

Theses

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On the Critique of Fate. Investigations along Walter Benjamin's Concept of Fate

1. The Task and Problems of the PhD Thesis

The task of the thesis is to find and partly to create those fundamental conditions that can pave the way for the elaboration of a critical concept of fate. For this task it is inevitable to survey and interpret those concepts and motives of fate that permeate the most definitive writings of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's approach towards the problem of fate in the late 1910s and in the early 1920s is at once critical and constructive. The writings of this period greatly determine his thinking until the end of his life. These include the short but problem-focused *Fate and Character*; the essay titled *Critique of Violence*, a problematic and thought-inspiring writing that mostly forms and informs my approaches towards fate, law and violence, and also my interpretations of mythic aspects; a longer essay critically interpreting Goethe's *Elective Affinities* whose guideline is the concept of fate, too; and finally *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the academically rejected postdoctoral work in which the concept of fate constantly returns. The aim of my comprehensive survey is not quantitative perfection, though; I did not consider it as a task of my thesis to exhaustingly recount, systematize or typologize each and every appearance of the concepts, motives, allusions concerning fate in Benjamin's oeuvre. The main task of the research and the thesis was rather to find the main characteristic features of the concept of fate, to interpret them, and to contribute in this way to the elaboration of a stereoscopic, comprehensive and critical concept of fate.

The task of a critique of fate can be summarized as that of expounding its relation to sin/guilt and freedom. Fate aspires to relate to sin/guilt and freedom through the sensual-natural sphere. That means that fate needs a symbolic complex of sensible signs in order to acquire shape. It needs a closed, configured world. From another perspective it also implies that any phenomenon of the sensual-natural sphere might become a sign of fate, and, in a retrospective, fate-inspired approach, it seems as if these signs need fate, too, in order to become supernatural. The order of fate is a nature that mythically overcomes itself in a supernatural and superhuman way.

In the context of Benjamin's thought fate belongs to the constellation of the idea of beauty. Fate is primarily an aesthetic category, thus the fundamental way to approach it is through the realm of art. This relationship explains that the most extensive part of my thesis consists of the interpretations of a literary artwork and two films (Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness*, Steve McQueen's *Hunger*, and Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*). The main guideline of these interpretations is the comprehensive analysis of correlative motives of fate and sin/guilt.

1. The Structure of the PhD Thesis. A Rough Overview of the Argument

Following the *Prologue* there are two main parts of the text, between them there is a chapter called *Epilogue/Transition*, and finally there is a closing *Epilogue*. The first part consists of three, while the second consists of two chapters.

The Prologue (2-9) introduces those problems and methodological considerations that I tried to survey above.

The subtitle of the first part (10-122) is *Fatelessness* as the argumentation gravitates towards the critical analysis of Imre Kertész's book worked out along the motives and concept of fate.

The first chapter of the first part (11-46) is titled *Law/Violence*. It expounds the relationship of these two concepts on the basis of the first half of Benjamin's text *Critique of Violence* and through a kind of detour, the analysis of the film *Hunger*.

The legitimizing efforts of modern states of the monopoly on violence (*Gewaltmonopol*) might be followed along two correlative lines: the first one is a sociological-legal, the other is a historico-philosophical thread. The text titled *Critique of Violence (Zur Kritik der Gewalt)* by Walter Benjamin tries to map the prehistoric-mythic origins of law and violence. His effort requires a comprehensive historico-philosophical perspective. His methodological point of departure is a distinction between the two main trends of legal philosophy: the first is called natural, the other is called positive law. According to natural law "violence is a product of nature, as it were a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematical, unless force is misused for unjust ends."

Positive law, on the other hand, sees violence as "a product of history". Thus positive law principally distinguishes between sanctioned, historically acknowledged and unsanctioned violence. The origins of the legal foundations of the state monopoly on violence might be found at this point. A basic hypothesis of Benjamin is that modern law strives to impede all individual or collective manifestations that aspires to fulfil their natural aims (their

“freedom”) violently. The force/violence that exists outside of the context of (positive) law is the one that might be able to found new power, new law: that is why all manifestations of violence appearing outside state monopoly imply a threat on the actually existing order of law. Modern order of law incorporates this threat mostly through the network of surveillance. Furthermore, it integrates and makes use of these incidents of threat. A remarkable phenomenon of this tendency is the introduction of the right to strike. With its mere existence the right to strike points at the ambivalent nature of the law-instating act. My analysis of the film *Hunger* tries to expound the radical form of conflict between the quasi-Promethean individual and the state along the example of the strike.

