General

Benjamin in Palestine
On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production

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A conference held last year in Palestine reflected on the relevance of Walter Benjamin's critical responses to oppression, in a place all too familiar with its reality. Here, Jack Segbars considers how and if critical theory now can avoid entrapment by the very target of its critique, and instead realize actual political change. As knowledge production becomes more entangled with artistic production, models – namely that of participatory panel discussions – must be reviewed for their capacity to enact the change they so desire.

The 'Benjamin in Palestine' conference and workshop in Palestine from 6 to 11 December 2015 was organized by an international group of critical theorists, activists, artists and Benjamin scholars. [1] Three days of workshops – interspersed with artistic and academic presentations and interventions – centred on close readings of some of Benjamin's key texts including: 'Theses on the Concept of History' (1940) in which Benjamin advocates for the necessity to stand with the oppressed at any given time vis-a -vis the power of the oppressor over history, thus keeping the space for the oppressed open; and 'The Task of the Translator' (1923), an exploration of translation and of language in terms of power relations and preventing instrumentalization in and through text. The last two days consisted of a conference with keynote speeches by Rebecca Comay, Susan Buck-Morss, and Slavoj Z iz ek, each of whom elaborated on Benjaminian thought in relation to the Palestinian context. Benjamin is a key person to turn to in contemporary Ramallah, as while a Jewish intellectual and icon of Western humanities, he remains an extremely influential cultural theorist due to his critical ideas on representation, state violence, and oppression, all of which still profoundly shape cultural production and the humanities of relevance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Case in point: Comay presented a paper on how to address the lack of a revolutionary testament of use in our current conditions by reconsidering Benjamin's notions on how to relate to our past and the demand that is put forward by our history.

With the animosity between the two sides become practically immensurable, hardly any intrinsic cultural exchange exists between Israelis and Palestinians, be it in journalism, academia, or otherwise, that might counter this stultified toxic relation. Antagonistic rhetoric, illustrated by many declarations made by Israeli officials, takes precedence, branding the 'other' as eternal danger and hereditary foe. Take Israel's recent ban in schools on novels featuring Arab-Jewish romance, under the claim that they 'threaten Jewish identity.' To organize such an event as this conference amidst growing acute violence in the West Bank and Jerusalem and the phenomenon of erratic stabbings, tests the potential for critical theory in a place where oppression is most felt and visible, and the doors of perception and of communication and exchange are most closed.

What can an academic project offer amid acute political turmoil? How can it, in the spirit of Benjamin's thinking, do justice to its supposed aim, and be of effect in the sense of its commitment to the oppressed? What state do the arts and critical theory find themselves in, facing contexts like these? What political agency can be found under the present conditions?

As Benjamin himself noted in considering the literary work in his text 'The Author as Producer': 'Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. In other words, it aims directly at a work's literary technique.' Taking this comment to art and critical theory, how these techniques or practices are executed or applied could be said to depend on the right tendency. [2] What political position is taken up and expressed by them? This question lies at the core of the 'Benjamin in Palestine' project.

The key objective of the organizers was two-fold: first, to address the situation in Palestine critically; and second, to self-critically assess the situation and practice critique and theory in general find themselves. The conference intended not only to insert theory into matters of politics – here, how Benjaminian concepts may form an antidote to factual politics by re- examining its revolutionary potential and its analysis on state violence and oppression – but also to address theory's role in neoliberalism and the way critical theory is instrumentalized under capitalist hegemony (transmitted here to the Palestinian situation via the Israeli occupation). Criticality is absorbed in capitalist production as yet another mode of productivity enhancement without touching capitalism's basic structure. It admittedly performs its critical role but fails to realize political agency and remains within the capitalist order organized under nation-state regimes.

The choice of Palestine was in response to another conference on Benjamin being organized in Israel, a location the organizers thought would in fact go against Benjamin's core thinking (as it would affirm the oppressor's status). [3] But does Ramallah produce the right form of resistance: that of the fight of the oppressed Palestinians versus Israelis, and the role of resistance performed by critical theory under capitalist subsumption? What is the truly committed position, how can we realize our aesthetic ambitions (what is the right *technique*) in cultural production under our conditions?

