a claim on it. Therein lies the interplay between materialism and theology. This then also forms the third point alongside ideology and utopia, which, when they come together, allow the dialectical image to emerge.

An image should show something, and it should express something. But above all, it also should not be a false image.¹¹ The ban on images stands for this movement, especially when it is not understood as a prohibition of pictorial representation in general, but as an intrusion into the images themselves. Benjamin named this movement in concrete terms, the flash and disappearance that characterizes the true image: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." (Benjamin 2007: 255) What is the true image of the past? It is the brief flash of the possibility of a different course, of a development towards the messianic era or, in other words, towards the realization of the utopia of a liberated society. It always also consists of looking at something from the past that has already been suppressed, defeated, or even destroyed in the real development of time and now is in danger of being wiped out by the historical narrative: those victims of history, the enslaved, the starving, the murdered – whether the history of progress passed over them or they were buried under the ruins of history in an attempt to give development a different direction.

But why does this image disappear the moment it flashes up? For one thing, it is already in the process of disappearing, as the course of history continues to bury it. On the other hand, the reason why such an image hides is nested in

11 So Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* state: "The Jewish religion brooks no word which might bring solace to the despair of all mortality. It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. [...] The self-satisfaction of knowing in advance, and the transfiguration of negativity as redemption, are untrue forms of the resistance to deception. The right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition" (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 17–18).

the interstices of history, persistently but secretly. Hence the suggestion that “[t]he past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (Benjamin 2007: 254). The fleeting nature of the true image of the past also points to the danger of mistaking a false image of the past for a true one. Instead, in the constellation of dialectical images, a brief flash of such a true image of the past can occur precisely because it is not a static image: the moment it is recognizable, it is also already gone.

Benjamin’s last text is characterized in a particularly impressive way by the tension between theology and materialism, which, according to their basic conception, should be mutually exclusive. The movement which lies in the theses on history between these two poles does not reveal any priority of one over the other, even if the first thesis with the image of the chess automaton might suggest this.¹² At the same time, however, this is precisely where the necessary intertwining of the two seemingly opposing currents becomes apparent: they need each other if they want to achieve their common goal. Theology is a corrective for materialistic thinking. The second entry in *Konvolut N* reads: “What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course. On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of the inquiry), I base my reckoning.” (Benjamin 1999: 456)

Where the present is not readily recognizable, the past paints a false picture and the future appears as a catastrophe against this background, for Benjamin it is only dialectics at a standstill that is able to break open the continuum of history. This is what he aims for when he writes: “To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.” (Benjamin 2007: 254) Elsewhere he explains:

The historical materialist who investigates the structure of history performs, in his way, a sort of spectrum analysis. Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history. Whoever wishes

12 “The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.” (Benjamin 2007: 253) This can be understood as the late revenge of philosophy, which for centuries, from the early Middle Ages to the Renaissance, had to play the role of handmaiden to theology. Or that, in truth, theology is more powerful in secret. However, no hierarchy of the two poles is recognizable in Benjamin’s thinking or can be intrinsically justified in it.

to know what the situation of a “redeemed humanity” might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers. He might just as well seek to know the color of ultra-violet rays. (Benjamin 1996c: 402)

Only “redeemed humanity” as Benjamin formulates it, aiming at the realization of humane conditions liberated from domination and violence, would be able to draw a complete picture of this humanity, as only it can truly understand.¹³ Within that what is, the view of this existing is clouded. This is why Benjamin calls for looking back instead of forward. This is precisely the connection between messianism and the ban on images, which calls for looking back instead of looking towards the future as a part of turning our backs on the horrors of the present, to be able to think of a possible other, as something that has not yet been realized. History thus becomes “a negative index of some utterly inconceivable transcendence waiting patiently in the wings” (Eagleton 1990: 326). The weak messianic power is similar, in that it refers to something that is not visible but exists (just not in the sense of the existence of a God). This reference to Jewish motifs – the ban on graven images and messianism – is intended to show that what is, is not everything. As Gandler points out, the confrontation between materialism and theology “leads to a new form of historical materialism that does not yet have a name” (Gandler 2008: 45, trans. LT). Therein lies the explosive power of Benjamin’s philosophy of history, because it does not draw hope from the uncertain possibility of a potential future, but from what has already happened and what therein points to an incompleteness. It is sometimes argued that the ban on images in relation to utopia prevents political action from being motivated. Another point of critique connected to this is that those who are to be motivated are denied a view of what is to be gained. But one could counter with Benjamin that looking back is enough to recognize that this world cannot and must not remain as it is and was.

13 This is a direct parallel or correspondence to what Adorno (2005: 247) called the standpoint of redemption.

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