

Anticipated Future and Temporal Mimesis

ANTICIPATED FUTURE - THE RHYTHM OF WALTER BENJAMIN'S TEMPORAL MIMESIS AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN THE POETICS OF JOAN BROSSA

Fernando Gerheim

Abstract

*This article discusses Walter Benjamin's theory of temporal mimesis, developed in *Doctrine of the Similar*, seeking to describe the rhythm with which "similarities erupt from the flow of things." Its goal is to demonstrate how the rhythm of this mimesis, while open to chance, is that of the anticipated future, whose visible presence today is just like the tip of an iceberg. This temporal relationship is discussed in dialogue with approaches by Claudia Caimi and Patrícia Lavelle, in addition to the writing theory of Anne-Marie Christin. Finally, temporal mimesis is related to three object poems and an action spectacle by the poet Joan Brossa.*

Keywords: *Walter Benjamin, temporal mimesis, non-sensuous similarities, anticipated future, Joan Brossa*

1. The magical dimension and the semiotic dimension of language

In *Doctrine of the Similar* (1933), Walter Benjamin observes that the mimetic theory of language in general leads to onomatopoeia but does not go beyond a very rudimentary level in its elaboration. To overcome this difficulty, he proposes the concept of "non-sensuous" mimesis, a form of mimesis that does not attempt to transpose the natural sound of things into language or to imitate their appearance but rather takes place through temporal correspondence. Breaking with the philosophical tradition that thinks of mimesis in the category of space, Benjamin relates it to time. In this temporal mimesis, the traditional relationship between model and copy is replaced by the idea of reading, which implies a temporal segment and an emphasis on the pole of reception.

This turnaround in the point of view, which links language to reading and time – something that is generally disregarded in the static models of mimesis – brings into consideration a dimension beyond the semiotic, namely, the "magical" dimension. The magical dimension is related to an apparition, a unique and unrepeatable manifestation which, together with the idea of distance, is the concept that Benjamin uses in his famous definition of the aura.

The magical and semiotic dimensions do not exist without each other. Their difference and interdependence can be seen in the double meaning of the word “reading”: the astrologer reads the position of the stars in the sky (semiotic dimension) and also the future (magical dimension).

Benjamin hypothesizes that the mimetic faculty, so present in the lives of the ancients, has not disappeared in modern times but is present in every segment of time that constitutes the act of reading. By elucidating the existence of this magical dimension of language and its relationship with reading which implies temporality, we can find out that the mimetic faculty finds its way to the civilization of the alphabet:

If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading *per se*, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually founds its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of non-sensuous similarity.¹

A little further on, he adds: “Thus, even profane reading, if it is not to forsake understanding altogether, shares this with magical reading: that it is subject to a necessary tempo, or rather a critical moment, which the reader must not forget at any cost lest he go away empty-handed.”² In this sense, the mimetic or magical dimension is still present in semiotics. One could even say that underneath any act of reading, in which we use the semiotic operation of decoding, there is a latent soothsayer or astrologer reading entrails or the stars.

In dealing with this “non-sensuous” dimension, Benjamin highlights an aspect of language that differs from the semiotic one. In other words, the non-sensuous similarity is not a similarity at the level of the appearance of the sign, nor in the sphere of the icon, which in Peircean terms are relationships of diagrammatic correspondence between the elements of the sign and those of the thing it signifies.³ If the sign is iconic when there is a relationship of similarity between its properties and those of its referent, this relationship is sensible; it is no longer arbitrary, to refer to Saussure’s definition of language as an arbitrary or unmotivated system of signs.⁴ But Benjamin intends, with the concept of non-sensuous similarity, to characterize the mode of being of the mimetic faculty as non-arbitrary, that is to say, as not just the expression of a mere system of signs, without being seen as a merely iconic sign that excludes the magical dimension. Benjamin thus departs from the exclusively spatial/semiotic way of thinking about mimesis. Researcher Claudia Caimi observes that the temporal dimension proposed by Benjamin breaks with the logic of representation by which mimesis has been thought of ever since Plato, namely, by use of dialectical aesthetic categories. She points out that in the classical discussion of art, mimesis was sometimes understood as an intentional and correlative construction, sometimes as a sensual resemblance:

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), p. 698.

² *Ibid.*, p. 698.

³ Charles Sanders Peirce, “4. Ícone, Índice e Símbolo,” in *Semiótica*, translated by José Teixeira Coelho Neto (São Paulo: Ed. Perspectiva, 2010), pp. 63-73.

⁴ Ferdinand Saussure, *Curso de Lingüística Geral*, translated by Antônio Chelini, José Paulo Paes, and Izidoro Blikstein (São Paulo: Ed. Cultrix), pp. 81-84.

Benjamin’s innovation is to bring the discussion into the dimension of time, thinking of similarity as an intense temporality, in which there is a participation between the same and the other, a time in which the interval, the difference and the void are associated with the moment they appear.⁵

If from the perspective of space mimesis was thought of as a copy or verisimilitude, by moving it to that of time Benjamin apperceives it through the notion of “correspondence.”⁶ Through this temporal category, he gives mimesis both extension and intensity. This change in point of view is linked to a historical vision through which Benjamin thinks about the transformation of the mimetic faculty. Correspondence points to an ephemeral time, which becomes present in language and then disappears, thus being a mark that is both trace and memory, in which the present can be questioned and configured to read the future within it. This is a characteristic of modernity, revealed by Benjamin’s historical, materialist, and philosophical gaze.

