



## THE RADIOPHONIC EXPERIENCES OF WALTER BENJAMIN IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC (1929-1933)

IRAY CARONE<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** – Writings of Walter Benjamin for radio during the Weimar Republic (1929-1933) to children education were discovered in the 60's and reveal to us his Hörspiele, Hörsmodelle, Funkspiele, catastrophes narratives, infantile stories, etc. The author had no radio theory but was intending to give another function to radio as educator, in a Marxist sense, in order to explore its esthetical and political potentialities. We are comparing the Benjamin's view of the radio with the radio theory of Theodor W. Adorno, in the period that is remembered as the 'radio days'. In fact, the differences between Adorno and Benjamin are rather based in their different objects of analysis – the radio music (Adorno) and the oral narratives by means of the radio (Benjamin). Besides the radio experiments of Benjamin, his assertions about the cinema and photography are extremely important for esthetical evaluations of art and technology relationship.

**KEYWORDS** – Benjamin radio experiments to children education, music in radio, Theodor W. Adorno radio theory, cultural industry, art and technology relationship.

Discoveries of Walter Benjamin's writings, published for the first time in Germany in 1985, under the title of *Aufklärung für Kinder*<sup>2</sup>, broadcasted by some radio station of Berlin and Frankfurt during the Weimar Republic (1929-1933), has allowed learning about several modalities – Hörspiele, Hörsmodelle, Funkspiele, infantile stories, narratives of catastrophes, radiophonic conferences, etc. – that he used and/or invented to reach and to educate a young public, in the attempt to 're-function' the radio in the brechtian sense; in other words, to explore their aesthetic and political potentialities.

These typed writings that were kept in his apartment in Paris, were confiscated by the Germans during the occupation and they were in the Gestapo files. After the liberation, in February of 1945, the Gestapo dossiers had to be destroyed quickly, but the files of Benjamin were rescued, by chance, due to an action of sabotage by the editor of a German newspaper – *Pariser Tageszeitung* – whose copies were put in the same folder of the Benjamin files. Sent to Russia, they were repatriated by GDR in 1960, together with many other documents, museums and libraries, now a part of *Akademie der Künste*, in Berlin.

The children and youths never were priorities in the communications of the radio, because of the difficulties of a technical medium without the support of visual images to transform them in captive listeners. But we should remember that the infantile stories were always written to be told by somebody, whose ability should stimulate the imagination to supply the lack of images and the mental concentration through a partially dramatized oral narrative. So much so, it is true that children like these stories to be told and told again several times, but not admitting that the storyteller alters them. They are, in this sense, better and more demanding listeners than the adults. If the oral narrative and the community of listeners link began to lose its place after the romance, could the radio not resuscitate one, as much as the other? This seems to have been the intention of Benjamin.

The radio builds, without a doubt, a world without images, and its voice is an artificial voice, because of the technical reproduction of the sound waves. Let us also remember that the radio, in the times of Benjamin, was a potent way without rival means to divide the receiving public's attention. The conquest of the omnipresence by the radio allowed its voice to be heard, in the same interval of time, by millions of listeners of different places - no technology until then had reached this fantastic power. Besides, the radio induces a strong sensation of reality because of the despicable difference between emission and reception – the temporary simultaneity – giving the impression that the announcer is speaking live, in real time, *about things happening*. A potential danger of the radio – the one of forming crowds – was demonstrated by the dramatization of the *War of the worlds* by Orson Welles, in *the Mercury Theatre* in 1938. The listeners changed, suddenly, from participating extras of a play without itinerary in the stage of the streets, facing a supposed invasion of Martians on the Earth.