In the essay 'All the World's a Platform: Dispatches from Berlin on Post-Internet Art' Benjamin scholar and activist Jacob Bard Rosenberg, one of the organizers of the 'Benjamin in Palestine' conference considers how artistic production today interprets our modes of social interaction (the use of social media and platforms) often failing to fully grasp the social and political dimension of these forms. [4] The essay's argumentation is based on a critical review of an event at the Volksbu hne in Berlin where a roundtable discussion was organized with artist and essayist Hito Steyerl, art historian and critic Susanne von Falkenhausen, and two of the editors of *DIS Magazine,* the curators of the (then forthcoming) 2016 Berlin Biennale. The discussion was titled 'History in the time of

hypercirculation,' a term construed for this occasion.[5] His critique is aimed at Steyerl's use of the term 'hypercirculation' to define the way in which the economy of circulation has undergone a fundamental change from commodity-form to conceptual to 'imagistic'. Steyerl argues that the modern, algorithmically driven media apparatus based on the consumer economy of images produces a quasi-autonomous mode of exchange. The proposition is that this makes way for a means of resistance since this mode of exchange could allow for an escape from regimes of centralized control (as accelerated exchange modules), offering a sociality manageable by its users (us). Or if not an escape and / or manageability, it can at least be a means of resistance.[6] Rosenberg argues, however, that this analysis fails to understand that it is precisely this circulation that is not under the user's control but under that of corporate and state scrutiny, establishing and affirming – by a failure of recognition – the oppressors' rule.

I bring this up not because the topic under discussion is the social, virtual platform as a form of social production, but because of Rosenberg's critique of an example of this now well- known approach that sees artists, curators, publicists and theorists / scholars come together to discuss before an audience. The 'platform' approach, which I detail here, has been very successful in recent decades, during which knowledge (academic) production has become more aligned with artistic production. In the case Rosenberg looks at, the primary positions of artistic production are presented and brought together: Steyerl as the theorist-artist, Von Falkenhausen as art historian and critic and *DIS Magazine* as curator. Of the audience – mostly well informed and often also from the field of art production – a participative role is expected in terms of their intervening, asking questions, furthering the discussion at hand and disseminating and producing information and knowledge. This format often assumes the idea that 'producing' together produces a (sovereign) form of social production hinting at operating autonomously, similar to what is proposed or suggested by hypercirculation.

This is a contested conclusion, however, or one that fails to escape the overarching system in which it operates, as Rosenberg rightly observes in response to Steyerl's claims. In addition, this example of platformed production in Berlin illustrates that theory as such is implicated and forms an essential part of the platform.[7] Yet the format of the 'Benjamin in Palestine' project has several traits similar to the platform format: the pallet of contributors that gather in a mode of production. Where Rosenberg critically addresses the role of curating and the artist in production, in the Benjamin conference, theory plays a similar role to curating but with respect to the production of the cultural object. So does the Benjamin conference manage to offer a method or form to avoid a conundrum so pervasive in critical cultural production?

The critique of theory and likewise of art is nothing new. Luc Boltanski and E ve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) argue that the role of art follows the capitalist regime while at the same time critiques it. This mode of critical agency as cultural production has been absorbed by capital, even as one of its prime qualities, thus rendering it powerless. The issue of leftist artistic-critical agency, in line with its avant-garde heritage, has become a question rather than a practice. It is arguably the single most important topic in the field of cultural production today.

