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Allegory, noise, and history: the *Arcades Project* looks back at the *Trauerspielbuch*

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ABSTRACT

In *Convolute N*, Benjamin claims that both the *Arcades Project* and the *Trauerspielbuch* reject a historiography based on the notion of periods of decline. Reflecting on the sonorous dimension of the dialectical image as presented in *Convolute N*, I suggest allegory as another link between the two works, which I explore in connection to sound and noise through an example from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* while remarking on the role of sound in Benjamin.

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Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress
Convolute J: Baudelaire

Benjamin has a keen ear for sound and noise – so keen that he complains of suffering from ‘noise psychosis’ (Scholem 2001, 137). Under the influence of hashish, the intensity of acoustic impressions – or shocks, as Jorge Ramos calls them – blots out all others to the point of carrying him beside himself (Benjamin 2003a, 678; Ramos 2010). In a fragment on Baudelaire, Benjamin refers to such experiences of intoxicated listening as ‘allegoric dismemberment’ (J78,3). When he wasn’t being interrupted by the din of elevators or shrill whistles from the street below, Benjamin let sound leak into his writing: voices, echoes, resonances, onomatopoeia – even music (Benjamin 2012, 592, 608).

From his autobiographical texts and radio works, through the book on baroque *Trauerspiel* to the *Arcades Project*, we hear a rumble in Benjamin’s work, audible to those who listen. This rumble is (in) the text itself: ‘In the field with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows’ (N1,1). As Mirko Hall suggests, Benjamin’s formulation of the dialectical image contains an overlooked aural dimension, a ‘dialectical sonority’ that ‘pierces, even deafens the ear’ (Hall 2010, 90). The importance of this sonic aspect grows if we recall Benjamin’s claim, against a historiography based on empty and homogeneous time, that for the historical materialist the present is what polarises the event into ‘fore- and after-history’: *Vor- und Nachgeschichte* (N7a8; Weber 2010, 138). If the dialectical image is the moment when what has been comes together in a suddenly emergent flash with the now (N2a,3), then after-history, *Nachgeschichte*, is echoed by the long thunder that follows,

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'langnachrollende Donner.' This sound endows the instantaneous image with duration, with an afterlife that differs from the text of conventional historiography. The instant redoubles in the reverberations of this *tempaurality*, a temporal aurality whose historical character contributes to the materialist critique of progress and historicism linking Convolute N and the *Trauerspielbuch* (N1,6; N1a,2).

But if the text of after-history is accompanied by thunder, its resonance is not without an 'immeasurable tension' that parallels the 'gulf' between writing and sound, as Benjamin states in the *Trauerspielbuch*, his most sustained reflection on sound (2009, 201). The tension between spoken and written language, and in general between sound and vision, is exploited in the baroque, where spoken language, intoxicating and mystical, is contrasted to the written word, which spells 'omnipotence over the objects of the world' (201). In the baroque, 'sound is and remains something purely sensuous; meaning has its home in the written language' (Benjamin 2009, 208). The question: if the thunder supplements the flash of the dialectical image endowing it with a tempaurality that challenges that of historicism, is this sound still, as in the seventeenth century, mere sensuousness opposed to the meaningfulness of the image and the written text? In other words, the dialectical image has an aural dimension, but what does this sound mean – if it *means* something at all?

At stake, then, is the changing epistemo-critical status of sound and vision; this status, for Benjamin, has a historical character not unlike that of allegory. Alongside the wellknown visual allegories (Dürer's stone, the death-head), Benjamin also comments that baroque techniques of anagrams, onomatopoeia and fragmented speech emancipate word, syllable, and sound from traditional meaning while exploiting them 'for allegorical purposes' (207). This should remind us that allegory is not exclusively visual. More generally, allegory is defined by arbitrariness: neither expression nor convention, but 'expression of convention,' since any person, thing, or relationship can mean 'absolutely anything else' (175). In the *Trauerspielbuch*, allegory has a historical character: unlike symbol – but like fashion – its materiality is subject to decay, it becomes dated, its shock-effect dulls with time. By the same token, allegory offers a privileged perspective on historicity itself, as a process of decay and ruin.

