

Detour and Dao: Benjamin, with Jullien, contra the Ontology of the Event

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Abstract

Taking its point of departure from Jullien's primary claim in *The Silent Transformations* that ancient Greek ontology propels European thought into 'the vertigo of the event,' the article turns toward a European thinker whom Jullien does not mention in this context, namely Walter Benjamin, and asks whether his work, too, succumbs to this vertigo. The choice of Benjamin as a 'test case' is governed by two factors: while his work is widely associated with notions of the event, there is little recognition of the degree to which he was engaged with the *Daodejing* (in translation) from the early 1910s to the late 1930s. Divided into four chronologically ordered sections, each of which is prefaced by a claim advanced in *The Silent Transformations*, the article shows how Benjamin's concepts of transition, effective non-action (under the term 'proletarian general strike'), mimesis, 'the second technology,' and *Jetztzeit* ('now-time') are all traversed by a mediated conception of the Dao. The primary question around this re-evaluation of his work, guided by the idea of 'the silent transformations' that Jullien adopts from Wang Fuzhi, is whether the theory of revolution Benjamin developed in the 1930s can be characterized as Daoist or, better yet, Marxist-Daoist.

Keywords

Benjamin, Brecht, *Daodejing*, Jullien, mimesis

Beginning with *Detour and Access*, François Jullien argues that the principal aporias of European thought can be circumvented by diverging from the doctrines of Being that originated in early Greek poetry and thought, attained canonical status in Plato's dialogues, and culminated in Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. A congruent argument, expressed most cogently in the short monograph from 2009, *Les Transformations silencieuses* (The Silent Transformations), directs attention to the various attempts on

the part of modern European philosophy to disabuse itself of its Greek inheritance. The overturning of ancient ontologies in the form of modern methodologies may have succeeded in changing the basic concept of *metabolē* that gives shape to the Aristotelian corpus; but this success exacerbated the ‘ideology of rupture’ (Jullien, 2011: 112) that links Greek antiquity with European modernity, despite their differences.¹ Homer, Pindar, Aeschylus, and Sophocles join with patristic theologians, medieval-scholastic philosophers, early-modern thinkers, modern political theorists, and contemporary French intellectuals – Badiou, most especially – in extolling ‘the event’ as an escape from the otherwise intractable blockage of Being; but, according to Jullien’s gentle yet compelling argument, there is no escape, only a re-installation of the originating aporias. This disorienting situation expresses itself as the ‘vertigo of the event’ (Jullien, 2011: 122), for only an ‘event’ promises to proceed beyond Being.

In tallying a list of thinkers, poets, writers, and philosophers who succumb to this ‘vertigo’, Jullien leaves out Walter Benjamin. In itself, this says little. To some extent, the absence of Benjamin’s name can be ascribed to his lack of importance within the context of French academic philosophy; more importantly, though, much of what has come to be associated with the name ‘Walter Benjamin’ conforms so fully to the ‘ideology of rupture’ that Jullien would gain nothing by adding it to his already impressive roster of its representatives.² It would be difficult to identify anyone, except perhaps Hölderlin, whose work is more closely associated with notions of caesura, interruption, breaks, discontinuity, and the like. The following quotation from Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History,’ written near the end of his life, could serve as a paradigmatic version of the ideology whose hold on the Western imaginary Jullien seeks to relax: ‘The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 1: 702). This is only one of several passages from ‘On the Concept of History’ where its author deploys images of bursting and blasting for the purpose of constructing a concept of history that goes ‘against the grain’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 1: 697). From Jullien’s perspective, however, Benjamin blithely goes *with* the grain, that is, with the ingrained pre-understanding of ontology, such that the perplexities of Being can be resolved only with the advent of an event that will change everything, including the concept of change. Taken together, the images of blasting in ‘On the Concept of History’ seem to provide proof positive that Benjamin is unable to conceive of anything akin to what Jullien calls ‘the *silent* transformations.’ In the last lucid months of his life, Nietzsche called himself ‘dynamite’ (1988, 6: 365). Benjamin extends this ancient-modern tradition by making his avatar, the ‘historical materialist,’ into an expert in event-explosive devices.

But what if all of this is, if not precisely wrong, then at least misleading, even backwards, derived in part from certain ways in which Benjamin’s work came to be known, cited, invoked, evoked, and pigeonholed into the alternative Marxist versus mystic? In an earlier article (see Fenves, 2018), I explored some of the many points where Benjamin’s work intersected with Chinese texts in translation. Here, I proceed a little further along the same lines – this time, guided by Jullien’s presentation of the difference between ‘the silent transformations’ and the boisterous business of proclaiming the potency of the event. No China text can be seen as a direct source of Benjamin’s

thought, for there is no evidence that he ever learned even the rudiments of a Chinese language. Indirectness, though, can be more than a pragmatic accommodation, especially for Benjamin, who prominently proclaims the opposite: ‘Detour is method’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 1: 208). With one ambiguous exception, which will not be considered here – a report he wrote on an exhibit of Chinese painters at the Bibliothèque nationale – detour is the only method Benjamin adopted in approaching Chinese books and images. Nevertheless, as I will propose here, in developing a critique of ontology that corresponds with Jullien’s, he is likewise drawn to the concept of the Dao about which he otherwise remains largely silent.

