

## Barbarism, Art and Narcoviolence in Mexico. A constellation.

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### 0 Introduction

The main subject of this presentation is to both research and build a concept of barbarism meaningful in the understanding of artistic reactions to the Mexican war on drugs. But before getting into the matter, I would like to make a small introduction in which I intend to answer why Walter Benjamin is so valuable for a context and a phenomenon that, at first glance, may seem too far away from the historical situations that hosted Benjamin's thought. Other than the similarities that some of his studies may have with what can be said about today's Mexican Narcowar, the philosophical treatment that images —not only in their visual dimension— get in his work drove me to weave a relationship between his *dialectical approach* and the lives of Mexican artists like Fernando Brito and Javier Sicilia. In this way, I hope to succeed in the making of a kind of ultrasound of Mexican reality, by appealing to his anti-sterile treatment of images.

Keeping this in mind, I've organized the text in two asymmetrically sized sections. First, I'll try to assemble a kind of theoretical toolbox, influencing my interpretation of Benjamin's ideas with some concepts coming from some of his fellow critical thinkers and interlocutors. Lastly, I'll present the work of the two aforementioned artists —both active detractors of the war on drugs public policies— who I believe can be understood as representatives of the *new barbarism* described by Benjamin. Having said this, I have only to insist on the importance of understanding the present lecture, nor as an apology of barbarism nor as a diatribe against it, but instead as a way of making art explode.

### I

#### —Dialectical Approach—

What kind of times are they, when  
A talk about trees is almost a crime  
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?  
To Those Born Later, Brecht.

As the following words have the pretension of being produced under the wing of Marxist Critical Theory, I consider of capital importance to take some time, even if it is short, to clarify in which way I intend to use the stimulating but cryptic expression used by Walter Benjamin: *dialectical approach*. For this task I will not only employ the work of the aforementioned author, but also that of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Bertolt Brecht, all of which will not only help me build the *dialectical approach* image, but shall also be fierce companions in the approximation to barbarism that will follow.

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Starting with the author whose Thesis' anniversary was the reason behind this Conference, we may consider his conference written for *leftist intellectuals* within the Institute for the Study of Fascism, in 1934 Paris: "The dialectical approach to this question—and here I come to the heart of the matter— has absolutely no use for such rigid, isolated things as work, novel, book. It has to insert them into the living social contexts" (Benjamin, 2005: 769). In this way, the *dialectical approach*, in line with the materialism that it explicitly subscribes to and appealing to the responsiveness that implies being a source of situated/incarnated knowledge, signifies the unveiling of the living relations that over/mid/under-lay —involve and enable— the *thing itself*, disclosing within this radical gaze its (A) historical nature. Thus, I consider necessary to point out that the *dialectical approach*, towards which I'm edging, resembles the calling to take things by their roots that Marx himself indicated already in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*<sup>2</sup>.

Subsequently, I move forward to the admonition that Adorno strongly makes in *Minima Moralia*, specifically in a note called "Bequest": "Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means" (Adorno, 2005: 150)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, to the historical nature must be added a (B) politically anti-logical disposition or, at least, one that shows discontent and rebelliousness toward the oppression that detaches from logic today. From this positioning, I wish to make two annotations: (a) the distancing from logic must not be understood as an illogical or irrational outcome given that it is followed by an invitation to use the means or, in other words, the tools previously owned by logic; in the case of this short text I'll keep using the power of self-excluding dichotomous representations, only that I'll emphasize the tension built between the parts to prove how they are self/co-involved in social reality. And (b) the intention of un-going/un-walking the path of logic is identified both as a conscious political act and, simultaneously<sup>4</sup> [Zusammenfallen], as a taking of one's posture.

Lastly, I quote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The concept, usually defined as the unity of the features of what it subsumes, was rather, from the first, a product of dialectical thinking, in which each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 11). As I have done before, focusing now on what I've decided to call (C) negative dimension, I would like to make two annotations: (a) very much in line with the ideas that may symbolize the pretensions of the Frankfurt School, the *dialectical approach* implies uncovering, for its critical study, social contradictions and (b) this line of thought calls for the distinguishing of all that apparently it is not but that enables all that it is and remains invisible in this process.

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<sup>2</sup> "To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself" (Marx, 2014: 60; the translation was done in reference of the English version of the Cambridge University, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> We may also think about the final lines of Max Horkheimer's *Authoritarian State*, in which is stated that history should stop following his logical course to fulfill its human destiny.

<sup>4</sup> The use of this word has the intention of making a direct reference to the importance that it holds for Marx in the third thesis of the *Theses on Feuerbach* (2013).

Having stated this, which makes up the basis of the analysis that is here submitted, I would like to paraphrase the words of a contemporary reader of Benjamin, Stefan Gandler, to extract from these words a statement that calls into play the three dimensions of the dialectical approach —historical nature, anti-logical disposition and negative dimension— and that works as a starting point, a *tabula rasa*, to understand the potential of the concept of barbarism: Only in the context of an anti-colonial and anti-racist fight can the concept of *barbarism* —despite its limitations and its internal dialectical antagonism— acquire a certain historical truth and *above all* emancipatory strength (Gandler, 2013: 34).

