

BENJAMIN'S MOMENT

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Man könnte sagen, daß unsern tiefsten Augenblicken gleich jenen Päckchenzigaretten – ein kleines Bildchen, ein Photo unsrer selbst – ist mitgegeben worden. Und jenes “ganze Leben” das, wie wir oft hören, an Sterbenden oder an Menchen, die in der Gefahr zu sterben schweben, vorüberzieht, setzt sich genau aus diesen kleinen Bildchen zusammen. (Walter Benjamin, *Aus einer kleinen Rede über Proust*, GS II. 3: 1064).

In this essay, I focus on the Benjaminian moment. The moment is understood firstly as a *temporal instance* that has become a meaningful issue in several of Benjamin's essays on literature, history, film and photography. Secondly, I thematise the more extensive *Benjaminian moment*, which occupies a central position in 20th Century thought. For instance, Michael Löwy notes that Benjamin's *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen* is the most significant and revolutionary document since Marx's *Thesen über Feuerbach* (Löwy 2001: 4-5). One core argument in Benjamin's *Thesen* is the importance of emphasising revolutionary action as a rupture, a form of action with the potential to intervene in any unquestioned continuum of thinking, action, or political, historical or aesthetic understanding. His aim is to highlight the relevance of various forms of present experiences, for example in understanding revolutionary action as marking the desire to pull 'the emergency break' as opposed to remaining a complacent passenger in the train 'of history' (cf. Benjamin GS 1.3: 1232). It is this revolu-

tionary character of the Benjaminian moment that remains relevant to this day and highlights the significance of Benjamin among theorists on time and history.

My purpose here is to discuss the potential re-conceptualisation of time from the Benjaminian perspective. This will relate to further questions, such as the examination of the ways in which the awareness of discontinuous or interruptive forms of temporality might reflect the challenges that we confront in contemporary debates – such as surrounding political and feminist theory, critical or literary theory, just to name a few. The fact that Benjamin's thinking is rooted in the cross-roads of disciplinary borders causes us to encounter a number of fruitful challenges and contradictions with regard to how his work should be understood.

To make my approach more accurate, I shall explore the backgrounds of two concepts that characterise the moment in Benjamin's work: *redemption* (*Erlösung*) and *kairos*. I approach these concepts by discussing the ways in which they reflect various intellectual heritages, such as Christian theology, the Western history of philosophy and Jewish Mysticism. The concept of 'redemption' appears quite extensively throughout Benjamin's work. Although he does not explicitly use the concept of *kairos*, I claim that the *idea of kairos* appears within both his discussion on temporality and his search for new forms of action or novel angles of thought in relation to political or aesthetic experiences. For instance, the idea of *kairos* is present in his concept of dialectics in standstill (*Dialektik im Standstill*), which emerges from his idea of reversed dialectics.¹ From the dialectical standstill emerges a possibility, which is a sudden recognition of the moment of action in the time of the present (*Jetztzeit*).

Benjamin detaches himself from German Idealism and, as such, from understanding time and temporality as a quantitative or universal conception. Instead, Benjamin highlights the possibility of deciphering singular moments as the 'seeds of the present'. He is referring here to the Leibnizian monads, in which the core of the connectedness between time and its experience originates.² Furthermore, he sees the time of the present and its experience as temporarily 'frozen' in moments, which thus brings us to the need to also carefully study his conception of experience. The experiential split expressed by Benjamin is related to the scattering of a homogeneous idea of space and time, which is constituted especially during the Enlightenment and in German historicism.³ The moments and the experience

of them might be materialised in political and individual expressions, such as works of art, historical texts, architecture, fashion, film or political manifestos.

What makes following Benjamin's argumentation quite difficult is that the writing and understanding of history are consciously intertwined in a reflecting relationship. A careful reading of the 17th *These* will reveal an important methodological point of departure, not only for the *Thesen*, but also for Benjamin's other work (GS 1.3: 1226-27). This is also emphasised in Benjamin's own style of writing: both the events and his commentaries on them are presented as open and infinite documents of time that remain open for reading at later points in time. The possibility of 'redemption' (as much as critique) is thus hidden in the tasks of reading and interpreting the events. Benjamin outlines single events as 'crystallisations' of times, which lack any constructed causality and, as such, can be actualised in any future moments.

