

## The *Weak* Messianic Power of Fiction: From Loss to Redemption

*Jaak Tomberg, Jüri Lipping*

Summary

**Abstract:** The article describes history as a tragic loss of historical possibilities and sees fiction as a vessel for a *weak* messianic power which regulates the virtual archive of 'failed' historical possibilities and thereby constitutes historical reality. The article interprets Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', relates them with the thoughts of Eric Santner, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek and describes the reconciliatory function of fiction through literary works by Christa Wolf and Mati Unt.

**Keywords:** fictional writing, historical materialism, the virtual, redemption, angel

This article is a direct follow-up to (and a further development of) 'Beyond the Red and the Blue Pill: The Virtual as the Substance of Reality',<sup>1</sup> an earlier article written by the same authors. In that article, we approached reality on an ontological level as a loss – as the actualization of the Deleuzeian infinite field of virtual potentialities, in which only one set of 'chosen' possibilities actualizes and all the (almost infinite number of) others retain their virtual status and re-emerge in (or support) 'actualized reality' as ghostly, haunting, 'failed potentialities'. We described fiction as something which regulates the balance between the actual and the virtual in actualized reality, thus being able to redeem, for the state of the actualized reality, those 'failed potentialities' – fiction itself constitutes reality by compensating for its catastrophic nature, reconciling reality with its 'virtual surplus'.

In the present article, we try to outline the historical correlate (and its exact mechanisms) for that ontological framework. How can the historical equivalent of Gilles Deleuze's and Slavoj Žižek's ontological approach to reality be described? How can the virtual field of potentialities in the flow of history be detected and characterized? And what function should be attributed to fiction which, in our previous article, takes the form of reconciling 'lost' virtual potentialities to actualized reality? In other words, how can the ontological constitutive component of reality also be described as something temporal, as a necessary prerequisite of coherent historical flow? These are the questions the current article addresses.

We first find such a historical correlate in Walter Benjamin's last work, the short 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'<sup>2</sup>, which outlines his own specific approach to what he calls 'historical materialism'.

In the first part of the article, 'Historical process as a catastrophe', we take a closer look at Benjamin's concept of history. Rather than seeing history as a continual progression of ideas, identities etc., or as a constant linear development of serial events, Benjamin regards it as the constant emergence of ruins, of lost or failed possibilities; instead of what *solely* takes place, Benjamin finds the present itself colored by those (infinitely larger number of!) past possibilities which could have taken place but didn't. He strong-

1 J. Tomberg, J. Lipping, Teispool punast ja sinist tabletti: virtuaalsus tegelikkuse substantsina [Beyond the Red and the Blue Pill: The virtual as the substance of reality]. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture* 2006, Vol. 15 (4), pp. 11–29.

2 See W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. London: Pimlico, 1999, pp. 253–264.

ly opposes the historicist stance of writing history linearly, 'as it was', claiming that precisely in such a case the end result submits itself to (or only speaks out for) the current predominate ideology. History written in such a way is only the history of a successive progressive development of events, entities, etc., which does not take into account and, thereby forces us to forget, everything that does not take part in (or doesn't have a function in) maintaining the flow of this progress. Rather, Benjamin's version of historical materialism proposes to focus closer attention on everything that historicism, by default, forces us to forget; instead of defining progress as the urge of every potentiality to actualize itself, Benjamin sees it as the retroactive restoration of the infinitely rich dimension of potentiality on the surface of mere actuality. This means that Benjamin denounces the widespread linear mode of writing history and replaces it with the notion of history as the time of the now (*Jetztzeit*): for the historical materialist, history (or even historicity itself) appears only at the moment of danger and uncertainty (Benjamin calls this the revolutionary situation) as a sudden flash in which the present and the whole dimension of the past's 'failed possibilities' conjoin. History is therefore perceived (and accessed) as something which is contained in the present, in the actual – and the present, the mere actual, as it is, is vitally supported 'from the inside' by the dimension of the failed potentialities of the what-has-been. We find such a view on the present and the past remarkably similar to Henri Bergson's and Gilles Deleuze's notion of the past as the virtual. For Bergson and Deleuze, as well as for Benjamin, the past (the virtual) is contained in the present (the actual), sustaining it 'from the inside'. The main purpose of this part of the article is to create a

bridge between Deleuze's and Benjamin's approaches to time.

In the second part of the article, 'History filled with the time of the now', we try to take a closer look at the inner mechanisms of such a 'history as the convergence of the present and the past'. We use the help of Slavoj Žižek's 'The Sublime Object of Ideology'<sup>3</sup> and conclude that such a convergence cannot take place on the diachronic axis of time but, rather, only as a direct paradigmatic short-circuit: on the level of the synchronization of the designators, past and present become one; they 'happen at the same time'. The present (of the successful 'revolutionary situation') forms a direct paradigmatic constellation with some (failed) past event, or rather, with historicity itself, and the past failed event is retroactively redeemed or reconciled through the success of the new, present event. Thus, the course of history is, for Benjamin, structured by a certain reconciliatory promise: in the same way as fiction structures reality by reconciling 'the spectral virtual excess' of reality with actualized reality itself, a successful revolutionary situation structures history by retroactively redeeming all similar failed and forgotten revolutionary attempts. This leads us to the interpretation of the central theme of Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': a *weak* messianic power that every generation carries along, a power which is supposed to lead the catastrophic nature of history towards redemption.

In the third part of the article, 'Forgotten Inability to Intervene', we try to analyze, through Eric Santner's essay 'Mira-

3 S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London, New York: Verso, 2002.

cles Happen'<sup>4</sup> and Christa Wolf's novel 'A Model Childhood'<sup>5</sup>, this *weak* messianic power that Benjamin attributes to the structure of historicity. We claim that the failures which this *weak* messianic power redeems are not forgotten deeds but, rather, forgotten inabilities to act (or to intervene in the flow of the dominant social force). And, furthermore, they are not some certain, chronologically or otherwise determinable failures, but rather a reminiscence of the whole dimension of 'failed virtual potentialities', a reminiscence of the catastrophic nature of history itself. In the same way as fiction does not change actual reality but rather the balance between the virtual and the actual in reality, a successful revolutionary enterprise does not change the 'actual past' but, rather, changes the balance between the virtual and the actual in the past.

This leads us, in the fourth part of the article, to an exact outlining of this *weak* messianic power, and also to a defining of it as the innermost structural component of fiction. Through the thoughts of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, we pay closer attention to why '*weak*' is emphasized by italics. Jacques Derrida, in his 'Specters of Marx', explains that this faint reconciliatory promise is something that one cannot deconstruct, that Benjamin's *weak* messianic power is in no way religious; it is a messianism without religion or, rather, 'the formality of a messianic without messianism'.<sup>6</sup> The messianic power that constitutes historicity has to be *weak*: it is only something that allows us to sense the catastrophic nature of history; it is not something that enables us to bring history to an end in a final reconciliation. In the final part of our article, we attribute the same *weak* messianic power to fiction and observe its function (to

regulate the balance between the virtual excess of reality and 'mere' actuality), using Mati Unt's novel 'Autumn Ball'<sup>7</sup> as an example.

*Summary by Jaak Tomberg  
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4 E. Santner, *Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor*. – S. Žižek, E. L. Santner, K. Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

5 C. Wolf, *A Model Childhood*. Trans. U. Molinaro, H. Rappolt. London: Virago, 1982.

6 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. Trans. P. Kamuf. New York, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 59

7 M. Unt, *The Autumn Ball: Scenes of City Life*. Trans. M. Aru. Tallinn: Perioodika, 1985.