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Article

Walter Benjamin's "Second Technique": a Harmonious Relationship between Humanity and Nature¹

A "Segunda Técnica" de Walter Benjamin: uma relação harmoniosa
entre a humanidade e a natureza

Lucía Pinto

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8423-4818>

CONICET – Universidad de Buenos Aires. Facultad de Ciencias Sociales. Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani. Buenos Aires, Argentina. E-mail: lucia.pintocp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to analyse Walter Benjamin's concept of "second technique" to comprehend the relationship between humanity and nature that it implies. This concept emerges in *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, but has roots in previous texts. This article aims to be, in strict sense, a contribution to the interpretations of Benjamin's concept of second technique, and, in a general sense, an input to the current debates surrounding technique and nature, within the framework of the environmental crisis. My argument is that since the mid-1920s, Benjamin introduces a conception of technique as a relationship between humanity and nature. This conception appears in several texts of the period and is crystallised in the concept of second technique, of which film provides an illustrative example. The concept of second technique, which first appears in *L'œuvre d'art...*, has antecedents in *Einbahnstraße*

¹ This article is an outcome of the research I did for my PhD in Social Sciences at Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina. I am grateful to Dr. Francisco Naishtat and Dr. Ricardo Laleff Ilieff for their fruitful comments on the previous findings of this research. Of course, I am solely responsible for the present version.

and *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* for two reasons: in both texts 1) Benjamin defines technique as a relationship between nature and humanity; 2) this technique is posed in opposition to a misuse of technique, whether as domination in *Einbahnstraße*, or as destruction in *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*. The concept of second technique represents an innovation that highlights the nature of this relationship, namely harmonious, and is explicitly opposed to a first technique defined by domination.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Second Technique, Humanity, Nature.

RESUMO

Este artigo procura analisar o conceito de “segunda técnica” de Walter Benjamin para compreender a relação entre humanidade e natureza que ele implica. Este conceito surge em *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, mas tem raízes em textos anteriores. Este artigo pretende ser, em sentido estrito, um contributo para as interpretações do conceito de segunda técnica de Benjamin, e, em sentido geral, um contributo para os debates atuais em torno da técnica e da natureza, no quadro da crise ambiental. Meu argumento é que, desde meados da década de 1920, Benjamin introduz uma concepção de técnica como uma relação entre a humanidade e a natureza. Essa concepção aparece em vários textos do período e é cristalizada no conceito de segunda técnica, do qual o filme é um exemplo ilustrativo. O conceito de segunda técnica, que aparece pela primeira vez em *L'œuvre d'art...*, tem antecedentes em *Einbahnstraße* e *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* por dois motivos: em ambos os textos, 1) Benjamin define a técnica como uma relação entre a natureza e a humanidade; 2) essa técnica é colocada em oposição a um mau uso da técnica, seja como dominação em *Einbahnstraße*, seja como destruição em *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*. O conceito de segunda técnica representa uma inovação que destaca a natureza dessa relação, que é harmoniosa, e se opõe explicitamente a uma primeira técnica definida pela dominação.

Palavras-chaves: Walter Benjamin, Segunda Técnica, Humanidade, Natureza.

1 Introduction

In 1936 Walter Benjamin publishes *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, a text in which he discusses the effects that the development of technique has had on art and the masses as the new protagonists². This article seeks to analyse the concept of “second technique” [*seconde technique*] of this text to comprehend the relationship between humanity and nature that it implies.

The topic of technique in Benjamin's work has been analysed by many scholars, in relation to modernity, war, the masses and art (Buck-Morss, 1989, 1992; Berdet, Pérez López and Schmidt-Gleim, 2019; Di Pego, 2016; Fenves, 2006; Hillach, 1979). In the last decades, some studies have focused on the concept of second technique. Esther Leslie (2000) analyses that technique involves social and political changes, and second technique can coexist with first technique. According to Jan Sieber (2019), Benjamin's reflection on technique has a metaphysical and an anthropological-materialist approach, in which the concept of second technique emerges. Daniel Mourenza (2020) highlights that second technique is based on play and the relevance of film to understand politics.

This article contributes to the knowledge of the concept by analysing the origins of the second technique, which emerges in *L'œuvre d'art...* as a harmonious relationship between humanity and na-

² In the following, *L'œuvre d'art...*

ture, but has roots in previous texts. This article aims to be, in strict sense, a contribution to the interpretations of Benjamin's concept of second technique, and, in a general sense, an input to the current debates surrounding technique and nature in the context of the environmental crisis (Beck, 1999; Hale, 2024; Haraway, 2016; Jonas, 1984; Lessenich, 2016; Puleo, 2011; Schumacher, 1999; Svampa, 2012).