Approaches to Benjamin

The approaches to Benjamin's work have undergone major changes since first beginning to appear. The first editors of Benjamin's work, Theodor W. Adorno, Gerschom Scholem and Rolf Tiedemann, had a long-lasting impact on its reception.⁴ One of the issues discussed was Benjamin's position between Marxism and Messianism, which led to disputes among the Frankfurt School as to whether or not Benjamin understood Marxist thought 'correctly'. Here, I mainly agree with Rolf Tiedemann, who wrote in his introduction to *Das Passage-Werk* that it is not at all difficult to identify Benjamin's misunderstandings of Marxism, although doing so does not lead very far (Tiedemann 1983: 28).

The discussion of Benjamin as a literary theorist began to emerge in the 1980's. It was led by theorists such as Michael Jennings (1987) and was also inspired by Paul de Man (1986). On the one hand, Benjamin was discussed within the framework of modern/post-modern thought as following the 'Marxist legacy' of interpretations, while his theory of language, to which, for instance, Jacques Derrida's interpretation (1991) was connected, was highlighted on the other. The wider acknowledgement of Benjamin's interdisciplinary nature emerged in the 1990's, when his work began to become the subject of several cultural and philosophical debates. Thus, the Benjaminian moment is

far from a fleeting memory. His thinking can be approached from a number of different – and sometimes paradoxical – contexts, such as the interpretation of his theory of the work of art from the context of the electronic, cybernetic or post-photographic era. I see some aspects of the contemporary and interdisciplinary discussion as represented quite interestingly in the volume edited by Gumbrecht and Marinan: *Mapping Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (2003).

The ongoing commentary on Benjamin's thought makes it obvious that the critical reading of "Benjamin" is far from complete. This idea is partly in keeping with his own temporal 'logic': by rearranging the moments in history, Benjamin himself observes the past through a temporal turn. He suggests that the reconstruction of traditions begins from the present time. From my viewpoint this actually offers perspectives both to read Benjamin's work in any era and to critically approach contemporaneous questions through the Benjaminian perspective. Instead of holding on to the understanding of historical 'truth' as something stable, Benjamin introduces *moments* of thought, vision and understanding, which acknowledge the temporality of truth, its momentary appearances and re-interpretations. This temporal situation in-between Then and Now is roughly where I place my own view on Benjamin. By acknowledging the traditions of thought and Benjamin's own position I raise the question of the content and meaning of the moment that is the connecting link between different temporalities and intellectual traditions. It is especially Benjamin's thought on history that represents the art of Janus-face, which derives from partly contradicting philosophical and theological traditions.⁵ This imports a dualistic view of both the past and the present.

Redemption of the Moment

Gerschom Scholem, a Jewish historian and lifelong friend of Benjamin, concentrates in his work on themes ranging from Jewish mysticism to the ways in which the Christian and Jewish ideas of Messianism are significantly different from each other. Scholem examines the Messianic idea particularly in the context of Rabbian Judaism, which he sees as being in a polemical conflict with Christian Messianism. According to Scholem, Rabbian Judaism includes three different principles of interpretation, which are conservative, restorative and utopian principles (Scholem 1963: 9-45). If we were to follow Scholem's

distinction, Benjamin's Judaism seems to come close to the restorative aspect, which aims at the re-presentation (*Wiederherstellung*) of the past in the present. Conversely, for example, Ernst Bloch's standpoint is that of utopian Messianism. The utopianism emphasises the totally new, which has elements of the old, but is not conceived of as the actual past. Moreover, they are dreamlike elements.⁶

An important feature of Jewish Messianism is that it refers to the possibility of redemption as occurring *openly* on the 'stage of history', whereas the Christian version of redemption is thought to happen in the *sphere of the invisible*, in the unique soul of a person. This transfer from the outer toward the inner sphere of redemption in Christendom was primarily expressed in Augustine's work, especially in *De civitate Dei* (Scholem 1963: 7-8). The Jewish Messiah-figure is also bound with the moment of action and critique, as the interference of the Messiah in history has the potential to cause a disruption in the previous concept of history. In highlighting historical action, the Jewish idea does not merely search for inwardly directed reformation, nor does it transfer the 'redemption' to the end point of the progressively understood course of time, which is important difference to the traditional Christendom (cf. Scholem 1963: 24-55).