The article is divided into four sections, each of which is associated with a term through which Jullien identifies a point where European and Chinese modes of thought diverge from each other; all four sections are organized around a moment in which Benjamin brushes alongside a mediated conception of the Dao.

Transition

Transition literally bores a hole into European thought, reducing it to silence. (Jullien, 2011: 17)

Youth is the time of transition between childhood and adulthood – or so it is generally supposed. If a polemical point could be distilled from a small treatise Benjamin wrote in 1914 or 1915 under the title ‘Metaphysics of Youth,’ it would probably consist in the claim that this preconception of youth is not only wrong, but wrong in such a way that it betrays the very idea of youth. Rather than being a time of transition from a *terminus a quo* to a *terminus ad quem*, youth is always only transitional; in reverse, any transition is youthful. For this reason, in a metaphysics of youth, nothing – least of all a fixed concept of youth as a limited period in life – can function as a principle, for all principles are either starting- or ending-points. Instead of principles, a metaphysics of youth unfolds as a series of images, each of which self-consciously captures a certain transition and, so doing, betrays youth, thus requiring a new image. ‘Metaphysics of Youth’ is thus closer to a ‘moving picture’ than a standard philosophical treatise. Benjamin derives one picture of youth from ‘the Old One,’ that is, Laozi, for he includes the following passage from the penultimate chapter of the *Daodejing* in Richard Wilhelm’s translation, which translates the name ‘Laotzu’ in its title: ‘Neighboring lands may live within visible proximity of each other, such that one can hear on either side the call of roosters and dogs, yet nevertheless the people die at the ripest old age without travelling hither or thither’ (Lao-tse, 1910: 85; see Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 96, cf. Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 424).³ Attentive to the Chinese tradition, Wilhelm places the chapter under the title ‘Independence,’ but his annotations undo this gesture by describing the image of neighboring villages in terms of the ancient Greek concept of ‘the golden age’ (Lao-tse, 1910: 112), which Benjamin, for his part, simply ignores. For Benjamin, by contrast, the image introduces a section of ‘Metaphysics of Youth’ entitled ‘Diary’: just as a youthful diary does not involve narrative continuity from one day to the next, so the two villages remain distant from each other. Those who reach ‘ripe old age’ without ever travelling from one village to the next become representatives of youth, who do not proceed from one ‘stage’ of life to another. Transition – which, again, is just another name for ‘youth’ – is not a

matter of physical movement in homogenous space; rather, it is ‘metaphysical’ *metabolē* without end.

Several years after abandoning ‘Metaphysics of Youth,’ Benjamin wrote a small treatise that announces its transformative intention in its very title: ‘On the Program for the Coming Philosophy.’ And if a single thesis could be distilled from this complex essay, it is probably the following: all European philosophy misrecognizes the basic character of experience, which lies in a sheer continuity. Benjamin’s critique of both Kant and neo-Kantianism follows from this thought. Despite the fact that Cohen (2005) says of the concept of continuity that it is the ‘compass’ of ‘pure thinking,’ which, in turn, generates ‘pure knowledge’ (6: 92–99), Benjamin perceives a decisive lack of continuity in both Kantian and neo-Kantian systems, for both systems understand continuity only as either a ‘regulative’ or ‘generative’ principle but never as the character of experience itself:

In Kant’s work there is a tendency against the division and distribution of experience [*Erfahrung*] into the domains of the individual sciences; and even if later theory of knowledge must deny recourse to experience in the usual sense of the term, which is already the case with Kant, nevertheless, in the interest of the continuity of experience, its presentation as the system of sciences, as neo-Kantianism purports to do, is still lacking; and in metaphysics a possibility must be found to form a pure systematic continuum of experience. Indeed, it seems that the authentic meaning of experience is to be sought here. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 164)⁴

This, then, is the guiding thread for the program for the coming philosophy: experience is ultra-continuous. As such, it must derive from a ‘sphere of total neutrality’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 163) with respect to the distinction between subject and object. Not only are there no such things as ‘things,’ every theory that presupposes the divisibility of experience into objects of knowledge is at bottom ‘mythological’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 161). There is perhaps no more stringent version of anti-ontologism: no object, no subject, no things, and no knower of things either. This means, furthermore, that none of the object-derivative distinctions among the individual sciences, beginning with the distinction between natural and spiritual realms of experience, will have anything to do with the ‘coming philosophy.’

