

THEMATIC SECTION:  
ART EXPRESSIONS  
AND CONTEMPORARY  
SUBJECTIVITIES

**Educação**  
& realidade

## **Children's Time: childhood, aesthetics and politics in Benjamin**

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**ABSTRACT – Children's Time: childhood, aesthetics and politics in Benjamin.** In his writings on modernity, technique and technical reproducibility, Benjamin proposes a theoretical view of reproducible art that dialogues with the demands of the new temporality. If the modes of artistic production are expanded by technological advances, resizing their field of action to more modern forms of expression such as radio, for example, there is here a new experimental relationship between the public and the work, in addition to a new intermediary function. The concern with the use of technique for totalitarian purposes, however, made the author formulate the demand for a politicization of art. This politicization is present in his radio work with children that is linked to the commitment to use the apparatus for enlightenment.

**Keywords: Technical Reproducibility. Politics. Radio. Childhood. Enlightenment.**

**RESUMO – A Hora das Crianças: infância, estética e política em Benjamin.** Em seus escritos sobre modernidade, técnica e reprodutibilidade técnica Benjamin propõe uma visada teórica sobre a arte reprodutível que dialoga com as exigências da nova temporalidade. Se os modos de produção artística são ampliados pelos avanços tecnológicos redimensionando o seu campo de atuação para formas de expressão mais modernas como o rádio, por exemplo; há aqui uma nova relação experimental entre o público e a obra, além de uma nova função intermediadora. A preocupação com o uso da técnica para fins totalitários, entretanto, fez o autor formular a exigência de uma politização da arte. Essa politização está presente em seu trabalho radiofônico com crianças que se articula ao compromisso do uso do aparato para o esclarecimento.

**Palavras-chave: Reprodutibilidade Técnica. Política. Rádio. Infância. Esclarecimento.**

## Introduction

When Walter Benjamin first entered the doors of a radio station, in the 1920s, he witnessed the threshold of a media whose technical and creative potentials were still unknown, but already demonstrated ample capacity for expansion. At the time, Germany's socio-historical context was one of crisis, the country faced the fruits inherited with the end of the First World War and the severe economic limits resulting from the imposition of the Versailles Treaty. The portraits of the Weimar Republic point to a weak economy, hostage to hyperinflation and full of debts arising from the war, in addition to the total deprivation, need, hunger and cold that the German population was going through (Bolle, 2000; Baudouin, 2009; Carone, 2014). From a cultural point of view, the scenario was no different. The same objective conditions that caused chaos on the material and economic level are incorporated here and, on the one hand, there is an effervescent and rich debate provoked by intellectuals and artistic vanguards in what concerns the social problems of the time; on the other hand, all its contradictions contributed to the emergence of Nazi-fascism towards the Third Reich and the Second World War (Bolle, 2000).

It was in this period marked by the First and Second Wars that we identified the growth, strengthening and social importance of radio, especially in times when Hitler used this means of communication to conquer Germany (Schafer, 1997). Considered in this light, the dissemination of information through the radio has resized not only the human voice, but also the totalitarian discourses that have given fascist ideology wide access to homes and commercial establishments through radio equipment. Through the use of radio, therefore, Hitler and Mussolini's speeches and ideologies became part of the daily lives of their contemporaries, as they were popularized by new technology (Baudouin, 2009).

In addition to the propagation of ideas and speeches, the technical innovations on the radio also allowed the introduction of resources, such as music, which contributed to the creation of very convincing cathartic effects in the retransmission. In these ways, when exploring the means of disseminating and reproducing information, fascism directly impacted the masses. Considering this whole panorama, Benjamin (1994b) criticizes the links established between aesthetics, technique and politics, when affirming the importance of technologies such as radio to representation, criticism, thinking and training. This means that reproducible art on a large scale has pedagogical elements that mediate not only our own relationship with technique, but also help in dealing with everyday experiences, with ways of understanding and experiencing reality, therefore exercising attitudes of criticism, reflection and, therefore, the formation of individuals.

If "[...] all efforts to aestheticize politics converge to a point [and] this point is the war" (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 195), Benjamin responds to the fascist use of technique with the politicization of art, that is, if Ger-

man fascism appropriated modern technologies to propagate its ideologies and exercise some dominance under the masses, its use could also contribute to other purposes than those. Benjamin's theoretical view on the political role of modern technology, which includes radio and radio broadcasting, aimed, according to Bolle (2000), to contribute to the formation of a type of audience whose interaction with the transmissible content was the most active possible. In proposing the use of radio, cinema or any other forms of communication as a necessary means for the interaction between the individual and the technique, for example, the philosopher escapes from the hypnotic and convincing aesthetic language oriented from the Nazi political ideology to draw attention to its educational, pedagogical and formative use.