The direction in which the philosopher points in this overcoming of the spatial paradigm, in addition to breaking with the scientific approach of Saussure’s linguistics, is also a borderline between philosophy itself and certain hidden areas of knowledge. The temporal and non-sensuous mimesis through which the mimetic faculty reaches contemporaneity, is, so to speak, an onomatopoeia in time, which, instead of symbolizing the thing through natural sound or the appearance it produces in space, concerns an encounter, an ephemeral and precise correspondence. This appearance is an instant of reciprocity and participation between the same and the other, and occurs at random, not determined by subjects and their individual consciousness. It is associated with interval, difference and emptiness:

(...) the example used by Benjamin is astrology, which marks the moment of birth on the birth chart – imbuing freedom into the state of non-physical similarity, freedom that he associates with chance, with the activity of gambling. Just like games of chance, in which what has happened before, the players’ experience or practical skills, do not serve as a form of exercise and lose their meaning when a new match is restarted, the experience of non-sensible similarity in its radical freedom presents an incompleteness in its procedure which is inconclusive and empty.⁷

The mimetic faculty, the gift of perceiving and making similarities, is thus, for Benjamin, akin to correspondences. The foundation that these correspondences provide for the mimetic faculty does not fit perfectly into the cosmic order, as does the symbol in a theological or mystical vision. There is a kind of inversion in the orientation of this foundation since it seems to start from the surface, from the chance encounter, and not from something that precedes it, an ontological being outside the temporal dimension, with a fixed and immutable substance:

⁵ Claudia Caimi, “A Aparência e o Jogo na Arte e na Literatura”, in *Sobre alguns temas em Walter Benjamin: notas de um percurso* (Porto Alegre: UniRitter, 2015), p. 156. Available from: <https://lume.ufrgs.br/bitstream/handle/10183/150227/000992692.pdf?sequence=1>

⁶ In the “Doctrine of Similar,” Benjamin uses sometimes “correspondences” and “similarities” as equivalents, as in this passage: “Script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.” (p. 697).

⁷ Claudia Caimi, “A Aparência e o Jogo na Arte e na Literatura,” p. 156.

But this, if you will, magical aspect of language, as well as of script, does not develop in isolation from its other, semiotic aspect. Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language.⁸

How can communication and mediation be a foundation? How can this semiotic instance be the primordial basis of what is communicated? What is this claim founded on? Benjamin’s thinking problematizes and invites us to unravel this relationship between the magical and semiotic dimensions. If, on the one hand, ‘everything mimetic in language is an intention’, on the other it ‘can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis’. How can the foundation of something be foreign to what it founds? How can the foundation, instead of being underneath, invisible, and providing support, be on the surface, apparent, in the communicative dimension? Benjamin continues, referring to both written language (“the literal text of the script is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle can form itself”) and oral language (“the nexus of meaning which resides in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent out of a sound, flashing up in instant.”).⁹

It is important to note here that the material and concrete dimension is the one and only foundation on which the puzzle can be formed. The sentences that follow are even more emphatic, stating in a countersense that “the literal text of the script” and “the sounds of the sentence” form the “sole basis” “from which something similar can become apparent.” Concomitantly with this admission of the paradox in the foundation, Benjamin introduces the question of time and specifies its rhythm by saying that the similar emerges from the context “flashing up in instant.” The paragraph continues,

Since this non-sensuous similarity, however, exerts its effects in all reading, at this deep level access opens to a peculiar ambiguity of the word “reading,” in both its profane and magical senses. The schoolboy reads his ABC book, and the astrologer reads the future in the stars. In the first clause, reading is not separated out into its two components. Quite the opposite in the second, though, which clarifies the process at both its levels: the astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it.¹⁰

2. The structure of time in correspondences

The relationship between similar things is one of reciprocity and participation, and it is also associated with intervals, differences, and emptiness. Precisely because there is a correspondence or association in time between different things, the temporality of this rhythm cannot be measured from the outside. Immediacy is a quality of this flashing correspondence or association, not a quantity. It is intense, not extensive. Its quality is that the semiotic dimension does not communicate something through it, but communicates itself, immediately. According to Benjamin’s essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” if the “contents of mind” (*geistiger Inhalte*) were communicated through a “linguistic being”

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 697.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 697.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 697.

(*sprachliche Wesen*),¹¹ and not in it, what would be communicated would not be a content of mind.¹² Furthermore, this transitory rhythm which cannot be fixed is related to chance and play, and posits a radical freedom for mimesis. In it, the perceptual simultaneity of the image cannot be completely separated from the sequentiality of verbal language. The non-sensuous similarity is not determined by individual consciousness but it is “the unconscious of the writer” who “conceals” images “or, more precisely, picture puzzles ... in his writing.”¹³ The fleeting rhythm of this magical dimension implies a certain relationship with the semiotic component to which it is intrinsically linked and without which it cannot develop. The semiotic is the support on which the magical dimension appears, like the flame of what is burned. There is an ambivalent relationship in which the destruction of the object by fire is also what allows it to be revealed, at the height of the flame. But the support, properly understood, is in its context, in its here and now, as in its wrapping, from which it cannot be separated. Thus, the context of the meaning of words or sentences is the support from which “similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more.”¹⁴

In addition to its transitory rhythm, which cannot be fixed, the temporality of the non-sensual similarity establishes a bond between reading and prediction. This bond is a subject surrounded by obscurity, and Benjamin approaches it by examining how language operates in hidden pieces of knowledge:

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.¹⁵

This example of Benjamin’s is meant to clarify the bond between the semiotic dimension (be it the spoken or the written word) and the meaning or the namer. It is a bond that the non-sensuous similarity establishes in an ever new, original, irreducible way. Immediacy, the speed of lightning, is what means that this bond is not guaranteed once and for all by any convention but is made and remade each time. This magic of immediacy comes from no other source than the paradoxically founding context of meaning.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” accessed on 01/24/2024 at <https://signaturen-magazin.de/walter-benjamin--ueber-sprache-ueberhaupt-und-ueber-die-sprache-des-menschen.html>

¹² The word “Wesen” in the English translation of Benjamin’s text is rendered as “being” or “entity.” I believe that this variation makes clear the paradox that Benjamin places at the center of his philosophy of language. The following passage demonstrates this: “Languages, therefore, have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages. Mental being is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication. What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity. Language therefore communicates the particular linguistic being of things, but their mental being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is capable of being communicated.” Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Men,” in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), p. 63.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 697.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 698.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 696.

The magical dimension of immediacy opposing onomatopoeia to the arbitrariness of the sign becomes more evident when Benjamin states: “The human word is the name of things” and “through the word, man is bound to the language of things.”¹⁶ This creates a magical community between them.