The two lines of arguments for a metaphysics without any of the traditional ontological distinctions – captured through fleeting images in ‘Metaphysics of Youth’ and developed under a systematic order of concepts in ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ – converge in a ‘Supplement’ to the latter:

The meaning of the terminus of the metaphysical, as it has been introduced here, consists precisely in this, that the limit [between philosophy and the sciences] is not objectively present, and the re-naming of ‘experience’ as ‘metaphysics’ means that so-called experience is virtually included in the metaphysical or dogmatic part of philosophy into which the highest cognitive-theoretical, that is, critical part makes a transition [*übergeht*]. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 169)⁵

The only experience, in short, is experience in transition – so much so that ‘experience’ is itself a transitional term, insofar as it suggests a movement of a cognizing agent proceeding out of itself and encountering obstacles thrown up by objects. If, as Jullien suggests,

transition ‘bores a hole into European thought,’ Benjamin’s youthful writings – ‘Youth Remained Silent’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 66) – form a silent drill bit.

Efficacy

[A]nother way of conceiving efficacy . . . is not to reconfigure the situation in an ideal way, in which a plan is made and an aim set up, but to ripen the conditions encountered. (Jullien, 2011: 150)

Benjamin published very few directly ‘political essays’ (1995–2000, 2: 101), and only one of a series of essays that he conceived under this rubric in the early 1920s ever made its way into print, namely ‘Toward the Critique of Violence.’⁶ As a prolegomenon to a coming politics, it explicitly opposes the ‘activist’ program promoted by Kurt Hiller and replaces ‘activism’ with a concept of non-action that expresses itself in the ‘proletarian general strike’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 193), which is to be distinguished from its ‘political’ counterpart. ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’ develops out of a series of inquiries into the concept of action that Benjamin wrote in the late 1910s, one of which is particularly pertinent to his attempt to distinguish one form of mass strike from another. Drawing on a phenomenological vocabulary he learned through his reading of Husserl’s treatises and participation in Moritz Geiger’s seminars, Benjamin began to sketch a theory of action that draws a categorial distinction between the first and second intention of any given action. Whereas the first intention of an action lies in its goal, the second intention intensifies the former intention ‘to the point where the intended correlate . . . falls away’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 6: 54). In this way, an action becomes strangely inactive. In relation to the issue of the mass strike, the distinction functions as follows: a ‘proletarian general strike’ departs from its initially ‘political’ character as soon as its goals do not so much change as intensify to a point where the proposed work stoppage is no longer an action in its own right and becomes, instead, a transformation of action, which does not stop until the form of work changes. This is not because the strike has no goals of its own; rather, it is because the non-action called ‘striking’ is not a means to achieve an end but is, rather, the ‘sign and seal’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 203) of its accomplishment. In this regard, Benjamin’s thought dovetails with Sunzi’s, as described by Jullien:

another way of conceiving efficacy, which we read notably in the *Art of War* of ancient China, is not to reconfigure the situation in an ideal way, in which a plan is made and an aim set up, but to ripen the conditions encountered, even the very ones in which oneself is implicated. In other words, to transform silently the situation engaged with in such a way that it progressively inclines in a favorable direction that this gradual inflection, forming a gradient, will cause the effects to come tumbling down by themselves, therefore indirectly of any desired goal. (Jullien, 2011: 150, cf. Jullien, 2004)

With respect to the question of whether the implicit idea of efficacious non-action that intersects with the broader argument developed in ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’ has anything to do with Benjamin’s studies of Chinese texts, the most accurate answer is probably ‘perhaps.’ While writing ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’ and related political essays, Benjamin was also forging plans for a qualifying dissertation. Among those plans

is a document in which he distinguishes between several ‘kinds of knowing’ (*Arten des Wissens*). The first of the five kinds Benjamin identifies enjoys a degree of renown among students of his work, for it contains a thesis that, when repeated almost *verbatim*, occupies a prominent place in the qualifying dissertation he ultimately wrote: ‘I. The knowing of truth [*Das Wissen der Wahrheit*]. This does not exist. For truth is the death of the *intentio*’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 6: 48). Transferred into the ‘Epistemo-Critical Preface’ to the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Benjamin, 1972–91, 1: 216), this proposition is methodologically precise, for it ‘criticizes’ cognition by describing its limit; at the same time, however, it loses its intimate relationship to the other four kinds of knowing, especially the fourth kind, which includes a striking reference to the concept of the Dao:

IV. Determinative Knowing [*Das bestimmende Wissen*]. This, namely action-determinative knowing, does exist. It is, however, determinative not as ‘motive’ but, rather, by virtue of its linguistic structure. The linguistic moment in morality is connected to knowing. It’s certain that this knowing, which determines action, leads to silence. It is therefore not teachable. This action-determinative knowing may have a close affinity with the concept of the Dao. By contrast, it is strictly opposed to knowing in the form of the Socratic doctrine of virtue. For the latter motivates the action; it does not determine the agent. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 6: 48–9)