More than that, just as photographic technique transformed the conditions of painting, or the invention of the press changed the diffusion and access to information; the transformation of the media brought about by the emergence of radio raised the demand to think about issues related to aesthetic production, as well as the role of literature and the writer in the proper scenario that comprises the historical, political and aesthetic experience of the time. In view of the above, in a context in which the radio allows a new field of creative possibilities, the problem presented here can be articulated to the criticism about the author's role, especially in what concerns the trends for which he writes, that is, the content and the form that its production contemplates and the unfolding that the writing provokes. Not by chance, already in the first lines of *The author as Producer* (Benjamin, 1994b), Benjamin clarifies that the historic and crucial moment lived in Hitler's Germany imposes on the writer the important task of choosing "[...] in favor of which cause he will place his activity" (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 120), that is, whether from the bourgeois cause or the proletarian cause. With this statement, the author points out two possible paths for the popularization of radio, namely, its use for the domain and for the restriction of human freedom produced through the aestheticization of politics; or its pedagogical use for the awareness of the masses.

That said, how does Benjamin's radio work fit into his work as a whole? What can we recover from this experience that shows us some ways to understand the meanings and density of your radio plays for children? To answer these questions, we will first think about the contextual aspects from which radio creations emerge, as well as important reflections made by Benjamin on the impact of mass media on people's daily lives. That done, we will go deeper into the issues related to the techniques and their reflexes in the relationship between producer/writer and receiver/listener and its impact on radio production. This whole discussion aims to show that writing for children demanded from Benjamin not only skill with words, but, above all, the reasoning of an aesthetic that articulated form and philosophical content aimed at a completely new audience for him: the child as an individual, citizen, consumer of goods and cultural goods and fruit of childhood created by the modern and bourgeois worldview.

## **Walter Benjamin and the Paths of Radio: creation, criticism and the daily bread**

The preliminary experiences also tend to be replaced by a flattening of the sensory and psychic surface that will erase the differences, once structuring human existence, between profane and sacred, life and death, public and private. The law of capital establishes a universal leveling which threatens to transform the most sublime experience into a new profitable commodity (Jeane Marie Gagnebin, 2014, p. 34).

In the context of the chaotic Republic of Weimar, and more specifically in 1925, Benjamin faced some difficulties and tried to finish his doctorate to start his professional life at the Academy and enjoy a certain professional and financial stability that would guarantee him, in a way, his own survival. The refusal of his thesis, however, had been materially catastrophic and led him to look for other paths in a scenario of economic and political instability. Writing, which as a means of support should have been temporary, has become a constant in his life. In correspondence sent to Gerson Scholen; on February 19, 1925<sup>1</sup>, Benjamin says he got a job to write a supplement for a radio station in Frankfurt. Despite the still shy beginning as a journalist writer, it was this experience that later referred him to a radio producer (Bolle, 2000; Baudouin, 2009; 2010).

The discreet entry into the universe of broadcasting allowed him to elaborate a set of reflections on the mass media, as well as to acquire a consistent experience about this technology (Bolle, 2000; Baudouin, 2010). According to Baudouin (2010), a French philosopher and broadcaster, Benjamin's first broadcast took place in 1927 and the most relevant route of his radio broadcasts took place between 1929 and 1933, having been completed on the occasion of Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany. If, on the one hand, the experience with radio did not correspond to the longed-for academic career, on the other hand, it constituted a challenge to the philosopher, mainly because it is an emerging field - with the potential for literary creation and for studies on the effects of modernity over the daily lives of the masses. Thus, Benjamin recognizes, in the work of radio, a privileged space for dealing with social transformations that would directly impact the perception and interaction of human beings with the world and that could be intermediated by new social communication technologies (Baudouin, 2009; 2010; Carone, 2014).

In the tangle of the same contingencies and context, as pointed out by Bolle (2000), Benjamin had his first contacts with Marxist literature around 1924. Subsequently, he made a training trip to Russia (at the time, the Soviet Union) between December 1926 and January 1927 in order to learn on the spot the development of a revolutionary culture. This contact with the process of the revolution and the entire transformation of the social fabric that followed it, as well as its relationship with Soviet

thinkers at the time, were decisive in his intellectual work. According to Bolle (2000), his stay in Moscow had such a significant impact on his later reflections that he contributed to the structuring of a whole praxis about his performance in the radio environment, in addition to “his position in the production process” (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 134).

