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*On the cover:* Walter Benjamin's borrower's card for the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1940. Reproduced from Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith, *Benjaminiana* (Giessen, 1991), p. 213.

# Critical Inquiry

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# Introduction

## Winfried Menninghaus

The publication of the first volume of the three-volume Harvard edition represents a landmark in the American reception of Walter Benjamin's works.<sup>1</sup> Given the high percentage of major essays and other material hitherto untranslated, this long-overdue edition is very likely to alter the American reception of Benjamin. Even though devoted Benjamin scholars in this country have always looked beyond the limited range of works available in translation, the "American" Benjamin consisted first and foremost of the famous late texts on aura and technical reproduction, on film and photography. By contrast, even the most outstanding achievements of the earlier Benjamin—namely, his groundbreaking dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* and the essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities"—were until now virtually nonexistent for American readers without an excellent command of German or unequipped to embark on an ambitious detour through Italian, French, or Spanish translations.

Considering the strong interest in Benjamin, the belatedness of the American edition is puzzling and recalls Benjamin's great theme of *Säumen* and *Versäumen*, of missed opportunities and the failure to make the right decisions at the right time. However, this should be the occasion to welcome Benjamin's newfound accessibility to the American public rather than to regret missed opportunities to read him in the past decades. In the following essays, delivered at a conference held at Yale University on 26–27 September 1997, this welcome does not assume the form of a criti-

1. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

cal account of the yet unfinished Harvard edition. Moreover, the conference—and this issue of *Critical Inquiry*—were not designed to bring together, one more time, Benjamin specialists. Rather, a number of renowned scholars were invited, scholars who have one thing in common: though their work in their respective fields occasionally borders on Benjaminian thought, they have thus far not published extensive studies on Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> These scholars were not even requested to give a paper on Benjamin; rather, oblique references were as welcome as highly selective forms of “applied Benjamin” (heretical as this may sound for serious exegetes). Accordingly, Scholem’s early essay “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice” (“Über Jona und den Begriff der Gerechtigkeit,” written in Bern in 1919) appears here—for the very first time in print—primarily in order to shed an indirect light on Benjamin’s reflections on justice. At the same time, it serves to open up new perspectives on the more recent debate on justice and violence.<sup>3</sup>

Given this variety of “marginal” purposes, the title of the conference, “*Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin*,” did not delimit a precise topic; rather, it served as a (Benjaminian) emblem for an agenda yet to be determined by the speakers. It follows that a summary of the questions and findings presented in this group of deliberately heterogeneous essays would be neither adequate nor possible. Each stands for itself, and I can only leave it to the reader to decide what new insights this bringing together of non-Benjaminians yields for the challenge of reading Benjamin.

2. On these grounds I have happily excluded myself from giving a talk, as I wrote a dissertation on Benjamin twenty years ago and have published several articles since.

3. Compare Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (July–Aug. 1990): 920–1045, and the subsequent special issue “On the Necessity of Violence for any Possibility of Justice,” *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991).

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# Benjamin's Silence

**Shoshana Felman**

Nothing more desolating than his acolytes, nothing more godforsaken than his adversaries. No name that would be more fittingly honored by silence.

WALTER BENJAMIN, "One-Way Street"<sup>1</sup>

"Expect from me no word of my own. Nor should I be capable of saying anything new; for in the room where someone writes the noise is so great. . . . Let him who has something to say step forward and be silent!"

KARL KRAUS, quoted by Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup>

Conversation strives toward silence, and the listener is really the silent partner. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one is the unappropriated source of meaning.

WALTER BENJAMIN, "The Metaphysics of Youth"<sup>3</sup>

I propose here to address—and listen to—that element in Benjamin's language and writing that specifically, decisively remains beyond communication. "In all language and linguistic creations," Benjamin has said,

1. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 469, from a section written in commemoration of Karl Kraus entitled "Monument to a Warrior."

2. Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1986), p. 243.

3. Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, p. 6; hereafter abbreviated "MY."

“there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated. . . . It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work.” In Benjamin’s own work, in his abbreviated, cryptic style and in the essentially elliptical articulation of his thought, a surcharge of meaning is quite literally imprisoned in instances of silence. It is the task of the translator of Benjamin’s own work to listen to these instances of silence, whose implications, I will try to show, are at once stylistic, philosophical, historical, and autobiographical. “Midway between poetry and theory,” my critical amplification and interpretation of this silence—my own translation of the language that is still “imprisoned” in Benjamin’s work—will thus focus on what Benjamin himself has underscored but what remains unheard, unheeded in the critically repetitive mechanical reproduction of his work: “that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter.”<sup>4</sup>

## I

### *Wars and Revolutions*

It is customary to view Benjamin essentially as an abstract philosopher, a critic and a thinker of modernity (and/or of postmodernity) in culture and in art. In contradistinction to this dominant approach, I propose to look at Benjamin far more specifically and more concretely as a thinker, a philosopher, and a narrator of the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century. “Wars and revolutions,” writes Hannah Arendt, “have thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century. And as distinguished from the nineteenth-century ideologies—such as nationalism and internationalism, capitalism and imperialism, socialism and communism, which, though still invoked by many as justifying causes, have

4. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings*, pp. 261, 259, 257.

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lost contact with the major realities of our world—war and revolution . . . have outlived all their ideological justifications.”<sup>5</sup>

The seeds of total war developed as early as the First World War, when the distinction between soldiers and civilians was no longer respected because it was inconsistent with the new weapons then used. . . . The magnitude of the violence let loose in the First World War might indeed have been enough to cause revolutions in its aftermath even without any revolutionary tradition and even if no revolution had ever occurred before.

To be sure, not even wars, let alone revolutions, are ever completely determined by violence. Where violence rules absolutely, . . . everything and everybody must fall silent. [*OR*, pp. 14, 18]

In my reading, Walter Benjamin's life work bears witness to the ways in which events outlive their ideologies and consummate, dissolve the grounding discourse of their nineteenth-century historic and utopian meanings. Benjamin's texts play out, thus, one against the other and one through the other, both the “constellation that poses the threat of total annihilation through war against the hope for the emancipation of all mankind through revolution” (*OR*, p. 11), and the deadly succession of historical convulsions through which culture—in the voice of Benjamin who is its most profound witness—must fall silent.

### *Theory and Autobiography*

Silence can be either the outside of language or a position inside language, a state of noiselessness or wordlessness. Falling silent is, however, not a state but an event. It is the significance of the event that I will try to understand and think through in the present essay. What does it mean that culture—in the voice of its most profound witness—must fall silent? What does it mean for culture? What does it mean for Benjamin? How does Benjamin come to represent and to incorporate concretely, personally, the physiognomy of the twentieth century? And how in turn is this physiognomy reflected, concretized, in Benjamin's own face?

In searching for answers to these questions, I will juxtapose and grasp together theoretical and autobiographical texts. Benjamin's own work includes a singular record of an autobiographical event that, to my mind, is crucial to the author's theories as much as to his destiny (although critics usually neglect it). Benjamin narrates this event in one of his rare moments of personal directness, in the (lyrical) autobiographical text entitled “A Berlin Chronicle.” I will interpret this event together with, and through, two central theoretical essays that constitute the corner-

5. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated *OR*.

stones of Benjamin's late work: "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In reading the most personal, the most idiosyncratic autobiographical notations through the most far reaching, groundbreaking theoretical constructions, my effort will be to give Benjamin's theory a face.<sup>6</sup> The conceptual question that will override and guide this effort will be, What is the relation between the theory and the event (and what, in general, is the relationship between events and theories)? How does the theory arise out of the concrete drama of an event? How does the concrete drama of an event become theory? And how do both event and theory relate to silence (and to Benjamin's embodiment of silence)?

## 2

*Theories of Silence*

Because my sense is that in Benjamin, the theory is (paradoxically) far less obscure than the autobiography, I will start by reflecting on the two theoretical essays—perhaps Benjamin's best known abstract texts—of which I propose to underscore the common theoretical stakes. I will argue that both "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" can be construed as two theories of silence derived from, and related to, the two world wars: "The Storyteller," written in 1936, is retrospectively, explicitly connected with the First World War; "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written shortly before Benjamin's death in 1940, represents his ultimate rethinking of the nature of historical events and of the task of historiography in the face of the developments of the beginning of the Second World War.

I will suggest that these two texts are in effect tied up together. I propose to read them one against the other and one through the other, as two stages in a larger philosophical and existential picture, and as two variations of a global Benjaminian theory of wars and silence. I argue therefore that "The Storyteller" and "Theses" can be viewed as two theoretical variations of the same profound underlying text. My methodology is here inspired by the way in which Benjamin himself discusses—in his youth—"Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," in analyzing in the two texts (as he puts it) "not . . . their likeness which is nonexistent" but their

6. This textual juxtaposition of the theory and the autobiography will be illuminated, in its turn, by Benjamin's work as a literary critic, especially in the early literary essays on Hölderlin, on Dostoyevsky, and on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. I will thus borrow metaphors from Benjamin's own literary criticism and will in turn use them as interpretive tools and as evocative stylistic echoes. My methodology will be attentive, therefore, to three distinct levels of the text that the analysis will grasp together: the conceptual level of the theory, the narrative level of the autobiography, and the figurative level of the literary criticism.

“comparativeness,” and in treating them—despite their distance—as two “versions” (or two transformations) of the same profound text.<sup>7</sup>

### *The End of Storytelling*

“The Storyteller” is presented as a literary study of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov and of his striking art of storytelling. But the essay’s main concern is in depicting storytelling as a *lost art*: the achievements of the nineteenth-century model serve as the background for a differential diagnosis of the ways in which *storytelling is lost to the twentieth century*. Something happened, Benjamin suggests, that has brought about the death—the agony—of storytelling, both as a literary genre and as a discursive mode in daily life. Benjamin announces thus a historical drama of “the end of storytelling”—or an innovative cultural theory of the collapse of narration—as a critical and theoretical appraisal (through Leskov) of a general historical state of affairs.

The theory, thereby, is Benjamin’s way of grasping and of bringing into consciousness an unconscious cultural phenomenon and an imperceptible historical process that has taken place outside anyone’s awareness and that can therefore be deciphered, understood, and noticed only retrospectively, in its effects (its symptoms). The effects, says Benjamin, are that today, quite symptomatically, *it has become impossible to tell a story*. The art of storytelling has been lost along with the ability to share experiences.

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. . . . It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us . . . were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.<sup>8</sup>

Among the reasons Benjamin gives for this loss—the rise of capitalism, the sterilization of life through bourgeois values, the decline of craftsmanship, the growing influence of the media and the press—the first and most dramatic is that people have been struck dumb by the First World War. From ravaged battlefields, they have returned mute to a wrecked world in which nothing has remained the same except the sky. This vivid and dramatic explanation is placed right away at the beginning of the text, like an explosive opening argument or an initial shock or blast inflicted on the reader and with whose force of shock the whole remainder of the text will have to cope and to catch up. The opening is, indeed, as forceful as it is ungraspable. The text itself does not quite process it;

7. Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings*, p. 33.

8. Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Zohn, ed. Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 83; hereafter abbreviated “S.”

nor does it truly integrate it with the arguments that follow. And this ungraspability or unintegratability of the beginning is not a mere coincidence; it duplicates and illustrates the point of the text, that the war has left an impact that has struck dumb its survivors, with the effect of interrupting now the continuity of telling and of understanding. The utterance repeats in act the content of the statement: it must remain somewhat unassimilable.

In Benjamin, however, it is productive to retain what cannot be assimilated. And it is crucially important in my view that what cannot be assimilated crystallizes around a date. Before it can be understood, the loss of narrative is *dated*. Its process is traced back to the collective, massive trauma of the First World War.

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. [“S,” p. 84]

Thus, narration was reduced to silence by the First World War. What has emerged from the destructive torrents—from the noise of the explosions—was only the muteness of the body in its absolutely helpless, shelterless vulnerability. Resonating to this dumbness of the body is the storyteller’s dumbness.

But this fall to silence of narration is contrasted with, and covered by, the new loudness, the emerging noise of information—“journalism being clearly . . . the expression of the changed function of language in the world of high capitalism.”<sup>9</sup>

In a world in which public discourse is usurped by the commercial aims and by the noise of information, soldiers returning from the First

9. Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” p. 242. Compare “S,” pp. 88–91. Information and narration are not simply two competing modes of discourse (two functions of language). They are in fact two strategies of living and communicating, two levels of existence within culture. Narration seeks a listener, information, a consumer. Narration is addressed to a community, information is directed toward a market. Insofar as listening is an integral part of narration, while marketing is always part of information, narration is attentive and imaginatively productive (in its concern for the singularity, the unintelligibility of the event), while infor-

World War can find no social or collective space in which to integrate their death experience. Their trauma must remain a private matter that cannot be symbolized collectively. It cannot be exchanged, it must fall silent.

### *The Unforgettable*

Gone are the days when dying was "a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one" ("S," p. 93). Irrespective of the battlefield experience, mortality is self-deceptively denied in sterilized bourgeois life, which strives to keep death out of sight symbolically and literally.<sup>10</sup>

Narration was, however, born from the pathos of an ultimate exchange between the dying and the living. Medieval paintings represent the origin of storytelling: they show the archetypal or inaugural site of narration to be the deathbed, in which the dying man (or the original narrator) reviews his life (evokes his memories) and thus addresses the events and lessons of his past to those surrounding him. A dying speaker is a naturally authoritative storyteller; he borrows his authority from death.<sup>11</sup>

Today, however, agonizers die in private and without authority. They are attended by no listeners. They tell no stories. And there is no authority—and certainly no wisdom—that has survived the war. "We have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" ("S," p. 86).

It is not simply that there is no longer a proposal for historical or narrative continuation. The First World War is *the first war that can no longer be narrated*. Its witnesses and its participants have lost their stories. The sole signification which "The Storyteller" can henceforth articulate is that of mankind's double loss: a loss of the capacity to symbolize; a loss of the capacity to moralize.<sup>12</sup>

mation is mechanical and reproductive (in its concern for the event's exchangeability, explainability, and reproducibility).

Benjamin was concerned not only with communication but (implicitly, essentially) with education. Educationally, these two modes conflict not only as two separate roles or institutions. They wage a battle *within* every institution and *within* every discipline of knowledge. They are in conflict, in effect, *within* every pedagogy. They struggle (to this day) within every university.

10. "Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death and . . . when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs" ("S," p. 94).

11. "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller has to tell. He has borrowed his authority from death" ("S," p. 94).

12. Since the storyteller (in Leskov and his tradition) is "a righteous man," a "teacher" and a "sage" ("S," pp. 109, 108), what now falls to muteness is the very possibility of righ-

*A Philosophy of History*

The outburst of the Second World War in 1939 (three years after the publication of "The Storyteller") brings Benjamin to write, in 1940—in the months that were to be the last ones of his life—what I have called his second theory of silence, entitled "Theses on the Philosophy of History." At first, this text seems altogether different from "The Storyteller." Its topic is not literature but history, of which the essay offers not a diagnosis but a theory. The theory is programmatic: its tone is not descriptive but prescriptive. The "theses" are audaciously abbreviated and provocatively dogmatized. They do not explicitly reflect on silence. The essay focuses rather on (scholarly and scientific) *discourses* on history. The word *silence* does not figure in the text.

And, yet, speechlessness is at the very heart of the reflection and of the situation of the writer. Like the storyteller who falls silent or returns mute from the First World War, the historian or the theorist of history facing the conflagration of the Second World War is equally *reduced to speechlessness*: no ready-made conceptual or discursive tool, no discourse about history turns out to be sufficient to explain the nature of this war; no available conceptual framework in which history is customarily perceived proves adequate or satisfactory to understand or to explain current historical developments. *Vis-à-vis* the undreamt-of events, what is called for, Benjamin suggests, is a *radical displacement of our frames of reference*, a radical transvaluation of our methods and of our philosophies of history.

The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.<sup>13</sup>

History is now the property and the propriety of Nazis (of those who can control it and manipulate its discourse). It is by virtue of a loyalty to history that Hitler is proposing to avenge Germany from its defeat and its humiliation in the First World War. All the existing discourses on history have proven ineffective either to predict or to counteract the regime and the phenomenon of Hitler.<sup>14</sup>

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teousness. Similarly, literature as teacher of humanity (in the manner of Leskov) has lost its voice. In the collapse of narrative as a generic, literary mode of discourse, literature as ethics—"counsel," education—is thus inherently historically and philosophically reduced to silence.

13. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, p. 257; hereafter abbreviated "TPH."

14. Among the theories of history that Benjamin critiques and "deconstructs" are pure theology (religion), pure historicism (positivism), pure liberalism (idealism), and pure Marxism (uncritical historical materialism).

History in Nazi Germany is Fascist. Fascism legitimates itself in the name of national identity on the basis of a unity and of a continuity of history. The philosophical tenets of this view are inherited from nineteenth-century historicism, which has equated temporality with progress, in presupposing time as an entity of natural development, progressively enhancing maturation and advancing toward a betterment as time (and history) go by. Benjamin rejects this view, which has become untenable vis-à-vis the traumas of the twentieth century.

It is the victor who forever represents the present conquest or the present victory as an improvement in relation to the past. But the reality of history is that of the traumatized by history, the materialist reality of those who are oppressed by the new victory. Historicism is, however, based on an unconscious identification with the discourse of the victor and thus on an uncritical espousal of the victor's narrative perspective. "If one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize," Benjamin writes,

the answer is inevitable: with the victor. . . . Empathy with the victor inevitably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. ["TPH," p. 256]

Historicism is thus based on a perception of history as victory. But it is blind to this presupposition. So blind that it does not see the irony with which this axiom has been borrowed—taken to extremes—by the discourses of Fascism. Fascism is, indeed, quite literally, a *philosophy of history as victory*. Unlike historicism, it is not unconscious of this prejudice; it is grounded in a cynical and conscious *claim* of this philosophy of history.<sup>15</sup>

Historicism is then based on a confusion between truth and power. Real history is, on the contrary, the ineluctable discrepancy between the

15. Compare Hitler's harangue to his top civilian and military officials in 1939, on the occasion of the invasion of Poland: "Destruction of Poland is in the background. The aim is elimination of living forces, not the arrival at a certain line. . . . I shall give a propagandistic

two.<sup>16</sup> History is the perennial conflictual arena in which collective memory is named as a *constitutive dissociation* between truth and power.

What, then, is the relation between history and silence? In a (conscious or unconscious) historical philosophy of power, the powerless (the persecuted) are constitutionally deprived of voice.

Because official history is based on the perspective of the victor, the voice with which it speaks authoritatively is *deafening*; it makes us unaware of the fact that there remains in history a claim, a discourse that *we do not hear*. And in relation to this act of deafening, the rulers of the moment are the heirs of the rulers of the past. History transmits, ironically enough, a legacy of deafness in which historicists unwittingly share. What is called progress, and what Benjamin sees only as a piling of catastrophe upon catastrophe, is therefore the transmission of historical discourse from ruler to ruler, from one historical instance of power to another. This transmission is constitutive of what is (misguidedly) perceived as continuity in history. "The continuum of history is that of the oppressors." "The history of the oppressed is a discontinuum."<sup>17</sup>

If history, despite its spectacular triumphal time, is thus barbarically, constitutively conflict ridden, the historian is not in possession of a space in which to be removed, detached, "objective"; the philosopher of history cannot be an outsider to the conflict. In the face of the deafening appropriation of historical philosophy by Fascism; in the face of the Nazi use of the most *civilized* tools of technology and law for a most barbaric racist persecution, "objectivity" does not exist. A historical articulation proceeds not from an epistemological "detachment" but, on the contrary, from the historian's sense of urgency and of emergency.<sup>18</sup>

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.

cause for starting the war,—never mind whether it be plausible or not. The victor shall not be asked later on whether we told the truth or not. In starting and making a war, not the right is what matters but victory" (quoted by Robert Jackson, introduction to Whitney Harris, *Tyranny on Trial: The Evidence at Nuremberg* [New York, 1954], p. xxxi).