An essential aspect of Benjaminian thinking is the way it demonstrates the need to conceive history ourselves, even proposing a methodology to produce this whereby agency can be gained as a means to oppose oppression. Benjamin's pointing to the importance of this is both to reveal the potential in counter narratives, but also to demonstrate how obscuring structurally serves authority (documented history always serves the oppressor and neglects or eradicates the oppressed, rendering these non-existent). Documentation and archiving are acts that lead to oppression,[8] the principle of what he calls the 'dialectical image.' Unearthing obscured histories thereby at once reveals the principle of

power and the potential of the other – the image that flashes up in a moment of danger.[9]

But how to gain agency through embracing this methodology is maybe the most problematic aspect of Benjaminian thinking – how to render operational a demonstration of the oppressed politically and to prevent this becoming a representation. For each act of representation of course stands the chance to fall in the register of oppression, and becomes the essential problematic to be negotiated. Arguably Benjamin was not able to solve this conundrum, that is, not theoretically, supported by a definite framework. The *Arcades Project,* however, shows a direction in how to circumnavigate this conundrum – a way in which to avoid theory to become a new epistemological and thereby authoritative form. [10] In the *Arcades Project* the detrimental effect of any historicization and epistemology is circumvented by laying out an overview of cultural expressions, disclosing obscured – oppressed – histories that can be navigated without reaching a finalized reading. Or that can be read differently each time the text is read, albeit always in the sense of recognisance of the oppressed (the notion of oppression). As Buck-Morss, keynote speaker and expert on Benjamin says in her preface to her study of the*Arcades Project*:

> It is a picture book of philosophy, explicating the dialectics of seeing developed by Walter Benjamin, who took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth. It draws its authority from a book that was never written, the Passagen-Werk [*Arcades project*], the unfinished, major project of Benjamin's mature years. Instead of a 'work,' he left us only a massive collection of notes on nineteenth-century industrial culture as it took form in Paris – and formed that city in turn. These notes consist of citations from a vast array of historical sources, which Benjamin filed with the barest minimum of commentary, and only the most general indications of how the fragments were eventually to have been arranged.[11]

In her keynote presentation Buck-Morss explains how she uses the same circumscribing approach as Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in how she writes about art and envisions her role as critic. Together with Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, she produced a booklet that accompanies Jacir's contribution to Documenta 13 for which she was invited.[12] It consists of photos by Jacir captioned by Buck-Morss, with further notes, both of essayistic and poetic-literary nature, in an effort to establish the critic's relation to artists as interpreter, a non-authoritative or finite reading of the work and / or artist. This intricate mode of communication works on the intimate level of direct contact, but how does this translate into the institutional level of art production?

Peter Osborne argues that current cultural production – in the form of contemporary art – is post-Conceptual, [13] a system in which all criteria of production, evaluation and quality are based on concept. The term post-Conceptual here does not mean beyond Conceptualism that was established in the 1960s and 1970s, but a mode of interaction and exchange we still inhabit and that is based on the characteristics and premises of information-exchange as a conceptual form of exchange. Further he denotes cultural production as 'an uneasy amalgam of art, economics and politics.' This constellation of production entails an interaction between artists, curators, institutes and theory from which the 'artistic object' emerges. Today's model of cultural production could be described as a constellation of authorships where it becomes virtually impossible to attach to the 'original' anymore, or locate its origins.

Within this cycle are constant instances of translation and exchanges of information. Issues of responsibility and accountability arise within the bigger theme of accountability that our technocratic societies are built on: return on investment, audience participation, the primacy of visibility and entrepreneurship. And all these understood as the primal markers of capitalist production. This circulation inevitably leads to a loss of sovereignty. It

is hard to overstate the role of language and theory in this cycle of production, acting as the channel of communication. Though one must distinguish theory proper from discursive and applied derivatives with their different frames of accountability (academic, non-academic), theory is unmistakable the Lingua Franca of cultural production, and medium of exchange. It is the medium of technique of contemporary cultural production. And notably the medium par excellence in *platform-ed* cultural production.