A further distinctive element is that the 'redemption' in Jewish Messianism is not conceived of as following a logical historical sequence or as being a consequence of history. Moreover, the relationship between history and redemption lacks the aspect of mediation. The idea of the progressive course of history was not originally present in the Jewish concept of history, and, in fact, the idea of history as progressing toward its salvation is a reconstruction made through the Western interpretation of Messianism since the Enlightenment (Scholem 1963: 24-25). What Scholem brings forth here serves as an important background for Benjamin's critique of the concept of history. Namely, if the Jewish idea of an apocalypse does not recognise history as being a progression moving toward redemption, it renders the procedure of linear time impossible. Therefore, if the specifically Jewish element of redemption is transferred to history, it means that there will inevitably be a *disruption in history*. This rules out conceptualising history in terms of progress and decline. As this disruption is structurally essential to the concept of 'Jewish' redemption, it scatters the autonomy of the Christian or rational concept of history, and the messianic framework introduces motives for understanding history through something other than its linear sequence.

Benjamin repeats his reference to the disruption of history in many of his writings.⁷ This interest in temporal ruptures might also explain why the concept of redemption has such an important position in his philosophy of history. Although Benjamin's use of the concept of redemption appears as problematic due to its theological content, the temporal problematic itself is not only theologically, but also philosophically and politically interesting. Through a philosophical perspective, 'redemption' refers to the temporalization of history through *caesura* in the previous course of history. As a critical concept, 'redemption' brings forth elements that have been excluded from continuous idea of history, especially in the Christian and the Enlightenment ideas of historical progress. It is also noted that in the rupture, time stands momentarily still. For Benjamin, this is repeated in his conception of 'dialectics in standstill', in which the course of history is seen as not only temporarily interrupted, but the rupture is embedded in the conception of dialectics itself. I will return to this concept later in this essay.

Benjamin's combination of the 'philosophy' of history with various lines of Jewish thinking and Western philosophy aims at a *revision of political and historical temporality*, which I would note as a significant turn in the 20th Century thought of history and temporality. Benjamin intends to revise his contemporaneous historical materialism, as he outlines in the *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*. Namely, in Benjamin's conception of materialism, the concept of 'history' would have been redefined and distinguished from the idea of Hegelian-Marxist 'history', and he would have allowed more room for a Marxist interpretation than he saw as having been common in his own historical context.⁸ Shortly, one might claim that he intended to politicize Marxism in making a difference between the Hegelian world history and the emphasis of the revolutionary moment as exploding the unquestioned continuities of thinking or action.

As Benjamin criticises the conception of history that emerged from the 19th century German idealism, he notes that this conception includes "homogenous and empty idea of time" (1940: XIII, XIV). Here, linearity is an echo of the *chronos*, which has to break into temporal fragments in modernity. In the discussion of *kairos* below, I will return to the problems of the *chronos*-time. The new (Benjaminian) concept of history would construct a connection between linearity and fragments, between individual writing and the understanding history, and also between the ideas of politics and action.

The Right Moment

What, then, happens during the moment of 'redemption' that is sought in the caesura of historical linearity? I would say that as Benjamin repeatedly stresses the uniqueness of the moment, he searches for the possibility to reach the *right moment* for thinking or for action as well. For instance, in his *Fifth Thesis of History*, Benjamin refers to the image of the past as an irretrievable object. The historical image contains something essential in approaching the truth of the past, but the puzzle is not simple; how can one grasp the 'true' image of time that appears only as 'flashing and actual' (Benjamin 1940: V)? Here, the understanding of the *unique character* of the temporal image is connected to the singularity of its 'truth' character. The image of the past is immediately recognisable with the flash of a memory, or, for instance, when notions of similarity between the past and the present appear as acknowledgeable to the subject. Thus, the potential to reach 'true' historical images is only possible in certain terms, since their readability is tied to the specific time in which the images are possible to decipher (1983: 577-8; 1940: XIV).

Benjamin refers to Focillon's definition of the 'classic style' in his consideration of the messianic *Stillstellung* (standstill of time). Following Focillon, he characterised the *Stillstellung* as reminiscent of *sudden good luck*, which actualises the moment of *kairos* in the standstill of temporal movement. The miraculous side of the moment in question is implanted in the 'hesitating immobility'.⁹ Here, Benjamin also compares the ideas of messianic time and Marx's classless society. He concludes this comparison with the short notation that the classless society is not conceived of as the goal of historical progress, but is rather the *interruption of that history*. Here, we can again notice the presence of the messianic conception of redemption in connection to the politics of history. The interruption includes the moment of 'hesitating immobility', and, thus, at this moment there is nothing pre-determined to characterise the nature of 'classless society'.