Benjamin’s argument turns from the right to strike towards military law. The compulsive sanctioning of peace proves to be the archaic form of law-instating. Law-instating violence has a mythical, often a heroic character. Fate (*Schicksal*) is “which in all cases underlies legal violence”.

While the mythic violence pursuing natural goals (the foundation of power) has a law-instating (*rechtsetzend*) function, the other violence pursuing legal goals in an already existing legal framework (a violence that is based on the already established state monopoly on violence) has a law-preserving (*rechtserhaltend*) function. The example in the realm of military law for law-preserving violence is conscription that provides the basis of militarism. Benjamin concludes that law originates in “violence crowned by fate [*schicksalhaft gekrönte Gewalt*]”. In spite of their superficial contradictions the principles of violence in natural and in positive law complement each other.

Fate-function is secured by the institutions and practices of law-preserving violence/power: law-preserving is “threatening, like fate, on which depends whether the criminal is apprehended”. And like antique fate modern surveillance aspires to be omnipresent and to rule everything. The power over life and death is thus a cardinal problem in legal philosophy. Capital punishment is not merely a law-preserving tool of the sanctioned legal power but rather a manifestation and re-establishment of the origins of that power. It is always a law-(re)instating act, too. It embodies the unrestrained power over natural life, fate as destiny (*Ananke*), the seeming possibility of the unconstrained power of legal judgment.

The second chapter of the first part (47-79) is titled *Ananke*. The German third Reich aspired to manifest the unconstrained power over life and death in a methodologically and technologically established way in its attempt to annihilate an amorphous, diasporic

community: European Jews. This attempt was, like the working of Ananke, at once latent and total. In the second and third chapters (*Elpis, Logos*, 80-112) I try to critically interpret a literary artwork that is able to allude to the most important, and maybe most hidden historico-philosophical problem-complex and impact of this catastrophe-constellation. This is Imre Kertész's book *Fatelessness*.

The intensified socialization as a convict of the main character of the book, Gyuri Köves, might be considered as ideal type of convict-socialization (especially if we take into account the economic role of time). A fate-like order dominates all phenomena of life, and finally Ananke rules among the orphic primal words. This process does not unfold at an instant, though, but, according to the intentions of the plot, it evolves in a slowly devious manner: from the seemingly normal civil life, through the elliptically and ironically built memoir-narrative the main character finds himself on the brink of annihilation – and finally he returns to the now uncannily “normal” civil relations. I have no space here to get into the details of the motivic interpretations; I confine myself to the rough presentation of conclusions.

This intensified and perfectionized convict-socialization and the above-mentioned cardinal role of capital punishment naturally does not imply that the modern democratic penal system has as its operational aim the practice of the concentration camps. It implies, however, that those tendencies working mostly latently in the former realized themselves at their full strength in the latter. Concentration camps get to the closest to the secret and latent ideal of currently working penal systems. This ideal is a distorted form of the ideal of good (the par excellence ethic ideal). It is distorted by a conception of public good that can be achieved through state and criminal law. The functioning of concentration camps provide an extreme point insofar as the legal-politically distorted interpretation of the religious dogma of original sin achieved its greatest triumph, and this triumph lead to the complete dissolution of the concept of natural “sin”. It was really mere existence that became a sin. The inextricably common origin of law and (mythical) violence showed itself manifestly in the practice of extermination camps. In my interpretation it is the complex, arborescent and prolific conclusions of this consideration that is the negative yield of the book *Fatelessness*.

The dialogue between the returning main character and the two old men in the closing chapter alludes to the book's positive yield that thematizes the ambivalent opposition between fate and freedom.

Between the two main parts of my thesis there is a chapter called *Epilogue/Transition* (113-123) that prepares the deeper layers of the investigation of fate. In the second part the concept of sin comes to the fore: by reconstructing and completing the argument of Mikhail Bakhtin I try to distinguish in this transitional chapter the concepts of moral sin, tragic flaw and natural-original sin. The last of these will serve as a thematic guideline for the motivic interpretation of the film *Antichrist*.

The title of the first chapter of the second (125-144) is *Gewalt/Gewalt*.