In order to pursue this objective, I need to analyse not only *L'œuvre d'art*, but also some earlier writings that are indicative of the second technique: *Einbahnstraße* and *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*. The article is divided in three sections: the first section examines *Einbahnstraße* and *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* to explore Benjamin's thesis of the war as an overflow of technique and the need to rethink the way in which human beings relate to technique. The second section explains Benjamin's interpretation of the art in the 20th century in *L'œuvre d'art*... and points out that while mechanized reproduction involves the death of the aura, art can also benefit from technical progress in a positive sense. The third section analyses the innovation of the concept of second technique, based on a harmonic relationship between humanity and nature, and goes back to *Das Passagen-Werk* to understand the significance of Charles Fourier's utopian thinking to this concept, followed by some concluding remarks.

I argue that, since the mid-1920s, Benjamin introduces a conception of technique as a relationship between humanity and nature. This conception appears in several texts of the period and is crystallised in the concept of second technique, of which film provides an illustrative example. The concept of second technique, which first appears in *L'œuvre d'art*..., has antecedents in *Einbahnstraße* and *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* for two reasons: in both texts 1) Benjamin defines technique as a relationship between nature and humanity; 2) this technique is posed in opposition to a misuse of technique, whether as domination in *Einbahnstraße*, or as destruction in *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*. The concept of second technique represents an innovation that highlights the nature of this relationship, namely harmonious, and is explicitly opposed to a first technique defined by domination.

2 War as the overflow of technique: the massive destruction

In September 1926 Benjamin completes *Einbahnstraße*, and publishes it two years later with a dedication to Asja Lascis. Benjamin alludes to the predatory way in which humanity conceives nature and criticizes the concept of technique as the domination of nature. Benjamin remarks this predatory way when the humanity is guided solely by the profit motive:

If society has so denatured itself through necessity and greed that it can now receive the gifts of nature only rapaciously—that it snatches the fruit unripe from the trees in order to sell it most profitably, and is compelled to empty each dish in its determination to have enough—the earth will be impoverished and the land will yield bad harvests (Benjamin, 2004, p. 455; GS IV/1, p. 101).

According to him, "technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation [*Verhältnis*] between nature and man" (Benjamin, 2004, p. 487; GS IV/1, p. 147). In his definition, nature is not seen as an object of domination, but he points out the need to rethink about the relationship between nature and humanity. Benjamin offers us clues for thinking about technique in a positive sense, instead of considering nature as a mere object of human domination. This text contains one of the first critiques of the use of technique in the First World War:

Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth (Benjamin, 2004, p. 486; GS IV/1, p. 147).

The war had a personal impact on Benjamin, who broke with Gustav Wyneken in 1915 and settled in Switzerland two years later (Eiland and Jennings, 2014). Benjamin saw war as the most fatal aspect of technical progress, its destructive capacity, and it inspired his first systematic reflections on technique. In the text, he writes that “technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 487; GS IV/1, p. 147). What is new is not the war or the deaths, but the massiveness: thanks to the development of technique, deaths are more massive than ever. I agree with Michael Löwy (2005) and Enzo Traverso (1997), who points out that war as a personal experience leads Benjamin to reflect deeply on technique.

In 1930 Benjamin publishes an article entitled *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* in the journal *Die Gesellschaft*. It is a review of *Krieg und Krieger*, edited by Ernst Jünger and published this year. This book compiles a texts by various authors, many of whom were veterans of the First World War. Technique has a main place in Benjamin’s review, and its use to massively destroy lives is what concerns him most³.

Benjamin begin *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* with the quote of Léon Daudet “L’automobile, c’est la guerre” and points out:

This surprising association of ideas was based on Daudet’s perception that there had been an increase in technological artifacts, in power sources, in tempo, and so on that private lives could neither absorb completely nor utilize adequately but that nonetheless demanded justification. They justified themselves in that they abstained from any harmonious interplay [harmonisches Zusammenspiel] in war, whose destructive power [Zerstörungen] provided clear evidence that social reality was not ready to make technology its own organ (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 312; GS III, p. 238).

Benjamin introduces us to a certain overflow of technique, an asynchrony between its degree of evolution and the benefit that society can derive from it. The technological artifacts justified themselves by renouncing “harmonious interplay” between them. He writes that “the harshest, most disastrous aspects of imperialist war are in part the result of the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic means of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords” (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 312; GS III, p. 238). To the extent that technique advances without reflection on its use, it overflows, and this overflow finds a channel in war. The cause of war is not only the excess of production caused by technical innovations, but the absence of reflection on technique itself. I consider Benjamin as a critic of economic interpretations of war: economics alone cannot explain the brutal character that war assumes. Benjamin shows us that technical progress does not necessarily imply moral progress, something that had already been noted by other authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2002) and Max Weber (2012). This does not involve a conservative approach to technique, according to which we should go back. What he indicates rather is that technique does not provide moral criteria for its use; it advances and overflows in war, like a torrent of blood that destroys a dam.