Benjamin leads us on a search for a conceptualization of time that is alternative to chronology or to linear understanding of the course of history. We do not have to look far from the ancient myth of *chronos* in order to find the *kairos*, the temporal figure that emphasises the opportunity and possibilities opened up in the present time. Thus, we need to look more carefully at the idea of *kairos* at this point. The idea of *kairos* characterises the right time of action, which is described as 'playful', 'unattainable' and 'quickly disappearing'. In fact, the

kairos appears to be quite similar to the Jewish idea of *redemption* discussed above; as sudden and unexpected, as arriving when one least anticipates its arrival, or at a time when the subject has already lost all hope (cf. Scholem 1963: 27). Consequently, this specific moment that is almost within our reach can disappear as quickly as it appears; the discernment of a moment might easily turn into a series of misrecognitions.

I would firstly like to highlight the broader context of Benjamin's attachment to *kairos* and briefly examine the ideas of Paul Tillich, who was a leader of the Christian religious socialists circle, the so-called *Kairos-Kreis*. Benjamin followed Tillich's influence in Germany during the 1920's and also had personal contact with him in the later 1930's.¹⁰ I claim that the combination of the aforementioned conception of Jewish 'redemption' and (intriguingly) the Christian *kairos* are indeed core critical elements in Benjamin's thought that led him to search for new conceptions of time. I claim that there are 'kairological' elements that are apparent in Benjamin's different temporal conceptions, such as dialectics in standstill or now-time (*Jetztzeit*).

Paul Tillich criticises the time concepts in the Old Testament, and he contrasts the ideas of the *kairos* and the *chronos*. As in Benjamin's *Thesen*, also in Tillich's work, the *chronos* is described as a 'homogeneous and empty' form of time.¹¹ Tillich approaches the Christian conception of time by directly focusing on its ignorance of the *kairos* (Tillich 1961: 48). This is characterised through the interplay between the temporal figures, in which the *chronos* signifies the idea of eternal truth and asceticism and the *kairos* represents its opposite, i.e. human temporality and its transformability. For Tillich, the specific 'emptiness' of the theological (eternal) *chronos*-time is crystallised through the attempt to reject the idea of destiny. One reason for the elimination of destiny from Christian theology seems to be embedded in its sudden and 'kairologic' form of appearance, which is interpreted as *demonic*, for example, in Greek tragedy, religion and mysteries. This undoubtedly contingent character of destiny leads to the attempt to control temporal contingency, for instance by eliminating the idea of destiny as an active form of temporality. Pace Tillich, this gradually leads to 'asceticism', in which time is abstracted from individual experience, fears or desires. In other words, Christian asceticism did not only signify a turn toward spirituality and *logos*, but it also turned away from contingency and human temporality, destiny and *Eros* (Tillich 1961: 48).

For Tillich, this elimination implies the moment toward 'Western rationalization'. As a consequence, kairologic possibilities, as well as the uncontrollable and unintentional character of individual existence and action, become excluded from the Christian idea of time. As only God can overcome the demonic, the problem of destiny becomes transferred from the human to the eternal idea of time. This is a topic that was repeated for instance in the Enlightenment critique of the *baroque irratio*, in which *ratio* is thought of as overcoming the demonic aspects of humanity (Tillich 1961: 25-8).

The attempt to redefine the temporal experience by including the (once already eliminated) contingent moments of time and destiny is a matter of having to accept more profane conceptions, such as *Eros* and *kairos*, as an important aspect of human temporality. Tillich argues that the *kairos* is also signified through the *logos*, not only excluded by it. It is the recognition of destiny that creates the rupture in *chronos*-time, since the conceptualization of time only becomes possible through the creation of a 'space' in which individual temporal knowledge is made possible. However, the discussion of the *logos* and the moment of the *kairos* is problematic. For Tillich, there is only one possible condition for the existence of the *kairos* in asceticism, and that is the acknowledgement of the subject as timeless. In this sense, the subject should be thought of as lacking the qualitative attributes of time, which results in its signification as an *akairos*.

Tillich suggests that the idea of Christian asceticism should not reject, but instead embrace the question of how to deal with destiny and creativity. Pace Tillich, the *logos* is present and inherent in thinking itself, although the act of thinking also includes the secret condition of unconditional 'truth'. If 'truth' is thought of as only following the tradition of the Christian *chronos*, this 'truth' cannot be conceived of as an object of human thought. As a result, the position of the thinking individual becomes excluded from the eternal *chronos*. Instead, Tillich's conception of the *kairos* that is being signified through the *logos* opens up a space in which human destiny intervenes in *chronos*-time and in which the possibility of reaching the core experience of temporality becomes possible.

