

# Language, childhood, mimesis – approaching childhood through the works of Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin

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## Abstract

As the title of the paper suggest, in this study I will examine a conceptual constellation that can be complemented by other concepts (idea, voice, image, writing) in addition to those mentioned in the title. Following Walter Benjamin, one could even say that this constellation is in fact nothing other than the idea of childhood. There is no doubt that this approach to childhood leads us toward a concept of childhood that is quite far removed from our everyday conceptions of it. Yet, its significance lies precisely in the problem which I reconstruct in the opening of my paper and which we might briefly call the problem of the crisis of tradition. The author of this paper agrees with those interpreters who look in the figure of the child for elements of a “new barbarism” that can lead us out of this crisis of tradition, but he believes that before we can adopt these elements, we must clarify what childhood is. He therefore undertakes to do so, drawing on the philosophers who have identified or developed the aforementioned problem. As he tries to demonstrate, this exploration leads through the philosophy of language and aims at the concept of transcendental synesthesia that conditions and generates the images of childhood.

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, childhood, language, mimesis

## Introduction

As a starting point for my study, I have chosen Giorgio Agamben's essay *Childhood and History*, in which the Italian philosopher undertakes an archaeological exploration of the concept of experience. Agamben's essay is ultimately prompted by the problematic of the loss of experience diagnosed by Walter Benjamin, which the German critic expounds in his 1933 text *Experience and Poverty*. In this, Benjamin links the fact that “experience has fallen in value” to the world war, one “of the most monstrous events in the history of the world”.

As a result of the experience of war, people “returned from the front in silence”, “[n]ot richer but poorer in communicable experience” (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 731). We also learn that the “completely new poverty” brought about by war is linked to the “tremendous development of technology” and thus does not merely affect our individual experience – the experience of humanity is as (or perhaps more) exposed to its effects as the old man on his deathbed, trying to fool his sons into believing that there is treasure buried in his vineyard (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 731). We can say, then, that the First World War inaugurated a new age: an age of loss and poverty of experience.

### **The problem and concept of experience in Benjamin and Agamben**

But what is the experience? – one might legitimately ask. The legitimacy of our question is guaranteed by the fact that, according to Benjamin, “everyone knew precisely what experience was”, that is, we should experience that experience is what “older people had always passed [...] on to younger ones” (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 731). Let us for a moment overlook what it entails to accept this response/experience and pretend that transmission, that is the essence of experience was not (permanently?, irreparably?) damaged a hundred and ten years ago: if the crisis Benjamin diagnoses is a crisis of transmission and transmissibility of experience, it is not incorrectly stated that “the war has shown that all past knowledge is utterly useless, that tradition itself has been invalidated”. As a result of the “tremendous development of technology”, tradition is rendered impossible, the “authority of age” becomes weightless: “in modern societies, there is no role for the elderly [...], because the world itself is not what the elderly have experienced and have knowledge about. »What they have seen is no more.«” (Kőszeghy, 2024). The latter realization also determines the direction of his response to this epochal (and at the same time unepochal!) crisis: our impoverishment leads not to a longing for new experiences, but to a desire to be free of experience. We must not forget that the advent of the age of experiential poverty makes possible the advent of “a new kind of barbarism”, which in turn offers the possibility of a new beginning: the answer is therefore to introduce a “new, positive concept of barbarism”, which can guide people in the discovery of a “world in which they can make such pure and decided use of poverty – their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty – that it will lead to something respectable” (Benjamin, 2005a, p. 734). If we add to this Nicola Gess's observation that the utopianism of the figure of the child in Benjamin's work must be understood in terms of the “»barbaric« and »primitive« tendencies that children display”, we begin to approach the problem of childhood (Gess,

2010, p. 683). But let us not run so far ahead. First, let's examine how Agamben confronts the situation outlined by Benjamin.

One of the most important questions we can ask in this situation is obviously how much the value of the experience has fallen. Agamben answers this question as follows: there is only one possible experience left for us, and that is the experience of infancy. We must quickly add, however, that in this text he has a very particular conception of childhood, for he sees infancy as the original or *a priori* limit, the transcendental source that conditions and makes possible all historical knowledge (Agamben, 1993, p. 50). In short, infancy is the source of history. I will not attempt to outline how Agamben arrives at this notion, as I cannot do so for reasons of space. For now, I will say that it is basically through his philosophy of language (which is not surprising, given the etymology of "child" or "infant", since we know that *in-fans* means, first of all, "speechless", "mute") and also because – true to its etymology – infancy can be seen, from both a philo- and ontogenetic point of view, as a pre-linguistic state, the grasp of which may lead the philosopher to explore the sphere of pure experience: a sphere that precedes the *linguistic* constitution of the subject (Agamben, 1993, p. 47). However, we must add immediately that, according to Agamben, infancy is not some pre-linguistic psychic substance or reality which – as a result of speech – ceases to exist at a certain point (if Humboldt is right, we cannot speak of such a reality, because there is none). We are closer to the truth if we consider it as an origin co-existing with language, without which the linguistic constitution of the subject is simply unthinkable (Agamben, 1993, p. 48–50). Childhood is thus an origin that is present in every moment of historical languages and that permanently determines the event of anthropogenesis (which is also not some past event that has already taken place) as a constitutive difference that separates man from language. The experience of infancy cannot, therefore, be seen as "an oath of silence or mystical ineffability": if childhood is the origin of anthropogenesis and language, it is not a verdict of silence, but "the vow that commits the individual to speech and to truth" (Agamben, 1993, p. 51). The experience of childhood is indeed the experience of the boundary of language, but at the boundary of language we do not experience silence. But what then?