16. In this conception, Benjamin is the interpreter—the synthesizer—of the diverse legacies of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud.

17. Benjamin, "Paralipomènes et variantes des *Thèses 'Sur le concept de l'histoire,'*" *Écrits français*, ed. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer (Paris, 1991), p. 352; my trans.

18. The reality of history is grasped (articulated) when the historian *recognizes* a historical *state of emergency* that is, precisely, *not* the one the ruler has declared or that (in Hobbes's tradition, in Carl Schmitt's words) is "decided by the sovereign" (Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* [Munich, 1922], a work cited and discussed by Benjamin in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne [1928; London, 1977], pp. 65, 74, 239 nn. 14–17; hereafter abbreviated *OG*.)



Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. ["TPH," p. 257]

The theory of history is thus itself an *intervention in the conflict*; it is itself historical. In the middle of a cataclysmic world war that shifts the grounds from under our very feet, danger, Benjamin implies, is what triggers the most lucid and the most clairvoyant *grasp* of history. Historical insight strikes surprisingly and unexpectedly in "moments of sudden illumination" in which "we are beside ourselves."<sup>19</sup> Danger and emergency illuminate themselves as the conditions both of history (of life) and of its theory (its knowledge). New, innovative theories of history (such that enable a displacement of official history) come into being only under duress.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. ["TPH," p. 255]

In Benjamin's own view, history—a line of catastrophe—is not a movement toward progress but a movement toward (what Benjamin calls enigmatically) redemption. Redemption—what historical struggles (and political revolutions) are about—should be understood as both materialist (Marxist, political, interhistorical) and theological (suprahistorical, transcendent). Redemption is discontinuity, disruption. It names the constant need to catch up with the hidden reality of history that always remains a debt to the oppressed, a debt to the dead of history, a claim the past has on the present.

Redemption is the allegory of a future state of freedom, justice, happiness, and recovery of meaning. History should be assessed only *in reference* to this state that is its goal. Historical action should take place as though this goal were not utopian but pragmatic. Yet it can never be decided by a mortal if redemption, ultimately, can be immanent to history or if it is doomed to remain transcendental, beyond history. "This world," Benjamin has written elsewhere, "remains a mute world, from which music will never ring out. Yet to what is it dedicated if not redemption?"<sup>20</sup>

19. Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections*, pp. 56, 57; hereafter abbreviated "BC."

20. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," trans. Corngold, *Selected Writings*, p. 355; hereafter abbreviated "GEA." Redemption seems, therefore, to be linked to the moment of illumination which suddenly and unexpectedly gives us the capacity to *hear the silence*—to *tune into* the unarticulated and to *hear* what is in history deprived of words. Redemption starts by redeeming history from deafness.

*Dedicated to Redemption*

When, therefore, will redemption come? Will there be a redemption after the Second World War? Will there ever be redemption *from* the Second World War? Benjamin foresees the task of the historian of the future. He will be sad. His history will be the product of his sadness.

Flaubert, who was familiar with [the “cause of sadness”], wrote: “*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage*” [“Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage”]. [“TPH,” p. 256]

Before the fact, Benjamin foresees that history will know a holocaust. After the war, the historian’s task will be not only to “resuscitate Carthage” or to *narrate extermination*, but paradoxically, to *save the dead*:

Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. [“TPH,” p. 254]

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins*. [“TPH,” p. 255; emphasis mine; Benjamin’s italics]

Thus, the historian of the Second World War will be sad. Beyond sadness, he will have to be intently vigilant. In this war particularly, the conceptual question of the historian’s identification with the victor inadvertently evolves into a graver, far more serious question of political complicity.

The task of the historian of today is to *avoid collaboration* with a criminal regime and with the discourses of fascism. Similarly, the historian of tomorrow will have to be watchful to avoid complicity with history’s barbarism and with culture’s latent (and now patent) crimes. Benjamin’s text, I argue, is the beginning of the critical awareness of the treacherous questions of collaboration that so obsessively preoccupy us to this day. It is still early in the war. Benjamin intuitively senses the importance of this question, as it will arise precisely, later, *out of* the Second World War. The historian, Benjamin suggests, must be revolutionary lest he be unwittingly complicit. And complicity, for Benjamin, is a graver danger, a worse punishment than death.

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to

wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. ["TPH," p. 255]

The historian, paradoxically, has no choice but to be a revolutionary if he does not want to be a collaborator.<sup>21</sup>

### *History and Speechlessness*

Benjamin advances, thus, a theory of history as trauma—and a correlative theory of the historical conversion of trauma into insight. History consists of chains of traumatic interruptions rather than of sequences of rational causalities. But the traumatized—the subjects of history—are deprived of a language in which to speak of their victimization. The relation between history and trauma is speechless. Traditional theories of history tend to neglect this speechlessness of trauma: by definition, speechlessness is what remains out of the record. But it is specifically to this speechless connection between history and trauma that Benjamin's own theory of history intends now to give voice.

He does so by showing how the very discipline, the very "concept of history" is constituted by what it excludes (and fails to grasp).<sup>22</sup> History (to sum up) is thus inhabited by a historical unconscious related to—and founded on—a double silence: the silence of "the tradition of the oppressed," who are by definition deprived of voice and whose story (or whose narrative perspective) is always systematically reduced to silence; and the silence of official history—the victor's history—with respect to the tradition of the oppressed. According to Benjamin, the hidden theoretical centrality of this double silence defines historiography as such. This in general is the way in which history is told, or, rather, this is in general the way in which history is silenced. The triumph of Fascism and the outbreak of the Second World War constitute only the most climactic demonstration, the most aberrant materialization or realization of this historiography.

Whereas the task of the philosopher of history is thus to take apart "the concept of history" by showing its deceptive continuity to be in fact a process of silencing, the task of the historian is to reconstruct what his-

21. For a historiography free of complicity, we must disassociate ourselves from our accustomed thinking:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes a sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a *revolutionary chance* in the fight for the oppressed past. ["TPH," pp. 262–63; emphasis mine]

22. The original and current German title of the essay is, precisely, "On the Concept of History" ("Über den Begriff der Geschichte").

tory has silenced, to give voice to the dead and to the vanquished and to resuscitate the unrecorded, silenced, hidden story of the oppressed.

## 3

*The Event*

I would like now to look backward from the theory to the autobiography and to try to reach the roots of Benjamin's conceptual insights in an original event whose theoretical and autobiographical significance remains totally ungrasped in the voluminous critical literature on Benjamin. The event takes place at the outbreak of the First World War. It consists in the conjunction of the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914 with the joint suicide, four days later, of Benjamin's best friend, Fritz Heinle, and of Heinle's girlfriend. A farewell express letter of the now-dead friend informs Benjamin where to find the bodies. This shared readiness to die and this joint act of self-inflicted violence is interpreted by Benjamin and his friends as a symbolic gesture of protest against the war. For Benjamin, the event is therefore one of loss, of shock, of disillusionment, and of awakening to a reality of an inexorable, tragic historical connection between youth and death. For the world, it is the outbreak of the First World War.

The impact of this event marks a dramatic turning point in Benjamin's life and in his thought. Before this event, Benjamin is involved in political activism in the youth movement, working to revolutionize German society and culture through a radical reform of education. In the youth groups supporting this reform, he holds a position of strong leadership as president of the Berlin Free Students' Union. After the event, he abdicates his leadership and turns away from political activity. He gives up any public role along with the belief that language can directly become action. He breaks with his admired teacher, Wyneken, of whose ideas he has been both the disciple and the ardent follower. Because this former mentor now guides youth toward the war, Benjamin realizes that philosophy has failed and that authority can no longer be relied on: "*theoria* in you has been blinded," he writes to Wyneken, in severing his links with him.<sup>23</sup>

In the duplicity of governments, in the duplicity of teachers, and in the isolated words of the letter of a dead youth telling Benjamin—the friend, the leader, the collaborator—where to find the bodies, language has betrayed. But the betrayal constitutes precisely the event; the betrayal is precisely history. "Midway through its journey," Benjamin will write, "nature finds itself betrayed by language, and that powerful blocking of

23. Quoted in "Chronology, 1892–1926," in *Selected Writings*, p. 499.

feeling turns to sorrow. Thus, with the ambiguity of the word, its *signifying* power, language falters. . . . History becomes equal to signification in human language; this language is frozen in signification."<sup>24</sup>

Refusing to participate in the betrayal of language and in the madness of the war, Benjamin leaves Germany for Switzerland and resorts to a silence that will last six years, until 1920.<sup>25</sup> During these years, he does not publish anything. He writes and circulates among close friends a text on Hölderlin in which he meditates on the nature of the lyric and its relation to the poet's death. The poet's death relates to Heinle's death. Heinle also has left poems, which Benjamin reads and rereads in an attempt to deepen his acquaintance with the dead. It is, indeed, as a dead poet that he now comes to know his friend. But Benjamin vows to give the dead poet immortality: to save Heinle from oblivion, to save the suicide from its meaninglessness, by publishing his friend's poetic work. This hope will never be relinquished. In the years of silence following the suicide, he edits Heinle's manuscripts. Benjamin's own text on Hölderlin and on the nature of the lyric is also an implicit dialogue with Heinle's work, a dialogue with Heinle's writing as well as with his life and with his death. Hence, Benjamin's specific interest in two poems by Hölderlin, "The Poet's Courage" and "Timidity," which designate the difference between Heinle's (suicidal) courage and the timidity of Benjamin's own (condemnation to) survival: suicide or survival—two existential stances between which Benjamin no doubt has oscillated but which he declares to be, surprisingly and paradoxically, two "versions" of the same profound text, deeply comparable or similar despite their difference.<sup>26</sup>

### *Belated Understanding*

This drama and this suicide are narrated (among other things) in Benjamin's most personal autobiography, "A Berlin Chronicle." I will argue that for Benjamin, this autobiographical narrative becomes an allegory of the ungrasped impact of the First World War.

But "A Berlin Chronicle" is written eighteen years later, in 1932. The direct result of the events of the war at the time of their ungraspable occurrence is that Benjamin quite literally falls silent. And especially, quite literally and strictly silent, speechless about the subject of the war: as though by oath of loyalty to the dead friend; as though his own speech, or the language of youth they shared, had equally committed suicide. Something within him has died as well. The traumatic (and, belatedly,

24. Benjamin, "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," *Selected Writings*, p. 60.

25. Compare Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers, ed. Martina Derviş (London, 1996), p. 118.

26. Benjamin, "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," p. 33.

theoretical) significance of this silence remains equally ungrasped by critics, who keep expressing their politically correct critique of it and their amazement at this eccentricity of Benjamin. Nor does anybody grasp the profound connection of this early silence to the later, much admired classic essays, "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin's early experience is, thus, on the contrary, separated from his later theory and is at once dismissed and trivialized: "Silence as an expression of inner protest at contemporary events: little doubt was cast on the legitimacy of such a stance at the time," the latest biographer Momme Brodersen historicizes.<sup>27</sup> The editors of the Harvard volume, more tuned in, feel equally compelled to mark a pious reservation: "Remarkably enough, Benjamin's letters . . . focus exclusively on personal issues. . . . There is rarely mention of the war, and no direct consideration of it or of his attitude toward it. It is as if Benjamin's injunction against political activity at the time also precluded cognizance of the most difficult events of the day."<sup>28</sup> What critics fail to see is how Benjamin's own narration of his war experience in "A Berlin Chronicle" is precisely, quintessentially, an autobiographical (and theoretical) *account of the meaning of his silence*.

## 4

*The Subject Represented by the "I"*

Eleven pages into "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin begins the narration of his war experience by insisting on his reluctance to say "I":

If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years' observance of one little rule: never use the word "I" except in letters. ["BC," p. 15]

However, Benjamin adds ironically, in this solicited piece he has accepted not just to say "I" but to be paid for it; if, therefore, these subjective notes have become longer than he had intended, it is not only because the subject, "accustomed for years to waiting in the wings, would not so easily be summoned to the limelight" but also because, metaphorically and literally, "the precaution of the subject represented by the 'I' . . . is entitled not to be sold cheap" ("BC," pp. 15–16).

The autobiographical impulse is therefore in conflict with a speechlessness, a muteness of the "I" that constantly defeats narration from inside. And, yet, the text originates in an imperative to tell, in a symbolic

27. Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 89.

28. "Chronology, 1892–1926," p. 502.

debt that goes beyond the personal and that makes narration unavoidable and indispensable. What is at stake, says Benjamin, are “deep and harrowing experiences” that constitute “the most important memories in one’s life” (“BC,” p. 16). Of these experiences, all the other witnesses are now dead: “I alone remain” (“BC,” p. 17). The ethical impetus of the narration stems from this aloneness and from this necessity: since the narrator is the last surviving witness, history must be told despite the narrator’s muteness. The narrator sees himself surrounded by dead doubles, younger than himself or of his age, dead witnesses who, had they been alive, might have helped him to cross the difficult thresholds of memory but whose dead faces now appear to him “only as an answer to the question whether forty [Benjamin’s age at the time of writing] is not too young an age at which to evoke the most important memories of one’s life” (“BC,” p. 16). “A Berlin Chronicle” implicitly announces, thus, the author’s fortieth birthday, with which its writing coincides. The autobiographer celebrates his birthday by mourning for the death of his contemporaries. From the start, death and birth are juxtaposed. “Berlin” is the name for this juxtaposition.

### *Prosopopeia*

Longing for the complementary narration of his dead doubles and identified with their eternal silence, the speaker in fact writes an epitaph much more than a biography. “A Berlin Chronicle” is an autobiography that is inherently, profoundly epitaphic and that seeks, thus, not expression but precisely “the expressionless”: the moment in which life is “petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment” (“GEA,” p. 340). In line with Benjamin’s analysis of “the expressionless,” the writing possesses a “critical violence” that interrupts expression, with which “every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill” with the abruptness of “a moral dictum” (“GEA,” pp. 340, 341, 340). “Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol” (“GEA,” p. 340). To use the terminology of Paul de Man, we might say that in “A Berlin Chronicle” “autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.”<sup>29</sup> De Man’s rhetorical analysis is here particularly pertinent: “the dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse is . . . the prosopopeia,” “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech.”<sup>30</sup>

I would suggest, indeed, that an implicit figure of prosopopeia struc-

29. Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 81.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 75–76.

tures not just Benjamin's autobiography but his entire work; the underlying, understated evocation of the dead is present and can be deciphered everywhere. Benjamin's whole writing could be read as work of mourning, structured by a mute address to the dead face and the lost voice of the young friend who took his own life in desperate protest in the first days of the First World War.

In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate.<sup>31</sup>

All of Benjamin's evolving subjects, I will argue, are implicitly determined by the conceptual implications of the underlying autobiographical prosopopeia, or the mute address to the dead friend: lyric ("Heinle was a poet" ["BC," p. 17]), language ("Because she is mute, nature mourns"), *Trauerspiel* (the corpse is the sole bearer of signification), and, finally, history itself:

In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [agonizer's face] of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head. [OG, p. 166]

*A Lecture on the Nature of the Lyric,  
or The Face of History (A Primal Scene)*

It is precisely as a metaphor for his entire work as inarticulate prosopopeia that Benjamin describes the lecture on Hölderlin and on "the nature of the lyric" that, after Heinle's suicide, he struggled to articulate in memory of his deceased friend.

It is significant that "A Berlin Chronicle"'s narration of the war events and of its "harrowing experiences" starts (disorientingly, hermetically) by the description of this lecture—by the mediation, that is, of the trauma by the work, by the translation of the lived event into *a thought on literature*. "A Berlin Chronicle" cannot go directly either to the proper name of the dead friend or to the actual story of his death. Temporally as well as spatially, the story keeps moving in circles, as though around an empty, silent center. The word suicide does not figure in the text. Heinle's name is introduced as though in passing: it vanishes as soon as

31. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Jephcott, *Selected Writings*, p. 73: "Even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute" (ibid.).



it is mentioned; and so does the event. Throughout the text, the name and the event keep vanishing.

It was in Heidelberg, during what was undoubtedly self-forgetful work, that I tried to summon up, in a meditation on the nature of the lyric, the figure of my friend Fritz Heinle, around whom all the happenings in the Meeting House arrange themselves and with whom they vanish. Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not "in real life" but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way. All the same, this first attempt to evoke the sphere of his life through that of poetry was unsuccessful, and the immediacy of the experience that gave rise to my lecture asserted itself irresistibly in the incomprehension and snobbery of the audience. ["BC," p. 17]<sup>32</sup>

In a roundabout way, what Benjamin is trying to evoke is not Hölderlin but history: an original historical event that has remained completely untranslatable. History is "the original," the writings, its translations. The task of the translator is the witness's task. The lecture tried, but failed, to translate the impact of the event. Nevertheless, the lecture gives a sense of the remoteness, of the unapproachability of the historical event. Behind this failed translation of the lecture on Hölderlin and on the nature of the lyric, the untranslatable historical original—the lived experience of the outbreak of the war—constitutes for Benjamin a veritable intellectual and existential *primal scene*.

### *The Meeting House* (Das Heim)

What, then, is the core of the historical event that cannot be approached but must be distanced even in the very act of bearing witness to it? What is the meaning of the story that the text cannot arrive at, cannot reach, cannot *begin* except through what has followed, the lecture that attempted to translate it—unsuccessfully?

It is the story of a death without signification, though pregnant with sense, with life and with emotion. It is the story of a meeting and of a Meeting House that turns out to be, ironically, the house of an encounter with a corpse, the posthumous symbol of a lost community and of the loss of language as communal, and the empty center of the space of the remembrance of so many missed encounters: a missed encounter with the audience of the lecture; a missed encounter with the war; a missed encounter with the friend who, dying so young, dies before he could be

32. The incomprehension of the audience then could ironically today stand for the incomprehension of Benjamin's contemporary critics with respect to the significance of the event (and of its subsequent inscription as a silence) in Benjamin's life and in his work.

truly met. "Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not 'in real life' but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way." It is the story of a war, and of its casualties that history does not narrate and does not count. It is the story of a letter doubled by a corpse that has become the bearer of a meaning it cannot deliver:

No matter how much memory has subsequently paled, or how indistinctly I can now give an account of the rooms in the Meeting House, it nevertheless seems to me today more legitimate to attempt to delineate the outward space the dead man inhabited, indeed the room where he was "announced," than the inner space in which he created. But perhaps that is only because, in this last and most crucial year of his life, he traversed the space in which I was born. Heinle's Berlin was the Berlin of the Meeting House. . . . I once visited him . . . after a long separation resulting from a serious dissension between us. But even today I remember the smile that lifted the whole weight of these weeks of separation, that turned a probably insignificant phrase into a magic formula that healed the wound. Later, after the morning when an express letter awoke me with the words, "You will find us lying in the Meeting House"—when Heinle and his girlfriend were dead—this district remained for a period the central meeting place of the living. ["BC," pp. 17–18]

### *The Letter and the Corpse*

The unnamed suicide takes place in the blank, the interval between a future—"you will find us"—and a past: "were dead." The corpse has left an urgent letter that awakens Benjamin in shock. But the letter does not speak, it tells no story. It does not explain the motivation of the suicide or its grounds; it does not *narrate* anything other than the utter muteness of the body—of the corpse: "You will find us lying in the Meeting House." What remains of Heinle now are only words. Words of poetry, which Benjamin preserves and hopes to publish. Words of an unintelligible letter. "Just as a certain kind of significant dream"—Benjamin writes—"survives awakening in the form of words when all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters" ("BC," p. 14).