Regarding the use of the technique for massive destruction, he places special emphasis on gases, which first use was by Germany against French troops in April 1915 at Ypres. Benjamin even anticipates history as one who can see the future and mentions the possibility of a future war dominated entirely by gases. Although toxic gases were not used in the Second World War that would break out nine years later, the centrality Benjamin attributes to them is premonitory of the gas used in the Nazi regime’s extermination chambers.

For Benjamin, the problem of *Krieg und Krieger* is that the book overlooks the consequences of a possible new gas war and ends up in a “cult of war” (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 314; GS III, p. 240). Benjamin enters into

³ It is worth noting that many other writings on technique were published in Germany in the 1930s: Oswald Spengler published *Der Mensch und die Technik* in 1931, Ernst Jünger published *Der Arbeiter* in 1932, and Heidegger gave the lecture *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* in 1938.

the German debate on war: he is worried about the dissemination of this cult because of its consequences for human life. *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* is an intellectual operation, an attempt to dispute a meaning and intervene in the present. Benjamin asks: "What does it mean to " win " or " lose " a war? (...) we have lost one of the greatest wars in world history" (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 315; GS III, p. 242-243).

I consider this is the core of Benjamin's article. The central question is what to do with this defeat. I wonder that Benjamin shows two paths: one is the path chosen by Ernst Jünger and his friends, which resides in the cult of war; the other is the one he proposes, which is to think about technique. In the first path, according to Benjamin, technique is not condemned for its destructive potential, while in the second, this is strongly denounced and another type of relationship with nature is proposed, which is reflected in the following quote:

War, in the metaphysical abstraction in which the new nationalism believes, is nothing other than the attempt to redeem, mystically and without mediation, the secret [Geheimnis] of nature, understood idealistically, through technology. This secret, however, can also be used and illuminated via a technology mediated by the human scheme of things [die Einrichtung menschlicher Dinge] (Benjamin, 2005a, p.319; GS III, p. 247).

Technique implies a relationship with nature that should be mediated by the human scheme of things. As Daniel Mourenza indicates, "the authors of the essays in *Krieg und Krieger*, however, approached technology as something mysterious, if not mystical. They failed to see that the goal of technology was precisely to help human beings" (Mourenza, 2020, p. 121). In the final pages of the article, he ends by questioning an instrumental conception of technique: it is not that technique was used by criminals and must now be used by people with good intentions. What he points out is that technique has not been conceived as a relationship between humanity and nature, which constitutes the icing on the cake of the article.

The problem is not technique, but "the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships [Verhältnisse] to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology" (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 320; GS III, p. 249). It is important to conceive technique in another way, that is, as a relationship with nature, as "a key to happiness" (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 321; GS III, p. 250)⁴. In this sense, we can think that the gas technique used to kill is not good or bad depending on who uses it, but rather that this use of the technique is not good because it is destructive. This is a non-instrumental conception of the technique, which is a relevant contribution.

3 The mechanized reproduction of art: the massive public

In 1936 Benjamin publishes *L'œuvre d'art...* in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, edited by Max Horkheimer. The journal was published in Paris at the time, and Benjamin's text was translated into French by Pierre Klossowski⁵.

⁴ A few years earlier, in the *Theologisch-politisches Fragment*, Benjamin had written that "the secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness" (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 305; GS II/1, p. 203).

⁵ According to Benjamin's critique complete edition, *Walter Benjamin. Werke und Nachlaß Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (WuN) there are five versions of this text, with differences between them (WuN 16, p. 317). The version published in 1936 in French and titled *L'œuvre d'art...* is the fourth version and the only one published. There are three earlier versions, and finally, a fifth version after the publication. In the following, I will analyse the published version, being aware that this version has passed through many corrections. In 1936, Max Horkheimer requested several changes to the French version submitted by Benjamin, including the replacement of terms such as "fascism" with "totalitarian state" (GS I/3, pp. 987-1000). Susan Buck-Morss (1977) has pointed out that the modifications were intended to eliminate communist political formulations that might jeopardize the continued existence of the Institut für Sozialforschung in the United States. Regarding the criticisms and reviews that articles received before publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Leo Löwenthal, the journal's editor-in-chief, noted that the journal was "less a forum for different viewpoints than a platform for the Institut's convictions" (in Jay, 1996, p. 26).