As Marxism was becoming a very present theme in his discussions, the philosopher began to question the critical position of the intellectual in the class struggle in the face of the growing emergence of German fascism. In this case, if, on the one hand, the value of a completely partisan literature is questioned, such as that which he himself witnessed in the USSR on the occasion of his visit to Moscow and which is closely related to the author’s absence of freedom and authority with the thinking, criticism and argumentation; on the other hand, there is also a question of the relationship of left-wing intellectuals, so-called revolutionaries, with conservative bourgeois elites in Western Europe. In Bolle’s view, (2000, p. 199), “[...] the criterion of truth, that are ideas and their *balance*, remains Benjamin’s critical goal even after the Moscow experience; in short, the critic’s art would be: to take sides - without betraying ideas”. In other words, positioning himself against the demands of the world without betraying the power of critical thinking engaged with the freedom of reflection, and not with prescriptive models, is a necessary condition for the author’s exercise.

Considering the above, the ways in which Benjamin tensions the technique are directly related to this problem. For this reason, the philosopher proposes the emancipatory use of new artistic and information technologies in contrast to their totalitarian use by reactionary social strands. What determines their emancipatory or reactionary value, therefore, is the use made of them, that is, the purposes for which they are used. It is not by chance that radio, as a medium and technique, received the same fierce and sagacious criticism regarding its social potential, since the trends by which it is written should also be assumed in what concerns the transmission of information:

[Benjamin] [...] never intended to become a ‘master of proletarian art’ [...] Distancing himself from the populist left’s strategy, he saw the task of the bourgeois writer and artist [...] to assume his bourgeois formation. He understood that the bourgeois writer could only act indirectly in favor of the proletariat. Serving the cause of the ‘proletarian revolution’ meant for him to rescue the revolutionary memory of the bourgeois class (Bolle, 2000, p. 166).

In this way, engaged with the cause of the vanquished, Benjamin highlights the revolutionary humanist sense of the Enlightenment that one day propelled the bourgeoisie in contrast to the economic value that started to move the class, in a reactionary way, towards the fascism of the 20th century. In other words, his proposal is “to promote the self-reflection of a class” (Bolle, 2000, p. 173) against the emerging form assumed by the barbarism of the time. It is from this context - from professional technical learning as a writer/journalist, writer/broadcast-

er, writer/producer, from economic and social crisis, from criticism to modern history - that his radio creations emerge as well as his important reflections on the impact of mass media on people's daily lives.

Considering the importance of the theme to the subsequent discussion on radio work aimed at children, we have an interest, from here on, to deepen the questions regarding the technique and how it impacted the relationship between producer/writer, receiver/listener in Benjaminian philosophy. With this exercise, as we will see, Benjamin outlined a philosophy especially aimed at an audience that was still new to him, namely, the child inserted in modern childhood, citizens and consumer of goods and cultural goods.

### **Fragments of a Thought about Radio: the emancipatory potential of the means of technical reproducibility**

It is not a matter of presenting literary works in the context of their time, but of presenting, at the time they were born, the time that reveals and knows them: ours (Walter Benjamin, 1931, n. p).

Taking sides and standing against official history was the ethical stance adopted by Benjamin in what concerns his written production in the context of the Weimar Republic. This choice resulted in countless reflections on the conditions of technique, creation and reception of cultural goods in the context of modernity, which, like film and photography, include radio in the discussion of technical reproducibility. As far as radio is concerned, however, its specificity lies exclusively in the reproduction of sound and it is this sonority that marks its invisible presence in people's daily lives. We receive through the radio waves a multiplicity of noises, melodies, as well as literary, scientific and / or political transmissions so that the radio is characterized by a certain ubiquity or by a sensitive and immaterial almost omnipresence.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the technical development of the production and reproduction of cultural goods reached a standard size of quality that allowed the mass media not only to transform "[...] into their objects the totality of traditional works of art, submitting them to profound transformations, such as [conquering] their own place among artistic procedures" (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 167). Among them, the radio was not immune, mainly due to its openness to all types of experimentation. In the context of transformations of modernity, the apparatus was innovative for aesthetic creation whatever its purpose.

In *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1994b) e *The Author as Producer*, (Benjamin, 1994b) the author justifies that the technique is at the service of human relations, attending to different interests, intentions and purposes. This means that, on the one hand, technological development has expanded access and forms of artistic expression, on the other hand, it has strengthened its links with politics and with the existing power structures, causing not only

the restriction of human freedom and autonomy, but also the domination of the masses. It is against the aestheticization of politics, therefore, that the author bases his conscious use to awaken the conscience that also permeates the radio, as noted in his radio plays (Benjamin, 2015).