Heinle at nineteen, Benjamin at twenty-two have come to the end of the experience that enables telling, or that makes narration possible. In 1936, in "The Storyteller," Benjamin will write that people have returned mute from the battlefields of the First World War. Benjamin himself falls silent not at the war's end but before the war, at the beginning of the war, because he grasps before the others its significance in history and its senseless violence, because he sees ahead of time the consequences of the war. The meaning of the war reveals itself to him in one stroke, in an

obscure illumination or in the shock of an epiphany of darkness, in the image of the suicide and in the vision of the combination of the private trauma and of the collective one.

It was in this café that we sat together in those very first August days, choosing among the barracks that were being stormed by the onrush of volunteers. We decided on the cavalry of Belle-Alliance Strasse, where I duly appeared on one of the following days, no spark of martial fervor in my breast; yet however reserved I may have been in my thoughts, which were concerned only with securing a place among friends in the inevitable conscription, one of the bodies jammed in front of the barracks gates was mine. Admittedly only for two days: on August 8 came the event that was to banish for long after both the city and the war from my mind. ["BC," p. 21]

"Autobiography"—said de Man—"veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause." The "place among friends" Benjamin tries to "secure" in "the inevitable conscription" turns out to be a place among corpses. "A Berlin Chronicle" is an autobiography of trauma. The event consists of an erasure: an erasure of Berlin and of the war out of the map of consciousness; an erasure of the self—its transformation into an automaton or a half-corpse, a body dispossessed of consciousness. "One of the bodies jammed in front of the barracks gates was mine," says Benjamin. The war, the shock against the mass of bodies replicated, two days later, by the shock of the discovery of two dead bodies, strips the self of "I": "It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images" ("BC," p. 57).

*Unspeakable Youth, or Living Outside Experience*

Benjamin mourns thus his own lost youthful self, for which Fritz Heinle has become the metaphor: he grieves at the same time over Heinle's and his own lost youth. "The medium in which the pure melody of his youth would swell was destroyed. . . . In despair, he thus recalls his childhood. In those days there was time without flight and an 'I' without death. . . . Finally, he is redeemed by losing his comprehension. Amid such obliviousness . . . he begins the diary. It is the unfathomable document of a life never lived" ("MY," p. 11).

The suicide represents, however, not simply death but a refusal to compromise with life. Benjamin loves deeply Heinle's absolute commitment to a youth that, unlike Benjamin, he refuses to survive. "Never in any other work," Benjamin will say of Goethe, "did he give to youth what he granted it in Otilie: the whole of life, in the way that, from its own duration, it has its own death" ("GEA," p. 353). This description equally applies to Heinle. Paradoxically, Heinle's suicide comes to represent not death but, on the contrary, vitality and life: "The pure word for life in its

immortality is 'youth,'" writes Benjamin, in analyzing traumatized youth in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*: "This young generation suffers from a damaged childhood."<sup>33</sup>

Unexpectedly, trauma meets youth precisely in its absence—its erasure—of experience: "We have not yet experienced anything," said Benjamin at twenty-one, speaking for youth.<sup>34</sup> At twenty-two, the trauma as erasure—"the event that was to banish for long after both the city and the war from my mind"—equally remains outside experience.<sup>35</sup>

In spite—or perhaps because—of this . . . the city of Berlin was never again to impinge so forcefully on my existence as it did in that epoch when we believed we could leave it untouched, only improving its schools, only breaking the inhumanity of their inmates' parents, only making a place in it for the words of Hölderlin or George. It was a final, heroic attempt to change the attitudes of people without changing their circumstances. We did not know that it was bound to fail, but there was hardly one of us whose resolve such knowledge could have altered. And today, as clearly as at that time, even if on the basis of an entirely different reasoning, I understand that the

33. Benjamin, "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*," trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, pp. 80–81; hereafter abbreviated "DI." Paradoxically, traumatized youth embodies both a principle of life (an everlasting youth) and a concurrent principle of the survival within language of a childish inarticulateness. Benjamin's interpretation of this wounded generation pursues one principle (life, youth) into the other (speechlessness, deficient language): "The pure word for life in its immortality is 'youth.' Dostoevsky's great act of lamentation in this novel is for the failure of the youth movement. Its life remains immortal, but the 'idiot' is obscured by his own brightness. . . . *This young generation suffers from a damaged childhood. . . . The child's inability to express itself continues to have a crippling effect on the speech of Dostoevsky's characters*" (ibid.; emphasis mine). Damaged youth is marked, thus, at once by a fixated condensation of vitality ("immortal life," eternal youth) and by a speechless inarticulateness (a damaged, "crippled," silent language). A traumatized language is for Benjamin the sign of a traumatized (an overwhelming) youth. This analysis applies to Benjamin as well (as will be demonstrated and elucidated by what follows). In childhood, life itself is a prisoner of silence (etymologically, an "infant" means "unable to speak"). Language develops with experience. But youth eternalized in death remains forever a prisoner of muteness.

34. Benjamin, "Experience," trans. Lloyd Spencer and Stefan Jost, *Selected Writings*, p. 3.

35. "The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions . . . , the less do these impressions enter experience [*Erfahrung*]," Benjamin will later write in his essay on Baudelaire (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 163; hereafter abbreviated "B"). As Freud explained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, memory fragments "are 'often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness'" (quoted in "B," p. 160). "Put in Proustian terms, this means that only *what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously*, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*" ("B," pp. 160–61; emphasis mine). "Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident *a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its content*" ("B," p. 163; emphasis mine). The *integrity of content* of the war experience—the integrity of its narration—is thus lost to consciousness and lost to language.

"language of youth" had to stand at the center of our associations. ["BC," p. 18]

Benjamin pledges fidelity to the "language of youth" the war has erased and that his subsequent work has struck dumb and reduced to silence. But "A Berlin Chronicle" narrates the way in which what is erased—the war, the corpse—remains precisely at the center. The center will thus be a silence. What is erased, what falls to silence at the outbreak of the war, is youth. But youth can have an unexpected afterlife. Heinle's youth lives on in Benjamin. And Benjamin's own silenced youth still speaks in interrupted lyric intervals that have become expressionless through Benjamin's own silence. "Fidelity shall be maintained, even if no one has done so yet," wrote Benjamin at twenty-one, signing "Ardor."<sup>36</sup> Grown mute, the aged writer still asserts: "And today, as clearly as at that time . . . I understand that the 'language of youth' had to stand at the center of our associations."

"Death," Benjamin discovers, "has the power to lay bare like love." "The human being appears to us as a corpse. . . . The human body lays itself bare" ("GEA," p. 353). In a shocking, unnarratable epiphany of darkness, the war lays bare the body, in suddenly revealing youth as corpse.

### *The Burial*

But the most traumatic memory that Benjamin keeps from the war is not simply this unnarratable epiphany—this sudden overwhelming revelation of youth as a corpse—but the added insult, the accompanying shame of the impossibility of giving the beloved corpse a proper burial, the shame of the incapability of taking leave of the dead bodies by giving them the final honor of a proper grave. It is because the bodies cannot be appropriately buried that the corpse of youth becomes a ghost that never will find peace. The grave, symbolically, cannot be closed. The event cannot be laid to rest.

And when, finally, after August 8, 1914, the days came when those among us who were closest to the dead couple did not want to part from them until they were buried, we felt the limits in the shame of being able to find refuge only in a seedy railway hotel on Stuttgart Square. Even the graveyard demonstrated the boundaries set by the city to all that filled our hearts: it was impossible to procure for the pair who died together graves in one and the same cemetery. But those were days that ripened a realization that was to come later, and that planted in me the conviction that the city of Berlin would also not be spared the scars of the struggle for a better order. If I chance

36. Benjamin, "Experience," p. 4.

today to pass through the streets of the quarter, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. ["BC," p. 20]

The graveyard stands for space in culture and in history: a grave materializes the survival of a name in the deterioration of the corpse. Symbolically, however, these casualties of war remain outside the map of history. The corpse of youth must remain nameless. "Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where."

The trauma, therefore, is not simply that a capitalist society and a capitalist war have killed youth and have taken *life* away. The real trauma is that they have taken *death* away, that they have robbed youth even from the possibility of mourning. In a world that has condemned youth to die at the war or from the war and in which even a burial is unaffordable; in a society in which even a grave is a commodity that needs to be bought and that can therefore be afforded only by the fortunate, youth, lacking proper funds, are subject—literally and metaphorically—to a *grief beyond their means*: "It was impossible to *procure* for the couple who died together graves in one and the same cemetery."<sup>37</sup>

### *The Lesson of the War*

The mourning will thus be transformed into shame. And it is the lesson of this shame, the moral of this shame, that will enable the autobiographer to say "I" despite his reluctance, as long as he is sufficiently paid,<sup>38</sup> and that will, on the other hand, give the narrator insight into the historical relation between war and revolution: "But those were days that ripened a realization that was to come later . . . that the city of Berlin would also not be spared the scars of the struggle for a better order." The lesson of the war is revolutionary, as history has demonstrated, in effect, in giving rise to the Russian revolution in the wake of and as a major consequence of the First World War. Benjamin will come both to endorse and to support this revolutionary logic that leads from war to revolution. If history has once revealed youth as a corpse, and if historically youth

37. There may have been additional reasons for the impossibility of giving the suicides a proper burial: religious reasons (since Heinle's girlfriend was Jewish; Jewish communities had their separate communal graveyards) and sociological reasons (middle-class families owned large familial burial sites potentially sufficient for the accommodation of their entire family; but the couple obviously did not qualify to be buried as family members by either family). The Selikson family (the wealthier of the two) would have probably accused Heinle of having dragged their daughter to suicide.

38. To overcome, that is, ironically and lengthily "the precaution of the subject represented by the 'I,' which is entitled not to be sold cheap."

means “the existence of a beginning that is separated from everything following it as though by an unbridgeable chasm” (*OR*, p. 20), only the new rupture of a revolution—only a new radical historical beginning—might perhaps one day redeem the corpse of youth or mean a possible return of youth in history. The loyalty to youth is henceforth revolutionary: it looks not to the past, but to the future. “Fidelity shall be maintained. . . .” “And today, as clearly as at that time, *even if on the basis of an entirely different reasoning*, I understand that the ‘language of youth’ had to stand at the center of our associations.”

*Written for a Child*

To whom, however, is this revolutionary lesson of a corpse passed on? To whom does Benjamin address the message of the “I,” this tale of the divorce between words, deeds, motivation, understanding, that is called history? For whom does Benjamin defeat “the precaution of the ‘I’” that is “entitled not to be sold cheap”? The dedication of “A Berlin Chronicle” reads: “For my dear Stefan.” Stefan is Benjamin’s only son, then fourteen years old. This unnarratable narration of a war, this horrifying, baffling story of a suicide and of the absence of a grave is, paradoxically, surprisingly, itself *addressed precisely to a child*.<sup>39</sup>

What Benjamin attempts, in other words, is to *transmit* the story that cannot be told and to become himself the storyteller that cannot be one but that is one—the last narrator or the post-narrator. The trauma—or the breakdown of the story and of memory, the fragmentation of remembrance and the rupture of the chain or of the web of stories—is itself passed on to the next generation as a testament, a final gift.

*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. . . . It starts the web which all stories form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers . . . have always readily shown. [“S,” p. 98]

“A Berlin Chronicle,” much like “The Storyteller,” is about transmission and about a breakdown of transmission. But this rupture is itself

39. “For childhood, knowing no preconceived opinions, has none about life. It is as dearly attached . . . to the realm of the dead, where it juts into that of the living, as to life itself” (“BC,” p. 28). Compare, toward the very end of “A Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin’s own childish memory of having been the addressee of a paternal narrative of death. “So the room in which I slept at the age of six would have been forgotten had not my father come in one night—I was already in bed—with the news of a death. It was not, really, the news itself that so affected me. . . . But in the way in which my father told me, there lay [text breaks off]” (“BC,” p. 57).

materialized now in the drama—in the image—of the suicide's corpse. What the corpse cannot tell will become the torso of a symbol.

The images, severed from all earlier associations, . . . stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. ["BC," p. 26]

Reminiscences . . . do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not. . . . For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. ["BC," p. 28]

Benjamin knows that "the flood of war books" published in the aftermath of the First World War cannot bridge over this gap in experience. Like Freud, Benjamin has therefore understood that the impact of the break will be belated and that the real problem of the trauma will be that of the second generation. This is why the postnarrator wants to reestablish the transmissibility of his experience and to transmit the happening that cannot be told—to transmit the war, the corpse, the suicide—to his son.

It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. ["B," p. 159]

Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material from the collective past. ["B," p. 159]

"Seen in this way," Benjamin himself, much like the storyteller, "joins the ranks of the teachers and sages" ("S," p. 108).<sup>40</sup>

## 5

### *The Angel of History*

In "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), Benjamin speaks of the First World War in facing Hitler's rise to power. In "The Storyteller" (1936), Benjamin

40. In addressing his impossible narration to a child, Benjamin returns to his original (early) concern with pedagogy and with education, a concern that in turn has been struck by silence but that he has never in effect abandoned. "But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? *Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery . . . of that relationship and not of children?*" (Benjamin, "One-Way Street," p. 487; emphasis mine).



speaks of the First World War because he foresees already the unavailability of the outbreak of the Second World War. "At the door awaits the economic crisis, and the shadow of the next war is right behind," he writes in 1933. "In [the] buildings, in [the] paintings and in [the] stories [of those who have made the radically new their concern], humanity prepares itself to survive culture, if there is no choice."<sup>41</sup>

The traumatic repetition of the war will make Benjamin fall silent a second time, this time definitively.

Before this final fall to silence, in the second winter of the war, Benjamin will write, however, the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in which the story of the silence of narration—the story of the First World War—is again narrated but this time interpreted as a theory of history. Again, Benjamin sees ahead of time the consequences of the war. The theory of history names the constellation of the two world wars—the past one and the present one—envisioned one against the other and one through the other. "One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call," wrote Benjamin in "A Berlin Chronicle" ("BC," p. 59). It is therefore through the repetition of the trauma that the historian will read history and that the theorist will theorize it; it is from the repetition of the trauma that Benjamin derives his crucial insight into the "philosophy" of history as a constitutive process of silencing, a discourse covering the muteness of the victims and drowning in its own noise the real happenings of their repeated fall to silence.

Thus, the angel of history is mute: his mouth is speechlessly open, as he is helplessly *pushed back toward the future*, pushed back from the Second World War to the speechless experience of the First.<sup>42</sup> The invasion of France in May 1940 repeats the invasion of Belgium twenty-six years earlier, on 4 August 1914, an invasion that was to be followed, four days later, by the double suicide.

Benjamin is trapped in what has now become occupied France. He plans to escape, to cross the Franco-Spanish border in the hope of ultimately reaching the United States, not so much because he wants to save his life as because he wishes to transmit a manuscript to the free world, be-

41. Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Schwepenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89), 2:1:219.

42. Compare "TPH":

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. ["TPH," pp. 257–58]

cause he wishes to *transmit*, that is, beyond the silence—and beyond the silencing—to the next generation. He carries this manuscript precisely on his body. Ironically, it is not known today what was this manuscript. Materially, the manuscript has not survived. It is presumed that this manuscript was indeed the very essay on history, of which copies were preserved elsewhere. But we cannot be sure. The title of the manuscript that Benjamin transported on his body will remain forever shrouded in silence.

*"The Time of Death Is Our Own"*

Arrested at the border and informed that he will be handed over, the next day, to the Gestapo, Benjamin will end his story by a final suicide. His own suicide will repeat, therefore, and mirror, the suicide of his younger friend, his alter ego, at the outbreak of the First World War.

What is highly ironic is that history repeats also the story of the absence of a grave—for lack of proper funds. The money left in Benjamin's pocket at his death turned out, apparently, to be sufficient only for the "rental" of a grave. After a while, the body was disinterred and the remains were moved to a nameless collective grave of those with no possessions. History repeats itself at once intentionally (suicide) and unintentionally (absence of a burial). "This language of the intentionless truth . . . possesses authority," Benjamin has written; "this authority stands in opposition to the conventional concept of objectivity because its validity, that of the intentionless truth, is historical."<sup>43</sup> After the fact, "A Berlin Chronicle" sounds almost like a prophecy: "Valuable things may be lying around," Benjamin insisted, "but nobody remembers where." Benjamin, writes Demetz, "is buried in Port Bou, but nobody knows where, and when visitors come . . ., the guardians of the cemetery lead them to a place that they say is his grave, respectfully accepting a tip."<sup>44</sup> For a long time, there was in that Spanish cemetery "neither monument nor flower." In 1992, a monument was built.<sup>45</sup> But Benjamin's body is not in the grave where the monument now stands.

"For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories," Benjamin has written in "The Storyteller" ("S," p. 91). Benjamin's own suicide will ironically and tragically repeat, thus, both the story of the suicide of his youth and the shameful story of the absence of a burial. By asserting his own choice of death and by taking his own life, Benjamin repeats as well, from Heinle's story, *the message of the corpse*: the posthumous, mute message of

43. Benjamin, "On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy," trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, p. 404.

44. Demetz, introduction to Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. xv.

45. The monument (sponsored by the German government) was planned and built by the "Arbeitskreis selbständiger Kulturinstitut" (ASKI).

the suicide as a symbolic gesture of protest against the war and as the autonomous assertion of an uncoerced and uncoercible will in the face of the overpowering spread of world violence.

In repeating Heinle's suicide at the threshold of the First World War and in reactivating his symbolic message of resistance to the war, Benjamin's own rush to suicide in the early stages of the Second World War will achieve, thus, a definitive reunion with the cruelly lost friend.

It was after a long separation. . . . But even today I remember the smile that lifted the whole weight of these weeks of separation.

Benjamin has always known—since the trauma of the First World War and the example of the suicide of his friend—that “the cowardice of the living” (the survivor's timidity that paralleled “The Poet's Courage” or the poet's death) “must ultimately become unbearable” (“MY,” p. 14). Already, at the age of twenty-one, he writes prophetically, as though in premonition of his future suicide:

The diary writes the story of our greatness from the vantage point of our death . . .

In death we befall ourselves. . . . And the time of death is our own. Redeemed, we become aware of the fulfillment of the game. . . . The vocation that we proudly dismissed in our youth takes us by surprise. Yet it is nothing but a call to immortality. [“MY,” p. 15]

#### *A Signature (A Call to Immortality)*

Framed as it is by Benjamin's own texts, prefigured by his life and central to the processes of his entire thought, the suicide therefore is not just an act of weariness and abdication, a mere untimely gesture of fatigue and of despair—as Hannah Arendt has quite famously depicted it (and mourned it) in underscoring its essential feature as “bad luck.”<sup>46</sup> Beyond the irony of fate, beyond misfortune, the suicide makes of death a sign. In desperation, dying becomes a language. It makes a point. It is not only a decision to stop suffering and to lapse into protective and forgetful sleep. It is—across the gap of two world wars—a knocking at the doors of history. It is the punctuation of a life of writing that, by a final, willful

46.