The various forms of technical reproduction of art date back to ancient times, such as casting and stamping. Later came the woodcut, lithography, and printing press, allowing the number of reproductions to increase intermittently and intensively over the years. The characteristic feature of the 20th century is not technical reproduction, but rather it becomes part of the artistic process and not an accessory or subsequent stage.

Vers 1900, la reproduction mécanisée avait atteint un standard où non seulement elle commençait à faire des œuvres d'art du passé son objet et à transformer par là même leur action, mais encore atteignait à une situation autonome parmi les procédés artistiques. Pour l'étude de ce standard, rien n'est plus révélateur que la manière dont ses deux manifestations différentes – reproduction de l'œuvre d'art et art cinématographique – se répercutèrent sur L'art dans sa forme traditionnelle (WuN 16, p. 165)⁶.

In the text, Benjamin makes a detailed analysis of two aspects: the technical reproduction of the work of art through photography and film. Both are testimony to the effects that technical development has on art: photography as the reproduction of the work of art and film as an art that necessarily depends on its technical reproduction. Benjamin shows a dimension that distinguishes this phase of technical reproduction and that involves these both aspects: the destruction of the aura.

The reproduction of a work of art through photography or a gramophone record depreciates the authenticity of the work, which defines it as “le *hic et nunc* de l'original forme” (WuN 16, p. 166)⁷. The depreciation of authenticity entails the loss of the authority that once characterized the original. This can be understood by comparing it with manual reproduction:

L'original, en regard de la reproduction manuelle, dont il faisait aisément apparaître le produit comme faux, conservait toute son autorité; or, cette situation privilégiée change en regard de la reproduction mécanisée. Le motif en est double. Tout d'abord, la reproduction mécanisée s'affirme avec plus d'indépendance par rapport à l'original que la reproduction manuelle. Elle peut, par exemple en photographie, révéler des aspects de l'original accessibles non à l'œil nu, mais seulement à l'objectif réglable et libre de choisir son champ et qui, à l'aide de certains procédés tels que l'agrandissement, capte des images qui échappent à l'optique naturelle. En second lieu, la reproduction mécanisée assure à l'original l'ubiquité dont il est naturellement privé. Avant tout, elle lui permet de venir s'offrir à la perception soit sous forme de photographie, soit sous forme de disque. La cathédrale quitte son emplacement pour entrer dans le studio d'un amateur; le chœur, exécuté en plein air ou dans une salle d'audition, retentit dans une chambre (WuN 16, p. 166)⁸.

Benjamin refers to his concept of aura: “ce qui, dans l'œuvre d'art, à l'époque de la reproduction mécanisée, dépérit, c'est son aura” (WuN 16, p. 167)⁹, which is defined as “une singulière trame de

⁶ “By 1900, mechanised reproduction had reached a point where it not only began to make the works of art of the past its object and thereby transform their action but also achieved an autonomous position among artistic processes. For the study of this standard, nothing is more revealing than the way in which its two different manifestations – reproduction of the work of art and cinematographic art – affected art in its traditional form”. An English translation of this text has not yet been published, so I chose to quote the text in its original language and offer my own English translation at footnotes. There are English translations of the second version (Benjamin, 2010), the third version (Benjamin, 2006a; 2008) and the fifth version (Benjamin, 2006b; 2007), but not of this one.

⁷ “the *hic et nunc* of the original form”.

⁸ “The original retained all its authority in the face of manual reproduction, the product of which could easily be shown to be a fake; but this privileged position changes in the face of mechanised reproduction. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, mechanised reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. In photography, for example, it can reveal aspects of the original that are not accessible to the naked eye, but only to an adjustable lens that is free to choose its field of view and which, with the help of certain processes such as magnification, captures images that are beyond the reach of natural optics. Secondly, mechanised reproduction gives the original the ubiquity of which it is naturally deprived. Above all, it allows it to be perceived either as a photograph or as a disc. The cathedral leaves its site and enters an amateur's studio; the choir, performed in the open air or in an auditorium, resounds in a bedroom”.

⁹ “what is lost in a work of art in the age of mechanised reproduction is its aura”.

temps et d'espace: apparition unique d'un lointain, si proche soit-il" (WuN 16, p. 168)¹⁰. Through photography, technical reproduction leads to the liquidation of the aura: where there was once an unrepeatable presence, it replaces a massive one. The unique specimen may be far away, but photography allows for closeness to the cultural object. Photography allows for repetition, and we no longer even have to go to a cathedral to see it; we can have a photograph of it in our library even if we have never been there. According to Susan Buck-Morss, while there may be a remnant of nostalgia, this erosion of the aura is not negative: "Benjamin believed this democratization of production and reception as well as the non-'auratic', scientific approach to objects were tendencies intrinsic to the medium, and he considered them progressive" (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 133).