Hence, it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. Language does not provide *mere* signs.¹⁷

The recovery of the magical dimension represents a re-enchantment of the world but the text also goes on to reject its mystical theory:

However, the rejection of bourgeois linguistic theory by mystical theory likewise rests on a misunderstanding. For according to mystical theory, the word is simply the essence of the thing. That is incorrect, because the thing in itself has no word, being created from God’s word and known in its name by a human word. This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not emerge from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation. Rather, the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. In name, the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth.¹⁸

The magical community that human language creates with things does not happen spontaneously but as constitutive of what “has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language,” as Benjamin says in the quote above. In this conception of language, which responds to the very language of things, as Caimi points out, “the interval, the difference, the void are associated with the act of appearing.” Similarly, in her *The Life of the Spirit*, Hanna Arendt points out that with regard to the act of thinking language is by no means as obviously suited to the activity of thought as sight is to its task of seeing.¹⁹

By endowing certain sensitive configurations with mimetic characteristics, such as the conjunction of stars in the constellations, the Ancients could not fail to attribute “full possession of this gift, and in particular its perfect adaptation to the form of cosmic being, to the newborn.”²⁰ At the end of the text, Benjamin returns to the bond between clairvoyance and the mimetic gift: “... it is to script and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers.”²¹ In line with him, from an anthropological perspective, Anne-Marie Christin maintains that divination was the last metamorphosis of the image into writing:

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On language as such and on the language of men,” p. 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *A vida do espírito*, translated by Cesar Augusto de Almeida, Antônio Abranches, and Helena Martins (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2009), p. 122.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 695.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 698

Its role has always been foreseen, for if the starry sky is the first canvas that has been offered to the eyes of men, the agency of its constellations must have allowed them to hope very soon that they would be able to read their destiny there.²²

The support of the semiotic dimension, whatever it could be, establishes an image through which the unknown is questioned, and a message is “explicitly destined for men by the gods.”²³ Following on from the text, Christin establishes the bond between the image and the emergence of reading as a form of divination. According to her, it was the image that allowed two notions to emerge: “that of *reading* – the soothsayer’s social function was to decipher texts and no longer to contemplate enigmas – and that of a *system of signs* that transformed these enigmas into text.”²⁴ There we have together the magical dimension, semiotics and its relationship with the future.

It is possible to speculate on the form of this temporal relationship in its characterization of non-sensuous similarity. For both Benjamin and Christin, we inquire about the future of that of which we know neither the origin nor the design, contemplating it in order to decipher it and make it be legible. For both, too, reading appeared before writing was invented and represents the most archaic form of the mimetic faculty. In this regard, Benjamin quotes Hofmannsthal’s baroque-inspired phrase: “To read what was never written.”²⁵ Here, we can deduce from Benjamin’s thought that the temporal element contained in mimesis has endured throughout history, bringing the power to perceive and make similarities from ancient times, when it was bonded to the sacred, to the present of alphabetic reading. In the second version of the text about the similar, *On the Mimetic Faculty* (1933), Benjamin hypothesizes that the “rapidity of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language.”²⁶ At the same time that this instant would make possible the fusion between the semiotic and the mimetic, it would, paradoxically, be the place of a fissure. As Caimi argues:

By rescuing the dialectic of the mimetic conception and reading the traditional work of art and the technical work from this perception, Benjamin defends the historical character of the mimetic faculty and its bond with what escapes man, the caesura with a natural and true foundation.²⁷

The bond with nature, which represents the magical dimension of language, loses strength to the other pole of mimesis, which represents technique, artifice, and finally semiotic support. This support, which, as we have seen, is the significant context, is the “alien” foundation, the background from which, solely and exclusively, “similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more.”²⁸ The retroactive rhythm of

²² Anne-Marie Christin, “Da imagem à escrita”, in Flora Süssekind e Tânia Dias, *A historiografia literária e as técnicas da escrita: do manuscrito ao hipertexto* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa de Rui Barbosa and Vieira e Lent, 2004), p. 290.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 722.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Gesammelte Schriften, II*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979), p. 722.

²⁷ Claudia Caimi, “A Aparência e o Jogo na Arte e na Literatura,” p. 158.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 698.

this foundation through the surface, a rhythm which is similar to that of revelation, is expressed in this shimmering temporality. But as has already been said, this is not a spontaneous process or event. The allocation in the future of what the reading should reveal indicates that the meaning revealed is something located ahead of the time that is anticipated.

A figure of speech from cinema could provide an example of this rhythm within the world of technology itself: “This paradoxical temporal form can be compared to the figure of speech from cinema called flashforward: a scene or sequence that partially anticipates what will happen.”²⁹ This preparation of what will happen next must work on a subliminal level, and the climax is built in advance by these flashes of the future that are inserted into the film in moments of pure image. This temporal figure is also engendered by the unconscious in dreams, of which Jorge Luis Borges asked the humorous question: “Who writes the script of dreams?”³⁰ Thus we come back to the question, “How can the foundation of something be foreign to what it founds?” The fusion between the magical and the semiotic that this immediate temporality of non-sensuous similarity makes possible is inconclusive and is different from that of a totalizing identity. As Benjamin’s thinking unfolds in his formulation of the concept of history, that question appears again and we can see that this fusion opens up a fissure for a non-linear time which is different from that of progress in that its teleology is future-oriented. This time is like a whirlwind saturated with conflicting forces. In *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin explains it with the concept of the *now-time* (*Jetztzeit*) which is compared to the transitory and ephemeral meetings of stars in a constellation.³¹ We can approximate it to the temporality within which correspondence passes swiftly in the non-sensuous similarity. As Caimi argued, “The now-time is not the instant of the absolutely identical, nor the lasting time, but rather the condensation in the intermediate space of the similarity and the longitudinal opening that offers itself to both the past and the future.”³²

The moment of fusion between the magical and the semiotic does not express, as it once did, a perfect adjustment to the cosmic order; it expresses the unstable present of this “longitudinal opening,” the caesura from which emerges a powerful and conflicting present saturated with nows. If the idea of fusion, on the one hand, leads us to think of a form of sensual similarity, it also paradoxically holds – by virtue of being transitory – a distanced relationship with the object, since it manifests at the same time the “impossibility of restoring this original movement.”³³ Thus, the mimetic faculty is as an absent presence that manifests itself in non-sensuous correspondences. The distancing and approximation, the movements of resemblance and difference that take place in this fusion which is at the same time fission go beyond spatial parameters and can only be understood within the category of time, as the lightning metaphor (“flash up fleetingly”) demonstrates.

²⁹ Fernando Gerheim, *Tempo Alterado - O flashforward da linguagem na vida e na arte. Arte & Ensaios* (Rio de Janeiro, PPGAV/EBA/UFRJ, 2011), p. 80. Available from: <https://revistas.ufjf.br/index.php/ae/article/view/53909>

³⁰ The phrase is in the chapter “O pesadelo” (“The Nightmare”) from a book of lectures given by Borges titled *Sete Noites* (Seven Nights) (São Paulo: Editora Max Limonad, 1983), p. 52.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, *Sobre o conceito de História*, edited and translated by Adalberto Müller and Márcio Seligmann-Silva, with notes by Márcio Seligmann-Silva (São Paulo: Alameda, 2000), Fragment XV, p. 61.