Benjamin's way of introducing the problems of truth and knowledge differs somewhat from Tillich's. However, he also ends up in the space in which the singular intervenes with chronological temporality. When reading Benjamin's work, one will notice the way in which truth is also clearly linked to representation, as well as how individual temporal experience serves as the link between the different layers

of past, present and future. This can be detected, for instance, in his method of writing the Thesen as well as other text-fragments, such as *Einbahnstraße* (1928) or *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (1933); not only in terms of their content but also in terms of his aim of 'showing' events through their fragmentary representation (*Darstellung*). Benjamin notes that the idea of the truth is being expressed in language, which originates in his reflection on Kant. Through this, Benjamin tended to distinguish the concept of experience from that of the mathematico-mechanical, as is evident in his 1918 essay.¹² As Benjamin criticises the temporal relation between Kantian knowledge and experience, he notes that in Kant's thought, knowledge is characterised as a timeless and 'experience' is represented as temporally passing. Instead of locating experience and knowledge generally to the realm of time, Benjamin formulates an idea of knowledge that is characterised by *temporal singularity* (cf. Benjamin 1918: 148). His goal is to find a connection between knowledge/insight and experience, which would reconcile the Kantian distinction between them.

Benjamin attempts to solve this problem with his idea of philosophical presentation (*Darstellung*), which is comprised of a combination of rational and intuitional elements. For Benjamin, as the philosophical method of presenting the truth is the *Darstellung*. 'True' knowledge can only express itself in language, although there is no 'truth' beyond language, as it escapes attempts of occupation. In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin explicitly distinguishes the ideas of truth and knowledge from each other. Here, knowledge appears to have the possibility of being possessed – and as such, it is always temporal (Benjamin 1925: 209). The task Benjamin assigns to the coming philosophy includes the representation of truth (*Darstellung der Wahrheit*), in which truth is not temporally permanent, but rather appears as a *medium* of reflection.

Benjamin makes several suggestions with regard to the reconceptualisation of the forms of historical temporality and the ways in which one might recognise the right moment. However, here, 'right' is not to be understood the opposite of 'wrong'. Rather, I see it as the *possibility* to reach the truth, or the space of historical/philosophical, aesthetic or political experience. For instance, Benjamin writes that the historical index of images does not only mean that they belong to a certain time. It means that they also become readable/recognisable at a certain time, which is not necessarily the time of their occurrence (Benjamin 1983: 577-78; also 1940: II, XIV). Historical time can be understood as consisting of several temporal indexes, which confront

and overlap one another. Various arrangements of these indexes create temporal refigurations between the dimensions of the past, present and future. As the dimensions are not necessarily causally related, the path from the past toward the present is not only approached chronologically, but can be experienced, for example, intermittently or sequentially.

Political time

The 'present moment', which gains its meaning and content from the rupture in history, has clear political implications. In his own historical context, Benjamin understood the continuation of history as implying catastrophe (cf. 1940: VIII). Hence, the redefinition of the concept of history was understood as a form of political action that would actualise the philosophy of history with the political catastrophes of his time. Thus, the rupture in historical continuity had the potential to unmask the *moment* of 'danger', which was included in the idea of the historical process that included the ideal of continuity and progress (Benjamin 1983: 586-7; GS 1.3: 1242). Especially in Benjamin's critique of fascist aesthetics, the 'danger' of identifying oneself with fascist values is illustrated through the terms 'cult' and the 'false' construction of historical continuity. In Benjamin's *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*, the cultic element of war is expressed by the idea of 'eternal' war (1930: 241), which is a description of the ways in which the Nazis merged the *political notion* of continuity with the *theological notion* of eternity.

For Benjamin, the process of actualisation (*Aktualität*) refers to a concept of history that cannot be seen as a closed entity, but rather as a discontinuous series of events. The actualisation also refers back to the past as much as to the present, as it facilitates the remaking of history in the present, for instance in ways which attempt to recognise the politically and historically 'lost', the absent. In the contemporary context, this is quite closely related to the discussion on historical memory, the problem of the Holocaust and the question of the possibility of historical experience and the meaning of historical documentary and testimony 'after the Holocaust'.