Insofar as the agents whose actions are determined by knowing are unable to represent either themselves or their actions in terms of motivations or goals, this kind of knowing tends toward silence. Agents cannot say what they are doing because, in a sense, what they are doing is already done: both action and agent are always already at their end, hence ‘perfect’ in some as yet undefined manner. This suggests a paradox that is the exact inverse of the one Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates in several early dialogues. If, as Socrates claims, no one can knowingly do wrong, then agents are infallible, relative to their particular agency (see, for example, Plato, 509d–e, 382a–c, 412e–413a, and 589c).⁷ The dominant response to this paradox from within the horizon of European philosophy can be found in the seventh book of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle describes a condition he calls *akrasia*, which designates an inability to exercise control over oneself. Agents who are ‘incontinent’ know perfectly well that their actions are wrong but do them anyway, for, while still in their ‘right mind,’ they nevertheless do not govern themselves (see Aristotle, esp. 1146b). The debate between Socrates and Aristotle is the setting for Benjamin’s construction of a concept of action- or agent-determinative knowing. Under the condition that knowing determines action, not only is it impossible for the relevant agent to say what is being done; it is likewise impossible for the agent to suffer ‘weakness of will,’ for it is not the will but, rather, knowing that determines the agent *viz.* action. It is for this reason, moreover, that the only other passage where Benjamin invokes the concept of action- and agent-determinative knowing concerns the intentional structure of ‘conviction [*Überzeugung*]’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 6: 61–2)–which is to say, an attitude or comportment in which *akrasia* is rendered impossible, for any weakening of the will is proof that the agent lacks conviction.

In outlining the character of action- or agent-determinative knowing, Benjamin draws attention to the concept of the Dao presumably because it could propel an inquiry into the structure of action beyond the sphere circumscribed by the Socratic doctrine of virtue and the Aristotelian concept of *akrasia*. This, though, did not happen. Or it does not

happen immediately. Even as Benjamin transforms his claim that ‘truth is the death of the *intentio*’ into a cornerstone of the critique of cognition with which he would preface his *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, he postpones its practico-critical counterpart.

Adaptation

Let us remember that ancient Chinese theater did not compose an epic or a theater, a staging of the event: it sacrificed its exceptionality for a constant *adaptation to the moment*. (Jullien, 2011: 127)

Benjamin’s studies of Chinese texts were neither constant nor straightforward. Not only did he conduct them all in translation; they also occurred sporadically. He was particularly engaged with Chinese texts in the early 1910s, probably prompted Gustav Wyneken, who often emphasizes the importance of Chinese classics as compendia of political philosophy that are far more valuable than Western political theory (see, for example, Wyneken, 1902), and then again, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, when he read a large number of texts related to China, including the exposition of ‘Chinese religion’ that Jan Jakob Maria de Groot conducted under an awkward neologism, ‘universism,’ which was his idiosyncratic translation of Dao.⁸ Benjamin’s reference to this concept in his brief account of the fourth kind of knowing is indebted at least in part to de Groot’s treatise. Around the time he probably wrote ‘Kinds of Knowing’ he asked another Dutch sinologist – de Groot had recently died – whether he would write an essay on the ‘spirit of Chinese language’ for a journal he hoped to edit under the title *Angelus Novus* (see Benjamin, 1995–2000, 2: 191).⁹ As the plans for the journal collapsed, Benjamin’s China studies went into abeyance. In *One-Way Street*, written several years later, he proposes several ‘techniques’ for literary productivity, including the following recommendation: ‘Keep your pen aloof from inspiration [*Eingebung*], and it will attract it with the force of magnets. The more calmly you delay writing down an initial thought, the riper will it be when it surrenders itself’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 4: 106). A ripening of this kind occurs with his studies of China, which were galvanized by two opposing forces: the posthumously published writings of Franz Kafka, especially *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* (see Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 676); and the work of Bertolt Brecht, especially his theory and practice of ‘epic theater.’ And in the early 1930s Benjamin’s China studies metamorphosed under the rubric of two ancient Greek terms, *mimesis* and *technē*: in the context of the first, he elaborates a concept of agent-determinative knowing; in the context of the second, he elucidates its action-determinative counterpart.

In 1919, Benjamin read the following description of the Dao:

Acting like the universe is adaptation to the universe [*Anpassung an das Weltall*], and since the universe is excellent in the highest degree, its imitation is virtue. . . . The ideal aim of human perfection is complete assimilation [*Angleichung*] to the Dao of heaven. (de Groot, 1918: 56–7)

In response to this and other passages from *Universism*, Benjamin wrote a letter to a close friend in which he acknowledges de Groot’s expertise but faults the treatise as antiquated and ahistorical (see Benjamin, 1995–2000, 2: 11). Certain elements of

'universism' stayed with him, however, and they ripened into a program of research around the basic concepts through which de Groot sought to describe in detail the elements of Daoist doctrine: adaptation to the cosmos, imitation of the universe, assimilation to the Dao of heaven. Thus, sometime in the early 1930s, Benjamin wrote a fragment entitled 'Moment of Birth' in which he presents astrology as a misguided attempt to capture something of this doctrine at its fringes:

Astrology is a late theory that stands askew to that early praxis whose data it arbitrarily and often erroneously interprets. It is not concerned with the influence of the stars or forces but, rather, with an archaic capacity of the human being to liken itself to the state of the stars at a certain hour: the hour of birth; in it, the first, incomparably wide-ranging act of adaptation may have happened: adaptation to the entire cosmos through assimilation to it [*Anpassung an den gesamten Kosmos durch die Angleichung an ihn*]. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 976)

In this way, de Groot's exposition of Daoism forms the nucleus of the 'complete prolegomena for every rational astrology' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 6: 193). The moment of birth is of importance because it is the only moment in which one is altogether exposed to the universe, for no defense mechanisms have yet been established. Astrology, however, according to Benjamin, misunderstands the mimetic character of this exposure insofar as it sees itself as a science of 'influences.'

Benjamin expands the thoughts presented in 'The Moment of Birth' through a series of proto-essays that develop its cardinal claim: 'adaptation to the entire cosmos [is] through assimilation to it.' The ability to act-like is 'the mimetic capacity,' while assimilation to the cosmos expresses itself in the recognition of similarities. In 'The Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Capacity' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 204–13), Benjamin explores a 'circle of life' that is both like and unlike the 'sphere of total neutrality' proposed some 15 years earlier – 'like' because this circle knows no distinction between subject and object; 'unlike' because Benjamin no longer grasps the shape of this sphere through the terminology of European metaphysics. Instead of proposing a neutral sphere as the nucleus of the coming philosophy, Benjamin acknowledges a contracting circle: 'as is known,' he writes near the beginning of 'The Doctrine of the Similar,' 'the circle of life that formerly seemed to be governed by the law of similarity was much larger. It was the microcosm and the macrocosm, to name only one version of many that the experience of similarity found in the course of history' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 205). The fact that the circle in which the law of similarity held sway has contracted does not mean that it has left no traces – or, indeed, that the power of mimesis has itself diminished. 'On the Mimetic Capacity' accordingly begins by emphasizing its persistence, even if its indices are also constantly changing:

The gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become like and conduct oneself alike. The human being possesses no higher function that is not co-determined by the mimetic capacity. This capacity, however, has a history in the phylogenetic and ontogenetic sense. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 210)

Without directly invoking any of the major concepts of his earlier writings, Benjamin's inquiries into the mimetic capacity can nevertheless be seen as extensions of the thoughts

pursued in 'Metaphysics of Youth' under a double ban: he will not speak of youth, and he will substitute an anthropological agenda for a metaphysical one. These changes accord with a materialist orientation, but they are also simply novel ways of denying that human beings are destined toward something like 'adulthood.' For the mimetic compulsion is never mastered; it is only ever transformed. Human beings are special only because of their heightened capacity for mimesis, not for their putative ability to act autonomously. This is especially true of language, which seems as though it is free of mimeticism via the so-called arbitrary character of the signifier. 'On the Mimetic Capacity' seeks to show that this is erroneous: language – including written language – is an archive of 'non-sensuous similarities,' where 'non-sensuous' does not mean what it generally means in European metaphysics, namely 'intelligible' or a priori; rather, the term indicates that similarities can no longer be sensed because of certain epochal alterations in the mimetic capacity. One of his examples is the Hebrew letter *beth*, in which the skeleton of a house is still discernible (see Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 208). He says nothing in this context about Chinese script; but this is probably because in the case of written language similarities, as he notes, are always entangled with semantics. Since he could not identify the meaning of Chinese scripts but had a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, he chooses the latter rather than the former for an example of the manner in which writing archives similarities that would otherwise succumb to oblivion. Being able to retrieve non-sensuous similarities is thus less a personal gift than a program of study that would belong to a 'universism' that, unlike de Groot's, acknowledges the historical character of the – natural, human, social, technical – universe.

Technology accords with a transformed 'universism' under the condition that a first technology be distinguished from a second one. The etymon of *technology*, like that of *Technik*, is of course *technē*, which designates an 'art' or 'skill' that attests to the know-how of an 'artist' – a blacksmith, for instance, who makes the equipment required for a successful sacrifice to Athena (see *Odyssey*, book 3, l. 433). Every 'technology' is, in other words, a function of a certain action-determinative knowing. Benjamin's innovation in the early 1930s consists in distinguishing between two modes of such know-how. Having largely purged his vocabulary of phenomenological terms – probably in response to Heidegger, who made phenomenology unpalatable – he no longer describes a first and second intention. Instead, he simply distinguishes between the first and the second technology. The relation between the first and second phases of the intentional structure remains the same: when the first technology 'fall[s] away,' the second unconsciously emerges: 'The origin of the second technology lies in the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 7: 359). 'Play' (*Spiel*) here is defined by the absence of a goal beyond its performance. The disclosure of the intentional structure of the second technology follows from this insight:

It should be noted that 'mastery over nature' can be designated as the goal of the second technology only in the most questionable way; it is so designated only from the standpoint of the first technology. The intention of the first technology really is directed at the mastery of nature; the intention of the second, by contrast, is directed at the interplay [*Zwischenspiel*] between nature and humanity. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 7: 359)

As in the earlier phenomenology of action, so in the theory of technology, the falling-away of the consciously intended goal is a consequence of its intensification. Only in the case of an 'advanced' technology does the second technology disclose itself as such. One such case, as Benjamin argues, can be found in the filmic apparatus, which – when left to its own devices, so to speak – provides a lesson for filmmakers, film-actors, and film-audiences alike. What all of them come to understand is that humanity adapts itself not so much to its competitive environment in accordance with some vaguely Darwinian notion, as to the natural-technical forces that manifest themselves when the goal of the first technology falls away – which means, in effect, when the presumption of mastering nature is defeated:

Acquaintance with this [the filmic] apparatus teaches human beings that subjugation in service of the apparatus will cede a place for liberation through the apparatus only when the constitution of humanity has adapted itself to the new productive forces that the second technology discloses. (Benjamin, 1972–91, 7: 360)

Benjamin saves the major consequence of this complicated claim for an associated footnote: 'It is the goal of revolutions to accelerate this adaptation' (1972–91, 7: 360).

Can the theory of revolution Benjamin briefly sketches in 'The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' be characterized as Daoist – or perhaps better, as Marxist-Daoist? Perhaps not, especially if the term Daoist is applicable only to a doctrine that derives from direct knowledge of the *Daodejing* along with other classics of Daoist thought. Nevertheless, as Benjamin's notes to the theory of revolution outlined in the 'Artwork' essay suggest, the idea of accelerated adaptation to the new forces of production derives from the very same sources as his inquiries into the mimetic capacity: 'these [language and dance] lie in mimesis as the ur-phenomenon of artistic activity,' he writes in a series of closely related notes, adding the following in parentheses: 'the oldest imitation knows at first only a single material in which it forms, namely the body of the imitator. Music and dance (lip- and bodily-gesture) are the first manifestations of mimesis' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 7: 666, cf. 7: 368).¹⁰ After crossing out these notes, he writes instead: 'It is the goal of the revolutions to accelerate this. The living body liberated through the liquidation of the first technology [*Es ist das Ziel der Revolutionen, dies zu beschleunigen. Der durch die Liquidation der ersten Technik befreite Leib*]' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 7: 666) – where 'this' may refer either to adaptation to the new productive forces or to the emancipation of the living body through the falling-away of technology's first intention. There is no real referential ambiguity, however, for the new forces of technology are 'new' precisely because they are not governed by the goal of gaining mastery over nature.

Far from being an interruption or break, revolution under the optic of agent- and action-determinative knowing – which is to say, mimesis and technē – becomes purely transitional. Benjamin signals as much by presenting revolution as an 'acceleration,' which in its classical Newtonian formulation can be represented only by continuous functions. Benjamin goes so far as to adapt Newton's second law of motion, 'f = ma,' so that it suits his own purposes. 'Force' becomes the forces of production, whose efficacy is disclosed by a second-order technology directed at the interplay between

humanity and nature; ‘mass’ becomes the proletarian masses, who are distinguished from ‘compact masses’ (Benjamin, 1972–91, 7: 370) by virtue of their constitutive diffusion; and ‘acceleration’ becomes revolution, whether or not outside observers – who go by such names as ‘politicians’ and ‘historians’ – recognize it as such. There is nothing about revolutions, so conceived, that requires notice or noise. To adopt a telling phrase from *The Silent Transformations*, the course of a revolution does not revolve around a dramatic event, captured in the Aristotelian concept of *peripeteia*; it consists, rather, in ‘constant adaptation to the moment’ (Jullien, 2011: 127) – under the premise, of course, that the word *moment* can be properly distinguished from *event*. The possibility of this distinction leads to a further reflection on what ‘transformation’ may mean beyond its suggestion that one ‘form’ leads to another.