There is . . . another . . . element . . . which is involved in the life of those “who have won victory in death.” It is the *element of bad luck*, and this factor, very prominent in Benjamin's life, cannot be ignored here because he himself . . . was so extraordinarily aware of it. In his writing and also in conversation he used to speak about the “little hunchback,” . . . a German fairy-tale figure . . . out of . . . German folk poetry. The hunchback was an early acquaintance of Benjamin. . . . His mother . . . used to say, “Mr. Bungle sends his regards” . . . whenever one of the countless little catastrophes of childhood had taken place. . . . The mother referred to “the little hunchback,”

act of silence, leaves behind *its signature*: a signature of desperate but absolutely *unconditional refusal of complicity and of collaboration* with the coercive tyranny of world wars.

Yet tragic silence . . . must not be thought of as being dominated by defiance alone. Rather, this defiance is every bit as much a consequence of the experience of speechlessness as a factor which intensifies the condition. The content of the hero's achievements belongs to the community, as does speech. Since the community . . . denies these achievements, they remain unarticulated in the hero. And he must therefore all the more forcefully enclose within the confines of his physical self every action and every item of knowledge the greater and the more potentially effective it is. It is the achievement of his *physis* alone, not of language, if he is able to hold fast to his cause, and he must therefore do so in death. [OG, p. 108]

Projected into his own words, Benjamin's own suicide can be read as "the attempt of moral man, still dumb, still inarticulate . . . to raise himself up

who caused the objects to play their mischievous tricks upon children. . . . (*With a precision suggesting a sleepwalker [Benjamin's] clumsiness invariably guided him to the very center of a misfortune*). . . . Wherever one looks in Benjamin's life, one will find the little hunchback. . . .

On September 26, 1940, Walter Benjamin, who was about to emigrate to America, took his life at the Franco-Spanish border. There were various reasons for this. The Gestapo had confiscated his Paris apartment, which contained his library . . . and many of his manuscripts. . . . Besides, nothing drew him to America, where, as he used to say, people would probably find no other use for him than to cart him up and down the country to exhibit him as "the last European." *But the immediate occasion for Benjamin's suicide was an uncommon stroke of bad luck.* Through the armistice agreement between Vichy France and the Third Reich, refugees from Hitler Germany . . . were in danger of being shipped back to Germany. . . . To save this category of refugees . . . the United States had distributed a number of emergency visas through its consulates in unoccupied France. Thanks to the efforts of the Institute in New York, Benjamin was among the first to receive such a visa in Marseilles. Also, he quickly obtained a Spanish transit visa to enable him to get to Lisbon and board a ship there. However, he did not have a French exit visa . . . which the French government, eager to please the Gestapo, invariably denied to German refugees. In general this presented no great difficulty, since a relatively short and none too arduous road to be covered by foot over the mountains to Port Bou was well known and was not guarded by the French border police. Still, for Benjamin, apparently suffering from a cardiac condition . . . even the shortest walk was a great exertion, and he must have arrived in a state of serious exhaustion. The small group of refugees that he had joined reached the Spanish border town only to learn that Spain had closed the border that same day and that the border officials did not honor visas made out in Marseilles. The refugees were supposed to return to France by the same route the next day. During the night Benjamin took his life, whereupon the border officials, upon whom this suicide had made an impression, allowed his companions to proceed to Portugal. A few weeks later the embargo on visas was lifted again. One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible. [Arendt, introduction to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 5–18; emphasis mine]

amid the agitation of that painful world" (*OG*, p. 110). Benjamin himself embodies, thus, in his own concept but with the "authority of . . . the intentionless truth," the "paradox of the birth of the genius in moral speechlessness" (*OG*, p. 110). His death gives his posterity a language; it endows the future with a yet unborn word.

The repetition of the suicide recovers the collective meaning that was lost to death both in the battlefields—and in the suicide—of the First World War. "The voice of the anonymous storyteller" ("S," p. 107) recovers "a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier" ("S," p. 102).<sup>47</sup>

One can . . . ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way . . . exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall. ["S," p. 108]

Through his death, Benjamin converts, thus, his own life into a proverb.

#### *The Will (A Posthumous Narration)*

Scholem tells us that the idea of suicide was not new to Benjamin, who was close to suicide several times throughout his life. Particularly, Scholem has learnt after the fact that, upon writing "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin had an imminent suicide plan in mind, a plan that unpredictably was changed at the last moment. This is why, as a correlative or counterpart to the autobiographical "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin has also

47. Benjamin in this way reenacts, beyond the moral speechlessness of Heine's story, a more effective transformation of the corpse into a message. If "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories," it goes without saying that *not every repetition is an art*. In "the age of mechanical reproduction," not every reiteration is endowed with what "The Storyteller" calls "the gift of retelling" ("S," p. 91), a gift which is specifically, says Benjamin, *a listener's gift*—an insight born out of the capacity for silent listening. Benjamin's "gift of retelling" is both autobiographical and theoretical: it is at once a literary gift and a historical force of perception; it is compellingly subjective (it pays the ultimate subjective price) and compellingly objective (it speaks with the intentionless authority of history). There are various ways of "repeating stories"—with or without historical surprises, with or without new meaning, with or without historical authority. Benjamin's historical retelling of the story of the suicide is authoritative, because it makes *transmissible* what it repeats, because it rescues the past suicide from its meaninglessness and from its original forgettability, in endowing it with a transmissible historical intelligibility.

left a will, a will that he “did not destroy when his will to live gained the upper hand at the eleventh hour,” and that after his death was found in his documents. The will reads:

All the manuscripts in my estate—both my own writings and those of others—shall go to Dr. Gerhard Scholem, Abyssinian Road, Jerusalem. My entire estate contains in addition to my own writings the works of the brothers Fritz and Wolf Heinle. It would be in accordance with my wishes if their writings could be preserved in the university library in Jerusalem or in the Prussian State Library. These comprise not only Heinle’s manuscripts but also my edited handwritten copies of their works. As regards my own works, it would be in accordance with my wishes if the University Library in Jerusalem provided space for some of them. Should Dr. Gerhard Scholem publish a posthumous selection of my writings . . . , it would be in accordance with my wishes if he sent a certain portion of the net profits from that edition—about 40–60% after deducting his expenses—to my son Stephan.<sup>48</sup>

In the enclosed farewell letter to his cousin Egon Wissing, the executor of his will, Benjamin declared:

I think it would be nice if the manuscript department of the library of the University of Jerusalem accepted the posthumous papers of two non-Jews from the hands of two Jews—Scholem’s and mine.<sup>49</sup>

As posthumous narration, the will insures transmission of the story of the other. Beyond its author’s death, it must secure, safeguard, the other’s immortality. It is in thus resisting another’s loss of life and another’s loss of meaning that Benjamin in death recovers, for himself and for his friend, what Heinle in his suicide lost precisely: the “narrator’s stance.”

With this comes to light the innermost basis for the “narrator’s stance.” *It is he alone who, in the feeling of hope, can fulfill the meaning of the event. . . . Thus, hope finally wrests itself from it . . . like a trembling question. . . . This hope is the sole justification of the faith in immortality, which must never be kindled from one’s own existence.* [“GEA,” p. 355; emphasis mine]

Immortality takes from the other. Life can become immortal only insofar as it is linked to others’ lives. What is immortal is the other, not

48. Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Zohn (New York, 1988), pp. 187–88.

49. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 188.

the self. What is immortal is, in other words, not the narrator but the very story of the repetition, a story that, repeated at least twice, is not simply individual. And the transmission must go on.

In the "trembling question" of a hope, Benjamin assigns to Scholem the task of continuing the story: the task of duplicating now, in Scholem's own life, the *prosopopeia* to the dead; the task of inheriting and of continuing the *Story of a Friendship*. Scholem will fulfill this task. Benjamin has proven thus that "not only a man's knowledge or wisdom,"

but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. ["S," p. 94]

### *Textual Authority*

Authority is what commends a text (a life) to memory, what makes it unforgettable. What Benjamin—prophetically again—says of Prince Myshkin—the protagonist of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*—can equally account for his own effect and for the literary impact of his own textual authority:

Immortal life is unforgettable. . . . *It is the life that is not to be forgotten, even though it has no monument or memorial. . . .* And "unforgettable" does not just mean that we cannot forget it. It points to something in the nature of the unforgettable itself, something that makes it unforgettable. ["DI," p. 80]

What is the secret of Myshkin's charisma? "His individuality," says Benjamin, "is secondary to his life" ("DI," p. 80). Like Myshkin, Benjamin is unforgettable because his individuality (including his own death, his suicide) is subordinated to his life.

Like the storyteller, Benjamin has "borrowed his authority from death." But the authority he has borrowed from death is none other than the storyteller's power to transmit, to *take across a limit*, the *uniqueness of a life*. It is life that, over and beyond the author's death, has been preserved in the texts of Benjamin. It is life that, over and beyond the Second World War, still reaches out to us and touches us and teaches us in the words of Benjamin and in his silence. It is the textual authority of Benjamin's life

that has claimed Scholem and that has compelled him to repeat the story and to continue in his own way Benjamin's prosopopeia to the dead.

In "The Metaphysics of Youth," when he was still himself a very young man, Benjamin wrote:

Conversation strives toward silence, and the listener is really the silent partner. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one is the unappropriated source of meaning.

Benjamin was a good listener because he was always faithful to the silent one.

I would suggest that the task of criticism today is not to drown Benjamin's texts in an ever growing critical noise but to return to Benjamin his silence.



# Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities

Stanley Cavell

The invitation to participate in a small conference on Walter Benjamin at Yale's humanities center meant to assess the appearance of the first volume of Harvard's *Selected Writings* of Benjamin as a measure from which, as the letter of invitation frames things, nonspecialists in Benjamin studies are asked to "evaluate Benjamin's contribution to their respective fields," was irresistible, allowing one to speak from, without quite parading, an ignorance it is otherwise hard to overcome. Whatever the exact perimeter and surface of my field, let us say, of philosophy, judged by the work from which I have made a living for most of a lifetime, it is, and, while partially and restlessly, has wanted to be, territory shared with those who, however different otherwise, acknowledge some affinity with the later Wittgenstein and with J. L. Austin, if just so far as those thinkers are recognizable as inheritors, hence no doubt betrayers, of a tradition of philosophy that definitively includes Frege, Russell, Carnap, and Quine. Seen from that shared territory, an honest answer to the question of Benjamin's actual contribution to the field is that it is roughly nil. But if that were my sole space for an answer, I would not have accepted the prompting to respond to the question.

Two helpful anthologies of writing about Benjamin—one from two or three years ago edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne and one from ten years earlier edited by Gary Smith—are explicit in their wish to present Benjamin in his aspect, or should one say semblance, as a philosopher; both are explicit in wishing to counter the dominating semblance of Benjamin as a great critic, as lent to him in the English-

speaking world by Hannah Arendt's portrait and collection under the title *Illuminations*, as they are explicit in recognizing that Benjamin at best created, and aspired to, as Adorno put the matter, "a philosophy directed against philosophy," which they are also prepared to recognize as something that a creative canonical modern philosopher, since I suppose Descartes and Bacon, is rather bound to do.<sup>1</sup> This gesture of a disciplinary or counterdisciplinary appropriation of Benjamin focuses two points of interest for me (I do not suppose them incompatible with those editors' intentions): (1) Benjamin's anti- or counterphilosophy may be seen specifically as immeasurably distant from and close to Wittgenstein's anti- or counterphilosophy in *Philosophical Investigations*; (2) there is an economy of inspiration and opacity in Benjamin's prose—sometimes it is, as Emerson puts things, a play of intuition and tuition—that suggests a reason that the idea of philosophy should not simply replace or succeed that of criticism in coming to terms with his achievement. Benjamin enacts, more or less blatantly, a contesting of the philosophical with the literary, or of what remains of each, that seems internal at once to the exceptional prestige of his work and to an effect of intimacy or concern it elicits from its readers.

A sense of affinity between Benjamin and Wittgenstein helped produce the signals in my subtitle, when, with the memory in my head of Benjamin's frequently cited letter to Scholem (17 April 1931) in which he expresses a phantasm of his writing as a call or signal for rescue from the top of the crumbling mast of a sinking ship,<sup>2</sup> I came upon a piece of his with the title "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" containing these sentences: "Almost every child's gesture is command and signal," and "it is the task of the director to rescue the children's signals out of the dangerous magic realm of mere fantasy and to bring them to bear on the material."<sup>3</sup> One hardly knows whether Benjamin is there identifying

1. See *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London, 1994); *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago, 1989); and *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969).

2. See Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 17 Apr. 1931, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Chicago, 1994), p. 378.

3. Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, trans. Don Reneau et al., ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, 1994), p. 233.

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more with the director than with the child, whose world Benjamin of course enters elsewhere as well (apart from his interest in the history of children's books, I cite Jeffrey Mehlman's fascinating *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years*).<sup>4</sup> And I know of no other major philosophical sensibility of this century who attaches comparable importance to the figure of the child with the exception of Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, which opens with Augustine's portrait of himself as a child stealing language from his elders, an autobiographical image that haunts every move in Wittgenstein's drive to wrest language back from what he calls metaphysics, and what we might perhaps still call the absolute.<sup>5</sup>

To the extent that opening a path for Benjamin's contribution to my field will be furthered by opening certain passages between his writing and Wittgenstein's *Investigations*—which is the object of these remarks—I have to give an idea of how I have wished to see the *Investigations* received.

My interpretation of that work is as a continuous response to the threat of skepticism, a response that does not deny the truth of skepticism—that we cannot coherently claim with certainty that the world exists and I and others in it—but recasts skepticism's significance in order to throw light upon, let's say, human finitude, above all, representing all, the human achievement of words. I go on to relate the resulting understanding of skepticism to the problematic of knowledge worked out in Shakespearean tragedy, whether in Othello's tortured doubts about Desdemona's faithfulness, or in Macbeth's anxiety about his wife's humanity, or in Lear's presentations of his worthiness for love, or in Hamlet's desire never to have succeeded, or acceded, to existence. Reading tragedy back into philosophical skepticism I would variously, in various connections, characterize the skeptic as craving the emptiness of language, as ridding himself of the responsibilities of meaning, and as being drawn to annihilate externality or otherness, projects I occasionally summarize as seeking to escape the conditions of humanity, which I call the chronic human desire to achieve the inhuman, the monstrous, from above or from below. (I wonder what might, or should, have happened to these ideas had I read earlier than mere months ago Benjamin's frightening portrait of Karl Kraus as a misanthrope and satirist. This is I trust for another time.)<sup>6</sup> Pursuing the "I" or "we" of the *Investigations* as the modern skeptical subject, I find specific, quite explicit, sketches there of this figure as characterized by fixation, strangeness, torment, sickness, self-destructiveness, perversity, disappointment, and boredom. It was in a seminar I offered three or four years ago on Heidegger and Thoreau, to

4. See Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago, 1993).

5. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London, 1958), for example, §47; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.

6. See Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), pp. 239–73.

a group of advanced students with whom I could more or less assume my reading of Wittgenstein, upon my saying of *Walden* that it is an exercise in replacing the melancholia of skepticism by a mourning for the world, letting it go, that a student—not of philosophy but of literary studies—blurted out that I must read Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*).

I had years earlier read just the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to the book profitlessly, unprepared to divine its motivations by what I had then read of Benjamin (essentially no more than, to say the banal truth, the essays collected in *Illuminations*), and I put the thing aside, vaguely planning to seek reliable advice and then go back. It is always an issue to determine whose advice or warning you will accept in such matters, and for some reason I allowed myself, after a while, to accept this student's unguarded appeal, with its registering of an unknown affinity. As an example of the results, I shall specify here something of the perspective from which I follow Benjamin's identification of saturnine melancholy as a feature of the mourning play, especially in its theological conception, as *acedia*, "dullness of the heart, or sloth," which Benjamin counts as the fourth or fifth of the deadly sins, and of which he nominates Hamlet as the greatest modern portrait.<sup>7</sup>

The conjunction of melancholy with, let me call it, ennui or boredom, speaks to one of the guiding forces of Wittgenstein's thoughts in the *Investigations*, the recognition that his mode of philosophizing seems to "destroy everything interesting (all that is great and important)" (*PI*, §118). Wittgenstein voices this recognition explicitly just once (and once more can be taken to imply it [see *PI*, §570]), but it is invoked each time he follows the method of language-games, that is to say, punctually through the bulk of the *Investigations*. That this destruction, as Wittgenstein notes, leaves behind as it were no scene of devastation, no place that has become "only bits of stone and rubble" (*PI*, §118)—everything is left as it is, your world is merely as a whole displaced, transfigured by withdrawing your words from their frozen investments, putting them back into real circulation—suggests that the imaginary destruction of what we called great and important reveals our investments to have been imaginary, with the terribly real implication that so far as philosophy was and is our life (and there is no surveying the extent) our life has been trained as a rescue from boredom, delivered to an anxious twilight of interest.

That Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book can be thus be entered as a study of a peculiar preoccupation with Shakespeare and skepticism is of pressing interest for me. (The baroque date of Benjamin's genre seems roughly to fit, but Benjamin's concept of the baroque, which he ties to the Counter-Reformation, is so far as I know unsettled in its application to the English-

7. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (1977; London, 1985), p. 155; hereafter abbreviated *OG*; see also p. 158.

speaking dispensation. This discrepancy may prove fateful.) Continuing for a moment the theme of melancholy, one may well be struck by the fact that Benjamin's report of the emblems of melancholy, which features the dog, the stone, and the sphere (following Panofsky and Saxl's celebrated work on Dürer), turns out to list figures that all appear in *Philosophical Investigations*.

The dog, possessed classically of a melancholic look and a downward gaze, as toward the center of gravity, appears in the *Investigations* at a moment in which Wittgenstein, in one of his images of human finitude (distinguishing that from animal limitation), remarks, "One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not?" The text continues by instancing this nondespairing hopelessness, as it were, of animals as follows: "A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?—And *what* can he not do here?—How do I do it?" Wittgenstein's answer here is to reflect that "the phenomena of hope are modes of [the] complicated form of life [of humans]," a life form he here identifies as of those who can talk, which for him seems essentially to mean, those who can fall into philosophical perplexity (*PI*, p. 174).

The stone appears in an equally fateful path of the *Investigations*' territory, that of our knowledge of pain, of our basis (under the threat of skepticism) of sympathy with the suffering of others. "What gives us *so much as the idea* that living beings, things, can feel anything?" (*PI*, §283). Countering the theory that I transfer the idea from feelings in myself to objects outside, Wittgenstein observes: "I do not transfer my idea to stones, plants, etc. / Couldn't I imagine having frightful pains and turning to stone while they lasted? Well, how do I know, if I shut my eyes, whether I have not turned into a stone? And if that has happened, in what sense will *the stone* have the pains?" The further working out of metamorphosis here is briefly Kafkaesque, and the association of pain with stone has a precedent in the poem of Trakl's ("A Winter's Evening") that Heidegger interprets in his essay entitled "Language."<sup>8</sup> (Is Wittgenstein's move against a narcissistic diagnosis of our knowledge of suffering not pertinent to a political imagination?)