As a result, the work of the author / writer is also reflected in times when the tendencies for writing are questioned. In other words, if the writer produces cultural goods, his exercise could operate in favor of human awareness and emancipation as opposed to the biased reproduction of the *status quo*. Thus, if for Nazism what mattered was to create efficient means of ideological control of the masses to manage and adapt the individual to his program, Benjamin understands that the programming and content of the broadcasts could serve as vectors for the awakening of individual conscience, above all due to the possibilities of popularizing culture and knowledge in a widespread manner through social communication technologies:

The position of traditional bourgeois society in relation to the masses, and its 'modernization' through a certain type of incorporation of the 'mass culture', was, as Benjamin saw at the time, the decisive strategic question. In the Weimar Republic, two different historical projects were confronted: the emancipatory use of the mass media, linked to a revolutionary utopia, and, on the other hand, its counterrevolutionary use [...] Technological art can, as Benjamin proposes, 'liquidate the cultural, auratic value', break with myths and contribute to the public's self-knowledge and emancipation. Here is the fundamental difference between the 'first technique' and 'second technique', in Benjamin's nomenclature (Bolle, 2000, p. 221-222).

Fascism, by adopting the first technique as an instrument, concealed social contradictions. As a result, a political propaganda model was created whose artistic object aimed to cover up social conflicts, as well as creating the illusion that the population was being contemplated through the social proposals and policies suggested by Hitler (Bolle, 2000). The aestheticization of politics is thus achieved through the use of aesthetic expressions to:

[...] organize the newly emerged proletarian masses without altering the relations of production and property that these masses tend to abolish [...] The masses have the right to demand a change in property relations; fascism allows them to express themselves, while preserving these relationships. It ends, consequently, in the aestheticization of political life (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 194-195).

By these means, the use of the technique in fascist Germany helped in the construction of apparently perfectible images, be it of its ideologies and deeds, or of its intentions. This is evident, for example, in military parades and parades, in speeches, on posters and uniforms, in architecture and art. In the very grouping of the Nazi mass, in the same way, one could observe the representation of this ideal of perfectibility

with the “sculpture” being formed by the mass itself that sought to incorporate the ideals through mimicry with which it reacted to gestures and orders Nazis. In Bolle’s view (2000, p. 230), “history and politics are transformed into a phenomenon that is both aesthetic and ritualistic”. The intention of this aesthetic expression would be nothing more than to establish in the German social environment an imaginary conducive to the full acceptance of the authoritarian political model about to emerge. In this sense, “[...] fascism, instead of demanding a critical task from the masses, meets their desire, organizing fun and illusion, game and spectacle [...]. The show’s magic, fascination and hypnotic character predominate over critical analysis, active participation and real experimentation” (Bolle, 2000, p. 234-235).

The analyzes on the aestheticization of fascist politics contributed to the foundation of the Benjaminian response to the problem, namely, the politicization of art as a means of combating the virulence of the propagation of regressive ideas. In this sense, the political character resized to the work of art could serve as a resource to enlighten the masses, especially with regard to the fascist concept of culture, its devices and mechanisms through which mythification and ritualization were practiced to seduce and alienate them. What Benjamin claims, therefore, is the possibility of “[...] extracting from the mass technological work of art, which operates a ‘destruction of the aura’, an emancipatory function, within the spirit of Illustration” (Bolle, 2000, p. 220). For Baudouin (2010), this is one of the tasks assumed by the progressive author when he opts for the correct trends in his writing. In *The Author as Producer* (Benjamin, 1994b), this role is highlighted and reinforced when the philosopher questions the author’s functions. In writing, therefore, there is a political engagement typical of the intellectual capable of guiding his work in favor of the losers.

This becomes possible only when there is a conscious appropriation of the technique that enables creation and aesthetic expression beyond its regressive and totalitarian ends. It is against these ends that the author’s work operates and gives him the revolutionary sense that Benjamin speaks about (2002). More than that, questioning about the causes assumed by the author is extremely important in a temporality in which the writing of the story was assumed from the perspective of the winners. The aesthetic expression, therefore, is able to bring about historical materiality, as well as the recognition of the work of the critical intellectual in the process of production and class struggle. Thus, modifying the productive apparatus means:

[...] break down those barriers, overcome those contradictions that hinder the productive work of intelligence [...] Here too, for the author as a producer, technical progress is a foundation of political progress. [...] Furthermore, the barriers of competence between the two productive forces – the material and the intellectual – erected to separate them need to be broken down together (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 129).