For Benjamin, this is a symptom of contemporary society, namely, a mass society that wants everything at hand and does not care about singularity, in which the value of tradition has been liquidated. Photography shows that art is emancipating itself from ritual: "un cliché photographique, par exemple, permet le tirage de quantité d'épreuves: en demander l'épreuve authentique serait absurde" (WuN 16, p. 170)¹¹. For Benjamin, photography, due to the destruction of the aura it implies, is the first revolutionary means of technical reproduction.

At the cinema, unlike the theatre, the actor does not perform to an audience directly, but through a machine. The actor acts in front of the camera, then comes the editor's task, and then the image is projected to the audience. The machine mediates between the actor and the audience. In film, the actor renounces the aura: "avec le public disparaît l'aura qui environne l'interprète et avec celui de l'interprète l'aura de son personnage" (WuN 16, p. 182)¹².

Film, due to the costs that demands, is an art form that is reproducible by definition. This is completely new: you can paint a work of art, compose a song, or construct a building without needing to reproduce them, but you cannot make a film and not reproduce it. Consequently, film is either massive or it is not:

Pour les films, la reproductibilité ne dépend pas, comme pour les créations littéraires et picturales d'une condition extérieure à leur diffusion massive. La reproductibilité mécanisée des films est inhérente à la technique même de leur production. Cène technique, non seulement permet la diffusion massive de la manière la plus immédiate, mais la détermine bien plutôt (WuN 16, p. 170)¹³.

In film there is no pure reality, but it is always mediated by machines: "dans le monde du film la réalité n'apparaît dépouillée des appareils que par le plus grand des artifices et la réalité immédiate s'y présente comme la fleur bleue au pays de la Technique" (WuN 16, p. 186)¹⁴. However, film has enriched the ways of representing the world. Benjamin shows that through the camera we experience the optical unconscious, while through psychoanalysis we experience the instinctual unconscious¹⁵. He shows that while mechanized reproduction involves the death of the aura, art can also benefit from technical progress in a positive sense. In his beautiful words, he writes:

¹⁰ "a singular weave of time and space: a unique apparition of a distant place, however close it may be". This article limits to the significance of the liquidation of the aura in photography and film, in relation to my interest in the technique. The debate on the concept of aura is beyond the scope of this article. It should be noted that Ezio Puglia (2016) emphasizes that Benjamin never wrote a text on this concept and that there have been many misunderstandings in its interpretation.

¹¹ "a photograph, for example, allows a large number of prints to be made: it would be absurd to ask for an authentic print".

¹² "with the audience disappears the aura surrounding the performer, and with the performer's aura the aura of his character".

¹³ "For films, reproducibility does not depend, as it does for literary and pictorial creations, on a condition external to their massive distribution. The mechanised reproducibility of films is inherent in the very technique of their production. This technique not only allows massive distribution in the most immediate way but actually determines it".

¹⁴ "in the world of film, reality only appears stripped of its devices through the greatest of artifices, and immediate reality appears there like the blue flower in the land of Technique".

¹⁵ In the fifth version of the text, Benjamin links this to *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens*, in which Sigmund Freud analyses the slip of the tongue (WuN 16, pp. 239). Film, like this 1901 work by Sigmund Freud, has enriched our world, revealing something that previously went unnoticed thanks to the use of technique.

Le geste de saisir le briquet ou la cuiller nous est-il aussi conscient que familier, nous ne savons néanmoins rien de ce qui se passe alors entre la main et le métal, sans parler même des fluctuations dont ce processus inconnu peut être susceptible en raison de nos diverses dispositions psychiques. C'est ici qu'intervient la caméra avec tous ses moyens auxiliaires, ses chutes et ses ascensions, ses interruptions et ses isolements, ses extensions et ses accélérations, ses agrandissements et ses rapetissements. C'est elle qui nous initie à l'inconscient optique comme la psychanalyse à l'inconscient pulsionnel (WuN 16, p. 190)¹⁶.

This has been also indicated in relation to photography in the previous text *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*: the camera, through shutter speed, freezing or magnification, allows us to capture actions that are not conscious, such as people's attitudes "during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step" (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 510; GS II/1, p. 371). He points out that photography allows to capture the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis captures the instinctual unconscious. In this text, he is very harsh on those who think that photography implied the death of art. This is a "fundamentally antitechnological concept of art" (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 508; GS II/1, p. 369) which Benjamin does not advocate. Benjamin quotes François Arago's discourse, which praises photography, while also criticizing the positions of Charles Baudelaire and Antoine Wiertz.

Thanks to technological developments, film generates a massive audience like never before. We might think that a painting can be seen by as many people as a film. We even might say that it is difficult to know whether more people have seen Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* or Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*. But while both can reach a large audience, only film is characterized by the simultaneous viewing by many people at the same time and generates a "réaction massive du public" (WuN 16, p. 188)¹⁷.