His radiophonic 'walks' – emitted in a very distant time – maintain, however, a notable freshness for the reader today. In 1932, there was the diffusion of the most famous radiophonic play of Benjamin – *Radau um Kasperl*<sup>3</sup> – that tells the noisy confusions of the Punchinello Kasperl facing the microphone of the radio, as a type of presentation of the new media of communication to the small-listeners. Kasperl had left house in the morning to buy fish in the market, but was confronted by a radio announcer. He says to him: *'What are those small cages that you have? Are they to trap mice?'* Answers the announcer: *'They are the microphones, Punchinello. You will speak now in one of them'*. He asks again: *'What will happen then?'* Answer: *'We will hear you in the whole world'*. However, the origin of the

confusions is that Punchinello, saying three or four rude 'truths' against his friend Seppl before the microphone, they were heard everywhere. It provokes a tumult in the radio station, that it is forced to cut the transmission from the air. Fearing for the consequences, he begins to run to several attractive places for children (the fair, the circus, the zoo, etc.), until returning very bruised to his house, without the fish ordered by the woman. This piece was especially written for the radio in the spirit of *Hörspiele*. The sonoplasty was produced for the children to guess the things and the places where the confusions of Kasperl would be happening.

The sound resonant files were almost all lost, remaining the texts dictated by Benjamin to a secretary, that he later corrected to attend the demands of the radiophonic transmission. His first experience of the radio was told in a small article under Detlef Holz's pseudonym – *Auf die Minute*<sup>4</sup> – in which he tells the panic he suffered when making a mistake about the time he disposed to do his reading, confusing minutes with seconds. Like this, glancing at the seconds display of the studio, judged that he had only four minutes and began to cut large part of his text, going soon to the end. However, noticing that he made a mistake, removed the text that had already put in the pocket of his coat and carried on the reading.

He regretted his relative failure before the microphone for having left some minutes suspended, without reading, supposing that he had run out of available time. However, his friends, who had heard the transmission, confused that reading lapse with a technical defect of the radio apparel. Two things were learned through this experience: the time in the radio has to be absolutely controlled in minutes and seconds (as the space is controlled in the newspaper), otherwise there might be an intervention, cut by the station; the best way to represent an invisible and abstract audience is not thinking that one is speaking to thousands or millions of listeners, but just one.

Another interesting point of the radiophonic inventions of Benjamin is the narratives of natural catastrophes and the histories of swindlers aiming at children<sup>5</sup>. The earthquake of Lisbon, Herculano's fall and Pompeia because of the eruption of the Mount Vesuvius, the tragedy provoked by the flood of the Mississippi river in 1927, the farces of Cagliostro, the behaviour of alcoholic drinks smugglers to dribble the Prohibition in the United States, the process against the witches, the gypsies' history, the history of the Bastille prison and of the 'iron mask', Caspar Hauser's history, the stories with base in the extraordinary jugglings of stage of Enrico Rastelli and to the double-dealings with philately, etc. They are told in sharp

contrast of what has been said and repeated regarding those events and people. In this sense, they are aimed for adults also.

The question regarding these narratives of catastrophes is that they seem to be *terror stories* for children. The world vision that is offered them is not anything like '*la vie en rose*', without a happy end to counterbalance the tragic sense. In the histories of double-dealings there is a touch of sympathy of Benjamin for the swindlers: it seems that, under cover, it is him who was having fun with the running abouts of their *down by law* characters' life.

For this reason, it is necessary to know the aesthetic and political potentialities of the means of technical reproduction for them to serve to the enlightening of the masses and not be subdued by the logic of the capitalist market. In the case of Benjamin, through his radiophonic experiments, for the *Aufklärung für Kinder*.

In the counterpoint to ideas of Benjamin about these potentialities, we have to consider the theory of the radio of Theodor W. Adorno<sup>6</sup>, developed during his participation in the so called *The Princeton Radio Research Project*, from 1938 to 1941. Actually, the point where the differences between Benjamin and Adorno stand out refer to the objects: the first is about the oral narrative of the radio and the second, about the music in the radio.