### **Benjamin's theory of ideas and philosophy of language – some brief reflections**

In his youth, Agamben's master, the previously mentioned Walter Benjamin, wrote an extremely influential essay, entitled *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*. At the beginning of this, he argues that "we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship

to language is an idea" (Benjamin, 2004a, p. 62). So, to get closer to childhood, we must first learn something about Benjamin's concept of idea. Benjamin perhaps develops his rather elusive theory of ideas most systematically in the *Epistemo-Critical Foreword* of his habilitation paper entitled *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, but if we turn to this *Foreword*, we already run into difficulties, for Benjamin states in it that the name is that "being that determines the givenness of ideas". Luckily, he immediately adds that ideas "are given [...] not so much in a primal language as in a primal hearing", but somewhat later he repeats his apparent contradiction by writing that "[t]he idea is something linguistic and, indeed, in the essence of the word it is in each case that moment in which the word is symbol [...]. It is the concern of the philosopher [...] to reestablish in its primacy the symbolic character of the word, wherein the idea comes to a self-understanding that is the opposite of all outwardly directed communication" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 13).

We know from Benjamin that language is not merely a communication of the communicable, but "a symbol of the noncommunicable" (Benjamin, 2004a, p. 74). We also know (from another famous text, *The Task of the Translator*) that languages symbolize the uncommunicable in their development or movement, and that this movement tends towards the pure language – "the messianic end of their history" (Benjamin, 2004b, 257). It is on this remark that Agamben bases his elaboration of the ideas expressed in the *Foreword*, when he writes that the "idea is the purely sayable, which is what is meant by all names, but which no name or concept of a language can reach by itself", so "the linguistic element that belongs to the idea [...] is not simply the name, but the translation, or what is translatable in the name" (Agamben, 2018, p. 69). But this raises a further problem: since we know from Émile Benveniste that of the semantic and semiotic planes of language it is precisely the semiotism of a language (and the names that constitute this plane) that is untranslatable, so it is not surprising that Agamben claims that the totality of languages and names can never reach the idea. This is the reason why pure language is replaced by philosophy, which Plato in the *Phaedo* defines as "the supreme music" and "which takes every language back to its music roots" (Agamben, 2018, p. 70).

I think it is in the light of this replacement that we should read a text by Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty*, which has not yet been discussed. In it, Benjamin argues that the highest manifestation of the mimetic faculty consists in the sensation of nonsensuous similarities (unfortunately, in this text we do not now have the opportunity to examine the nature of this paradoxical "perception"). If we want to grasp this concept, we must turn to the "canon" according to which its meaning can be „at least partly clarified" (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 721). This canon is language,

as it was already known to those who, “under the name of onomatopoeia”, discussed the importance of mimetic attitudes in the formation of language. But there are those who are even more radical and claim that “»[e]very word – and the whole of language [...] is onomatopoeic«” (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 721). Benjamin doesn’t reject this claim but argues for its clarification. In order to specify the program implied by this idea, it is precisely the concept of nonsensuous similarity that can provide us with a point of reference. At this point, Benjamin evokes an image which, if not in its entirety, is almost unchangingly repeated in his writing on *The Task of the Translator*: “For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their center” (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 721). Moreover, this kind of similarity has to do with the written word too, he adds, “[a]nd here is noteworthy that the [written word] – in some cases perhaps more vividly than the spoken word – illuminates, by the relation of its written form to the signified, the nature of nonsensuous similarity” (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 721–722). Returning then to the replacement mentioned by Agamben and Plato, if we read Benjamin’s short text in its light, we must affirm with his Italian disciple that the mimetic element of language which Benjamin describes in the text is none other than the voice (Agamben, 2023, p. 63).

We have arrived from the problem of childhood to the idea and from this to the voice, although when Benjamin writes about his own childhood, he usually does so in the form of thought-images [*Denkbilder*]. Since a clarification of the relation between language and image in the light of Benjamin’s *oeuvre* would require a much longer study, it is not possible to address the question of how we arrive from the voice to the image. One thing is certain: the passage quoted at the end of the previous paragraph has made it clear that nonsensuous similarity is closely linked to the written word.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to a point in Agamben’s interpretation that could serve as a remarkable starting point for an investigation of the relation of the voice to the image. After noting that the mimetic element of language is the voice, Agamben draws attention to a hymn by Cleanthes, in which the philosopher-poet defines hymn as *èchou mimēma*, i.e. an imitation or image of voice (Agamben, 2023, p. 64). In this context, the Italian philosopher draws attention to Nicoletta Di Vita’s important idea that in the hymn language celebrates and says itself [*dice sé stesso*], and the voice is invoked and thought as

the original place of language (this is the reason why certain ancient philosophers, such as Cleanthes, regarded the hymn as the proper form of philosophy). The point is this: if the place of pure language, which alone corresponds to the idea, is taken by the supreme music, then the hymn, the image of the voice and the place where it is manifested, is the form of this music (Agamben, 2023, p. 64). The idea, then, reveals the voice, the place of language and the way in which language takes its most proper place – the way in which language happens. At the border of language we see the voice, we experience the event of language. This transcendental synesthesia is the source of the images that capture Benjamin's childhood.

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