The masses do not just imply an increase in the number of viewers, but a change in their participation. It is not just a matter of the massive reach, as might be the case of the printing press or photography, but of the masses becoming audiences. It's a matter of collective reception: the movie audience is not the solitary individual reading a novel, but people are necessarily together when watching a film at the cinema. Benjamin writes: "la quantité se transmue en qualité: les masses beaucoup plus grandes de participants ont produit un mode transformé de participation" (WuN 16, p. 194)¹⁸. Today we could say things have changed. If Benjamin wrote that individuals could not afford a movie, with on-demand platforms, that no longer applies. We can watch a movie completely alone.

4 Film as a second technique: a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature

In *L'œuvre d'art...* Benjamin explicitly indicates that there are two types of technique. There is a technique that involves domination and another one that establishes a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature: the first technique "visait réellement à un asservissement de la nature — la seconde bien plus à une harmonie de la nature et de l'humanité" (WuN 16, p. 173)¹⁹. It is particularly important to note that of all the existing versions of this text, Benjamin only mentions the concept of

¹⁶ "Although the gesture of grasping a lighter or a spoon is as conscious as it is familiar to us, we nevertheless know nothing of what happens between the hand and the metal, let alone of the fluctuations to which this unknown process may be susceptible because of our various psychic dispositions. This is where the camera comes in, with all its aids, its falls and rises, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and shrinkages. It introduces us to the optical unconscious in the same way that psychoanalysis introduces us to the impulsive unconscious".

¹⁷ "massive reaction of the audience".

¹⁸ "quantity is transformed into quality: the much larger numbers of participants have produced a transformed form of participation".

¹⁹ "was really about enslaving nature — the second was much more about achieving harmony between nature and humanity".

second technique in the third version and published one, and only in the published version he refers to it in terms of harmony. My intention is to rescue this fruitful concept.

Art is linked to both techniques: "le sérieux et le jeu, la rigueur et la désinvolture se mêlent intimement dans l'œuvre d'art, encore qu'à différents degrés. Ceci implique que l'art est solidaire de la première comme de la seconde technique" (WuN 16, p. 173).²⁰ Notably, film has significant importance in the development of the second technique: "la fonction sociale décisive de l'art actuel consiste en l'initiation de l'humanité à ce jeu 'harmonien'. Cela vaut surtout pour le film" (WuN 16, p. 174).²¹ ¿How can film show this harmonious play? I consider that to the extent that it uses technique not for domination, but rather for a play in which nature and humanity can relate to each other in harmony. As Sieber indicates:

The realm of art relates to technique in a special way. Art, from the perspective of technique, is a space where humanity is able to freely rehearse new uses of new technologies and experiences related to it. It can thus have an exemplary and precursory function regarding the task of humanity to give shape to the world in the medium of technique (Sieber, 2019, p. 2).

¿What are Benjamin's references when he thinks about a second technique? In this text appears a clue that was absent in *Einbahnstraße* and *Theorien des deutschen Fascismus*, namely the explicit reference to the thinking of Charles Fourier:

Or, la seconde technique est à peine assurée de ses premières acquisitions révolutionnaires, que déjà les instances vitales de l'individu, réprimées du fait de la première technique – l'amour et la mort – aspirent à s'imposer avec une nouvelle vigueur. L'œuvre de Fourier constitue l'un des plus importants documents historiques de cette revendication (WuN 16, p. 174).²²

When Benjamin published this text, he was writing *Das Passagen-Werk*, in which he dedicates the convolute W to Fourier. In *Das Passagen-Werk* he mentions *Théorie des quatre mouvements* and quotes commentators such as Felix Armand and Rene Mounblanc. In the part of the convolute that he wrote between 1928 and June 1935, that is, before *L'œuvre d'art...*, he mentions that Fourier said that "Nature will evolve in such fashion, he maintains, that a time will come when oranges blossom in Siberia and the most dangerous animals have been replaced by their opposites. Anti-lions, anti-whales will be at man's service then, and the calm will drive his ships" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 622; GS V/2, p. 766) and "when the earth shall have been rationally cultivated in all its parts, the aurora borealis will be continuous" (Benjamin 2002, p. 628; GS V/2, p. 774).²³ In the same convolute, he writes:

Utopian elements: (...) "The world turns to its antitype, as dangerous and savage animals enter the service of mankind: lions are used for delivering the mail. The aurora borealis reheats the poles; the atmosphere, at the earth's surface, becomes clear as a mirror; the seas grow calm; and four moons light up the night. In short, the earth renews itself twenty-eight times, until the great soul of our planet (now enfeebled, exhausted) passes on, with all its human souls, to another planet" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 630; GS V/2, p. 775).