For Adorno, the technological characteristics in the radiophonic apparatus alter the quality of the music by it transmitted and they impede the aesthetic experience of contact, above all with the serious music. In this case, the noxious effects reflect on the listener of the radio, whose audition becomes inattentive, atomistic and regressed, in other words, unable of structural listening of serious music. In the case of the popular music, the *plugging* of the radio is a high pressure machine to create successes, so that it is completely inadequate to suppose that the listener chooses the music spontaneously that become *hits* or success songs. This manipulation is not noticed by the listener himself because the radio knows to operate very well in the conditioning of their ears in the conscious and unconscious levels. Only the field research can reveal this conditioning when becoming conscious of the backstage of the production of successes. Since the music became *big business*, there is no ignoring of their production methods, reproduction and distribution, in which the radio has an effective role. Every business implies in production costs and the goal is, without any doubt, to obtain a return that increases profits to the invested capital. As the only form of publicity of the music is made by playing it several times, its repetition – the *plugging* or *rotation* – for the radio it is

the main advertising resource used for the product to enter in the ears of the listener until he leaves whistling its melody thereabout or humming its lyrics as if it was a letter written especially for him. The 'our music' – as say the lovers – seems to guess the more intimate feelings of the listeners expressing them better than they could have done it. However, it is obvious that it is part of a commercial game that little or nothing has to do with the individualities of the listeners. It is part of the pseudo-individuation of the popular song, in the sense that Adorno lent the expression to characterize the illusion it provoked.

The popular music includes its own *plugging* through the refrain that not only helps in the memorization by the repetition, as gives title to it. For this reason, practically there is no popular music without refrain, which acts as a commercial *jingle* in it inserted: its propaganda to be recorded in the mind. Adorno's criticism are driven, without a doubt, towards cultural industry of the music and measurement of the radio in the process of total occupation of the cultural space by the commercial music and at the same time, its centrifugal force for the displacement of the musical works with characteristics truly artistic for the outlying margins of this space. Or then, of the process of cannibalization of the artistic music that destroys the structure in the same moment in which they are divulged by the radio. Because the listening to it in this channel to is, actually, a *non-listening listening*: an inattentive, distracted, disconcentrated and atomistics where the music is reduced to a background for other activities of the listener. This pattern of listening determined by the radio technology is a form of hearing perception that commits the aesthetic effects of the reception and impedes the listener of structural hearing of the music – quite dismal effect when considering reception of serious music.

There is a point of difference among Benjamin and Adorno that deserves the attention: Benjamin pretended to refunctionalize the radio in the manner of Brecht, in other words, to politicize the art through his radiophonic experiments just as Brecht's didactic and political theater. However, for Adorno<sup>7</sup>, the art engaged like this is not autonomous art, but political propaganda of a left wing party that instrumentalizes it. The true work of art already possesses inherent political content – her *Wahrheitsgehalt* – and has autonomy as art. To affirm this is not to postulate his total estrangement of the existing reality – the 'pure' art or the art for the art – because it shelters the real world inside itself. Its political function is inherent to itself. Let us remember, for this purpose, of an episode that surrounded the North American war against Iraq, after the terrorist attacks on *World Trade Center Towers* in 2001. The generals

under George Bush presidency were gathered to decide about the war based on the accusation that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. This in a living room in which a reproduction of the mural *Guernica* of Picasso was exposed<sup>8</sup>. Symptomatically, they covered it entirely with a dark blue curtain. Would it be that showing that work of art of 1937 was extremely uncomfortable, for the power of truth that carried with itself, in an hour of military decision? In fact, per a report of Picasso in an interview, a German official of Gestapo in 'visit' to his studio in Paris asked him if he had painted that picture, after seeing its reproduction on a postcard, and Picasso answered: '*No! You made it.*'

The theoretical study of Adorno and the radiophonic inventions of Benjamin seem to have only historical value as precursory approaches of the sciences of the communication in the era of the radio. Without a doubt, today the radio cannot compete with new more potent and diversified technologies; we can remember, however, that these analyses, together and maintaining their differences, showed us that the technology can be used for the production of works of art, as well as to supply the market with the workmanships of the cultural industry. It is also necessary to punctuate that the concept of cultural industry was not shaped except between 40 and 44, by Adorno and Horkheimer, and it was not part of aesthetics of Benjamin, concentrated in discovering the aesthetic and political potentialities of the technological means of the radio, cinema and photography<sup>9</sup>. In the industry of the entertainment, sustained by capitalist organizations, those measurements worked, without any doubt, much more for the cultural industry than for artistic accomplishments, because they demand great publics destinataries, to cover the costs and to generate profit for the invested capital.