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—Why art and barbarism—

Let's think now about the quietly popular Adorno quote, written at the beginning of his text *Prisms*, that has been interpreted by more than a few people as an announcement of the impossibility of writing poetry. Nonetheless, I believe this interpretation is based on a superficial reading commonly spread in commentators that keep citing it partially. Thus, I present it in its entirety:

Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. (Adorno, 1997: 34)

The nuance that I wish to apply to the statement is based, to a great extent, on what was settled previously. Although I think that turning the interpretation all the way around to see in this sentence an invitation to barbarism would be at the very least daring —although I hope that, by the end of this lecture, with a critically revised concept of barbarism, it does not seem so outlandish—, I think we cannot lose sight of the fact that there is an ongoing invitation to art and image in both Adorno and Benjamin.

This is why, and with the intention of being provocative, I go to Brecht, specifically to a poem of his authorship, to help me in the presentation of the barbaric sense that nests in the *poiesis*. The provocation happens, consciously, on two levels: first, it is known that the relationship between Adorno and Brecht was crossed by a series of constant polemics — and we just placed ourselves in the bosom of one of them<sup>5</sup>— and, secondly, I turn, precisely, to a poem —the mere thing that would be object of the criticism in question.

The poem is the one that has been used as epigraph: *To Those Born Later* (2006). In it, Brecht points out the extent to which an artistic creation —dedicated to nature— can be considered a crime or a *barbaric act*: when, in *dark times*, in times like these, doing so means the omission of so many atrocities and treachery. Being that for both Adorno and Brecht the summary judgments are alien, it should be highlighted that the vehicle chosen by Brecht to make the statement is, in itself, an artistic creation and that his work is full of poems about trees.

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<sup>5</sup> Between "the five difficulties to say the truth" (Brecht 2003) and the difficulties "To compose music" and "To understand the new music" (Adorno 1985), which took place between 1963 and 1966.

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—New barbarism—

At the end of 1933, less than six years before the start of World War II and when the Nazi party was already at a not insignificant moment in the curve of its rise to power, Walter Benjamin writes, for the magazine *Die Welt im Wort* [The world in the word], an article entitled “Experience and poverty” (Benjamin, 2005: 731-736). Here we find the possibility of distinguishing between two forms or circumstances of barbarism, being that, in one of them, the diametrical turn that was previously thought could finally be made possible. Effectively, Benjamin, who was already occupied with the effects of the great machines of death and war that had spread in the Great War and the possibility of a new violent conflict, notices a difference between the barbarism against which he will face certain critical thinking and something that he provocatively calls *new barbarism*:

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; ... to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a *tabula rasa*. They need a drawing table; they were constructors. Such a constructor was Descartes, who required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than the single certitude, “I think, therefore I am.” And he went on from there. Einstein, too, was such a constructor; he was not interested in anything in the whole wide world of physics except a minute discrepancy between Newton's equations and the observations of astronomy. And this same insistence on starting from the very beginning also marks artists when they followed the example of mathematicians and built the world from stereometric forms, like the Cubists, or modeled themselves on engineers, like Klee. ... Klee's figures too seem to have been designed on the drawing board, and even in their general expression they obey the laws of their interior. Their interior, rather than their inwardness; and this is what makes them barbaric. (Benjamin, 2005: 732-733)

Thus, it is clear that barbarism here is not understood as those great monolithic concepts of academic patriarchy, but that it works more within the register of those dialectical images that try to reveal the historical and political character of their own approach to the problem. Benjamin decides to show himself as a supporter of the second element that purges constantly in the dichotomy of culture and barbarism—in a very similar fashion to the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin 1969) in which he will build the basis for conceiving a history of the vanquished and forgotten.

From what is stated in this brief article by Walter Benjamin, it can be understood that the barbaric is associated with a kind of state of emptiness—in this case not self-provoked, but caused by the muteness that comes from facing the bloody violence of war, violence that, from the past, bursts into today's Mexico through the assassination of indigenous activist Samir Flores, through the finding of three bodies of film students

dissolved in acid, or through the dissemination of the remains of one of the 43 Iguala students, placed by the Mexican government in plastic bags, to quiet the voices that claim for justice, memory and life—, state of emptiness that triggers in humans a type of poverty that it is not economic —at least not only—: that of experience and, therefore, that of the enunciation of this experience. That is why the soldiers come back mute from the front, a front that today has overcome his own spatial limits by expanding to Mexican cities and now makes photographers and poets become mute. However, instead of thinking of the theory as something cold that stays still in this situation, Benjamin inquires into the phenomenon described above to see that within it there are people who seem to have remembered things that normally should be forgotten to be *civilized*. The *tabula rasa* described in the quotation is closely related to a primitive/original dimension of the human; let us think: the muteness of disaster can lead us to babbling and stuttering, to be barbarians and tartars.