This sits uneasily with the Benjaminian distinction between information and the original and the necessity of proper translation. Benjamin in 'On the Task of the Translator' departed from the notion of the existence of the 'original,' an original and self-sufficient event, though already containing the possibility of its translation, but which would require its own 'form' to do justice to the translation and without degrading into mere communication. [14] The possibility of an original event now under capitalism and the regime of the post-Conceptual condition, seems emptied out. The task of the translator, whomever that may be, would be to discern and navigate the phantasmagoria between positions, and even propose again an 'original' quality within and emerging from this artistic constellation. The performing translator would also need to know how to translate the 'original' through the assembled form of its mediation with the right technique.

The 'Benjamin in Palestine' conference, as an assembly of these positions, illustrated and showcased our current condition of production, and sought to critically address it. Besides making the obvious and necessary move and political gesture of going to a place where the conversation would be relevant, it also carried out research into the politics of translation. The diversity of geographies, fields and expertise and subsequent diversification of discourses, required dedicated time for thorough exchange, reading and discussion. This was expertly addressed by organizer and Benjamin scholar Sami Khatib, who forced participants into a slow reading of a selection of Benjamin's texts that served as a reflective agent to exchange. Notably again 'On the Task of The Translator' served this purpose. In lengthy discussions bound by the prism of translatability and the commitment to the oppressed, issues of differences and legibility were negotiated, highlighting the way in which issues of power were examined: how to avoid communication as hierarchic transference of information, but instead to keep the channels open to 'real' emergent exchange. [15] The conference provided for a different means of resistance. The time that was invested, countered the regular mode of production, and halted the notion of progress as being the critic's remaining claim to agency.

Communication might have become a quality of discourse, information, the *derivative* of origin, and a sign of the loss of the image as provider of auratic experience. But it can also be used in the framework of the dialectical image. Since it is the material of institutional power relations, it can be treated as the focal point of dialectical scrutiny. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the decline of aura, [16] as part of the natural system of the artistic object; that is, loss of aura also proves the aura's existence (as *supposition*).

Here Liam Gillick paraphrasing Maurizio Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labour springs to mind: 'The discursive is a negotiation and demonstration of Immaterial Labour for other ends,' and 'The discursive makes use of theories of Immaterial Labour in order to escape simplistic understandings of production within a cultural context.' [17] The 'other ends' resonate with Khatib's assessment of Benjamin's conception of means and ends: the different projections of ends and means in the constellation of production, in the exchange between its positions, need to be pulled away from their intentions, their projections of ends, in order to become mutually understood. [18] This requires from the participant in the cycle of communication and of the translator as moderator: investment, dedication and stubbornness. Plus a sense of the auratic appearances and disappearances in the different scales of production, in which different modes of production appear.

'Benjamin in Palestine' as a platform takes a stance of resistance, almost despite its academic content, in being an embodied committed presence as a form of action. It is the performance of poe sis, and from this gains its political agency. Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, it cannot be closed theoretically, it needs to be done, to be traversed actively. Yet it leaves unanswered the question of how it as platform on the bigger scale of production, performed this function. The conference as intervention is something in which one cannot be sure as to who is touched by it or where its potential is archived. This may be the task at hand: how to develop its archive.

As I walked home through Ramallah's city centre, I heard of other conference attendees who couldn't reach their places due to Israel Defense Forces incursions into Ramallah and subsequent violent confrontations. What until then had been an intense week of critical academic thinking and exchange, was suddenly punctured by something of a different 'real' that imposed itself. This awareness presented itself as a dialectical image.