This harmony between humanity and nature that characterizes Fourier's utopian thinking appears in the concept of second technique. I consider that film allows Benjamin to consider the effective pos-

²⁰ "seriousness and playfulness, rigour and casualness are intimately intertwined in the work of art, albeit to different degrees. This implies that art is bound up with the first as well as the second technique".

²¹ "the decisive social function of art today is to initiate humanity into this 'harmonious' game. This applies especially to the film".

²² "However, the second technique had scarcely made its first revolutionary achievements when the vital elements of the individual, repressed because of the first technique – love and death – were already aspiring to impose themselves with renewed vigour. Fourier's work is one of the most important historical documents of this demand".

²³ In the chronology of the writing of the *Passages*, I follow Tiedemann (1991).

sibility of a second technique. As I have shown, in earlier texts such as *Einbahnstraße* and *Theorien des deutschen Fascismus*, technique appears as a relationship between humanity and nature, but only in *L'œuvre d'art...* appears the explicit formulation of a first and a second technique and the harmonious character of the relationship of the second one.

In other words, Benjamin sees in film a concrete example of a different use of technique, a “harmony” that refers to the relationship between people and nature that Fourier imagined as utopian. Benjamin returns to a thinker who died a hundred years ago to rescue a different relationship between humanity and nature. Why? Because Fourier deserves to be updated considering that technique has caused death and massive destruction in war. It can be said that Benjamin makes a “tiger’s leap into the past” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 395; GS I/2, p. 701) and gives “now-time [*Jetztzeit*]” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 397; GS I/2, p. 704) to a thinker of 19th century.

Thus, the concept of second technique can be best understood in the context of *Das Passagen-Werk*. Fourier’s importance for Benjamin has also been highlighted by Reyes Mate (2009), who stated that Fourier helps Benjamin to distance himself from the dominant concept of technique, and by Sieber, who highlighted that “utopian demands, like the ones formulated by Fourier and Scheerbart, are for Benjamin prophetic expressions of the potential of a playful, experimental and constructive use of technique” (Sieber, 2019, p. 5)²⁴.

After publishing *L'œuvre d'art...* Benjamin continues to quote Fourier. In the same file W, in fragments written until at least 1937, he indicates that while Fourier supports the right to hunt and fish, animal abuse is condemned in *Le nouveau monde industriel et sociétaire*. In March 1939, in the summary of the project written for Max Horkheimer, Benjamin again refers to Fourier and his disapproval of the exploitation of nature: “One of the most remarkable features of the Fourierist utopia is that it never advocated the exploitation of nature by man, an idea that became widespread in the following period. Instead, in Fourier, technology appears as the spark that ignites the powder of nature” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 17; GS V/1, p. 64).

In the thesis *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, written in 1940 and the last text by Benjamin to which we have access, he reflects on technique and points out that Fourier’s fantasies “prove surprisingly sound” and about the polars without ice and the four moons, he writes: “all this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, would help her give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 394; GS I/2, p. 699). Benjamin was fascinated about Fourier’s utopian socialism because of the possibility of a relationship with nature that does not involve domination, which is a source of inspiration for his concept of second technique. I agree with Fabio Mascaro Querido (2010) and Michael Löwy (2005), who highlighted Benjamin’s condemnation of the exploitation of nature.

Returning to *L'œuvre d'art...*, there are also clues about the subjection of man to the machine: “car c’est sous le contrôle d’appareils que le plus grand nombre des habitants des villes, dans les comptoirs comme dans les fabriques, doivent durant la journée de travail abdiquer leur humanité” (WuN 16, p. 180)²⁵. Here Benjamin makes a leap in the text that is worth noting: if he initially distinguished two techniques, namely one that dominates nature and another that establishes harmony with it, he now suggests that man finds himself subjugated by technique. Benjamin shows that technique, initially conceived as the mastery of nature, has turned against man. In other words, humans wanting to dominate nature end up being dominated by technique.

²⁴ Although in *L'œuvre d'art...* Benjamin does not mention Paul Scheerbart, in a text written in the late 1930s he notes that in the utopias of Fourier and Scheerbart “there is as much mockery of present-day humanity as there is faith in a humanity of the future” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 387; GS II/2, p. 632). In *Erfahrung und Armut*, published in 1933, he also refers to Scheerbart. On the presence of Scheerbart in Benjamin’s work, see Berdet (2017), Di Pego (2022), and Pérez López (2021).

²⁵ “for it is under the control of machines that the majority of city dwellers, whether in counters or factories, have to abdicate their humanity during the working day”.