For instance, Chryssoula Kambas (1986, 88-90) argues that the Benjaminian conception of actualisation is more than a temporal location in the *Jetztzeit*. The actuality defines temporal space, simultane-

ously 'subordinating' it to revolutionary praxis, as the historical actuality did present itself as parallel to political actuality in the events of 1939-1940. Benjamin's concept of actuality might be seen in the larger political context as a principle of reading history and inspiring its reconceptualisation. The 'reading' could be seen as the actualisation of present events in a way that connects them to political theory and praxis. In the draft of the *Thesen*, Benjamin notes that the conception of revolutionary chance is inherently present in any given moment. This chance is defined as a new solution: *einer ganz neuen Lösung im Angesicht einer ganz neuen Aufgabe* (GS I.3: 1231). This new solution is not to be found in the past but in the present. The time is opened up through 'hesitating immobility' thus once again brings us close to the moment of *kairos*.

The 'kairologic' idea is also included in the attitude that Benjamin refers to as 'temporal awareness' or 'mental presence' (*Geistesgegenwart*). (See Benjamin 1983: 594-5; GS I: 1235-7 or GS 1.3:1243-4.) This existential condition becomes explicit only in the draft version of the *Thesen* (GS 1.3: 1243-4).¹³ The idea points to the need to intuitively 'prophesise' (diagnostisize) the present – although not through the past, but from the perspective of the present itself. This temporal interplay brings the *kairos*-moment closer to individual reach, and it shifts from an historical-theological concept of history toward a political setting by stressing the moment of action. In Benjamin's way of seeing the chronological idea of history as collapsing as a result of its non-linearity, history becomes politicised through its actualisation in the present (benjamin 1983, 490-1). The present moment becomes important, as it pierces through history and is the 'place' in which the historical subject actualises his or her temporal experience and knowledge. In this place, Benjamin understands the moment of 'redemption' as occurring spontaneously, which stresses the importance of being conscious of the present. Simultaneously, it shifts from historical-religious thought toward a political setting that is the aforementioned actualisation. This could also be referred to as a moment of politicisation, as it offers the 'historical materialist' the (theoretically constructed) possibility to become an agent in historical events.

The mental presence combines the aspects of the present time and the subject/actor and its historical position with a political and critical attitude toward history. Benjamin's 'political agent' is someone who is both mentally alert in and about the present and who should also be able to catch the 'images of time' in a diagnosing manner

(cf. 1940: V; GS I: 1244). Through the interruption of temporal stream, the agent finds the possibility for knowledge as part of the actual political action, as the *Geistesgegenwart* is defined in the Benjaminian attribute of a 'real' politician (see also 1983: 594-5).

Another way of describing the moment of politicization is the Benjaminian '*Copernican change*' in the idea of history. Here, his conception of the 'political' is clearly an intellectual attitude. Benjamin explicitly temporalizes politics by shifting the view toward *political time*, in which politics is a category of thinking that is primarily located in the present time as opposed to the historical understanding (1983: 490-91). Politics refers to manoeuvring between the temporal dynamic of movement and its standstill, and political action is directed as an attempt to liberate the understanding of the present moment from its universal interpretations or ideologies. His ideas raise the question of the qualitative understanding of time, in which an individual is seen as actively participating in the construction of history. Benjamin theoretically opens a space of action within the collisions of past and present experiences, which he refers to in his later work as 'now-time' (*Jetztzeit*). Through this, he reverses the 'historicist' scenario by highlighting the ways in which an individual actor may become a central figure on the historical scene, which thus affects the ideas of historical knowledge and praxis.

In addition, his concept of the 'dialectical image' describes the collision between the moments of Now and Then. As the now-time points out the moment of recognition, the dialectical image connects the aspects of temporal insight and knowledge to intellectual, and in this case especially visually constructed, experiences.¹⁴ Benjamin notes (1983: 1037-8) that the idea of time, which is said to 'freeze' in a dialectical image, is already included in the Hegelian dialectics. However, the Hegelian dialectic mainly acknowledges time as the historical *chronos*, and also partly as psychological, as mental time. Benjamin's emphasis of the singular moment includes the interruption, the non-synthetic moment within the temporal course, which opposes the Hegelian idea of a movement of history that is characterised in terms that are confined to synthesis in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. In the Hegelian terms, the historical phase is possible to examine 'after' closed synthetic interpretation. For Benjamin, such an interpretation would be impossible, since his dialectics concern more than reconciliation, as his concept of 'history' also includes the aspect of the unknown, for example, Non-Synthesis (*Nicht-Synthesis*, 1918: 166). I understand this notion as further creat-

ing an approach to 'kairological' temporality that unfolds the historical contingency and the sudden appearances of known and unknown historical elements in a way that also characterises the politics of historical interpretation.