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Footnotes

1. The conference's organizing partners were the International Academy of Art Palestine, Birzeit University, Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center and the Goethe-Institut Pala stinensische Gebiete.
2. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer,' *New Left Review* 1, no. 62 (July–August 1970).
3. This was the 'Spaces, Places, Cities, and Spatiality' conference, organized by International Walter Benjamin Society Conference: Eli Friedla nder, Yoav Rinon, Ilit Ferber, Vivian Liska, 13–16 December 2015, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.
4. See prolapsarian.tumblr.com.
5. Quote from 'All the World's a Platform': 'The background to the discussion was an intervention regarding contemporary artistic production made by von Falkenhausen in the latest issue of *Frieze*: "Too Much Too Fast. The work of art in the age of digital circulation: a lament." In her essay, Von Falkenhausen takes issue with the current trend for Post-Internet works, claiming that they ultimately fail to address history in the way that artworks ought to: that through their integration into contemporary ideological forms, they renounce the critical power of distance once implied in the notion of artistic autonomy. As such, this discussion offered at least a possibility of critical reflection, for the subject of critique was the relation to history of the works and "projects" of the scene who had arrived to listen.'
6. This is the central question at hand in the discussion on accelerationism that is being conducted at the moment: Can the capitalist means of production be freed from exploitation by accessing its qualities beyond central control?
7. Quote from 'All the World's a Platform' in which Rosenberg adheres to the criticality of the topic discussed but questions the form in which it is structured: 'But away from the seriousness, there is also a sense in which theoretical discussion of the arts are staged as a form of entertainment appropriate to the type of intelligentsia of which this scene considers itself to be composed. This gives the discussions themselves a tinge of comedy: as the roundtable started with what felt like an extended job interview of the DIS editors, it seemed this would employ the model made popular by *The Apprentice*: a comedy of hubris drawing on the overconfidence of entrepreneurs, who become the fall guys as they flailingly attempt to undertake everyday work.'
8. 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.' Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.
9. '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.' Ibid., 255.
10. The lack of a strict theoretical framework was critiqued by Adorno, but embraced by the arts, indicating the tension between the accountability of science proper that forms its own authoritative episteme, and the humanities.
11. Susan Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), IX.
12. See Emily Jacir and Susan Buck-Morss, *N°004*, in the '100 notes – 100 thoughts series' for Documenta 13 (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).
13. 'This is a logic that is itself contradictory: divided between the presentation of the collective exhibition-value of the works and their putative use-values as models within a speculative program of social construction. Such programs are uneasy amalgams of art, economics and politics. But then, what is "culture" but such an amalgam?' Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), 161–162.
14. 'And is this not something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet? Such, actually, is the cause of another characteristic of inferior translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content. Whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader, it demonstrates this.

However, if it were intended for the reader, the same would have to apply to the original. If the original does not exist for the reader's sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise? Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1972), 254.

15. The performances by Slavoj Z iz ek, both in the workshop as in the conference, exemplary but also strangely, fit the overall theme. In a provocative style he emphasized and embodied the importance of translation as such. By not being a priori politically correct, one takes the one one addresses seriously. In several instances during the workshop this style of transgression led to debate. It was laudable to what great lengths Z iz ek went to explain the rationale behind this technique. In his argument it is of no use to anticipate the other, one has to express oneself head on, in order to fully honour the other's existence. Differences are there, and not to be negated, but solidarity amongst people is all that matters. In his case the role of theory and embodiment are performed in unison.

16. 'Let us say, to dialecticize, that the decline of the aura supposes – implies, slips underneath, enfolds in its fashion – the aura as an originary phenomenon of the image. It is, to be faithful to Benjamin in the productive instability of his exploratory vocabulary, an "uncompleted" and "always open" phenomenon. The aura and its decline are thus part of the same system (and have undoubtedly always been so in every age of the aura's history: we need only read Pliny the Elder, who was already complaining about the decline of the aura in the age of reproducibility of antique busts). But the aura persists, resists its decline precisely as supposition.' See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity, Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005).

17. Sven Lu tticken, '(Stop) Making Sense,' in*Meaning Liam Gillic*k, ed. Monika Szewczyk et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

18. From a Kantian perspective, Benjamin's concept of pure means or means without end might be read as an inversion of the ethical end-in-itself. Ends-in-itself and pure means (means-in-itself, so to speak) are not the same. Shifting the perspective from ends to means and cutting off the reference to a final goal, *Endzweck*, Benjamin emancipates the medial sphere of means from its secondary, supportive role without giving up on the concept of mediation.

Tags

Critical Theory