Transformation qua Gestation

Yet this concept of silent transformations will never (should I admit it?) become a concept as we might desire it to be. (Jullien, 2011: 156)

In the passage from *The Silent Transformations* where Jullien speaks of ‘constant adaptation,’ the term *moment* is distinguished from *event* by virtue of its generality: an event is an exceptional moment, unique unto itself, whereas every moment is just like any other moment. This is a slender conceptual skeleton, to be sure; but only such a structure, for Jullien, would be commensurate with what he seeks to accomplish. The aim in *The Silent Transformations* does not lie in the exposition of a solid architectonic constructed out of fiercely independent concepts; rather, he seeks to induce in European thought a quasi-concept that its representatives have hitherto missed. This is signaled, above all, by the title of the tenth and final chapter of the treatise: ‘Of the Concept Which is Lacking–Historical-Strategic-Political.’ The concept in question is, of course, that of ‘the silent transformations,’ borrowed from Wang Fuzhi, who applied it to the seemingly noisy, abrupt, and disruptive foundation of the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE. Without drawing attention to what he is doing – this, too, conforms to the theme of his study – Jullien seeks to accomplish in the early 21st century a reversal of what Chinese scholars did in the late 19th century. The latter introduced a concept that was lacking in the Chinese language, namely a concept of time akin to that which the Greeks called *chronos*: ‘from the late nineteenth century, upon encountering Western thought, the Chinese have translated ‘time’ as the ‘between-moments’ [*entre-moments*] (*shi-jian* in Chinese; *ji-kan* in Japanese)’ (Jullien, 2011: 102).

Chronos is only one of the terms for ‘time’ in ancient Greek; *kairos* is another. Whereas the moments that make up *chronos* can perhaps be called ‘abstract’ and ‘homogeneous,’ a moment that would be categorized as *kairos* must be ‘opportune’ or ‘fortuitous.’ Nowhere in *The Silent Transformations* does Jullien devote any attention to *kairos*; but this is doubtless only because he had already done so in another treatise, specifically *A Treatise on Efficacy*, where he first introduces Wang Fuzhi’s concept of ‘the silent transformations’ (see Jullien, 2004: 79). Such transformations, Jullien argues, should not be seen as kairoic, for the concept of time qua *kairos* is only the inversion of the concept of time qua *chronos*: the latter is rational, the former is irrational; one is an

everlasting stream of one moment succeeding another, while the other is either one great dramatic success or a correspondingly tragic failure. Because of their structural homology, neither concept captures the deep structure of the change that takes place in any silent transformations. For this is, indeed, the issue: there is such depth to the transformation in question that it must be silent; if anyone were to perceive it directly, it would be known by this very fact that the change was not deep enough, hence not genuinely transformative. Jullien is particularly keen on unearthing the deep structure in the following passage, also drawn from the final chapter:

The merit of the concept of silent transformation . . . is that it sets us free from theo-teleological constructions and otherwise recomposes, in a non-metaphysical way, the relation between the visible and the invisible. Let us then reconfigure the relation between the two: transformation is gestation and stands for a condition; the event, as I have said, emerges on the surface. (Jullien, 2011: 142)

From this image of surface and depth Jullien constructs an historico-political-strategic concept that is lacking in European thought – and this despite the fact that European thought is far from lacking images of surface and depth, including in some of its major metaphysical concepts, such as the Latin translation of *ousia* as *substantia* and the German translation of *ratio* as *Grund*. Nothing here should be construed as a criticism of Jullien's procedure; but the image of surface and depth cannot fail to invoke vertical axiomatics that are not only spatial but always also historical, strategic, and especially political. The deepest is the highest, and as for what can be perceived of the depths, this can be at most a subtle sign. Would Parmenides or Heraclitus disagree? In any case, it may be valuable to consider another fragile concept of transformation that does not express itself in vertical imagery. Such is Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit*, which literally means 'now-time' and could also be translated as 'moment' or perhaps even as 'between-moments.' Among readers of his work, the term is generally connected with 'On the Concept of History,' where it stands in direct contrast to 'homogenous and empty time' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 1: 701). But this is not the only place in his work where he finds an opportunity to use this word. In a series of commentaries he wrote in the 1930s on a selection of Brecht's poems, *Jetztzeit* is linked with gestation, specifically the gestation of the poet himself, whose poem 'Vom armen B. B.' (About Poor B. B.) recalls the transitory circumstances of his pregnant mother. In commenting on the last words of B. B.'s poem, which speak of being in earlier time – 'in meiner Mutter in früher Zeit' (in my mother in earlier time) – Benjamin identifies the basis for the time-lag that can in retrospect be understood not only as the structure of the poem but as the 'time' of its subject-matter as well: 'the connection with the *Jetztzeit* must have been missed' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 554).¹¹ For this reason, B. B. acquires the epitaph 'poor.' For the same reason, though, as Benjamin explains at the conclusion to his commentary, a certain kind of action-less beginning can be made: 'The one who best stands for a cause' – the 'cause' (*Sache*) in this case is that of class struggle – 'is the one who begins by letting herself go' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 554). Without directly addressing a single element of classical Chinese thought, this conclusion to a commentary on a poem about the gestation of an exiled German poet stands as a striking résumé of what Jullien (2004) undertakes to explain in *A Treatise on Efficacy*.