Already in the first of his *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*, Benjamin illustrates how the theological concept of time, especially its Christian eschatological variation, is dressed in the cloaks of numerous philosophies. When the cloaks are removed, the one remaining on stage is the winner of the game: theology (cf. Konersmann 1991: 27-32). According to the *Thesen*, the true concept of history is that of historical materialism. Benjamin constructed his own concept of history not only as a critique of the German idealist concept, but also as a revision of the previous historical materialist one. However, Benjamin's conceptual game is so complex that his ambitious effort to establish a 'real' conception of history that would also 'surpass' the current materialist one remains hidden in the unfinished *Thesen*. Although this task was to be left unfinished, it is the singular temporal form of the Benjaminian Moment, constructed as a critique of the linear and universal history, which was to become most innovative in a political or philosophical sense. Within the context of Benjamin's 'historical materialism', the basic concept of history is not progress, but rather *actualization* (1983: 574), which again describes the shift from homogeneous time toward singular, punctual and, as I have already referred to it here, Benjamin's 'kairologic' redefinition of the temporal course.

Benjamin's Moment

Benjamin's 'theory', which is reminiscent of an architectural structure of various intellectual elements, creates an approach to impulsive and rhythmic temporality in which the moment stands directly in the 'spotlight'. Using his own terminology, the new concept of historical temporality includes a temporal and dialectical 'standstill' and the 'reversed' dialectics between the past and present. As Benjamin searches for a moment in which to combine individual experiences and moments in time into temporal knowledge, he creates the now-time (*Jetztzeit*), which conceptualises and combines the elements

of the non-linear and kairologic form of time I have outlined above. Viewed from the perspective of the cessation of events, the dialectics between the moments of Now and Then form the possibility for this specific experience of the *Jetztzeit*.

In this essay, I have distinguished several temporal conceptions in Benjamin's work, which could be arranged as follows:

Firstly, the past as an abstract concept (*die Vergangenheit*). Here, the past is understood as a general field of reference; one cannot know, memorise or understand 'all' of its components. It is this point of approach that distinguishes Benjamin's view of historical time from, for instance, Hegel's. I also noted that Benjamin produces an idea of the past as being constituted by temporal indexes, which are not identical to 'time'. The indexes function rather as means of 'measuring' various combinations/collisions between the past and the present. These indexes confront one another, through which their combinations form temporal differences and inspire various time-concepts.

Secondly, the idea that reveals the way in which time is turned into an object of the individual's present experience. Here, the past is seen as crystallised in singular objects. This appearance might be in the form of an aesthetic document, such as photograph, yet it can also refer to a textual quote, an object of art, a commodity, a flash of memory, etc. On the other hand, the specific culmination of historical time and the aforementioned indexes are marked by the concept of redemption. Importantly, 'redemption' also includes the combination of elements of time, which are derived for instance from theological, philosophical, aesthetic and political contexts.

Third, Benjamin presents the specific concepts which outline a temporal experience, such as the 'now-time' or 'dialectical image', in which the temporal insight occurs by combining the moments of the present (Now) and past (Then). Generally, the possibility to attain temporal knowledge includes the realisation of the moment of the *kairos*. In *Jetztzeit*, the recognising subject is also characterised as a temporal mode of being, as *Jetztzsein* (Benjamin 1983: 495). The now-being is a specific 'peak' of one's present existence, which has a connotation both as the temporal experience of an individual and as the historico-political conditions of this individual's experience.

Another aspect of this temporal peak is expressed by 'mental presence' (*Geistesgegenwart*), which describes the political condition of being aware of the quickly passing moments of *Kairos*. This mental awareness includes the chance to turn the ever-increasing temporal speed of modernity into action *before* the possibility disappears into

the unreachable past. In addition, *Geistesgegenwärtigkeit* includes the existential idea of being 'mentally present' in time. Here, the course of time allows for the emergence of a creative moment in which it is possible to build a bridge toward 'the new' time, which is much more than the mere repetition of the old. The passive act of waiting for the future, which Benjamin also describes through the phantasmagoric image of time, should be turned toward the 'liveliness' of a contemporary action (cf. Benjamin 1928: 115).

Fourth, the possible *standstill*, such as it is characterised in dialectics in standstill, turns a fraction of a second (*Bruchteil der Sekunde*) into one of the most meaningful moments in Benjamin's thought. This moment, in which 'nothing happens', is the seed of the present that is possible to open in the act of knowledge. For instance, in the photographic event, the moment is frozen and the action is taken when the photographer takes a snapshot. This freezes time into a momentary constellation of sight, and the temporality is materialised in the image. The changing perception and attitudes of the individual are visualised in any given split-second. This turns the fluent view of time into a political moment, unfolding qualitative aspects of time in which individual experience actively intervenes in the course of history.