³² Claudia Caimi, “A Aparência e o Jogo na Arte e na Literatura,” p. 158.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

3. The foundation in the future

This temporality of the non-sensuous resemblance formulated by Benjamin in his theory of mimesis already appeared, in another way, in the introduction to his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In this *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, the word *Ursprung*, “origin” in German, does not refer to what originates in the past but to what emerges in a present that, like the now-time, interrupts the continuous and catastrophic flow of history. The etymological origin of the German word *Ursprung* is the same as that of the word *Sprung*, which means ‘leap’. I will try to outline here the way in which this non-self-identical present offers itself to the future, in the longitudinal opening or caesura that characterizes the immediate time of correspondence. The questions that I will address here are “In what direction does this leap occur?” and “How can we describe its transitory phenomenality?”

A decisive stage in the history of writing was the invention of the calendar with the inscription of strokes on a long wooden stave. The handling of time which the calendar provides expresses this relationship of the non-sensuous similarity with clairvoyance and the future, which it moves from the mystical to the practical field. The etymology of the Latin word *legere*, ‘read’, is related to that of *colligere*, ‘harvest’ and can be traced to the Greek *léghein*, ‘to gather’. To the sense of *legere* are linked the words for ‘read’ in all the neo-Latin languages: *leggere* in Italian, *leer* in Spanish, *lire* in French, and *ler* in Portuguese. Taken together, they are suggestive of the meaningful context in which the sounds of a sentence form the foundation from which the “similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things.”³⁴ This foundation can only come to light “in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language.”³⁵

Since this foundation is the semiotic dimension, we could assess it using Peirce’s semiotic theory. In the perspective of this theory, the being of the icon is a dimension of perception that is always before any fixation or reflection; the being of the index is the present experience; and the symbolic dimension of language is the only one for the general laws, capable of influencing thought and conduct, to emerge.³⁶ As Roman Jakobson warns: “A general law can never be fully realized,” “it is a potentiality,” its mode of being is that of *in futuro*.³⁷

As Benjamin says, “everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language.”³⁸ Therefore, intention does not determine the semiotic support; on the contrary, the significant context, the semiotic support on which the correspondence comes to light, is alien to it. If we ask what is the direction and the rhythm in relation to the temporal segment inside which this connection occurs, the answer is that the direction of this trajectory is one that starts from the future; that is, one that anticipate the future. It should be noted here that ‘origin’ also has the meaning of a ‘leap’; the proposal to read, gather, or collect the future

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 698.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 697.

³⁶ Roman Jakobson, “À procura da essência da linguagem,” in *Linguística e comunicação*, translated by Izidoro Blikstein and José Paulo Paes (São Paulo: Ed. Cultrix, 2010), p. 149.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of Similar,” p. 697.

in the image is a kind of a leap backwards, from the not founded or “alien”; that is, from the future, which, as a leap (*Sprung*), is also an origin (*Ursprung*). Thus, for the dialectical category that characterizes this temporal mimesis, the anticipated future is also an original regression.

If the magical dimension has no other foundation than a meaningful context, the leap into the void of being its own presupposition is then the leap into that semiotic dimension or, in other words, a leap into the matter. As its direction is backward, as in a cinematographic flashforward, it is also a leap *from* the semiotic support, because the semiotic support is, paradoxically, the foundation and the surface, it is the one that leaps. There is a strangeness in the temporality of this leap: what is supposed to be before – the first indemonstrable premises – comes after; and what is supposed to be after – the similarity, but to what? – comes before. In this sense, the questions that arise here are “Would time within the non-sensuous similarity be like a narrative that tell the very act of narrating, *mise-en-abyme*?” and “Is the segment of time the only secure ground on which the correspondence can take place?”

4. What we can show but not know

The semiotic dimension never allows itself to be bent with such a ductile malleability that it does not produce friction and give off sparks. In her book *Walter Benjamin Metacrítico - uma poética do pensamento* (*Walter Benjamin metacritic - a poetics of thought*), Patrícia Lavelle discusses the role of the linguistic and symbolic dimension as a foundation or “placenta” in the act of thinking. In dialogue with Benjamin, Hans Blumenberg’s metaphorology, and Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Lavelle distinguishes between thought and knowledge: certain issues can only be thought but not known (because they have no presence in nature), which “only a metaphorical transfer from the sensible to the intelligible allows us to present.”³⁹ In her discussion of the act of thinking we can identify the rhythm of the correspondences with which Benjamin characterizes non-sensuous similarities, which would allow us to speculate on the transition from an existential state of thinking to the identification of an appearance among appearances. This transition can be made only by an analogy that creates perfect similarities between two relationships between completely different things. We can express it with “absolute metaphors,” which (in the sense of Blumenberg) are metaphors that represent an object that remains conceptually non-transposable but still closely associated with concepts.⁴⁰

In his examination of the ontogenetic development of the mimetic faculty, Benjamin points out that mimetic behaviors teach the child to appropriate a language. For him, this is a rudimentary way of assimilating and “conferring unity on experience before becoming the subject of a certain biography.”⁴¹ The experience of the similar, in this linguistic dimension of thought, is related to a comparative tension in which things and beings are brought together by affinities. According to Lavelle, the implicit horizon of Benjamin’s theory of the mimetic faculty is the Kantian conception of the imagination as a fundamental comparative force.⁴² For

³⁹ Patrícia Lavelle, *Walter Benjamin Metacrítico - uma poética do pensamento* (Belo Horizonte: Relicário, 2022), p. 187.

⁴⁰ Patrícia Lavelle brings Benjamin’s thinking closer to that of Hans Blumenberg. See especially the introductory text of her book previously cited. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Benjamin, the functional role of similarity in language, which for Immanuel Kant is related to creating schemes for the concept, constitutes the mimetic faculty. In his view, the statements in language are made by an analogy whose expression does not contain a schema for the concept but only a symbol for reflection.