From the above, Benjamin proposes a revolutionary praxis as an ethical conduct for the critical intellectual of this time and does not shy away from this requirement when creating radio plays with such ethical rigor. In this way, his exercise was not limited to working only with bourgeois intellectuals aiming at their awareness, but he perfected his own work as a broadcaster and cultural producer in order to contribute to what he considered important and essential at the time: the awakening of the conscience of the general public. It is not by chance that Benjamin has dedicated himself, in numerous programs, to establishing a dialogue and a critical pedagogical performance with the entire public, especially with children and young people. As Bolle (2000) and Baudouin (2010) point out, he believed that the critical writer should be active in the context in which new forms of media and technologies of mass communication emerged. His radio works testify to this engagement.

From his performances, Benjamin bet on the radio as an apparatus that could be used to transform people through access to culture as long as this requirement was at the basis of radio production. During this period, contact and friendship with Brecht were decisive for the radio experience. The influences of Brecht and his epic theater helped him to create new radio plays, even as a rising genre (Baudouin, 2009; 2010). The influence of Brecht's work led Benjamin to conclude that:

Epic theater forms correspond to technical forms, cinema and radio. It is situated at the highest point of the technique. If cinema has imposed the principle that the viewer can enter the room at any time, that the very complicated background must be avoided and that each part, in addition to its value for the whole, must have its own, episodic value, this principle became absolutely necessary for the radio, whose audience arbitrarily turns its speakers on and off at any moment. Epic theater does the same with the stage (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 83).

For the author, “[...] all children's performance is guided not by the ‘eternity’ of the products, but by the ‘moment’ of the gesture. As an ephemeral art, theater is children's art”, (Benjamin, 2002, p. 117). For Benjamin, this is an example of the politicization of art that would help to form a critical, practical and, consequently, political conscience (Baudouin, 2010). These reflections refer to themes present in other of his texts. By way of example, the characteristics of epic theater are also included in the essay *Program of a proletarian children's theater* (Benjamin, 2002). In it, it is evident how close the notion of ‘childish gesture’ is to what he proposes to be the actor's gesture in another essay - *What is epic theater?* (Benjamin, 1985). According to Benjamin (1985), gesture is the soul of epic theater, because it is through it that the actor makes occasional and intentional pauses and interruptions, operating with a strategic critical distance that adds the pedagogical character to the genre.

At the center of this reflection, what calls our attention is the value given to the event, or to *the nows*, in the form of improvised and the way

in which this is related to the fantasy of the real. In other words, in the semi-structured mode, close to improvised and in the way that the epic theater is produced, there is the possibility of experimenting situations in a freer way, given the minimalism of the scenery and the speeches as *a priori* elements. With this, through the gesture, which is also an interpretation technique, the possibility for the existence of a space not yet completely filled by the demands of capital and the consumer society opens up. This primordial emptiness, which is fundamental when making playful and the fantasy of the real, corresponds to "*Spielraum* (literally, space to play), a space to play, experiment, transform" (Gagnebin, 2012, p. 150). To Gagnebin (2012, p. 150):

If the essays on Brecht insist on the mutability of space – strictly speaking, there is no longer a 'theater' building with an entrance, staircase, stage, moat, ceilings, etc. –, the children's theater program insists on the changing of time. Children are organized in a collective and have the possibility to stage their fantasies through activities in various workshops, under the coordination of an adult/director. These workshops are for material execution of various objects and concrete learning (preparation of accessories, painting of the scenery, recitation, music, dance). This concrete confrontation with 'matter' [Stoff] is essential, writes Benjamin, to allow children to escape the 'dangerous magical kingdom of mere fantasy'. Without this confrontation, they would be trapped and helpless in that magical realm (as they are today in front of television), that is, also deeply diminished in their return to the 'real world'. Thanks to acting with matter, which allows the transformation of fantasy into material signs, the 'mere' fantasy becomes a game of possibilities and concrete experimentation. Such stagings, stresses Benjamin, allow themselves to be guided by improvisation, instead of obeying a previously given text. With much more resourcefulness than adults, children perform the temporality of experimentation in the theatrical game.