But what is a sonorous allegory, and what does it have to do with the meteorological metaphors of the Dialectical Image in Convolute N? We can procure an exemplary instance from Italian baroque opera, the very fore-history of the *Trauerspiel*: Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1609). In this work on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Monteverdi left us a pregnant, yet still unheard allegory. In Virgil's telling of the myth, a peal of thunder is heard three times ('terque fragor stagnis auditus Avernus') after the frenzied Orpheus breaks Pluto's law having turned to gaze at Eurydice (Virgil 2000, 4.493). In Monteverdi, it is the reverse. By an unexplained deviation from (and betrayal of) the myth, the thunder happens *before* Orpheus turns: it precedes – and precipitates – the flashing image, of Eurydice's loss. This reversal of the myth cannot be underestimated when considering the historical aspect of the thunder that supplements the dialectical image with a sonic dimension. Except that in Monteverdi it is not a thunder as such: the score only specifies that 'a noise (*strepito*) is made behind the stage' (Monteverdi 1609). It is a purely sensuous sound, an allegory that aims to denote – what? Not the fate it denoted in Virgil, that much is clear. Virgil's thunder attests to a mythical conception of meaning where sound is tied to fate, vision to transgression and loss; Monteverdi's meaningless, secularised sound, on the other hand, seems to have only a causal, mechanical effect – it makes Orpheus turn. If Virgil's thunders are the mythological symbol of *ananké*, the

sound of fate, Monteverdi's noise suggests its fallen counterpart – an allegory of *ananké* as modern, catastrophic necessity. This sound, then, turns myth into history.

The word 'catastrophe' evokes the image of Benjamin's dearest allegory of history and turning – the *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin 2003b, 392). At first glance, the ninth thesis 'On the Concept of History' is all about images, looking, and seeing: the storm that blows from Paradise, driving the Angel irresistibly into the future, is silent. This silence attests to the very conception of progress that is under critique in the Theses: progress as forward movement, guided by frontal vision. The Angel's face is turned towards the past; his back is turned towards the future. The Angel of History shares with Orpheus this catastrophic link between frontality, vision, and progress, and their turn evokes the 'thinking of the back' that David Wills dubs *dorsality*, a deviation that challenges the fantasy of forward progress (Wills 2008, 5). While Orpheus loses Eurydice at the moment he sees her, the Angel is unable to tear his gaze from the wreckage piling skyward as he is blown into the future. Yet the Angel knows that, however much he captures in his field of vision, 'what comes to him to change the present and produce the future will flash up *from out of* that field, beyond visibility, in the irretrievable past in front and the imperceptible future behind' (Wills 2008, 203).

If vision is thus linked to progress and knowledge, as in the Dialectical Image, then the Angel's hope might lie in the rolling thunder that follows, for sound always confounds directionality and exceeds frontality. This turn, caused by the irruption of sound into the notion of history, is key to overcoming the notion of progress of conventional historiography. Knowledge is still linked to the instantaneous image, but its development – the truly dialectical component – comes only with the thunder, with sound, which is therefore 'saved' from its fallen status in the seventeenth century, to use the language of the *Trauerspielbuch*. But even if the acoustic shock of these noises could free the dialectical image from its visualist cast, this displacement is nothing certain and is certainly not a return to mythical sound. The constellation formed by these allegories – the noise in *Orfeo* and the silent storm blowing from Paradise – operates on the gulf between the sonorous and the visible. We cannot *know* if the noise and the storm are one and the same sound, nor what causes them: between pure noise and silence, their rhythm pushes at the extremes of audibility. All we know, when we turn to look, is that the image that flashes in the moment of danger is preceded by thunder, by noise.

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