In *Critique of Judgment*, paragraph 9, Kant writes,

All intuitions that we submit to *a priori* concepts are either *schemata* or *symbols*, of which the former contain direct presentations, and the latter indirect presentations of the concept. The former does this demonstratively and the latter by means of an analogy (for which we also make use of empirical intuitions), in which the faculty of judgment fulfills a double function: firstly, to apply the concept to the object of a sensible intuition and then, secondly, to apply the simple rule of reflection on that intuition to a totally different object, of which the former is only the symbol.⁴³

We can note that when language displays an analogy, the leap is like a fleeting flash-up of an absolute metaphor that can serve as a foundation. Such metaphor is there as a symbol in place of the schema of the concept. It is a metaphor – which, as we know, in Greek means ‘transference’ – of something that cannot be known but can only be shown. And that which we want to show, if it is to have an appearance, will have to appear where there is nothing. In other words, it is something that is placed by the device of transfer. Thus, the temporality of the non-sensuous similarity in correspondence is that of a full present, not identical with itself but rather the locus of a transformation. One could assert that in this integral and immediate actuality, thought, in its symbolic and linguistic dimension, cannot acquire appearance, according to the functionality of similarity, or what Kant calls the “rule” of thought, except through a connection reminiscent of the rhythm of serendipity. In this semiotic dimension, the origin of the leap, insofar as it is also a leap into the linguistic matter of thought, has no other springboard than the symbol. Speculative thought has no other substitute for its absent foundation than a symbol. The primary presuppositions place the symbol in the place of the foundation, no longer as a mystical presence, as the Ancients did, but, according to Benjamin’s historical view of mimesis as known from his study on the Baroque, as allegory. The concept is an identity, but the symbol is a relationship between the same and the other pointing to a moment of change and transformation. Metaphorical transfer in the case of absolute metaphors does not proceed by way of equivalence but by transformation, which can also be seen as a deformation or anamorphosis. For the non-sensuous similarity, the unity endowed with mimetic characteristics is like the transitory and contingent unity of a constellation, in which the individual characteristics of the planets can only be perceived by their influence on that position, and not by some substantial, fixed, and immutable property. Benjamin thus defines the idea in terms of the image of the constellation.⁴⁴ In his view, unlike the concept, the idea is an image of thought and, paradoxically, its sensitive configuration has movement and transformation as parts of its

⁴³ Immanuel Kant, *Crítica da Faculdade do Juízo*, translated by Valerio Rohden and Antônio Marques (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo: Forense Universitária, 1995), p. 196 (English translation mine).

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Questões introdutórias de crítica do conhecimento,” in *Origem do Drama Barroco Alemão*, translation, presentation and notes by Sergio Paulo Rouanet (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1984), p. 56.

essence.⁴⁵ In this way, the foundation of an idea becomes the significant exteriority of the context. We can thus say that the fusion between the magical-mimetic dimension and the semiotic is not opposed to the interval, the difference, and the void. On the contrary, it is the place – or better, the time – where they emerge. This fusion is therefore always a risk and the present is imbued with its forces.

5. Brossa: action as image, image as action

The Catalan poet Joan Brossa (1919-1998) once declared: “A poem is an idea whether it is expressed with words or without them.”⁴⁶ Breaking the boundary between literature and contemporary art and placing poetry in dialogue with different forms of artistic expression, be it theatrical, visual or musical, he was always open to experimentation, but he never advocated overcoming the strictly literary poem, which is a different stance from the teleological discourse of the avant-garde. Brossa has an extensive dramaturgical work in addition to having created visual poetry, object poetry and invented original forms of expression such as *striptease* and *acció spectacle*, which anticipate both the happening and the performance. Here I will try to show that the mimetic faculty as a moment of transformation can be readily identified in his poetics.⁴⁷

Brossa’s work titled *Lectura* (1989) shows a black mask over the blank pages of an open book (Fig. 1).⁴⁸ The mask here can be taken as denoting the game between the same and the other, denying the identity of the concept. In an earlier variation of this work in *Poema II* (1968), which can be seen as its inversion, the letters of the alphabet appear written on the mask (Fig. 2). The letters here can be seen as indicating that language, as a transformative action, is closer to theater and its scene than to abstraction and its concept, which can be associated with a

⁴⁵ Benjamin writes: “Ideas relation to things like constellations to stars.” *Ibid.*, p. 56 (English translation mine).

⁴⁶ Interview given by Brossa to Joaquin Soler Serrano on the RTVS television program *A fondo* in 1977. I consulted the recording of the interview in the MACBA archive, which handles some of the material belonging to the Joan Brossa Foundation in Barcelona.

⁴⁷ I offer a further discussion of the relationship between Brossa’s poetics and the idea within a broader framework in two my articles. The first is “Relacions entre paraula i imatge a les Suites de poesia visual (1959-1969) de Brossa i a la poesia d’avantguarda brasilera del mateix període,” in Glòria Bordons and Lis Costa (eds.), *Joan Brossa Els arbres varien segons el terreny* (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2021), pp. 139-151, or online: https://books.google.com.br/books?id=P1RBEEAAQBAJ&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=fernando+gerheim&source=bl&ots=15cBnbobt_&sig=ACfU3U3Tzk52EXvzVjDY63gzy2vNxYx96g&hl=pt-BR&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi99bTMx6j-AhVeAbkGHaDNBRc4bhDoAXoECAMQA#v=onepage&q=fernando%20gerheim&f=false

The second is “Contaminações entre palavra e imagem nas Suítes de Poesia Visual (1959-1969) de Brossa e na poesia de vanguarda brasileira do mesmo período,” in Maria Lúcia Bueno and Sabrina Parracho Sant’Anna (organizers), *Diálogos entre arte e sociologia - leituras contemporâneas* (Juiz de Fora: Editora UFJF, 2023), pp. 13-27. For a discussion of the relationships between word, image, and object in the broader spectrum of the invention of languages, see my book *Linguagens Inventadas - palavra imagem objeto: formas de contágio* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Zahar, 2008).

⁴⁸ Copyright of all photos (poems) reproduced in this article belongs to Fundació Joan Brossa (© de los poemas de Joan Brossa, Fundació Joan Brossa).

faithful mirror. That is, it is closer to analogy and absolute metaphor than to a logical-causal chain.