The *Spielraum*, as a space to play, can also be understood, in Benjaminian thought, as a threshold space or an operational place for fantasy whose purpose is to release the child's action to formative experiences in relation to the environment. Materiality is the part of reality whose subjective world of the child is creatively engaged, combining and recombining its accessible parts. The perceptions that she manages to incorporate from this reality are then transformed into material / context for playing or for the imagination of what is narrated, as seen in fairy tales, fantastic stories or radio plays. It was not by chance that Benjamin's pieces have a kind of strategic topography. Through it, the author guided the children through the narratives, almost in a spatial way, as if indicating a way to go through the labyrinths of their stories, based on what, in some way, was concreteness or part of the German children's reality in threshold between the 1920s and 1930s:

An essential element of this *Aufklärung für Kinder* (illustration for children) is to develop an immunization of listeners against everything that is impact and sensationalism, which reinforce passivity and consumerism. The author recognized the need for fantasies and myths; they must serve for the recipient to develop his personality, including becoming a producer of texts. In addition, Benjamin has also created programs for adults; they were mainly conceived as guidance aid in practical everyday matters, for example, how to ask the boss for a raise. In all these programs, as well as in literary presentations, the main objective was not the accumulation of information, but the formation of the capacity to judge. The listener should learn to discern between 'wrong' and 'right' behavior, that is, between obedience to power- mythifying appeals and a stance that made his agents 'antics transparent' (Bolle, 2000, p. 246).

As a journalist, Benjamin wrote for a wide audience and for different age groups. However, his experience with the radio reveals a very special attention and care with the form and content, especially in radio plays aimed at children and young people. For this audience, he created a set of pedagogical programs that deal with the most different subjects - reports that addressed the world of work, wizards and witches, scam artists, toy stores, catastrophes, literature and language, finally -, always dialoguing in a dialectical way with the playful sensitivity of children's life in an ethical and emancipatory perspective. In the author's perspective, technological art for the masses or aesthetic production in the media era should be accompanied by some pedagogical index. According to Baudouin (2010), Benjamin shared this thought with Brecht, so much so that he translated into his radio work a series of procedures and experiments arising from the Brechtian theatrical conception of didactic and pedagogical play, thus creating his model of radio play with pedagogical character. "Let it be said, just in passing, that there is no better starting point for reflection than laughter. And that the vibration of the diaphragm is usually a better stimulant of thought than the vibrations of the soul", is what the author had once said about epic theater (Benjamin, 1994b, p. 134).

However, this same catalyzing element of reflections, which we call here the "laughable aspect" of the work, can easily be found in Benjamin's writings aimed at children or as a characteristic in his reflections on childhood. There is, therefore, a concern with the characteristics or the social nature of the child representing modern childhood, such as his sensitivity and curiosity for the urban and technological environment. In this sense, there is no subject prohibited or that cannot be translated for them, provided that, through the composition between form and content, the narrated data is accessible and touching<sup>2</sup>.

The pedagogical propositions about the use of the radio made by Benjamin, according to Bolle (2000), tend to a meeting between the public and the author/producer<sup>3</sup>. To the extent that it organizes the

agenda, content and format of the programming, observing what is of interest or the specificity of a certain audience, the writer as a producer can contribute so that the listener is guided towards knowledge, when identifies with the broadcast program. The proposal, therefore, is that there is a dialectic in this meeting that makes it possible to develop a type of knowledge that captivates both the expert on the subject at hand and the most lay of listeners:

The radio play 'purposefully starts from the most superficial', while seeking to 'link to the issues of advanced literary theory'; for the author, it would be a great incentive 'if he could captivate both the expert and the layman'. In this tension field, Benjamin sought to develop the broad prism of his genres, ranging from the simplest language to the 'difficult text' (Bolle, 2000, p. 267).

For a challenge as big as pleasing such a diverse audience, Benjamin bet on experimenting and creating his own radio genres and forms. The genres he worked on during his professional life on the radio, as Baudouin (2010) points out, can be studied in at least two broad categories of broadcasts. On the one hand, the commentator gathers the broadcasts that used the radio only as a means and support for dissemination, such as interviews, lectures, readings of essays, children's history, chronicles and literary criticisms; on the other, he lists the pieces imagined and designed specifically for the radio. Therefore, if Benjamin has a foot in journalism, with regard to certain broadcasts, he has another in the field of cultural production and realization as *Hörspielmacher* or radio playwright in literal translation, as Baudouin (2010) justifies.

The radio plays made by the philosopher correspond to the category of *Hörspiele*. Of German origin, the term means 'game (*Spiel*) for the ears' and is characterized by a heterogeneous format with regard to the choice of material and the composition structure of the pieces. "This type of radio game is based on the expressiveness of sounds, as well as the combination of genres, such as electroacoustic music, sound poetry or musical theater" (Baudouin, 2010, p. 120, our translation)<sup>4</sup>. This characteristic feature of *Hörspiel* can be understood as a form of radio literature with a pedagogical character accessible to children and young listeners. In addition to providing entertainment and fun, mainly due to the playful nature of the pieces, it adds another function in itself: the awakening of the audience's awareness through the content underlying the form and technique of the pieces.