Of course such considerations would, at best, be responded to as curiosities by more representative members of my field, and at worst, not without proper impatience, as an avoidance or betrayal of philosophy (as if I perversely emphasize the aspect of the *Investigations* that is itself a betrayal of philosophy). And I am not even mentioning Wittgenstein's place for the fly, the beetle, the lion, and the cow. Benjamin's recurrence to animals (as well as to stone and to angels) is a principle theme of Beatrix Hanssen's recent book, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, which op-

8. See Martin Heidegger, "Language," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, ed. J. Glenn Gray (New York, 1975), pp. 194–95.

poses Benjamin's new conception of natural history to, importantly, Heidegger's articulation of Dasein's historicity.<sup>9</sup> So I might note that I am also not mentioning in connection with Benjamin's new conception of natural history that the concept of natural history occurs significantly also in the *Investigations*, in accounting for our species' ability to attribute concepts to others that imply membership in our species, such as commanding, recounting, chatting, walking, drinking, playing (*PI*, §118) (and, of course, accounting for an inability to exercise this ability in particular cases).

Nor will impatience be stilled as I now list the sphere—understood as the earth, the third of the emblems of melancholy—as appearing among the countless paths along which Wittgenstein tracks the philosophical pressure on words that forces them from their orbits of meaningfulness: “[An] example [is] that of the application of ‘above’ and ‘below’ to the earth. . . . I see well enough that I am on top; the earth is surely beneath me! (And don’t smile at this example. We are indeed all taught at school that it is stupid to talk like that. But it is much easier to bury a problem than to solve it)” (*PI*, §351). (Preoccupied with Benjamin, we should perhaps recall that Brecht, in his *Galileo*, found it of politically revolutionary importance to provide the right explanation for the error of supposing people at the antipodes to be “below” our part of the earth. It is worth considering whether Brecht was in his way a bit burying the problem, I mean the intellectual resources of the Counter-Reformation Church.) Perhaps a more pertinent invocation of the sphere, or its surface—pertinent now to Benjamin's struggle with German idealism—is the following instance of Wittgenstein's unearthing our untiring requirement of the ideal:

Thought is surrounded by a halo.—Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world. . . . We are under the illusion that . . . [this] order is a *super*-order between—so to speak—*super*-concepts. [*PI*, §97]

The conflict [between actual, everyday language and our requirement of the crystalline purity of logic] becomes intolerable; the requirement now threatens to become empty—We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! [*PI*, §107]

Where other theorists of melancholy emphasize the relation of the human to earth's gravity, working out the fact of finding ourselves bound or

9. See Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, 1997).

sunk upon earth, Wittgenstein, the engineer, works out the fate of our capacity to move ourselves upon it, to go on—a different insistence upon the Benjaminian theme of our existence in materiality, our new relation to objects.

Something is right in the exasperation or amusement such considerations may cause those within the tradition of Anglo-American analytical philosophy. One who insisted on such matters as the melancholy or disappointment in the *Investigations*, in the absence of, unresponsive to, the matters it instances in its preface—matters concerning “the concepts of meaning, of understanding, of a proposition, of logic, mathematics, states of consciousness,” along with attention to Wittgenstein’s insistence on the procedures he calls his “methods”—would not be, I would be prepared to join in saying, talking about Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*, p. iv). (Though I am not prepared to identify ahead of time every way responsiveness to such matters can look.) But then why not be content to say that? Why the exasperation? Why *does* Wittgenstein write that way? Couldn’t the occasional animals and the odd flarings of pathos, perverseness, suffocation, lostness, be dropped or ignored and a doctrine survive? Many, most serious scholars of the *Investigations* have felt so, and behaved so.

Benjamin may provide a further fresh start here, from an odd but characteristic place, in his decisive interpretation or illumination of the animals in Kafka’s stories—help specifically in grasping how it is that matters that can readily seem negligible, and which after all occupy so small a fraction of the actual sentences and paragraphs of the text of the *Investigations*, can nevertheless seem to others (who do not deny the presence of the other shore) to contain, as it were, its moral, the heart of the counsel it offers. Kafka’s parables, Benjamin suggests—the old friend of Gershom Scholem’s—“have . . . a similar relation to doctrine as the Aggadah [the nonlegal part of the talmudic and later rabbinic literature] does to the Halakah [the law or doctrine in that literature].” And Benjamin asks:

But do we have the doctrine which Kafka’s parables interpret and which Kafka’s postures and the gestures of his animals clarify? It does not exist; all we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it. Kafka might have said that these are relics transmitting the doctrine, although we could regard them just as well as precursors preparing the doctrine. In every case it is a question of how life and work are organized in human society.<sup>10</sup>

The application to the *Investigations* must be rather topsy-turvy. It is a work that quite explicitly claims not to advance *theses* (see *PI*, §128), a

10. Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” *Illuminations*, p. 122.

claim few of its admirers, I believe, believe. The closest thing to a doctrine I discern in the *Investigations* seems to occur in three short sentences that end its opening paragraph, in which Wittgenstein announces what he calls the roots of the idea of language that he sees in the picture conveyed by the paragraph from Augustine's *Confessions* referred to earlier. The idea Wittgenstein formulates is as follows: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands." The 693 ensuing sections of the *Investigations* can be said to discover relics transmitting this doctrine, or precursors preparing the doctrine, ones that show the doctrine—which seems so obvious as to be undeniable, if even noticeable—to come not merely to very little, but to come to nothing, to be empty. Yet it announces in its roots—in every one of the words Augustine employs to express his memory of receiving language—the theory of language as a means of referring to the world and as expressing our desires that every advanced philosophy since Frege and Husserl and the early Russell, up to Heidegger and Benjamin and Lacan and Derrida have in one way or another contended with. Wittgenstein's originality, to my mind, is to show that the doctrine, as reflected in its countless relics, is nothing we believe, that it is its very promise of emptiness that we crave, as if that would be not less than redemption.

Students of Wittgenstein have heard something from me over the years not unlike this skeptical news, or rather this news about skepticism, and have taken it to attribute to Wittgenstein a vision of the end of philosophy, an attribution some deplore and others embrace. It will hardly be of interest to either of these receptions of Wittgenstein to hear that the dismantling of a false redemption is work enough for an ambitious philosophy. But that is in any case not the direction of issue for me at the moment, which is to suggest that if readers of Wittgenstein should be interested in Benjamin that is because readers of Benjamin might find they have an interest in Wittgenstein. And any specific news I have from this direction, as a beginning reader of Benjamin, can only come from testifying to specific interests that I am finding in it, its bearing on the work I do, obvious and devious.

I cite one or two sentences of Benjamin's taken from each of the two most elaborated essays in the first volume of *Selected Writings*: from "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," Benjamin's doctoral dissertation and most extended, I believe, investigation of the concept of criticism; and from the essay, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," containing stretches of Benjamin's most concentrated, I believe, work of concrete, or what used in my circles to be called practical, criticism. (Some, I know, find Benjamin's later work to surpass the earlier. But can it be true, any more than in Wittgenstein's case, that the later *obviates* the earlier?)

Start with the essay on criticism: "The entire art-philosophical project of the early Romantics can . . . be summarized by saying that they



sought to demonstrate in principle the criticizability of the work of art.”<sup>11</sup> Part of what this summarizes is the idea of criticism as a sober “continuation” or “consummation” of the work of art; together with the idea that “every critical understanding of an artistic entity is, as reflection in the entity, nothing other than a higher, self-actively originated degree of this entity’s consciousness,” and the corollary idea or “principle of the uncriticizability of inferior work.”<sup>12</sup> That movies—the best even of Hollywood talkies—are as responsive to the pressure of something like the degree of critical unfolding as, say, the texts of Shakespeare, is the explicit basis of my treatment of Hollywood comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*. It is the thing that book has often and variously had charged against it, often put as my taking these films too seriously. In part the charge is a reflection of the unexplained yet decisive fact of aesthetics in the Anglo-American dispensation of philosophy, that the questions it characteristically addresses to artistic entities neither arise from nor are answered by passages of interpretation of those entities, say as represented in Benjamin’s Goethe essay, as in the following sentences from it:

Is Goethe . . . really closer than Kant or Mozart to the material content of marriage? One would have to deny this roundly if, in the wake of all the literary scholarship on Goethe, one were seriously determined to take Mittler’s words on this subject as the writer’s own. . . . After all, [Goethe] did not want, like [his character] Mittler, to establish a foundation for marriage but wished, rather, to show the forces that arise from its decay. . . . [In] truth, marriage is never justified in law (that is, as an institution) but is justified solely as an expression of continuance in love, which by nature seeks this expression sooner in death than in life.<sup>13</sup>

This view of the justification of marriage unnervingly resembles the view taken in my articulation of Hollywood remarriage comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*, namely, that marriage is justified not by law (secular or religious, nor in particular, to cite a more lurid connection with *Elective Affinities*, by the presence of a child) but alone by the will to remarriage. That articulation, however, denies Benjamin’s rider, which proposes that continuance in love seeks its expression sooner in death than in life (perhaps Benjamin means this as a smack at a romantic suggestion that it is easier to love eternally than diurnally). This is to say that the remarriage narratives I isolate as among the best classical Hollywood talkies (the ones best

11. Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Belfour, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 179.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 159.

13. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, pp. 300, 301.

able to bear up under what I call philosophical criticism) locate the idea in a comic form, one to define which I find to require, for example, a concept of repetition grounded in Kierkegaard's and in Nietzsche's ideas of repetition and of recurrence; a concept of the relation of appearances to things-in-themselves that challenges Kant's curtaining between them; a concept of attraction or magnetism that does not depend upon beauty; and a theory of morality that requires a working out of Emersonian perfectionism in its differences with the reigning academic forms of moral theory, deontological or Kantian, and teleological or Utilitarian. I would like to claim that this represents on my part a struggle, in Benjamin's perception, "to ascertain the place of a work or a form in terms of the history of philosophy," something Benjamin implies is his project in the *Trauerspiel* book (*OG*, p. 105).

I hope to get further into a discussion of this claim with Benjamin's writing more than with any other, but I anticipate trouble from the outset. For his inescapable essay of a few years later, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in its sense of the invention of photography and of film as perhaps having "transformed the entire nature of art," does not seek confirmation for this sense of film by means of the criticism of individual films, nor does it suggest that film (some films) can be read as containing the idea that philosophical criticism is to consummate. (Of course not, if the consequence of this transformation is that we no longer possess a developing concept of art, that [in Wittgensteinian terms] nothing any longer plays this role in our form of life.) It would be worth knowing more surely (I seem to persist in counting on some reasonably positive answer) whether film, for example, within the trauma of its role in transforming our ideas of the authorship and the audience and the work of the work of art, has mysteriously maintained, in something like the proportion of instances one would expect in any of the arts in the modern period, the definitive power of art to suffer philosophical criticism; and if film, then perhaps postfilm.

Supposing for the moment that an interest in Wittgenstein's work taken from the perspective of Benjamin's would lead to contributions of Benjamin to something like my field, or to modifying the field, I ask in drawing to a close, more specifically, what the profit or amplification might be for Benjamin's projects. I cite moments from two projects that seem to me to cry out for consideration within and against a Wittgensteinian development, that is, for subjection to the exposure of mutual translation.

First from "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man": "The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence."<sup>14</sup> This is an early reflection of Benjamin's insight into the language of the bourgeois for

14. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Jephcott, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, p. 72.

which Scholem (in the letter I alluded to earlier) praises him as he rebukes him for disfiguring his metaphysics of language by claiming its relation to dialectical materialism. Benjamin responds by recognizing a necessary intellectual risk here, but what were his options in theorizing the Kierkegaardian/Heideggerean theme of prattle? Evidently he does not wish to endorse either Kierkegaard's Christianity or Heidegger's own mode of explicating Dasein's thrownness and falling, which would mean in effect accepting his articulation of life in the crowded everyday. Has he an account of what language is such that it *can* corrupt itself?

Here is a great theme of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, an essential feature of which (in which Austin's work adjoins Wittgenstein's) is the investigation of thinking's internal relation to nonsense, an investigation of course related to logical positivism's obsession with meaninglessness, but radically and specifically opposed to its mode of accounting for it. (I do not know how far one may go in taking the interest in nonsense to be definitive of what came to be called analytical philosophy, an interest that fruitfully differentiates it from its estranged sibling, called Continental metaphysics.) Naturally a philosophical attention to the essential possibility of nonsense in human speech can be taken to avoid Benjamin's concern with a historically specific source of human violation, say that of late capitalism. But what is the theory (of history? of philosophy? of nature?) according to which it must be so taken? And what of the possibility that an attention to history is used to avoid the glare of philosophy?<sup>15</sup>

The second, related project is announced in "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them from the world and its affairs. The thoughts we are developing here originate from similar considerations. . . . Our consideration . . . seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians [traitors to the cause of anti-Fascism] continue to adhere [or, as he goes on to say, to conform].<sup>16</sup>

Here I appeal to my various efforts to show Wittgenstein's and Austin's differently cast attentions to the ordinary as underwritten in the work

15. Winfried Menninghaus, who organized the Yale conference, commented to me after my talk that Benjamin was in fact interested in nonsense, construing (if I understood) the freedom from sense in fairy tales as a rescue from the dictation of sense in myth. I am not prepared now to speak to this. Nor can I now derive the tuition from a theme from the *Trauerspiel* book that to my ear captures the intuition in my tendency to characterize the skeptic as wishing to escape the responsibility for meaning his words; I refer to Benjamin's claim that, in the baroque antithesis of sound and meaning, "meaning is encountered, and will continue to be encountered as the reason for mournfulness" (*OG*, p. 209).

16. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, p. 258.

of Emerson and of Thoreau, and I note the presence of the concept of conformity, an Emersonian master-tone, in aversion to which, as aversion to which, he defines thinking. The language of conformity in his society presents itself to Emerson's ears as sounds from which he finds himself continually shrinking ("Every word they say chagrins us")<sup>17</sup> and which he interprets as an expression of depression—Thoreau famously characterizes (early in *Walden*) the lives of the mass of people as ones of quiet desperation; Emerson had explicitly said "secret melancholy" (in "New England Reformers").<sup>18</sup> Thoreau's invention and demonstration of civil disobedience registers the knowledge that massive depression has, whatever else, a political basis. Specifically, it interprets the emergence of consent as a political phenomenon to signal the recognition that I must acknowledge my voice as lent to, hence as in complicity with, the injustice in my society, hence recognize that I become inexpressive, stifled, in the face of it. Pathos is one response to this knowledge, and who is capable, from time to time, of grander semblances of pathos than Benjamin (as at the close of the Goethe essay)?: "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope."<sup>19</sup> Here is the point at which to assess Emerson's violent efforts at cheerfulness, at raising up the hearts of his neighbors, which so grates on intellectual ears.

I suppose that this Emersonian note is a sound of hope in democracy, a kind of cost of participation in it. Emerson's formidable essay "Experience" enacts a relentless demand for attaining, or for mourning the passing of, one's own experience—adjoining signature themes of Benjamin's—an enactment through a process of judging the world that Emerson names thinking, something he also calls patience, by which he says we shall "win at the last."<sup>20</sup> I might take that formula in Emerson's dialect to suggest, "ween at the last," *ween* meaning to think something possible, as though realization is a function of active expectation now. (As in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*: "Ween you of better luck . . . than your Master, / Whose minister you are?")<sup>21</sup> And is it sure that Emerson's affirmation is too American a proposition, asking too much of that old part of us so fascinated by the necessity and the freedom of being uncomprehended? Except of course by children.

17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, 1983), p. 264.

18. Emerson, "New England Reformers," *Essays and Lectures*, p. 600.

19. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," p. 356.

20. Emerson, "Experience," *Essays and Lectures*, p. 492.

21. William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1974), 5.1.135–37, p. 1011.

# From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes

Horst Bredekamp

Translated by Melissa Thorson Hause and Jackson Bond

## 1. *Traces of Benjamin's Esteem for Schmitt*

Walter Benjamin's esteem for Carl Schmitt is one of the most irritating incidents in the intellectual history of the Weimar Republic. It arouses astonishment to this day, connecting as it does Benjamin, a victim of Nazism, to Schmitt, who, with his distinction between friend and enemy, developed a Manichean definition of the political and took a public stance in support of National Socialism in the years after the *Machtergreifung*.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this bizarre relationship, which for decades was repressed as inconceivable or dismissed as a mere chance episode, was no isolated incident. Although he was forbidden to teach after 1945 and his reputation remained tainted, Schmitt served as a kind of oracle for countless intellectuals and politicians in Germany and elsewhere before his death in 1985.<sup>2</sup> It was even suggested that he "has more 'pupils' at universities in Ger-

For Stephan Holmes's fiftieth birthday.

I am grateful to Gerhard Giesler, Helge Høibraaten (who gave me the opportunity to discuss some of these problems at a symposium dedicated to Carl Schmitt at the University of Trondheim, Norway), Heinrich Meier, and Winfried Menninghaus for their comments and criticism, and to Joshua Gold for his assistance in research. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are our own.

1. See Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1932; Berlin, 1991). Compare Joseph W. Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton, N.J., 1983), and Andreas Koenen, *Der Fall Carl Schmitt: Sein Aufstieg zum "Kronjuristen des Dritten Reiches"* (Darmstadt, 1995).

2. See Dirk van Laak, *Gespräche in der Sicherheit des Schweigens: Carl Schmitt in der politischen Geistesgeschichte der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Berlin, 1993).

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many and abroad than any other professor of his generation.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, he continues to be the subject of increasing interest, even and especially in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

What is particularly remarkable is the frequency with which we learn of the high regard for Schmitt held by persons who at first seem foreign to him in their origin and thought. Perhaps the most spectacular instance of this kind of interest was the sudden departure of Alexandre Kojève, the celebrated philosopher of “the end of history,” after a lecture at the Freie Universität in the seething Berlin of 1967. Kojève announced that he was going to see Schmitt, the only one “worth talking to” in Germany. Jacob Taubes, who had invited Kojève, was, in his own words, dismayed.<sup>5</sup>

But it was that same Taubes who, almost twenty years later, revealed the heretofore little-noticed connection between Benjamin and Schmitt. In 1986, one year after Schmitt’s death, Taubes was called to account as before a “tribunal” at a panel discussion in the Maison Heinrich Heine in Berlin. Taubes, the son of a rabbi and himself a well-known Judaist, was taken to task for having visited Schmitt himself and even, despite the gulf that separated them, having respected his work. It seemed inconceivable that a scholar who characterized himself as an “arch-Jew” could have had anything to do with Schmitt.<sup>6</sup> Taubes countered with Schmitt’s own dictum, which the latter had borrowed from his poet friend Theodor Däubler—“The enemy is the embodiment of your own question”<sup>7</sup>—and then played his trump card: Benjamin’s admiration for Schmitt.

3. Heinrich Meier, “Der Philosoph als Feind: Zu Carl Schmitts ‘Glossarium,’” *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, und “Der Begriff des Politischen”*: Zu einem Dialog unter Abwesenden (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 145.