Summarizing the comparison of the writings of Benjamin with the theory of the radio of Adorno and the aesthetic and political subjects implicated – that points us to the most general theme of the relationship between art and technique – we affirm that these analyses can be admitted jointly, because they refer to different objects and within different perspectives. The radio-speaker is an agent different from the radio that reproduces in a worn-out way the serious music or the popularization of music standardized by the cultural industry of the music. It is good to observe, however, that Adorno made a lot of radiophonic interventions, above all, in the form of conferences in Germany, in the decades of 50 and 60.

Referring to Walter Benjamin and his radiophonic inventions, the technological mediations of the radio, of the cinema and the photography, they obtained a new dimension through their aesthetic concepts: the today denominated arts post-aura or simply, *art*

*techniques*, show us the possibility and the existence of works of art being produced with the technological reproduction. They are also arts closer to the masses and not captured in the old cult niches and reverence. The radio is a vehicle directed to the masses, the cinema was created to be attended collectively, the photograph has a great number of commercial usefulness in the press, in the illustrated magazines, in the advertising, etc. One cannot dissociate this cultural production of the reproduction technology (microphones, camcorders, photographic cameras, etc.), or from the collective addressees. This peculiar aspect of the cultural production with the direct use of the technology implicates in changes of aesthetic conceptions that, from my viewpoint, are still very marked by the bond with auratic arts, in benjaminian format, in which the reproduction technology is only used *a posteriori* of the originals, so that their copies circulate in the market.

If these mediations, however, they are more easily captured to serve a production and spread of the cultural industry, thanks to the proximity to the receiving masses and the impositions of the capitalist market, the aesthetics of Benjamin lead us to discover, at least, the intrinsic properties of these technologies to enlarge the potencies of the senses and to propitiate new aesthetic experiences. If these potentialities exist, then the technologies do not need to be limited to function for the mere entertainment of the masses and the relationship between art and technique can be reconsidered without prejudices of aesthetic order.

The critical theory of the society, by the examples mentioned above, invented new tracks for the investigation of the technological means, without taking part in what is called *media studies*. These tracks make unusual ways for the constitution of the *critical media studies*, in which art and cultural industry have a central place, but not ignoring the aesthetic potentialities of the reproduction technology and at the same time with the recognition of the limitations imposed by the entertainment industry.

---

## NOTAS

---

<sup>1</sup> Doutora em Filosofia pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP, posteriormente com diploma reconhecido pela Universidade de São Paulo (Usp). Professora do Instituto de Psicologia da Universidade de São Paulo. Versão para o inglês de Katalyn Weiss. Email: iraycarone@uol.com.br.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Baudouin, P. *Au microphone: Dr. Walter Benjamin-Walter Benjamin et la création radiophonique 1929-1933*, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 2009; Mehlman, J. *Walter Benjamin for Children – an essay on his radio days*, The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, W. “Alboroto en torno a títère”, *Obras*, Libro IV/vol 2, Madrid, Abada Editores, 2010, pp.110-127.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, W. “À la minute” *Rastelli raconte et autres récits*, Éditions du Seuil, 1987, pp. 97-101.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, W. *Lumières pour enfants: émissions pour la jeunesse*, Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1988; *Rastelli raconte et autres récits*, Éditions du Seuil, 1987.

---

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, T. W. *Current of music – elements of a radio theory*, Suhrkamp, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, T. W. “Commitment”, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, edited by Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt, Continuum Publishing Co., 1982, pp. 300-318.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, M.B. “Why media aesthetics?” *Critical Inquiry*, n.30, Winter 2004, University of Chicago, pp. 391-395.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, W. “A obra de arte na era da sua reprodutibilidade técnica”, *Benjamin e a obra de arte*, Contraponto, 2012, pp. 9-40.