Violence/Force/Power. Mythical/Allegorical Nature. Following the thread of the second part of Benjamin's essay I try to establish a more differentiated concept of violence in the first half of the chapter. From the distinction between law-instating and law-preserving violence the investigation turns toward possibilities of differentiating between mythical and divine violence. With perfect certainty we cannot separate mythical and divine violence/force from each other. Though the mythical retrospectively always condemns to sin, the divine violence resolves from sin in a way that can never be judged from an external perspective. The non-usable new terms of the essay's last sentence further strengthen the idea of the forms of violence/force as a permeable continuum.

The law-instating manifestation and force of mythical violence is exemplified in Benjamin's essay by the story of Niobe. Niobe is the prototype of expiation and grief. The figure of Niobe gradually differs from the figures of other great mythical sinners who all have their relations to the symbol of the stone: her figure transforms into stone. The body of Niobe transforms into a symbol of expiation and grief. As lifeless (but not dead!) nature, as a stone Niobe is an "eternally mute bearer of guilt". But her muteness implies rather her elementary grief rather than her guilt. The muted figure of Niobe is very akin to the idea of fallen nature in the Bible: she is confined in her expiation, over-determined by guilt, over-named by prattle, and thus she is tuned to muteness and grief. Her only form of communication is presented in her never-ending tears: this self-exposing, powerless expression of complaint. This complaint cannot be formed into words or into any more differentiated language: it remains a reduced, wordless, even soundless, mute communication. The language of the mythically mute nature is translated by the ambivalently allegorizing man to sounding language.

This relationship provides the basic principle for the interpretation of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* in the fifth chapter (which is the second in the second part, 145-163). Again, I have no space to go into details of the motivic analysis, I can only recite the considerations and conclusions.

A basic characteristic feature of the film is that it over-deterministically invests the seemingly insignificant objects, gestures, motions and natural beings with a violent allegoresis, it overloads them with construed symbolic relations. This technical principle includes an overused poetic-economic factor, too, that is responsible for the claustrophobic atmosphere of the film (regardless of open nature scenes). There is no such phenomenon in this film that can escape the exploiting or overloading, but ever-indeterminate symbolic investments and the pressure of prophetic and motivic function: in short nobody and nothing in this film can just be one- or itself innocently, or freely – they have to signify something other than themselves. This technique is highly similar to, sometimes even identical with fate-accusing techniques: astrology, prophesizing, oneiromancy, cursing.

The construction of the film is openly takes the risk of transparency: the violent and bloody scenes are pregnantly critical: the representation of violence and self-mutilation causes critically functioning, serious harm on the texture of the film.

Antichrist is a story of an initiation. The source and object of the negative revelation is the film's nature, the medium of the initiation is the female character, its subject, through the male character, is the viewer. The result of the initiation is not the acquirement of an esoteric knowledge, but rather a hint or implication that reminds the viewer about the originally constructive nature of esoteric-possessive complex of knowledge and thinking schematism.

The closing *Epilogue* (164-182) has the following subtitle: "*Original*" *Sin/Freedom: The Additions of Søren Kierkegaard's Interpretation of Anxiety to Walter Benjamin's Concepts of Fate and Language*. The concept of anxiety provides fundamentally significant aspects for the investigation of fate because the psychological disposition of anxiety somehow calls forth fate. A soul possessed of anxiety feels most pervasively the truth of eternal return. The more she is possessed by anxiety, and the more she reflects intellectually on this condition without, however, seeing any possibility of breaking-forth, the more she feels the hand of fate on every phenomena of life that surrounds her or takes place inside her. The female character of *Antichrist* represents both an extreme version of this condition and the most possibly destructive critique of it.

The book titled *The Concept of Anxiety* by Kierkegaard has the following subtitle: "a simple psychological deliberation oriented in the direction of the dogmatic problem of original sin". Similarly to the early essay of Walter Benjamin on the philosophy of language, Kierkegaard's book interprets the biblical story of fall. In accordance with its context in Benjamin's study

the linguistic aspect prevails, but Kierkegaard's interpretation and terminology may prove to be very helpful in interpreting Benjamin's thoughts. The condition that structurally precedes the condition of the judging/abstracting "fallen language-mind", and which might be labelled, in the spirit of Kierkegaard, the condition of anxious language-mind, has no knowledge of judgment and abstraction, but the biblical narrative suggests with the introduction of the prohibition and punishment that it has some presentiment about them. The anxiously innocent language-mind was, according to Benjamin, "fully cognizant", as it is as it were inside the creative language of God, and does not try to imitate it externally; the immanent magic of this directly cognitive language-mind is a vulnerable immanency. This recognition is represented in the empirical-psychological sphere by the concept of anxiety worked out by Kierkegaard.