A third work by Brossa in which we can see this temporality of the immanence of the semiotic dimension is the scenic poem *Cinquanta-unena acció espectacle* (Figs. 3 and 4). In this performance, in which the poem is the action itself, the sensitive configuration of the context literally consists of an open interval of time. Brossa enters the scene in three slight incursions to write something on a sheet of paper. At the end, he puts the paper in an envelope. He then asks the audience for two volunteers – one to mark five minutes on the clock and the other to open the envelope at the end of that time period and read what is written on the sheet. The five minutes are marked by restless reactions on the part of the audience. Once the time has elapsed, the second participant opens the envelope and reads aloud what is written there – the word “end.”

This *action spectacle* (Brossa also calls this form of his poetry ‘scenic poems’) consists of the very time it occupies. We could say that it suggests a form of anticipated future. But this anticipation does not have the teleological form of a project, because its process does not have the same importance as its final product, to which it is a subject. The entire process of the poem consists of writing a word on paper. When, finally, the word is revealed, ironically the audience finds out that it is, precisely, the word “end.” The anticipated future thus looks more like the circular figure of the ouroboros or a matryoshka, in which past, present, and future can be seen as contained and containing each other, as in an intensive temporality.

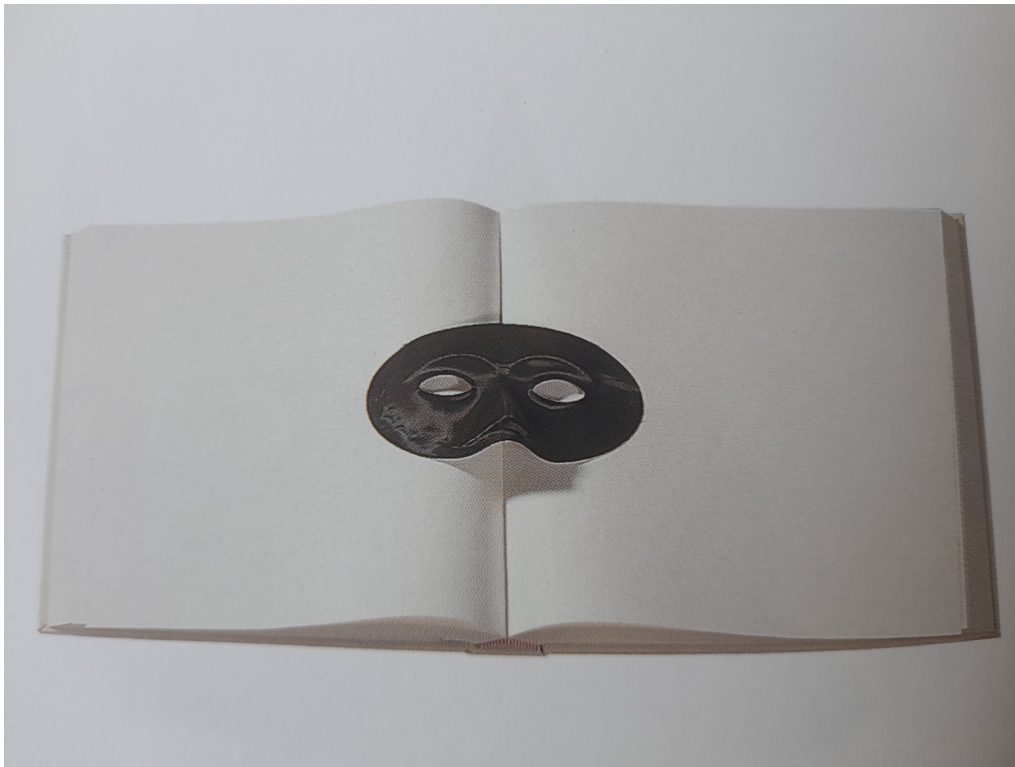


Figure 1. Joan Brossa, “Lectura,” 1989 (© de los poemas de Joan Brossa, Fundació Joan Brossa).

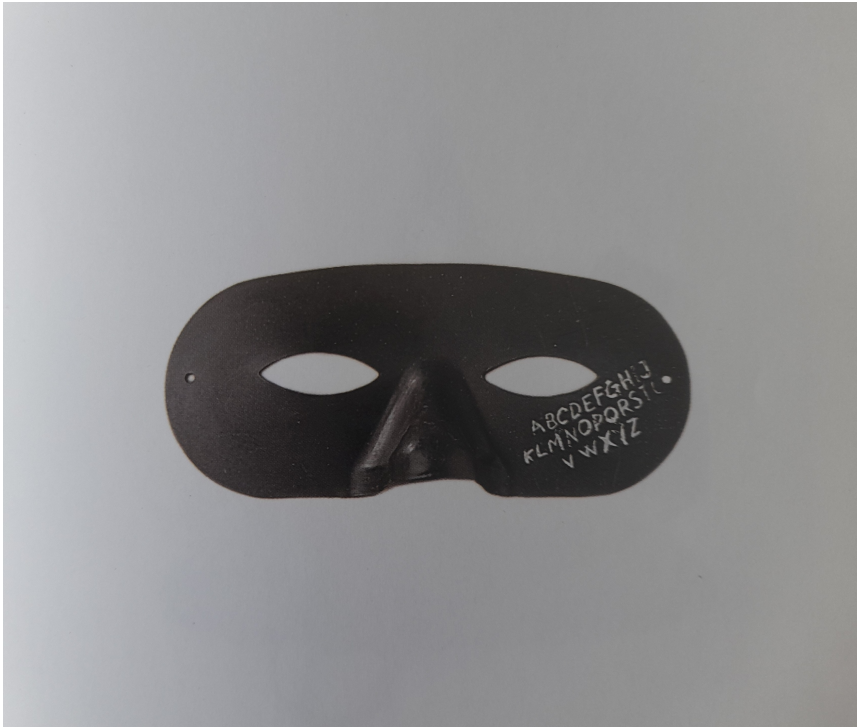
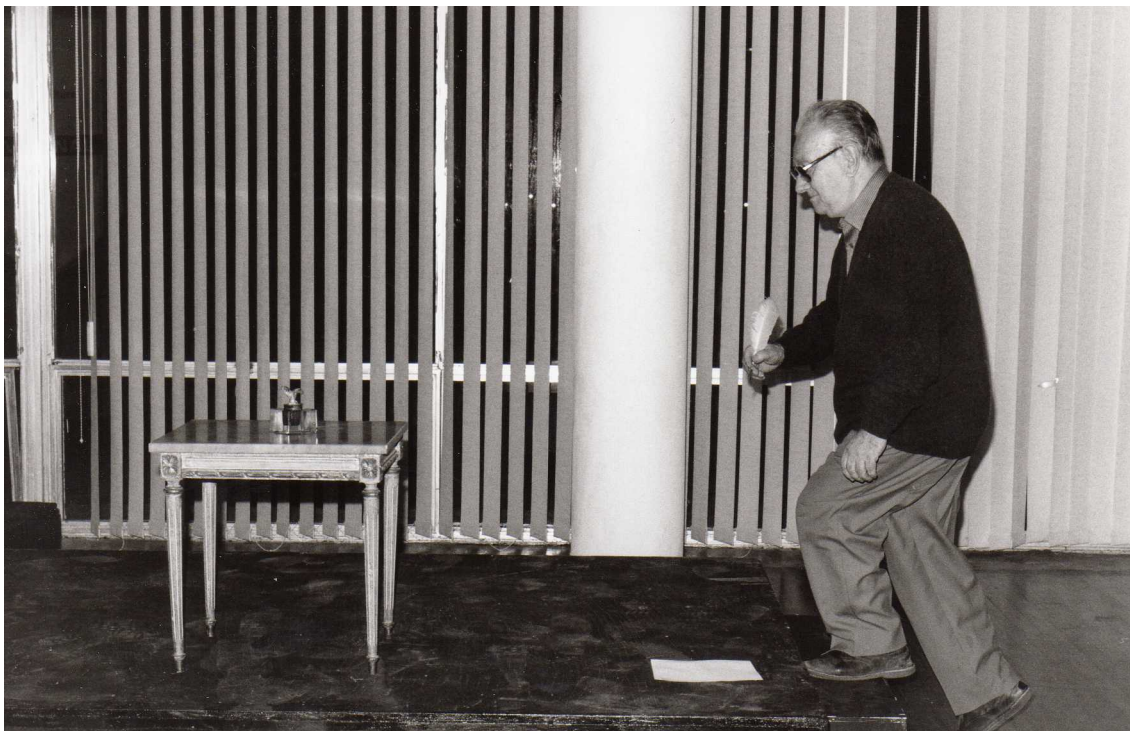