4. Mark Lilla’s critical commentary on the latest Schmitt “boom” (“The Enemy of Liberalism,” *New York Review of Books*, 15 May 1997, pp. 38–40, 42–44) has been met with sharp criticism by Paul Piccone, Gary Umen, and Paul Gottfried in *Telos* 109: 87–97. Compare also John P. McCormick, “Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English,” forthcoming in *Political Theory*. As early as 1987, Jürgen Habermas expressed consternation regarding two translations of Schmitt into English: “Die Schrecken der Autonomie: Carl Schmitt auf Englisch,” *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), pp. 103–19.

5. See Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebiges Fügung* (Berlin, 1987), p. 24; hereafter abbreviated CS.

6. Taubes, letter to Schmitt, 18 Sept. 1979, in CS, p. 39; compare also p. 46.

7. “Der Feind ist deine eigne Frage als Gestalt” (Theodor Däubler, *Hymne an Italien* [Munich, 1916], p. 58). This source was discovered by Meier, “Der Philosoph als Feind,” pp.

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Evidence of Benjamin's attraction to Schmitt can be found as early as 1923. In a letter to Gottfried Salomon from December of that year, Benjamin wrote that he had been reading texts on the doctrine of sovereignty in the baroque era during work on his *Habilitation*.<sup>8</sup> Without doubt he is referring to Schmitt's *Politische Theologie*, which Benjamin cites as his political-theoretical basis in a central chapter of his *Habilitation* on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels)*, published two years later.<sup>9</sup> In his short curriculum vitae of 1928, Benjamin confirms that his work on the *Trauerspiel* book was methodologically influenced by both the art historian Alois Riegl and the political thinker Schmitt:

This effort, undertaken on a larger scale in the above-mentioned *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, embraces on the one hand the methodological ideas of Alois Riegl with his idea of the *Kunstwollen*, and on the other the contemporary essays of Carl Schmitt, who in his analysis of political structure makes an analogous attempt to integrate phenomena that can only seemingly be isolated in different areas. Above all, however, it seems to me that such observation is the prerequisite for any penetrating physiognomic interpretation of works of art, to the extent that they are unique and inimitable.<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis of this appraisal is remarkable. But an even more unequivocal sign of Benjamin's admiration for Schmitt is found in a letter

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12, 35, 79, 91, 96; see also Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts: Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung politischer Theologie und politischer Philosophie* (Stuttgart, 1994), p. 76. On Taubes's use of the verse, see *CS*, p. 51; on Benjamin and Schmitt, see *ibid.*, p. 26.

8. See Chryssoula Kambas, "Walter Benjamin an Gottfried Salomon: Bericht über eine unveröffentlichte Korrespondenz," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 56 (1982): 609.

9. See Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, 7th ed. (1922; Berlin, 1996), hereafter abbreviated *PT*; and Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1974–89), 1:1:203–430; see esp. p. 246; hereafter abbreviated *UD*; trans. John Osborne, under the title *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977; London, 1985); see esp. p. 65; hereafter abbreviated *OG*.

10.

Dieser Versuch, den ich in größerem Maßstabe in dem erwähnten "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels" unternahm, knüpft einerseits an die methodischen Ideen Alois Riegls in seiner Lehre vom Kunstwollen, andererseits an die zeitgenössischen Versuche von Carl Schmitt an, der in seiner Analyse der politischen Gebilde einen analogen Versuch der Integration von Erscheinungen vornimmt, die nur scheinbar gebietsmäßig zu isolieren sind. Vor allem aber scheint mir eine derartige Betrachtung Bedingung jeder eindringlichen physiognomischen Erfassung der Kunstwerke in dem worin sie unvergleichlich und einmalig sind. [Benjamin, "Lebenslauf," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:1:219]

written to him in December 1930,<sup>11</sup> announcing the shipment of his 1925 book on German tragic drama:

Esteemed Professor Schmitt,

You will receive any day now from the publisher my book, *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*. With these lines I would like not merely to announce its arrival, but also to express my joy at being able to send it to you, at the suggestion of Mr. Albert Salomon. You will very quickly recognize how much my book is indebted to you for its presentation of the doctrine of sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Perhaps I may also say, in addition, that I have also derived from your later works, especially the "*Diktatur*," a confirmation of my modes of research in the philosophy of art from yours in the philosophy of the state. If the reading of my book allows this feeling to emerge in an intelligible fashion, then the purpose of my sending it to you will be achieved.

With my expression of special admiration,

Your very humble

Walter Benjamin.<sup>12</sup>

Taubes called this letter "a mine" that "explodes our conception of the intellectual history of the Weimar period" (*CS*, p. 27), and since then it has given rise to a continuing discussion. The metaphor of explosion, however, presupposes fixed boundaries between Left and Right, the avant-garde and its reaction, that do not exist in monolithic form. Rather, the same opinions can often be formulated from different positions,<sup>13</sup> a phenomenon that holds true for Benjamin and Schmitt as well. The two thinkers shared the critique of a liberalism lacking in seriousness, extremity, and depth, and when Schmitt emphasizes the modern character of

11. Schmitt mentions this letter in his 1956 book on Shakespeare; see Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba: Die Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (1956; Stuttgart, 1985), p. 64. The letter was not published in the first edition of Benjamin's correspondence (Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, 2 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1966]), but was later printed by Hans-Dietrich Sander in *Marxistische Ideologie und allgemeine Kunsttheorie*, 2d ed. (1970; Basle, 1975), p. 173 n. 79 and commented upon in three important articles: Michael Rumpf, "Radikale Theologie: Walter Benjamins Beziehung zu Carl Schmitt," in Peter Gebhardt et al., *Walter Benjamin—Zeitgenosse der Moderne* (Kronberg im Taunus, 1976), pp. 37–50; Fritz Güde, "Der Schiffbrüchige und der Kapitän: Carl Schmitt und Walter Benjamin auf stürmischer See," *Kommune* 3, no. 6 (1985): 61–67; and Horst Turk, "Politische Theologie? Zur Intention auf die Sprache bei Benjamin und Celan," in *Juden in der deutschen Literatur: Ein deutsch-israelisches Symposium*, ed. Stéphane Moses and Albrecht Schöne (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), pp. 330–49.

12. Benjamin, letter to Schmitt, 9 Dec. 1930, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:3:887, and Benjamin, letter to Schmitt, 9 Dec. 1930, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Göttsche and Henri Lonitz, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), 3:558; trans. Samuel Weber, in Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics* 22 (Fall–Winter 1992): 5.

13. See Michael Rumpf, "Radikale Theologie."



German romanticism in order to condemn the radical subjectivism he saw fully unfolded in it for the first time, he agrees with Benjamin, though the latter affirmed romanticism for the same reason that Schmitt repudiated it.<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin must have known that Schmitt had enjoyed considerable success as a literary critic and surrealist writer,<sup>15</sup> as well as the high regard of poets such as Däubler and artists such as the Catholic-leaning dadaist Hugo Ball.<sup>16</sup> The decisive factor in Benjamin's use of Schmitt, however, was the way in which he saw his own concept of art clarified in the latter's political theory. Benjamin saw the double strategy of placing the shock of the exception against the background of eventless continuity as a way to, on the one hand, oppose the integration of phenomena to the existence of isolated and autonomous areas within society, and, on the other, to search for that which made the work of art "unique and inimitable." But this uniqueness consisted not only in the contrast to the close-knit web of phenomena but also in its opposition to the continuity of time. This is the point at which the ideas of Benjamin and Schmitt converge. Schmitt's theoretical association of the political, art, and time appealed to Benjamin and finally ensnared him.

## 2. Conceptions of Time in the Work of Carl Schmitt

In a central passage of his *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin addresses the significance of the "state of exception" (*Ausnahmezustand*) (*UD*, p. 246; *OG*, p. 65),<sup>17</sup> a discussion that is based on Schmitt's dictum "sovereign is he who decides upon the state of exception" ("Souverän ist, wer über den

14. See Schmitt, *Politische Romantik*, 5th ed. (1919; Berlin, 1991). On this complex of ideas, compare Ellen Kennedy, who attributes the antiliberal thinking to the Frankfurt school as a whole; see Ellen Kennedy, "Carl Schmitt und die 'Frankfurter Schule,'" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 12 (1986): 389; on Benjamin's letter, see p. 382 n. 5. A series of critiques of Kennedy appeared in *Telos* 71 [Spring 1987]: Martin Jay, "Reconciling the Irreconcilable? Rejoinder to Kennedy," pp. 76–80; Alfons Söllner, "Beyond Carl Schmitt: Political Theory in the Frankfurt School," pp. 81–96; and Ulrich K. Preuß, "The Critique of German Liberalism: Reply to Kennedy," pp. 97–110. See also Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Theatrical-Theological Politics, Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," in *Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940*, ed. Uwe Steiner (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), pp. 123–37, and the thorough dissertation by Susanne Heil, "Gefährliche Beziehungen: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt" (Ph.D. diss., University of Stuttgart, 1996).

15. His surrealist piece "Buribunken" appeared in the magazine *Summa* 4 (1918): 89–106, in which authors such as Ernst Bloch, Hermann Broch, Max Scheler, and Robert Musil were also published.

16. Compare Ingeborg Villinger, *Carl Schmitts Kulturkritik der Moderne: Text, Kommentar, und Analyse der "Schattenrisse" des Johannes Negelinus* (Berlin, 1995); Heil, "Gefährliche Beziehungen," pp. 10–47; and A. and Ch. Einem, "Carolus jocosus? Ein Blick in die Katakomben der Carl-Schmitt-Forschung," *Etappe* 13 (Sept. 1997): 59.

17. Compare Heil, "Gefährliche Beziehungen," p. 128.

Ausnahmezustand entscheidet") (*PT*, p. 13). In this idea, he saw the disparity between continuity and uniqueness expanded to include a concept of time that sought to distinguish between normality and exception. This idea is in fact the keystone of Schmitt's system of thought, at least during the years that were decisive for the relationship between Schmitt and Benjamin.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of the state of exception expresses Schmitt's conviction that democracy loses its foundation when different factions pursue their divergent interests to the point where a splintered political system is no longer able to guarantee the security of law. Under these circumstances, an extrasocietal force, the sovereign, must suspend the laws in order to save them.

Up to this point, Schmitt's argument corresponds to the standard justification for dictatorial authority. What lends it an art-theoretical twist, however, is his relentless politicization of the concept of time. According to Schmitt, it is logically impossible for the representatives of law and politics to create a limited sphere of time outside the framework of normality. Like the miracle for the theologian, the state of exception must come from the outside. Schmitt thus defines sovereignty as a "borderline concept" (*Grenzbegriff*), localized in the "outermost sphere." Because its place lies beyond the space of normality, sovereignty corresponds to an abnormal time. And, since the framework of normality cannot be broken open from within, the state of exception must be declared by a person coming from the outside who interrupts the line of continuity. Political theory thus begins to approach political theology.<sup>19</sup> It demands a court of appeal—the state of exception—located outside all frameworks, one that defines the character of time and even produces it. The state of exception in temporal terms may be described as the cessation of ordinary time.

The concept of a limited time beyond the continuity of the normal, in itself already an unusual idea, has the even stranger consequence of establishing itself as a "delay" (*Frist*). The interpretation of the state of exception as a *Frist* is a function of Schmitt's arch-Catholic conception of the *katechon* or the "Restrainer,"<sup>20</sup> a scheme in which history takes place

18. On the legal aspect of the state of exception and its relation to the "borderline situation" (*Grenzsituation*), see Hasso Hofmann, *Legitimität gegen Legalität: Der Weg der politischen Philosophie Carl Schmitts*, 3d ed. (Berlin, 1995), p. 65. Compare also Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision" (1992), p. 125. On *Grenzsituation*, see Karl Jaspers, *Einführung in die Philosophie* (Zurich, 1953), p. 20. Compare in general Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision," in *Enlightenments: Encounters between Critical Theory and Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Harry Kunneman and Hent de Vries (Kampen, 1993), p. 148.

19. See Meier, "Was ist Politische Theologie? Einführende Bemerkungen zu einem umstrittenen Begriff," in Jan Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel*, 2d ed. (Munich, 1995), pp. 7–19.

20. Schmitt refers to the second letter to the Thessalonians in the New Testament (2 Thess. 2:7). On Schmitt's frequent use of the term, see Günter Meuter, *Der Katechon: Zu Carl*

in the space of time between the present and the coming of the Antichrist. It is the span of time in which the works of the Lawless One have not yet gained the upper hand and the Antichrist has not yet appeared. The *katechon*, whatever form he may assume, produces history; without him, time itself would long ago have ended. He halts the flow of time leading toward the counter-era of the Antichrist, whether Communism or the mechanization of the world: "in the time of exception, the power of true life breaks through the crust of a mechanics caught in continuous repetition" (*PT*, p. 21).<sup>21</sup> The reciprocal play of both together—the continuous time of normality as well as the shock of the state of exception—produces the history that is given to humanity as the *Frist*.

This political concept of time might at first seem too cryptic to be worthy of further consideration. But here, too, other thinkers have adopted the same ideas as Schmitt, making them appear less strange. The construction of the *katechon*, for example, was used as an alternative to nihilism not only by the Catholic Schmitt but also by the Protestant Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>22</sup> Schmitt's ideas, moreover, have a diabolical logic that has ensnared others besides Benjamin. Their marginal movement is exactly what it pretends to be; Schmitt's theory of time is a philosophical "borderline case" (*Grenzfall*), which posits a zone far beyond the known world. Accordingly, this theory seeks to nullify the rules of normal time and produce a moment of standstill and shocklike clarity.

This motif of the abrupt departure from the time of normality corresponds to the concepts of shock, the now, and suddenness from the canon of the avant-garde propagated by Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger as well as by André Breton and Louis Aragon.<sup>23</sup> In his curriculum vitae Benjamin emphasizes the proximity of his theory of art to Schmitt's dichotomy between continuity and uniqueness; in actuality, this dichotomy corresponds to the span between normality and the state of exception used by Schmitt in his concept of the *katechon*. And even the cinematic "shock effect" praised by Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of

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Schmitts *fundamentalistischer Kritik der Zeit* (Berlin, 1994), and Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts*, pp. 46, 234–53, as well as Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, und "Der Begriff des Politischen,"* pp. 56, 90.

21. "In der Ausnahme durchbricht die Kraft des wirklichen Lebens die Kruste einer in Wiederholung erstarrten Mechanik." Compare Lutz Berthold, "Wer hält zur Zeit den Satan auf? Zur Selbstglossierung Carl Schmitts," *Leviathan* 21 (1993): 287, 294.

22. See Wolfgang Schuller, "Dennoch die Schwerter halten: Der Katechon Carl Schmitts," in *Geschichte—Tradition—Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hubert Cancik, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Peter Schäfer, 3 vols. (Tübingen, 1996), 2:389–408.

23. See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Plötzlichkeit: Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), pp. 52–54, 67, 73, 180, 183, 184, 211, and Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror," *Political Theory* 20 (Aug. 1992): 433.

Mechanical Reproduction”—an effect that, “like every shock, should be cushioned by intensified spiritual presence”—refers to the tension between normal time and uniqueness that Benjamin in his curriculum vitae had also found and praised in Schmitt’s method.<sup>24</sup>

But the connection between Benjamin and Schmitt is more complex and contradictory than the mere adoption of Schmitt’s concept of uniqueness would suggest. The link between the two thinkers can be established much more firmly via a relatively lengthy detour, one that leads to Thomas Hobbes’s concept of political time and offers a key to both Benjamin and Schmitt.

### 3. Hobbes’s Image of the Leviathan as the Creator of Time

While Benjamin himself does not quote Hobbes, there can be no doubt that his fundamental theses are based on the latter’s definition of the political. Thus it has been surmised that the image of the Leviathan should be viewed as a secret antithesis to the emptiness of the allegory. At the beginning of Benjamin’s “Kritik der Gewalt,” where he deals with Spinoza, Hobbes is likewise present between the lines.<sup>25</sup>

Schmitt, on the other hand, who sought to reactivate the Hobbesian view of the state as rooted in elemental human fear, lays explicit claim to Hobbes as his intellectual “brother.”<sup>26</sup> Of particular interest is the importance he attributes to the Leviathan metaphor: “In the long history of

24. Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (Zweite Fassung), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:1:379 n. 16. Compare Heil, “Gefährliche Beziehungen,” pp. 91–98, and my criticism of Benjamin’s ingenious but art historically misleading essay in “Der simulierte Benjamin: Mittelalterliche Bemerkungen zu seiner Aktualität,” in *Frankfurter Schule und Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Andreas Berndt et al. (Berlin, 1992), pp. 117–40.

25. See Benjamin, “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:180; compare Martin Windisch, “‘When There Is No Visible Power to Keep Them in Awe’: Staatstheorie und Bildform bei Thomas Hobbes,” *Zeitsprünge* 1, no. 1 (1997): 162.

26. Helmut Schelsky even called Schmitt “a German Hobbes” (Helmut Schelsky, *Thomas Hobbes: Eine politische Lehre* [Berlin, 1981], p. 5). Schmitt published extensively on Hobbes: “Der Staat als Mechanismus bei Hobbes und Descartes,” *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 30 (1936–37): 622–32; *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes: Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols*, ed. Günter Maschke (1938; Cologne, 1982); and “Die vollendete Reformation: Bemerkungen und Hinweise zu neuen Leviathan-Interpretationen,” *Der Staat*, 4 Apr. 1965, pp. 51–69. In his memoirs, written after 1945, Schmitt compares himself repeatedly to Hobbes; see Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus* (Cologne, 1950), pp. 61, 63, 67, 68, 75, 78, 89. See also Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–51*, ed. Eberhard Freiherr von Medem (Berlin, 1991), p. 81. On this subject, compare Helmut Rumpf, *Carl Schmitt und Thomas Hobbes: Ideelle Beziehungen und aktuelle Bedeutung mit einer Abhandlung über: Die Frühschriften Carl Schmitts* (Berlin, 1972), pp. 57, 61–67, and the foundational discussion in Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts*, p. 157.

political theories, richly laden with colorful images and symbols, icons and idols, paradigms and phantasms, emblems and allegories, this Leviathan is the most striking and powerful image. It transcends the framework of all intellectual theories or constructions."<sup>27</sup> Despite his criticism of the Leviathan as an image inappropriate for the mechanistic Hobbesian state—a position he later repudiated<sup>28</sup>—Schmitt attributes to this image the power to rupture the time of normality. The Old Testament metaphor of the Leviathan is equivalent to the sovereign, and thus possesses that time-producing quality that justifies sovereignty.

The same holds true for the anthropomorphic visualization of the Leviathan. The frontispiece is the most authoritative answer imaginable to the experience of inescapable political chaos and years of civil war (fig. 1). Equipped with the bishop's crosier of spiritual power and the sword of secular authority, the giant bends men to his will. In the tradition of Arcimbolde's composite images,<sup>29</sup> his body is comprised of over three hundred people who, like a coat of mail, replace the skin and obviously extend into the body itself (fig. 2). This double effect, where hundreds of people look toward a single head that itself returns our gaze, doubtless illustrates the decisive passage in chapter 17 of the *Leviathan* in which the birth of the state occurs through the transfer of the individual will to the sovereign: "This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man. . . . This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that Mortall God, to which we owe under the *Immortall God*, our peace and defence."<sup>30</sup>

"Generation" here means the creation not only of a body but also of time. The concept is related to the tradition of state effigies fashioned at the death of a king in order to fill the period of the interregnum with a quasi-living representation of the state. Such effigies prepared the way for the process of visualization without which the Leviathan would

27. "In der langen, an bunten Bildern und Symbolen, an Ikonen und Idolen, an Paradigmen und Phantasmen, Emblemen und Allegorien überaus reichen Geschichte der politischen Theorien ist dieser Leviathan das stärkste und mächtigste Bild. Es sprengt den Rahmen jeder nur gedanklichen Theorie oder Konstruktion" (Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes*, p. 9).

