

Reconstructing through manipulation: editing between *dialectical image* and *détournement*

Editing certainly acquires a central role within Benjamin's musings on history. Since *The Word of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* it is possible to detect Benjamin's interest towards cinema's most groundbreaking and characteristic element, i.e. the editing process. The yet-unseen and revolutionary possibilities introduced by this new method of exposition of reality lead Benjamin to imagine a renewed use outside the cinematic and visual field. Deep contents of reality emerge through the application of *editing* to historical reconstruction, transforming it into an innovative cognitive tool. In fact, inside many fragments of *Passagenwerk* Benjamin suggests possible implications and innovations by means of introducing the usage of editing for the reconstruction of an era and he announces the possibility of renewing the entire historical materialist approach through the acquisition of the «*principio del montaggio nella storia*»¹. The idea reaches its most developed stage in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where the reconstruction of history in *dialectal images* is presented as an innovative possibility capable of showing history in its real dialectal fluidity. In fact, reconstructing history through dialectal images means *to construct, to edit* history placing the events according to a «*principio costruttivo*»², without falling into a flat historicist *continuum*, every single fragment keeping instead the dialectal element within itself, in order to be subsequently shown again as a dialectal fragment of a dialectal process, i.e. as a fragment charged with its own original conflict and simultaneously capable of transferring this conflict onto the present. The dialectal images is the «*l'immagine rapida [che] coincide con l'agnizione dell'“adesso” nelle cose*»³ and through it «*l'esposizione materialistica della storia conduce il passato a portare in una situazione critica il presente*»⁴. Precisely within this theoretical sphere it will be possible to fully comprehend the addition of *Passagenwerk*, on which Benjamin intentionally writes: «*metodo di questo lavoro: montaggio letterario. Non ho nulla da dire. Solo da mostrare. [...] Stracci e rifiuti [...] non per farne l'inventario, bensì per rendere loro giustizia nell'unico modo possibile: usandoli*»⁵.

This idea of reconfiguration of the past which, on several levels, accompanied Benjamin throughout his whole theoretical production, unexpectedly appears twenty years later. We're nearing the end of the fifties and the world, the society, the cities described by Benjamin are unrecognizable, yet the same moving principle forcibly asserts itself, this time in the field which originally inspired its birth, i.e. cinema. The Situationist International, an artistic and political movement, with Guy Debord standing on its foreground, invents a practice, *détournement*, mostly utilized in film creation, in which the usage of editing and its own purpose are in many ways close and continue Benjamin's intuition. Practicing a *détournement* means to take possession of preexistent works, subtracting them from their usual context, and to modify them in order to then insert them in a new juxtaposition of meaning, thus creating a new relation of meaning. The *détournement* is then «*il riutilizzo in una nuova unità di elementi artistici preesistenti*»⁶ and, it is clear, *editing* constitutes the heart and deep value of said practice; still, the purpose, far from limiting itself to vague aesthetic ambitions, is placed instead on the political and conflictual field already pinpointed by Benjamin: «*l'“appropriazione indebita” restituisce alla sovversione le conclusioni critiche passate che sono state imbalsamate in verità rispettabili*»⁷. Therefore, it implies to manipulate the past in order to return it to the present, yet to return it not as a static historic object, but rather as a conflictual element in service to the critical and

¹ W. Benjamin, *I «passages» di Parigi*, in R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser (a cura di), *Opere complete di Walter Benjamin*, 9 voll., Einaudi, Torino 2002-2014, vol. IX, N 2, 6, p. 515.

² Id., *Sul concetto di storia* (1966), a cura di G. Bonola, M. Ranchetti, Einaudi, Torino 1997, tesi XVII, p. 51.

³ Id., *I «passages» di Parigi*, cit., O° 81, p. 947.

⁴ *Ivi*, N 7a, 5, p. 528.

⁵ *Ivi*, N 1a, 8, p. 514.

⁶ Internazionale Situazionista., *Il détournement come negazione e come preludio*, in «Internazionale situazionista», 3 (1959), in *Internazionale Situazionista 1958-69*, Nautilus, Torino 1994, p. 10.

⁷ G. Debord, *La società dello spettacolo* (1967), Baldini&Castoldi, Milano 2013², § 209, p. 175.

revolutionary praxis; editing is exactly what makes this re-actualizing manipulation possible.

In order to establish the aforementioned parallelism, this article intends to be articulated on different levels; in particular, it will focus on the role assumed firstly by citation and secondly by the editing process in the works of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord. The first paragraph will analyze the *citation* practice as a deconstructing element, of subtraction of the past to the past, particularly referring to the construction of dialectical images and to the *play fields* opened by said practice in the present.

I will therefore concentrate on *détournement*, its birth, its operating principle, and especially its political *anti-spectacle* usage within Debord's works. In the second and last paragraph it will be attempted to underline the importance of the usage of editing to imbue the *cited* elements with a second emerging meaning, it is as a result shown, in their relation, the necessity of a *positive editing work* that reinforces both Benjamin's philosophy and Debord's works. In particular, I will outline the essential correlation between the two authors, which reveals itself in the notion that historical editing is capable of creating an historiographic narration, allowing to return to the past the *usage* of the present through *dialectical image* on one hand and *détournement* on the other.

The underlying aim of the article will be to keep a constant comparison between the two authors that will be able to unveil the affinities, yet also the differences, between these two practices. Moreover, I will work on three aspects of continuity: first, the decision which both made to work with preexistent elements – citations – although by dismantling that concept of citation; second, the central role undertaken by both formulations of editing – specifically, the manipulation practice of given elements to create something new through the relation of the same elements in a new constellation of meaning; third, the purpose of the use of this practice, recognized by both, in reclaiming elements of the past in order to reconstitute them to a subversive use in the present. The intent of aforementioned comparative analysis – which will be conducted via a free juxtaposition of themes approached by the authors, still maintaining a firm grasp on the examined texts, which will be cited accordingly in a meticulous manner – will consist in highlighting the deep link which bounds the ideas of both authors (a link on which exists, nowadays, a limited critical analysis), yet also in displaying the modernity of said ideas and the value that the usage of editing as a deconstructive and critical tool can also assume in contemporary society.