Figure 2. Joan Brossa, “Poema II,” 1968.





Figures 3 and 4. Joan Brossa, *Cinquanta-unena acció espectacle*, Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM), unknown author, Rio de Janeiro, 1993.

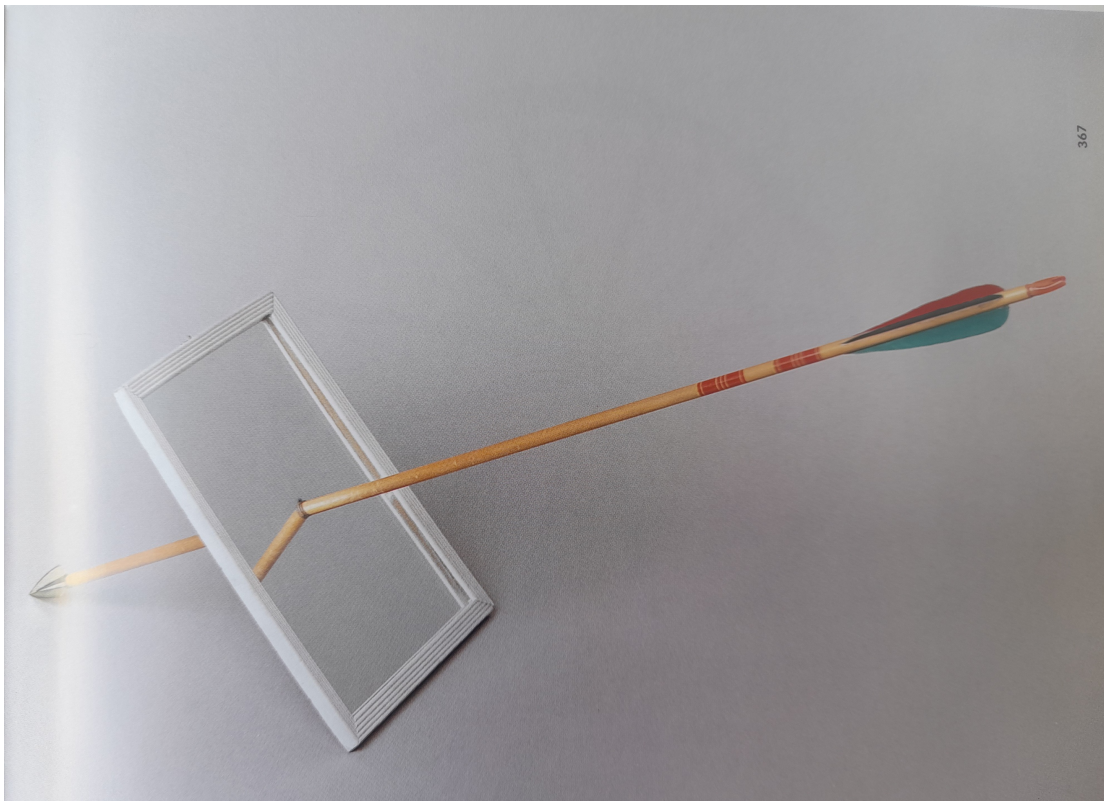


Figure 5. Joan Brossa, “Memòria del temps,” 1986.

There is something linguistic and symbolic about the image in the poem “Memòria del temps⁴⁹ (Fig. 5). The objects, taken in their symbolic dimension, could perhaps be characterized as an absolute metaphor in the sense that they are not the image of something else as in a comparison. When we look for a concept for the poem, all we have is an image for reflection. The title “La memòria del temps” can be seen here as rather enhancing the symbolic dimension than giving it a concept of understanding. “The memory of time” is a sentence that exposes a paradox and calls into question the very form of language as a producer of meaning.

The mirror reflects an image that is always in the present, but in the case of Brossa’s poem that present has partly passed. As if in a magic illusion, it is being pierced by the arrow of time. It is partly invisible as a reflective image. What remains of it is the mark, the perforation. As in a longitudinal cut, this concentrated present of the mirror, which we can see as the image of temporal mimesis, also contains the future, the time ahead, but this cannot appear as an image reflected on the surface of the mirror. The future and the past, however, are condensed in the present. The mirror, the mimetic faculty, is not a place of representation but of a transitory correspondence. The invisible is also present in the objectual image, beyond the mirror. If the mirror is an image that is always in the present, this present is the time of the poem, and it is in this present that all the times alluded to by the poem are present: the moment before the perforation piercing, when the arrow was approaching, the exact moment when the perforation piercing takes place and the moment afterward, when the arrow has perforated the mirror. The present thus is then the condensation of this moment: it contains memory and clairvoyance. The past and the future are images. The image has a body. The correspondence between the things that enter into a relationship is like the present moment of a perforation: its temporality is intensive.