28. See Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 50–53, and Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts*, p. 160.

29. See Reinhardt Brandt, "Das Titelblatt des Leviathan und Goyas El Gigante," in *Furcht und Freiheit: Leviathan—Diskussion 300 Jahre nach Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Udo Bernbach and Klaus-Michael Kodalle (Opladen, 1982), p. 204 n. 5, and Bredekamp, "Zur Vorgeschichte von Thomas Hobbes's Bild des Staates," in *Räume des Wissens: Repräsentation, Codierung, Spur*, ed. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Michael Hagner, and Bettina Wahrig-Schmidt (Berlin, 1997), pp. 23–37.

30. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1991), p. 120; hereafter abbreviated *L*.

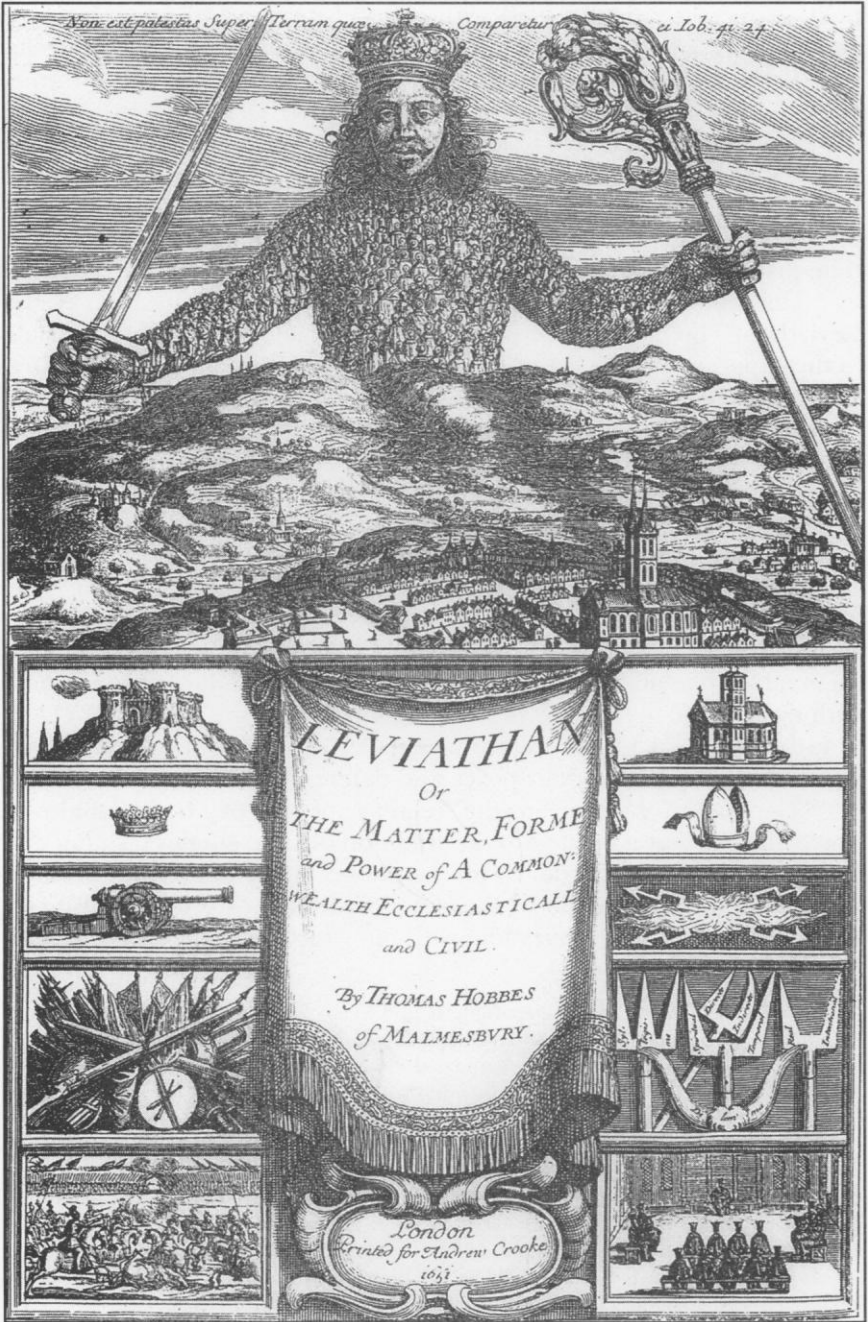


FIG. 1.—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651), frontispiece.

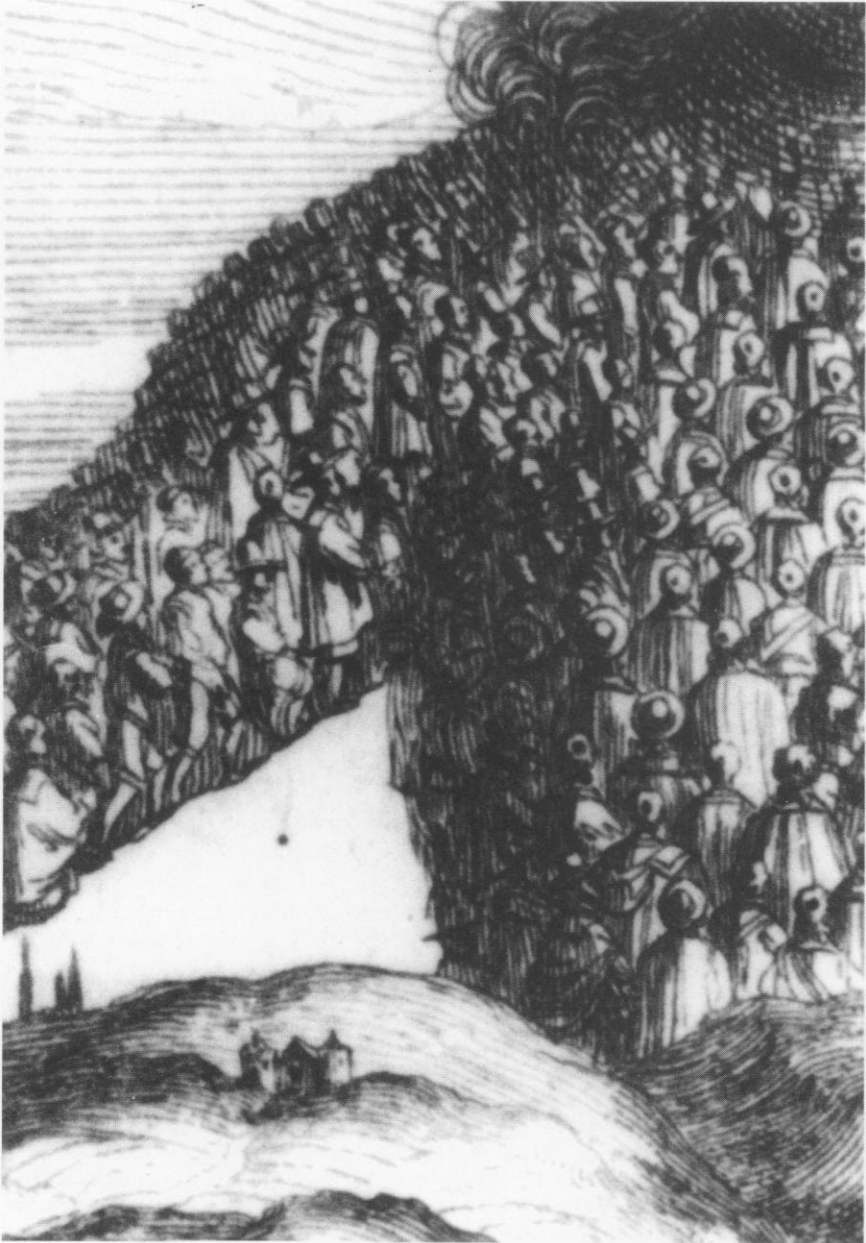


FIG. 2.—Detail of the Leviathan.

scarcely have been conceivable.<sup>31</sup> The collection of royal effigies, dating back to the fourteenth century,<sup>32</sup> demonstrated what was otherwise only visible to a supernatural eye, elevated above the flow of time: the chain of office-holders, fragmented over time, but extending from the past into the future as a coherent composite figure. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes explores the question of the “Right of *Succession*” as if he were envisioning the royal effigies of Westminster Abbey:

Of all these Formes of Government, the matter being mortall, so that not onely Monarchs, but also whole Assemblies dy, it is necessary for the conservation of the peace of men, that as there was order taken for an Artificiall Man, so there be order also taken, for an Artificiall Eternity of life; without which, men that are governed by an Assembly, should return into the condition of Warre in every age; and they that are governed by One man, assoon as their Governour dyeth. This Artificiall Eternity, is that which men call the Right of *Succession*. [L, p. 135]<sup>33</sup>

In *Leviathan*, the artificial figure that represents the state claims this artificial eternity. The Leviathan is built to last.

#### 4. *The State of Exception: Hobbes, Schmitt, and Benjamin*

Common to both Hobbes and Schmitt is the preoccupation with a form of time posited beyond the continuum of normality. Like Hobbes's interregnum, Schmitt's state of exception constitutes the center around which all political considerations revolve. But while Hobbes theoretically

31. The words *representation* and *image* were used synonymously for the first time on the occasion of the burial of Henry VII in 1509: “Over the Corps was an Image or Representation of ye late king layd on quissions of gold aparelled in his Riche robes of astate wat crowne on his hed ball & scepter in his hande.” Later, arms and legs were added, allowing the figure to assume various positions, so that “sundrie accions first for the Carriage in the Chariot and then for the standinge and for settinge uppe the same in the Abbey” intensified the illusion of life through the appearance of motion (quoted in W. H. St. John Hope, “On the Funeral Effigies of the Kings and Queens of England, with Special Reference to Those in the Abbey of Westminster,” *Archeologia: or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 60 [1907]: 539, 555). Against this background, Hobbes's description of the Leviathan as a living machine is understandable. His introductory statement, “by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man,” is clearly inspired by kings' effigies (L, p. 9). Compare Bredekamp, “Zur Vorgeschichte von Thomas Hobbes's Bild des Staates.”

32. See Anthony Harvey and Richard Mortimer, *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey* (Woodbridge, 1994).

33. The resemblance of the Leviathan to the model of the effigies was noted already by Bourdieu, though only in passing, in a sentence explaining the principle of representation; see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p. 209.



extends the brief interregnum in order to transform the potentially endless time of anarchy into a period of authority and order through the permanence of the social contract and a living effigy—that is, the state—Schmitt is concerned with the duration of an unstable order, to which he opposes the moment of the “state of exception.” Hobbes’s objective is the permanence of the Leviathan, whereas Schmitt emphasizes the exaltedness of the moment. Schmitt, who attacked occasionalism as a delusion specific to German romanticism,<sup>34</sup> is, in fact, its involuntary heir. Hobbes is political, Schmitt romantic.<sup>35</sup>

Benjamin occupies a middle ground between Hobbes and Schmitt. At first, his *Trauerspiel* book follows Schmitt’s approach. Adopting the contrast between the serious case (*Ernstfall*), borderline concept (*Grenzbegriff*), and exception (*Ausnahme*), on the one hand, and the phenomenon of continuous normality, on the other,<sup>36</sup> he emphasizes the significance of the “unique-extreme.” Moreover, the criteria by which Benjamin evaluates German tragic drama are taken from Schmitt: the sovereign, his relation to the state of exception, and his ability to make extreme decisions.<sup>37</sup>

In his chapter on the theory of sovereignty, Benjamin makes reference to Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty, which “emerges from a discussion of the state of exception” (*UD*, p. 245; *OG*, p. 65; trans. mod.).<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, one would expect Benjamin to follow Schmitt at this point, too; but such is not the case. Sovereignty, according to Benjamin, “makes

34. See Schmitt, *Politische Romantik*.

35. “The bucolic idyll has become—to exaggerate a little—a predatory idyll” (Helmut Kuhn, review of *Der Begriff des Politischen*, by Schmitt, *Kant-Studien* 38 [1933]: 194; there Schmitt is also characterized as a “Romantic”). Compare Hofmann, *Legitimität gegen Legalität*, p. 162. In a contribution to a discussion published in *Recht und Institution: Helmut Schelsky-Gedächtnissymposium Münster 1985*, ed. Rechtswissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Universität Münster (Berlin, 1985), p. 99, Hermann Lübke likewise calls Schmitt a “Romantic of the exceptional situation,” driven by an “intellectual and aesthetic weakness for exceptional political positions” (p. 99).

36. “The normal proves nothing, the exception proves everything” (“Das Normale beweist nichts, die Ausnahme beweist alles”) (*PT*, p. 21).

37. “‘The unique extreme.’ The concept proceeds from the extreme” (“‘das Einmalig Extreme: Vom Extremen geht der Begriff aus’”) (*UD*, p. 215; *OG*, p. 35; trans. mod.). Compare Michael Makropoulos, *Modernität als ontologischer Ausnahmezustand? Walter Benjamins Theorie der Moderne* (Munich, 1989), pp. 39–41, and Weber, “Taking Exception to Decision” (1992), p. 124.

38. Osborne renders “Ausnahmezustand” as “state of emergency.” Compare the foundational essay by Weber, “Taking Exception to Decision” (1992), p. 130, and the essay by Günter Figal, “Vom Sinn der Geschichte: Zur Erörterung der politischen Theologie bei Carl Schmitt und Walter Benjamin,” in *Dialektischer Negativismus: Michael Theunissen zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Emil Angehrn et al. (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 262. As far as I know, Benjamin’s reasons for praising Schmitt’s book on dictatorship have never been investigated. The answer might lie in the fact that this book once again treats of extreme situations and the “exception” that helps to understand and safeguard the legal norm; see Schmitt, *Die Diktatur: Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf*, 5th ed. (1922; Berlin, 1989), pp. xiv, 16.

it the most important function of the prince to avert this," that is, the state of exception. The shift of nuance is of utmost significance. For while Schmitt views the state of exception as the *conditio sine qua non* for the establishment of sovereignty, Benjamin sees sovereignty as existing in order to avoid the state of exception in the first place.

The passage that follows likewise reveals fundamental differences, despite the Schmittian influence: "The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of exception." At first glance, the sentence reads like a summary of Schmitt's work on *Diktatur*, which Benjamin had praised in the letter of December 1930. But while Schmitt views the sovereign, who establishes himself in the reciprocity of normal continuity and the state of exception, as both necessary and possible, Benjamin speaks of his absence.<sup>39</sup> His *Trauerspiel* shows rulers who are only seemingly able to govern the state of exception and, ideally, to exclude it. The symbol of the epoch is neither the clarity and permanence of the laws nor the moment of the sovereign's decision, but rather the "inability to decide" (*Entschlußunfähigkeit*)<sup>40</sup> and the torsion of hesitation: "The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of exception, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision. Just as compositions with restful lighting are virtually unknown in mannerist painting, so it is that the theatrical figures of this epoch always appear in the harsh light of their changing resolve" (*UD*, p. 250; *OG*, p. 71; trans. mod.). Benjamin searches for traces of the true sovereign, but the rulers appear to him unable to find a way to the transcendence that would make possible an outer Archimedean point.<sup>41</sup> The potentate is symbolized by the cold, unrestrained plotter, whose actions fill up the permanent state of exception stochastically, without meaning or morality. His counterpart is the masquerade of the allegory, which transforms reality into changing masks of continual metamorphosis.<sup>42</sup>

Benjamin criticizes authority as a masquerade of the chaotic state of nature, the endless repetition of change without substance, and the

39. The German drama of the Counter-Reformation was formed "in an extremely violent effort, and this alone would mean that no sovereign genius gave the form its peculiar character" ("in einer höchst gewalttätigen Anstrengung und dies allein würde besagen, daß kein souveräner Genius dieser Form das Gepräge gegeben hat") (*UD*, p. 229; *OG*, p. 49; trans. mod.).

40. Compare Turk, "Politische Theologie?" p. 332.

41. The more the world moves aimlessly toward its end, the more history becomes bound to the world: "The religious man of the baroque era clings so tightly to the world because of the feeling that he is being driven along to a cataract with it. The baroque knows no eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end" (*UD*, p. 246; *OG*, p. 66). See also Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision" (1993), p. 153.

42. See Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision" (1992 and 1993), p. 133 and pp. 154–59.

meaningless use of pliable allegories. He views history not as the pendulum swing of disintegrating order and its reestablishment in the state of exception but as one-dimensional monotony—and thus to be lamented. Inasmuch as Benjamin views the absence of sovereignty as catastrophic, he remains, despite his “theological anarchism,” within the Schmittian framework.<sup>43</sup> He differs from Schmitt in his interpretation of history, not, however, with respect to the criteria for its evaluation.

### 5. Schmitt's Response to Benjamin

Schmitt reacted to Benjamin's objections. In a series of letters from 1973, he mentions in passing that he had been occupied with Benjamin during the entire decade of the thirties. First, he underlines his relation to Benjamin by stating that he was “in daily contact” with shared acquaintances.<sup>44</sup> Then he deals with Benjamin's interpretation of the *Leviathan*. He suggests that his article of 1937 had implicitly criticized Benjamin's failure to deal with the symbolism of the Leviathan: “The important thing is the symbolism of the Leviathan, of which, strangely, W. Benjamin says nothing (as far as I can tell).”<sup>45</sup>

In the following remark—which may be described as nothing less than spectacular—Schmitt explains that his influential book on Hobbes of 1938, which he himself characterized as his most significant, was intended as an answer to Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*: “Unfortunately, my attempt to respond to Benjamin by examining a great political symbol (the Leviathan in the political thought of Thomas Hobbes, 1938) went unnoticed.”<sup>46</sup>

At first glance, it may seem questionable whether Schmitt really had Benjamin in mind when he wrote his critique of Hobbes. It is possible that he, looking back in 1973, was seeking some share in Benjamin's fame. He may have viewed this as a welcome opportunity to disguise the book's open anti-Semitism by describing it as a veiled answer to a Jewish emigrant, in this way appearing to take him seriously and even honor him.

On the other hand, the question of the extent to which Schmitt sought to style himself in retrospect is of secondary significance. For re-

43. Figal, “Vom Sinn der Geschichte,” p. 253.

44. Schmitt makes reference to a letter of 7 July 1932 written to him by Karl Korsch; “From the fall of 1932, I also have letters from Franz Neumann; most of them—above all Otto Kirchheimer, who did his doctoral work with me in Bonn in 1928—and the acquaintances shared with W. Benjamin are not documented because we were in daily contact” (Schmitt, letter to Hansjörg Viesel, 11 May 1973, in Viesel, *Jawohl, der Schmitt: Zehn Briefe aus Plettenberg* [Berlin, 1988], pp. 60–61).

45. *Ibid.*, p. 16. The article mentioned is Schmitt, “Der Staat als Mechanismus bei Hobbes und Descartes.”