Later, Benjamin himself explains to us that the empty starting point that he proposes works in negative terms: *nudity* as absence of clothes —not constituting itself as a new cloth. The eagerness of the German author here indicates that this undressing could amount to a certain process of dehumanization understood as a way of removing the clothes that have led man to this boredom of experience; starting point where the subject is confirmed, simultaneously, not as the organic-naked but as a will (willingness to untuck) that is opposed to the organic. Let's think about it this way: if humanity is Auschwitz and the incessant feminicides at the Mexican-US border, let's dehumanize ourselves, be barbarians, do stuttering poetry (Luca, 2001: 169-176), poetry that talks about sand and our dead (Arana Villarreal, 2011).

Trying to clarify the implications of these observations, we intend to refer two concretions of them, both proposed by Benjamin himself. In first place, this state of new barbarism is understood as a non-auratic state (Benjamin, 2010: 220), a state of transparency that once again shows what is at the root of man, which would be man himself (Marx, 2014: 60), explaining the praise of the metaphor of architecture that uses glass with the intention of not upholding any mysteries. Hence, barbarism would constitute a reference to defetishization, to the non-phantasmagoric.

Moving on to the second point; the dialogue with Bertolt Brecht may help us reveal the critical character that can be found within certain concepts or polemics. This is why Benjamin recommends going back to his thought: communism would not be the distribution of wealth, it would be, on the other hand, that of poverty. This time I propose to complement this assertion by referring to a small text called "On the art of the philosophers" (Brecht 2004a); Brecht invites the people who want to make philosophy to do it as if they were in a battle, conceptualizing philosophy as the art of giving and receiving —distributing— punches.

## II

—Fernando Brito and Javier Sicilia—

And so, we finally arrive to the second part of this lecture, in which I hope to let some images and poetry speak by themselves. But first, I want to address a question not only to

you but, mainly, to myself: What is there of barbarism in the artistic creations of Fernando Brito and Javier Sicilia? In addition to stating the obvious presence of violence and suffering, in both cases there can be found a fight for emancipation and a process of becoming muted by poverty of experience that must be understood and studied in intimate relationship.

I'll start from the younger one: Fernando Brito. He is a photojournalist that has been leader of the photography and edition department of the local newspaper *The Debate* in the northern border Mexican state of Culiacán. He started doing what he himself called *nota roja* —a radical genre in yellow journalism focused mostly on physical violence—, whose characteristics can be included in the scopic paradigm of the legal and biomedical look that crosses and fragments inert bodies to expose them in front pages. After many years succeeding in his task to produce the kind of images that can be found on the cover of any alarmist media, Brito asked himself if this was the best way of giving an imaginary—in the sense of images, not of fantasy— farewell to the people whose lives ended in the struggle within the war on drugs. Thus, he started a project called *Your steps were-lost/ vanished in the landscape*, that has the exact same duration of the narcowar: from 2006 to the present day. Through the contemplation of the images Brito has shot and the analysis of the words Brito has pronounced, I believe we can understand these art pieces as a double-edged sword—in a positive way: the fight against the invisibilization of a complex death machine whose favorite victims are the most vulnerable strata of society—class struggle—and the fight against the treatment of people as empty bodies that can be identified as mere numbers emptied of any past—rationalization. These images are barbaric, they are new barbarism, in the way that they *obey the laws of their interior* by trying to show a piece of the story and the emotiveness of their protagonist, in the sense that they dialectically approach, at least in the moment of their assassination, the subjects-bodies who suffered a violence that constitute our modern states.

Finally, I want to present a small portion of the work/life of Javier Sicilia. He was a poet and political commentator active since the early 90's, but with a relatively low profile until March 2011, when his son was murdered in a narco-related crime. The official answer of the government to Sicilia's demand for justice was the accusation of Juan Francisco being related to drug trafficking and, therefore, being a normal/non-innocent victim of the conflict. From that point on, after writing a final poem that I've translated for you, Sicilia decided to stop his work as a poet and dedicate himself to social activism, through a movement called Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD). We find, once again, a muting process of stripping away one of the most emblematic characteristics of Sicilia's humanity: language, poetic language. As he himself will later say, a process of becoming *uninhabited*. Before showing *Poetry exists in me no more*, I would like to read another poem that a fellow Mexican and barbaric poet—Gerardo Arana, who, instead of uninhabiting poetic language, decided to uninhabit life itself— discreetly dedicates to Sicilia's son:

In a ruthless and terrible country.  
In a country with thousands of deaths.

Lived a Christian poet:

—Does God live in criminals?

—Yes

—In murderers?

—Yes

—And what is he waiting for

—To transform himself

Into what.

Into us.

### **THEY KILLED THE SON OF THE POET.**

He was Abraham.

He was God.

God among men.

Among us men.

For us men.

Sacrificed.

Sanctified.

Signified. (Arana Villareal, 2011: 8)

With nothing more to add, I read his ode to barbarism:

The world is no longer the word's world.

They strangled it within us

as they stifled you

as they ripped up your lungs

and the pain does not leave me.

I have only the world.

For the silence of the just

only for your silence and for my silence, Juanelo...

The world is no longer worthy of the word, it's my last poem, I cannot write more poetry... poetry exists in me no more (Sicilia, 2011).

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