We can say that, as Benjamin speculates, the instantaneous speed of reading enhances the fusion of the magical and semiotic dimensions.⁵⁰ Just like temporal mimesis, the poem is a corporeal image; its symbolic power is inseparable from its objectual spatiality. If we want to see the mirror as the mimetic-magical dimension and the arrow as the semiotic dimension, then the relationship between them is immediate, not mediated. If we imagine the poem in the intensive time of a mobile and portable present in which past and future are concomitantly present, something strange happens: the poem is the memory of time if we imagine it from the point of view of its past – time as arrow (semiotic dimension), which came towards the mirror (mimetic dimension). Thus, what we see in the present – the mirror perforated by the arrow – is the memory of that past. But in an intensive time, without the chronological linearity of past-present-future, we can imagine the mirror, the mimetic dimension, as a place half of the past, half of the future, since each half of the arrow is on one side. This future, invisible half also makes up the present which is partly made up of virtuality. But what is the present like from the point of view of this invisible future that makes it up? This is the backward temporality (the anticipated future) of the temporal mimesis theorized by Benjamin – the temporality of a magical-mimetic dimension that has no other foundation than the semiotic dimension that serves as its support and the lightning time of a correspondence.

⁴⁹ Brossa’s object poetry is discussed by Glòria Bordons in the article “La poesia objetual de Joan Brossa,” *Poesis. Revista de crítica y creación literaria*, no. 3(1996), pp. 22-30.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” p. 722.

6. Final words

In a 1977 interview, Brossa said that in an visual poem “there is a change of code in the sense of valuing the sign that is not alphabetical” and compared this new code to “a leap into the void, which requires sensitivity and a sense of what is wanted that is more concrete, more in sight.”⁵¹ The poet continues: “The code can always be a crutch, the poet just has to know his lesson because there is a ballast in language.”⁵² In these words, one can read how much the fusion between the magical and the semiotic is open to differences and intervals. It can be as much a leap into the void as it can be plastered over by established formal and rhetorical models. In the case of the new codes that Brossa explores to produce a fast reading, fast communication, a fleeting flashing up, the poet drops his crutches in a “leap into the void.”

This leap is nothing other than the leap into the semiotic support, or as we have seen, into matter. We can say: the leap is into the always new, originary, and irreducible matter of language. Time in *La memòria del temps* is as immediate as that of the non-sensuous similarity which scratches the sky and disappears. The mirror, which reflects whatever is in front of it in space, is overcome when it is perforated by the arrow. The image is no longer something immaterial placed on a pure surface but also a corporeal, real object. Insofar as it cannot be a complete reflection, this image could be seen as an unconscious perception: on the other side of the mirror is the invisible future. Brossa’s poem is a spatial and corporeal image which uses objects in a concrete and symbolic way at once, in writing without words – except for the title which is part of the work, like “a color that does not come from the paint tube,” as Duchamp puts it. Brossa’s poem is like thought in that it is irreducibly symbolic and linguistic, keeping in mind that what is properly symbolic and linguistic is not a concept. Brossa’s poem is like thought precisely when it does not offer a concept of understanding but only a symbol for reflection. The material Brossa works with seems to be one in which, if we were to isolate it, language would appear as an intercession between thought and poetry.

If, on the one hand, in a disenchanted world that favors causal relations, the linguistic and symbolic experience of thought has been relegated to unconscious perceptions; on the other hand, this immediacy from which magic has been eliminated has come to have another canon: language. It is in that canon that the profane and reflective dimensions of Brossa’s poems emerges. The fact that the correspondence between the stars and the newborn child was not objective did not prevent the ancients from believing that it had an effect on human existence from the moment of birth. In the same way, the correspondences that language establishes, even those of which we may be unaware, have an effect. Insofar as they emerge as ever-new, original, and irreducible perceptions, they come from the future. They are communicated to us, the active receptors and conceivers, in a call to read them.

The leap is made solely and exclusively by the encounter between magical-mimetic and semiotic support. This encounter serves as the leap’s very foundation. The rhythm of this leap, that is to say, the immediate and flashing time of the non-sensuous similarity or correspondence, is from the future. This is the leap from the future to the present and this is what ‘leap into the void’ means. It is a leap *from* language into language. But if there is nothing before matter or

⁵¹ Interview given by Brossa to Joaquin Soler Serrano on the rtve.es television program *A fondo* in 1977.

⁵² *Ibid.*

before semiotic support, nothing before action, if it is language that comes at the beginning, one wonders how it can come and from where. Based on what we have seen so far, one could answer that it comes from the image. From the symbol, taking advantage of its interstitial liminality between the same and the other, its power to transfer, to be in an unknown place indicating another, which can only be thought but not known, being the presence of an absence; that is, from the symbol which is placed in the place of the schema for the concept. The symbol does not just provide a schema for the concept, but an image for reflection. This image does not arise voluntarily nor self-sufficiently but from an active reception or receptivity that conceives it. This is the terrain where thought cannot be detached from its linguistic and symbolic dimension that the ancient powers of prediction of divinatory reading still connect with our lives to determine them in an unconscious, in a not entirely controlled way which is open to the unknown and to chance. I repeat: this rhythm of language from the future, visible in speculative thought, is present in contemporary life like the powerful underwater mass of an iceberg of which we only see the tip. Brossa’s poetry shows us that the linguistic and symbolic dimension of thought may not rely on words but on images, which are essential to it. To the extent that in place of the foundation there is the paradox of language leaping into the void of being as its own presupposition, drawing only on an image of thought as a symbol for reflection, and not on a concept of knowledge, this leap whose direction is from future to present is also the origin. At the same time that something is said through language, it is language that is said, as something immediate, corporeal. In this present, however, there is a distance, in which poetic vision and critical reflection converge, as if a clairvoyance made the prophet turn their eyes to themselves and see that their prediction is nothing more than the temporal rhythm that best describes this intensive movement.