In addition to them, Benjamin produced a second type of radio piece entitled *Hörmodelle*. These radio models correspond to Brecht's didactic or learning pieces, as pointed out by Bolle (2000) and what is original about them is the intimate relationship between scenic dialogue and theoretical discussion. Such relationship occurs:

[...] based on situations borrowed from everyday life, from the listeners' experiences, Benjamin strives to develop a

true method of analyzing behaviors and attitudes, based on a dialectic between examples and counterexamples [...] He mobilizes to teach the public the art of resolving the conflicts of everyday life (Baudouin, 2010, p. 128-129, our translation)<sup>5</sup>.

In a period of radical and rapid transformations in German society, Benjamin tried to produce something that could contribute to the development and orientation of the ability to make decisions in typical situations of a daily life in which individuals were subjected to the constant pressures of Nazi ideals. Sound poetry, word games and literary arts, that is, *Funkspiel*, constituted a third form of radio broadcasting in Benjamin. *Funkspiel* is a literary type of radio game that, as Baudouin (2010) explains, aimed to create a form of interaction with the public, as well as to encourage them to write and produce their own 'essays'. The game was designed to invite the listener to play a game that consisted of writing a short, coherent text, from a set of words recited randomly during programming at a time determined by the emission animator.

Finally, other radio productions, especially radio stories for children, reveal the author's effort in dealing with themes of the day, modernity, in order to adapt the ways of narrating to culture and age, avoiding the traps of excesses in the name of pedagogism. It is noted, here, that there was an effort to offer young listeners broadcasts fully adapted to their demands and sensitivity. "Due to his unique radio practice, he will try to create a space of freedom and experimentation for young listeners, offering radio tales of a new type" (Baudouin, 2010, p. 151, our translation)<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, Benjamin's project as a writer/producer of children's literature, if we can say so, had the objective of: "[...] to preserve the values of childhood and youth, as it was exactly these - as the 'future of the nation' - that were in the sights of the propaganda machine of the new authoritarian regime that sought to organize, capture, seduce, 'make up the head' of young people and children, encouraging them by all means to join the 'Hitler Youth' (Bolle, 1984, p. 13).

Despite all the efforts of critical intellectuals in the fight against fascist thinking, it is known what the outcome of this story was. Benjamin saw the overthrow of critical thinking not only in the mass media, but also in the context of the society of the time. He was a witness to how authoritarian regimes managed to use modern media and all the persuasive force that emanates from it in favor of engineering built for mass destruction. In addition, he found, with the experience of the Nazi rise, that technological progress contributed to support the cult and magic that led to the enlightenment ideals of emancipation and formation in favor of the affirmation of capitalism as religion. The *Hitlerjugend*, or Hitler Youth, was certainly a mass phenomenon that troubled Benjamin when he reflected on what Nazi propaganda had in store for young audiences and children. Reports on this advertisement show the predatory and seductive strength of its engineering:

Writing thirty years later, Melita Maschmann remembered herself at the age of 15 as pursuing a 'fundamental

purpose': 'At that age, we see a life of schoolwork, family outings and birthday invitations deplorably empty of meaning. No one is given credit for being interested in more than these ridiculous trivialities. No one says: 'You are needed for something more important; come!' When it comes to serious matters, we don't even count. But the boys and girls of the marching columns counted. Like adults, they carried banners where the names of their dead were written' (Savage, 2009, p. 278).

By the end of 1933, approximately 3.5 million young Germans were already part of the Hitler Youth. The pressure and persuasion of Nazi propaganda was essential to this expansion, however, the movement also took advantage of the post-war context and the lack of perspective on life to give a soul to the masses. Youth, therefore, had an important place in Hitler's imperialist attentions and intentions. Once, in 1933, he presented his plan for the future of German Hitler youth to the public:

I'm starting with young people. We who are older are worn out. We are rotten to the core. We have no uncontrollable instinct left. We are cowards and sentimental. We are carrying the weight of a humiliating past and we have in our blood the melancholy reflection of servitude and subservience. But my magnificent young people! Are there any better somewhere else in the world? Look at these guys and boys! What material! With them I can build a new world (excerpt from Adolf Hitler's speech in 1933 apud Savage, 2009, p. 279).

Faced with this scenario, Benjamin acted consciously against framing youth to the fascist social project. To this end, their efforts consisted of creating a radio literature aimed at children as a way of collaborating in the formation of resistance against the pressure of National Socialism. It was through his experiences with the new technology of radio, in short, that his radio tales witnessed a care for the culture of the child, putting in play the child protagonism alternative to that proposed by Nazism to children and young people. The politicization of Benjamin's art thus reveals itself in the conscious, critical, pedagogical and emancipatory use of the technology used not to curtail human freedom and autonomy, but to clarify what entangles and expropriates freedom.