Technique is one of the most interesting topics in Benjamin's work, in which he is attentive to grey areas and contradictions. Technique is something that characterizes the human condition. Benjamin does not advocate for a conservative approach, but for overcoming predatory technique. He does not conceive technique as an instrument for the domination of nature. At the same time, this overcoming is not intended to be utopian: Benjamin finds in film at least the initial possibility of this second technique. It is about empowering something that already exists among us in art²⁶.

This use of technique, characteristic of film, coexists with the use of technique for the purpose of domination. Jan Sieber understands the first and second techniques not as isolated, but as "two opposite poles of one and the same medium", to the extent that both modes of technique are always possible:

The measure of their difference consists in instrumental or non-instrumental use. The former is inadequate insofar it employs technique as a mere means to an end alien to itself, as a mere instrument of domination and exploitation. Making a non-instrumental use is adequate to technique as a medium, adequate to the mediality of technique. Thus Benjamin significantly departs from the classical concept of techne as a target-oriented and rule-governed ability bound to a certain positive knowledge. Technique is instead a non-instrumental medium in which humanity practically and constructively gives shape to world with the aim of happiness (Sieber, 2019, p. 2).

Technique is not a means of domination but implies a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. What is Benjamin telling us? What does it mean that technique is not conceived as a means? Benjamin refers to technique as a means when he writes that technique should be used to "canaliser des cours d'eau" and "ensemencer la terre du haut de ses avions" (WuN 16, p. 199)²⁷. It is legitimate for humanity to use technical instruments. Benjamin shows us that humanity can use technique to achieve a better quality of life. He disapproves the use of technique as a destructive relationship between humanity and nature. Technique conceived as domination ended up subjugating humanity, even killing it in war. In this sense, I agree with Sieber (2019), who states that the technique proposed by Benjamin is a non-instrumental one. Technique is a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. What defines technique is, then, this relationship, not its status as a medium, although it remains that.

Benjamin's concern is not only humanity, but also nature. It is the conjunction of humanity and nature, thus denouncing the exploitation of nature. Reading Benjamin challenges our preconceptions about how nature is exploited and how it relates to human exploitation, highlighting the productivity of his writing.

5 Conclusion

From the mid-1920s, technique emerged for Benjamin as a problem to be addressed. I have shown that it appears primarily linked to two phenomena: war and art. In both, technique alludes to the masses: in war, it is expressed in massive death, and in art, in the massive presence of the public. In the first case, technique is absolutely destructive, while in the second, the possibility of a second technique emerges, characterized by a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. In film, Benjamin sees a concrete example of the second technique.

²⁶ After reading the third version of *L'œuvre d'art...*, Adorno praised the concept of the second technique and wrote that "my emphatic endorsement of the primacy of technology, especially in music, must be understood strictly in this sense and in the sense of your second piece on technology" (Adorno and Benjamin, 2003, p. 128). However, he introduces a difference with respect to collective laughter, by mentioning that "the laughter of a cinema audience (...) is anything but salutary and revolutionary, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism instead" (Adorno and Benjamin, 2003, p. 130). On Adorno's criticisms see Buck-Morss (1977), Lesmes (2017) and López (2022).

²⁷ "channelling waterways"; "sowing the earth from the top of his planes".

My argument throughout this article has been that since the mid-1920s, Benjamin introduces a conception of technique as a relationship between humanity and nature. This conception appears in several texts of the period and is crystallised in the concept of second technique, of which film provides an illustrative example. The concept of second technique, which first appears in *L'œuvre d'art...*, has antecedents in *Einbahnstraße* and *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* for two reasons: in both texts 1) Benjamin defines technique as a relationship between nature and humanity; 2) this technique is posed in opposition to a misuse of technique, whether as domination in *Einbahnstraße*, or as destruction in *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*. The concept of second technique represents an innovation that highlights the nature of this relationship, namely harmonious, and is explicitly opposed to a first technique defined by domination.

Benjamin's concern for the harmony between humanity and nature is also original. It is not about returning to a natural state, nor about dominating nature for other purposes, but rather about making other uses of technique, as shown in film. It is neither a conservative nor evolutionary conception of technique, but rather a critical one. Fourier's utopian thinking serves as inspiration for humanity to use technique in a positive sense.

Hence, Benjamin's ideas are relevant considering the issues that our society is currently facing. François Hartog (2015) has pointed out that in presentism, experience undergoes an alteration and appears doubly indebted, that is, in two directions: toward the past and toward the future, both conceived as catastrophic. Benjamin can contribute to think about a different relationship between humanity and nature. This article has considered the richness of the concept of second technique, exploring its origins in Benjamin's work and showing the challenges and possibilities that the development of technique represents for humanity.

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