The last of Benjamin's commentaries on Brecht's poems makes the connection to the concept of the Dao explicit, moreover, for it concerns a poem about another gestation—not that of a writer in his mother's womb but of a text written in a time and place of transition. The writer is Laozi, and the text is the *Daodejing*. In commenting on 'Legende von der Entstehung des Buch Taoteking auf dem Wege des Lao-tse in die Emigration' (Legend of the Emergence of the *Daodejing*, as Laozi Made his Way into Emigration), Benjamin does not use the term *Jetztzeit*; but the concept of a transformation that appears as lag time or time lag permeates his commentary, for such is the time, according to the legend, during which Laozi wrote the *Daodejing*. The timing of Benjamin's commentary is itself an element of the commentary, which is also the first publication of Brecht's poem – in an April 1939 Sunday edition of a Swiss newspaper.¹² Why does Laozi stop for a while on his way into exile, during which time he transforms his thoughts into writing? Benjamin's answer, drawn from the poem, is this: he does not write the *Daodejing* during the lag time at a border crossing for any prospect of gain, nor does he entertain any warm feelings of camaraderie or fellow humanity; he writes during his 'down time' only out of an almost infinitely distant 'friendliness,' which he first demonstrates by giving the customs officer overseeing his passage a specimen of his sagacity: 'That the soft water in movement/Vanquishes, with time, the mighty stone' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 572).¹³ All the points of Benjamin's China studies gather around this image of a silent transformation, that gestures toward an even more silent transformation qua gestation. With help from Jullien's abundant store of quasi-concepts, readers of this commentary on a poem about the gestation of Daoism can discern the inner workings of that enigmatically 'weak messianic force' to which Benjamin famously refers at the beginning of his final reflections in 'On the Concept of History' (1972–91, 1: 694).

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Notes

1. The translation of passages from *The Silent Transformations* is occasionally modified on the basis of Jullien (2009).
2. The only discussion of Benjamin in Jullien's work (so far as I know) occurs in a brief passage concerning the concept of the aura in Jullien (2018: 62–3).
3. A literal translation of the title Richard Wilhelm used for his translation of the *Daodejing* would be: 'The Book by the Old One about Meaning and Life.' In his introduction, Wilhelm reiterates that 'Lao-tse' is a description ('old man') rather than a proper name (see Lao-tse, 1910: iv).
4. I am reading the phrase '*wie sie der Neukantianismus gibt*' as '*wie sie der Neukantianismus vorgibt*'. The point of the sentence is that the Marburg school pretends to provide a systemic continuum of experience, but it is '*mangelhaft*' nevertheless.
5. A more thorough examination of the idea of transition in Benjamin would begin perhaps with this observation in his complementary essay on language of the same period in which translation (*Übersetzen*) consists in continuous transformation: 'Translation is leading over [*Überführung*] of one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Continua of transformations . . . traverses translation' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 151).

6. See my introduction to Benjamin (2021).
7. Socrates' dictum functions as a fulcrum of Benjamin's argument in the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (see Benjamin, 1972–91, 1: 402); this, too, indicates that 'Kinds of Knowing' was an element in the composition of his qualifying dissertation.
8. For further references see Fenves (2018: esp. 41–8) and cf. Jullien (1995: 278).
9. The other Dutch sinologist was Henri Borel, whose *Weisheit und Schönheit aus China* includes a small treatise that advertises itself as a 'fantasy' prompted by the concept of *wu wei* (Borel, 1898: 75–135).
10. The quotation is modified in accordance with my reading of the original note, as reproduced in Benjamin (2012: 148).
11. There may be something of an 'in-joke' here, although the issue at hand circa 1939 is no laughing matter: ten years earlier, Benjamin and Brecht had convened a working group for the purpose of 'shattering Heidegger' (Benjamin, 1995–2000, 3: 522), presumably his *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*). A shard of this plan is perhaps discernible in Benjamin's commentary on 'Of Poor B. B.,' the final words of which, 'in earlier time,' are concerned not so much with being-in-the-world as pre-being-in-the-world, from which several modes of poverty, including the poverty of philosophy, can be read. Benjamin prefaces his remarks to Scholem about 'shattering Heidegger' with a brief report on the disposition of his Brecht commentaries.
12. Neither the poem nor the commentary could appear, of course, in Nazi Germany, which had recently absorbed Austria. For illuminating discussions of the circumstances in which Benjamin's commentary appeared in an April 1939 number of *Schweizer Zeitung am Sonntag*, see Wizisla (2016: esp. 138–9) and Kambas (1999).
13. Among those in exile who first heard Brecht's poem, the lines drawn from the *Daodejing* concerning the defeat of the mighty stone by the soft water, 'rang in their ears' with a 'promise that was nothing less than messianic. And for the present-day reader it contains not only a promise but a lesson' (Benjamin, 1972–91, 2: 572). 'Present-day' cannot mean the day in the spring of 1939 on which Benjamin wrote the word 'present-day,' since the 'mighty stone,' understood as Nazi Germany, was far from defeated; rather, 'present-day' functions as an adjectival form of *Jetztzeit*, while the image of the mighty stone encompasses any oppressive force in its apparently intractable concreteness.

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