## **Final Considerations**

The experience of Nazi Germany and the aestheticization of politics made Benjamin criticize the links established between aesthetics, technique and politics. Faced with this scenario, Benjamin proposed ways to clarify the problems of which he was contemporary. In the context of typical transformations of modernity, the increasing presence of apparatuses in social and private life has transformed relationships and ways of practicing life. Benjamin was not insensitive to this presence. If the technique has become so ubiquitous in everyday life, its use

could mediate the experimental relationship between the public and the sound system or between humanity and technology. The technique, in the light of Benjamin, therefore, has an intermediary function and requires us to pay close attention to ethical issues specific to our temporality.

This criticism is based on “*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*” (Benjamin, 1994b) and it is closely related to the political use of new forms of artistic expression for the aestheticization of politics that threatened human freedom and autonomy. In response to the problem, the politicization of art emerges in a context in which the apparatus operates necessarily in favor of critical thinking, training and enlightenment. Every author who intends to be engaged in this struggle cannot ignore the trends and causes for which he writes. This exercise, extended to Benjamin’s work, is seen in his radio plays, especially those dedicated to young people and children, through which radio was instrumental in enlightening the public.

Benjamin’s experiences with the radio demonstrate care for those who, still in formation, can be spared the corruption present within authoritarian speeches and advertisements. Training critical, ethical and committed citizens to the issues of time may have mobilized Benjamin to support the use of technique in addition to those dedicated to the reification of the masses. On the contrary, its potential lies in its ability to make pedagogical and emancipatory criticism in dark times<sup>7</sup>.

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## Notes

- 1 In the letter Benjamin reflects on his professional condition at the moment. Original reference: “I am keeping an eye open for any opportunities that may arise locally and finally have applied for the editorship of a radio magazine or, to be more precise, a supplement. This would be a part-time job, but it probably will not be so easy for me to get because we are having trouble agreeing on the honorarium. The situation is that Ernst Schoen has had an important position here for months now. He is the manager of the Frankfurt ‘broadcasting’ station and put in a good word for me.” (Benjamin, 1994a, p. 262).
- 2 As a way of exemplifying our statement, we would like to quote the first part of the radio, a piece entitled *The Berlin dialect* (Benjamin, 2015, p. 9) “Good morning, today I want to talk to you about how Berliners speak; the famous huge *beak* is the first thing to think about when talking about Berlin. At a Berliner’s house everything is different, everything is better and done in a smarter way, at least that’s what is said in Germany. In fact, it is even good when you have the capital of a country that you can speak badly about”. The quote shows how Benjamin explores the imagery of words to form a topography from which the child’s imagination is guided with good humor and irony through the paths of knowledge.

- 3 Reflections on Radio In: Benjamin, Walter. *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. London: Harvard University Press, 2008. P. 391- 392. Original reference: "Not that it would be an easy task to describe the way the voice relates to the language used - for this is what is involved. But if radio paid heed only to the arsenal of impossibilities that seems to grow by the day-if, for example, it merely provided from a set of negative assumptions a typology of comic errors made by speakers-it would not only improve the standard of its programs but would win listeners over to its side by appealing to them as experts. And this is the most important point of all" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 392).
- 4 The original reference – "Littéralement, *Hörspiel* signifie 'jue (*Spiel*) pour l'ouïe". Ce type de pièce radiophonique se fonde sur l'expressivité des sons ainsi que sur la combinaison de genres tels que la musique eletroacustique, la poésie sonore ou le théâtre musical" (Baudouin, 2010, p. 120).
- 5 The original reference – "A partir des faits emprutés à des situations de la vie quotidienne, au vècu des auditeurs, Benjamin, s'efforce d'elaborer une véritable méthode d'analuse des comportamentes, des attitudes à partir d'une diletique d'exemples et de contre-exemple. [...] Il s'agit d'enseigner aux auditeurs l'art de résoudre des conflits de la vie quotidienne" (Baudouin, 2010, p. 128-129).
- 6 The original reference - "Par sa pratique singulière de la radio, il va tenter de créer un espace de liberté et d'experimentation pour les jeunes auditeurs en leur proposant des contes radiophoniques d'un nouveau genre" (Baudouin, 2010, p. 151).
- 7 Funding source: FAPESP Process: 2013/21152-3/CAPES Process: BEX 7915/14-4.

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