The temporal perspective is significant when we consider suddenly occurring events that question modes of understanding history with the notion of time as just 'going on'. Nowadays, we experience almost daily confrontations with events ranging from terrorist attacks to environmental catastrophes, or are faced with having to de-construct the meta-globally proceeding structures of globalisation. Instead of confronting major European revolutions, we are constantly confronted by small re-valuations of actions and meanings of the political. To highlight the importance of temporal moments in opposition to the continuities of history, we must illuminate these unpredictable and novel characters of time that become part of the individual experience. Any singular moment acquires its fullest meaning when it becomes detached from the earlier linear interpretation of time, history or tradition, thus requiring a re-interpretation of events and their meaning in our lives.

NOTES

1. Cf. Benjamin 1940: 14, 15, or Benjamin 1983: 1037-8
2. Leibniz 1720/1975: *Monadology*: 9, 11; Benjamin 1940: XIV, XVII.
3. Benjamin outlines ruptures in the concept of experience in the modern era in *Erfahrung und Armut* (1933), *Der Erzähler* (1936) and *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1939). I have discussed Benjamin's concept of experience in greater detail in Lindroos, 2001.
4. For instance books by Fuld (1981) and Hering (1979) are written as a critique of the first editors.
5. On the variety of interpretations, see e.g. Konersmann 1991, who approaches the *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen* as an intellectual testament and reads them explicitly one by one. Balfour's 1991 reading of them is as an epistemological question. Makropoulos's 1989 reading of the text portrays it as outlining the contingency of modernity. For other works on Benjamin's idea of history and time, see also Gagnebin 1978, Osborne 1995, Weidmann 1992, or Eidam 1992.
6. See Bloch, 1985 or 1979 (see also Scholem's critique of Bloch's Marxist-Jewish mixture of thought, Scholem 1963: 13).
7. For instance, Benjamin's critique of the continuity of the legal system and its structural idea of power/violence is the focus of *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (1921); the critique of the homogenous concept of time and history is mainly outlined in *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen* (1940) and practised in writing *Das Passagen-Werk*; the critique of the 'empty' and transcendental concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) in philosophical traditions, such as Kantian and Neokantian thinking, is outlined in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (1918).
8. Cf. Benjamin's letter to Scholem 6.5.1934 (1978: 604-5).
9. Focillon: *Vie des formes*, Paris 1934: 18; after Benjamin, GS I.3: 1229.
10. See Konersmann 1991: 42-47; on Benjamin's remarks about his meeting with Tillich, see 1978: 591, 749. Adorno also noted how Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* is reminiscent of Tillich's idea of *Kairos*, especially in Benjamin's XIV Thesis (Adorno's letter to Horkheimer from 12.6.1941, GS VII: 774).
11. Cf. Benjamin 1940: XIII, XIV, *Anhang A, B*
12. *Die große Umbildung und Korrektur die an dem einseitig mathematisch-mechanisch orientierten Erkenntnisbegriff vorzunehmen ist, kann nur durch eine Beziehung der Erkenntnis auf die Sprache wie sie schon zu Kant's Lebzeiten Hamann versucht hat gewonnen werden. (...) Ein in der Reflexion auf das sprachliche Wesen der Erkenntnis gewonnener Begriff von ihr wird einen korrespondierenden Erfahrungsbegriff schaffen, der auch Gebiete deren wahrhafte systematische Einordnung Kant nicht gelungen ist umfassen wird* (Benjamin 1918: 168)
13. *Die Geistesgegenwart als politische Kategorie kommt auf großartige Weise in diesen Worten Turgots zu ihrem Recht: "Avant que nous ayons appris que les choses sont dans une situation déterminée, elles ont déjà changé plusieurs fois. Ainsi nous apercevons toujours les événements trop tard, et la politique a toujours besoin de prévoir, pour ainsi dire, le présent."* (Turgot, *Oeuvres* II, 1944: 673. Quoted after Benjamin 1983: 598).
14. Due to the heterogeneous nature of Benjamin's concept of image, it is not clear whether 'dialectical image' refers directly to a visual as opposed to a textual 'image', such as allegory. This is a problem that I have tackled elsewhere, particularly by interpreting *Passagen-Werk* fragments, in which the problem of the interpretation of the nature of Benjamin's images is represented (see Lindroos 1998: 191-5 and 201-3).

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