46. Schmitt, letter to Viesel, 4 Apr. 1973, in Viesel, *Jawohl, der Schmitt*, p. 14.

ardless of whether it was consciously intended at the time or represented a later construction, Schmitt's preoccupation with the *Leviathan* makes complete sense as a hidden dialogue with Benjamin. Benjamin had written that in the age of the baroque, a state of exception was impossible because there was no authority that could instate or end it. The abrogation of law had become the condition of normality, approaching the Hobbesian state of nature and dissolving the dialectic between the status quo and the *Grenzbegriff*.

Schmitt is concerned with the reconstruction of this reciprocal relationship. He attacks Benjamin's view of a persistent instability by critiquing its polar opposite, Hobbes's concept of the eternal, intact body politic. Hobbes's monster, according to Schmitt, cannot be as stable as it pretends to be. In the schemes of Jewish thinkers like Spinoza, "freedom of thought" works like a slow poison, undermining the foundations of the state, weakening its bones, and finally leading to its collapse.<sup>47</sup> Schmitt sees this hollowing-out of the Leviathan as a process of decay, almost making us think he had abandoned "exception" in favor of order. But there can be no question that he did not abandon the former as the mere fact of his sympathy for pirates and interest in guerrillas proves.<sup>48</sup> In his criticism of those who undermine the Leviathan, moreover, there are undertones of cryptic satisfaction, for it is these situations that make possible a higher authority than the Leviathan itself: the sovereignty of the state of exception, which provokes the shock of uniqueness. Without the underminers, the reciprocity on which sovereignty exclusively depends would be impossible. Since the state of exception remains the core of his political thought, Schmitt's *Leviathan* book separates him from both Hobbes's concept of an earthly god of state and the perpetual absence of the Leviathan posited by Benjamin.

The possibility that Schmitt really was thinking of Benjamin when he formulated his critique of Hobbes is also confirmed by an explicit reference to him sixteen years later. In his book on Shakespeare, Schmitt confines his criticism to the two sentences in which Benjamin praises Shakespeare for having Christianized *Hamlet*.<sup>49</sup> Schmitt maintained that since *Hamlet* is in no way a Christian play, Benjamin had trivialized it. In Schmitt's view, Shakespeare's England was "more barbaric" than Benjamin was ready to admit—"barbaric" as an antipode to the Continental creation of the modern state with its omnipresence of the political.<sup>50</sup>

Schmitt's use of the term *barbaric* is similar to Benjamin's confron-

47. Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes*, p. 86.

48. See Schmitt, *Land und Meer: Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Leipzig, 1942), p. 26 and *Theorie des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkungen zum Begriff des Politischen*, 4th ed. (1995); see p. 33, for example, for the explanation of the concept of risk.

49. See Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba*, p. 63. See also *UD*, p. 335; *OG*, pp. 157–58.

50. Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba*, p. 65.

tation of the “barbarians” Klee, Picasso, Brecht, Kraus, and others with the lifelessness of contemporary humanism.<sup>51</sup> According to Schmitt, Shakespeare’s drama is interwoven with life beyond the stage and the elemental force of the exception. Schmitt defines Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as “play” (*Spiel*), but a play that reveals its opposite, the “serious case” (*Ernstfall*). As play, the theater is the negation of the *Ernstfall*; yet without knowledge of the latter, it remains empty.<sup>52</sup>

Schmitt’s interpretation of *Hamlet* negates the autonomy of the work of art<sup>53</sup> in order to show it as the recipient of the “intrusion of time into the play”: as an extreme form of the elemental, nonmechanical, and anomalous that demands the highest order, clarified and given form in sovereignty. In contrast to Benjamin’s diagnosis that the state of exception is impossible because it already exists as a permanent state of lawlessness, here too Schmitt advocates the shock theory of the authoritarian avant-garde. Once again, political theory and the theory of art are intertwined.

## 6. Benjamin’s Response to Schmitt

As Schmitt noted with regret in 1973, the response to Benjamin implicit in his *Leviathan* book of 1938 went unnoticed. Nonetheless, shortly after the publication of his book he became the unstated target of Benjamin’s philosophy of history. Benjamin’s eighth thesis, followed by the famous picture of the *Angelus Novus* of destructive progress,<sup>54</sup> was, to adopt Taubes’s theatrical description, “written eye to eye with the theses of Carl Schmitt” (CS, p. 28).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Benjamin calls attention to the allusion by placing the words *state of exception* in quotation marks:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of exception” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real

51. See Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba*, pp. 64–67; Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:215; and Heil, “Gefährliche Beziehungen,” p. 71.

52. Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba*, pp. 42 and 71 n. 15.

53. “There is a powerful taboo of the autonomous work of art, isolated from its historical and sociological origin, a taboo of absolute form, the real taboo of an idealistic philosophy, a purity taboo, deeply rooted in the tradition of German learning. This taboo does not permit us to speak of the intrusion of time into the play” (Schmitt, “Was habe ich getan?” *Dietsland-Europa* 2 [Jan. 1957]: 7–9; rpt. and annotated by Piet Tommissen in *Schmittiana* 5 [1996]: 13–19).

54. See O. K. Werckmeister, “Walter Benjamin’s ‘Angel of History,’ or the Transformation of the Revolutionary into the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 239–67.

55. “Dieser Text, eine Art Testament Walter Benjamins, steht Aug in Aug mit den Thesen Carl Schmitts.” Compare Heil, “Gefährliche Beziehungen,” p. 158.

state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin here expands the thesis developed in his *Trauerspiel* book, that in the baroque the state of exception is impossible not because it is superfluous but because it exists permanently as a perpetual state of lawlessness, continuing to the present. What Schmitt views as the event of historical rupture, as the state of exception and a cessation, Benjamin sees as trapped in the permanence of a power that now, in the worst possible sense, truly is “barbarian.” As in the *Trauerspiel* book, however, Benjamin once again concurs with Schmitt’s demand for a true state of exception<sup>57</sup>—in order, now, to turn it against Schmitt’s concept of history. Benjamin’s conception of the shocklike liberation acquires the character of a Last Judgment of Fascism.

As powerful as this image may seem, without knowledge of its real addressee it remains obscure.<sup>58</sup> It adopts Schmitt’s state of exception in order to formulate a version of “political theology” that is immediately turned back against Schmitt. It is worth noting, moreover, that Benjamin, even while he seeks to attack Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie*, remains caught in the framework of its conception. Theses 14–17, in which Benjamin seeks to “destroy” the idea of linear progress, likewise contain an echo of Schmitt’s time-construct of the state of exception, inasmuch as they crystallize the idea of the “shock” in a “messianic cessation of activity.”<sup>59</sup> Benjamin’s moving reflection on history uses the Schmittian pattern of politicized time, an idea that received its conceptual contours—as already with Hobbes<sup>60</sup>—in the realm of art theory.

Benjamin employed Schmittian metaphors or at least parallel con-

56. Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:697; trans. Zohn, under the title “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, p. 257; trans. mod. Zohn translates “Ausnahmestand” as “state of emergency.”

57. Michael Rumpf, “Radikale Theologie,” p. 46, emphasizes this point but does not discuss Benjamin’s critical turn.

58. The image becomes no clearer if one takes into account Georges Sorel’s gnoseological theory of the general strike, to which Benjamin referred in his “Kritik der Gewalt,” p. 194, a theory that was also significant for Schmitt’s conception of power; see Schmitt, *Die Diktatur*, p. 147. Compare Michael Rumpf, “Radikale Theologie,” p. 41; Kurt Anglet, *Messianität und Geschichte: Walter Benjamins Konstruktion der historischen Dialektik und deren Aufhebung ins Eschatologische durch Erik Peterson* (Berlin, 1995), pp. 41, 49, 83, 101, and esp. 102; and Wolin, “Carl Schmitt,” p. 435.

59. Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” p. 703; “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” p. 263; trans. mod. Compare Andreas Poltermann and Emil Sander, “Rede im Exil: Theologische Momente im Werk von Walter Benjamin,” in *Kritische Theorie zwischen Theologie und Evolutionstheorie: Beiträge zu einer Auseinandersetzung mit der “Frankfurter Schule,”* ed. Wilfried Kunstmann and Emil Sander (Munich, 1981), p. 42.

60. See Bredekamp, “Kunsttheoretische Topoi in Thomas Hobbes’s Definition des Leviathan,” in *Formen der Wissensvermittlung*, ed. Gary Smith (Berlin, 1998).

cepts in his critiques, shifting at will between political theory and the theory of art. We see his borrowings in his critique of parliamentary liberalism, which, he says, leads to compromises reflecting nothing of the violence that gave birth to parliament;<sup>61</sup> in his longing for decision, as formulated in his piece on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, written a year after he had read Schmitt's *Politische Theologie*,<sup>62</sup> and in his desire to argue from the *Grenzlinie* as developed in the *Einbahnstraße*.<sup>63</sup>

"Affinities" between Benjamin and Schmitt have led Jacques Derrida to subject Benjamin's "Kritik der Gewalt" to a similar analysis in the name of "deconstruction," an investigation whose cryptic conclusions make the association appear downright harmless. Again and again, the comparison with texts by Schmitt is merely hinted at, causing the motive for the examination of Benjamin to remain vague. Only in one passage, where Derrida deals with the problem of time that arises in the moment of legislation, does he address the connection that was apparently constitutive of the "affinities" between Benjamin and Schmitt: "It is the moment when the justification of law hovers in the void or over the abyss, clinging to a purely performative act."<sup>64</sup> This moment may explain why Benjamin could orient himself so strongly to Schmitt. His esteem for Schmitt was based on art-theoretical considerations that, drawing from an iconology of time grounded in Hobbes, were able to sustain the longing for a time of exception.

Perhaps Benjamin saw Schmitt as the latter saw his enemy: "the embodiment of his own question." This "embodiment," however, was the aesthetically manifested state of exception, a trap from which Benjamin could not free himself even as he sought to turn it against itself. The aesthetic intersections were more powerful than the political fronts. To see this as a purely moral problem would be to ignore an elementary dilemma, one for which Schmitt and Benjamin each conceived his own solution: the filling of time with substance. One cannot confront it without first looking cold-bloodedly at the bottom of this Pandora's box.

61. Benjamin, "Kritik der Gewalt," p. 190; compare Michael Rumpf, "Radikale Theologie," p. 40.

62. "Only the decision, not the choice, is recorded in the book of life. For choice is natural and may even suit the elements; the decision is transcendent" ("Nur die Entscheidung, nicht die Wahl ist im Buche des Lebens verzeichnet. Denn Wahl ist natürlich und mag sogar den Elementen eignen; die Entscheidung ist transzendent" (Benjamin, "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:1:189; trans. Stanley Corngold, under the title "Goethe's Elective Affinities," *Selected Writings, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings [Cambridge, Mass., 1996], p. 346; trans. mod.).

63. See Anglet, *Messianität und Geschichte*, p. 60.

64. Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: Le "Fondement mystique de l'autorité"* (Paris, 1994), p. 89; trans. Alexander García Düttmann, under the title *Gesetzeskraft: Der "mystische Grund der Autorität"* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), p. 78. On the "affinities" between Schmitt and Benjamin, see pp. 65, 67, 99, 110.

Albert Salomon, Social Democrat and professor of political philosophy at the Deutsche Hochschule für Politik in Berlin—the one who had encouraged Benjamin to send his *Trauerspiel* book to Schmitt—organized a series of lectures called “Problems of Democracy” in the winter of 1929–30. Schmitt was one of the participants. Shortly thereafter, Benjamin had a long discussion with Bertolt Brecht, which he summarized in four words. In their highly emotional form, they embody Benjamin’s paradoxical proximity to Schmitt: “Schmitt / Agreement Hate Suspicion.”<sup>65</sup>

65. “Schmitt / Einverständnis Haß Verdächtigung” (Benjamin, diary entry, 21 Apr. 1930, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:3:1372). On the lectures, see Schmitt, in *Probleme der Demokratie*, Politische Wissenschaft, Schriftenreihe der Deutschen Hochschule für Politik in Berlin und des Instituts für Auswärtige Politik in Hamburg, 2d ser. (1931). Compare Kambas, “Walter Benjamin an Gottfried Salomon,” p. 611.



# The Theoretical Hesitation: Benjamin's Sociological Predecessor

**Fredric Jameson**

Ours is an antitheoretical time, which is to say an anti-intellectual time; and the reasons for this are not far to seek. The system has always understood that ideas and analysis, along with the intellectuals who practice them, are its enemies and has evolved various ways of dealing with the situation, most notably—in the academic world—by railing against what it likes to call grand theory or master narratives at the same time that it fosters more comfortable and local positivisms and empiricisms in the various disciplines. If you attack the concept of totality, for example, you are less likely to confront embarrassing models and analyses of that totality called late capitalism or capitalist globalization; if you promote the local and the empirical, you are less likely to have to deal with the abstractions of class or value, without which the system cannot be understood. There are several famous precedents in the diagnosis of this antitheoretical strategy: I think, for example of Perry Anderson's epoch-making "Origins of the Present Crisis" of 1964, in which he denounced the empiricisms of the Anglo-American tradition as so many defense mechanisms in the face of a world reality in full political and revolutionary upheaval; more recently, of Paul de Man's "The Resistance to Theory," which evokes the terror of the seam between meaning and matter; or of Theodor Adorno's late crusade against what he called positivism in general, in other words, the systematic elimination of the negative and the critical, of theory defined as negation, from modern thought and everyday life.

I want to make a much more modest contribution to that debate, one

that raises the issue of the evasion of abstraction as such and that also, along the way, asks questions about the unexpected fortunes and prestige of Walter Benjamin, in a period that has seen the discounting of the stock of most of the other radical thinkers and litterateurs of our period. We may suppose, among other things, that Benjamin's good luck (in North America at least) was (like Gramsci's) to have never been fully translated into English until now and thus never to have been fully available as a coherent work, but rather to have offered the merest and most tantalizing, yet legendary, fragments. I've suggested elsewhere that Benjamin may uniquely fill a pressing need in the reunified Germany of today, which needs literary predecessors and canons not tainted by any of its earlier avatars (from the West German federal republic, through Hitler, back to Weimar or the Wilhelminian period). As something of a pre-Nazi era exile, Benjamin has something to offer the gaps in the German tradition today that is only enhanced by his complex inner contradictions, whose various poles can be counted on to neutralize each other in an ideologically reassuring fashion.

In the antitheoretical context I have been mentioning, however, a different kind of suspicion comes to mind. I don't fully endorse this doubt but feel it demands expression. For cannot Benjamin himself be enlisted among the ranks of those for whom theory and abstraction are pernicious? Are not the places of theory, in Benjamin, blinded by the transcendental glare of a whole range of mysticisms; while at its other reach, the passion for philosophy as such is replaced by the *fiches* of history, abstraction and concept by quotations and curious, stray facts? And does this movement away from theory not find its climactic expression in the great exchange of letters between Benjamin and Adorno on the form and staging of what I still prefer to call the *Passagenarbeit*? An exchange in which Adorno tells Benjamin, in effect, that if he wants his readers to draw dialectical conclusions from his various exhibits and montages, then he has to spell them out himself, to articulate his own interpretation and express the content of his dialectic in conceptual language, something Benjamin was unwilling to do for reasons that may well have been aesthetic but that were surely also ideological (and even philosophical).

Alongside this Benjamin, who might, for example, serve as a precursor to the New Historicism, there are others who fit into the theory spectrum in rather different ways. It has always mildly surprised me, for instance, that in this time, which is supremely characterized by its resis-

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tance to any and all conceptions of an original or primordial human nature as such, the omnipresent traces of a seemingly humanist doctrine of experience—preserved within Benjamin’s very interrogation of the consequences of its loss or breakdown—have not seemed in the least to discredit his work. Such a doctrine presumably lies as an amorphous concept somewhere in between psychology and metaphysics—neither of them very prestigious fields at the moment, and both very different from psychoanalysis, to which Benjamin’s occasional appeals do not carry much conviction and scarcely suffice to undo the associations of the merely psychological. Indeed, in the great symbolic trilogy, which begins with “The Storyteller,” passing through the essay on Baudelaire’s “motifs,” and concludes with “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin evokes a no doubt socially grounded conception of the unity of experience in order to denounce modern psychic and experiential fragmentation, only to project some future utopian transformation of all this in forms that need not be thought to be organic. Still, it is the premise of some original unity of experience that is bound to arouse suspicions and hesitations, reservations, and perhaps even ideological critique in the present day and age of the nonfoundational and the antiorganic.

So we confront two antithetical yet evidently interrelated phenomena here: a resistance to theory and to the dialectic, accompanied by traces of the unexamined presuppositions of a kind of phenomenological or prephenomenological *Lebensphilosophie*. Both perhaps betray a resistance to the philosophical concept, the one in the name of an aesthetic refusal of abstraction, the other in that of a phenomenological commitment to the “concrete.” In the present essay I will not go further with this in the work of Benjamin himself but have felt I could make a useful contribution to the problem by returning to the work of one of Benjamin’s most important precursors and predecessors, in which both of these features are even more strongly marked. I refer, of course, to the work of Georg Simmel, who seems to be knowing something of a revival at the present time, when his incalculable but underground influence in previous intellectual generations of the last century (from the U.S. to Japan) has been altogether forgotten and obliterated.

I should add that I’m not interested in positing any direct influence, although Benjamin attended Simmel’s seminar in 1912. He could later on be dismissive indeed in his reactions to Simmel’s work (as in his letter to Gershom Scholem of 23 December 1917), but his own work on the city equally failed to escape the force field of Simmel’s thought, and he was capable of observing—to Adorno, perhaps as a sly provocation—that it might well be time “to give him his due as one of the forefathers of cultural Bolshevism.”<sup>1</sup> At any rate, it is a comparable rhythm of procedures

1. Walter Benjamin, letter to Theodor W. Adorno, 23 Feb. 1939, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Ger-

I wish to draw attention to, a set of hesitations, evasions, theoretical decisions, a relationship to empiricity, that the two thinkers seem oddly to share. I only have space to refer to two texts by Simmel here, one small but classic—the famous essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in which anticipations of an already rather Benjaminian *Lebensphilosophie* can be detected—the other an immense morass of a book, *The Philosophy of Money*, in which the very root of a dialectical reluctance that keeps the dialectic alive can be uncovered.

To evaluate Simmel is to measure the stimulation he afforded any number of very different people and thinkers (from the Chicago sociologist Robert Park to Georg Lukács, from Max Weber to Benjamin). He knew this himself: “My legacy will be like cash, distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use according to *his* nature.”<sup>2</sup> I try to imagine this transmission of intellectual excitement, and even of intellectual productivity, on the order of the awakenings stimulated by French phenomenological existentialism, which showed so many people how to theorize about daily life and the most seemingly unphilosophical items and events. *The Philosophy of Money* thus contained a whole program within its provocative title, namely, that things are already philosophical in and of themselves. They (and we leave “their” contents open: a walk in the city for De Certeau; Raymond Aron’s famous glass of beer, which has evidently been reidentified as a crème de menthe; Sartre’s “look”; Husserl’s mathematical operations; an automotive directional signal in Heidegger; prostitution for Simmel himself) do not require the massive application of external philosophical and interpretive machinery, already bearing as they do an intellectual and philosophical meaningfulness within themselves.

But Simmel must pay a heavy price for this generalized suggestiveness, and it is a toll that contemporary *doxa* has generally been unwilling to identify as such, namely, the refusal of the philosophical system and, in the textual detail of the writing itself, of the jargon and neologisms with which most powerful contemporary philosophies or theories have violently displaced everyday speech and made it over into so many charged names that signify the operation of a specific idiolect. For it is only at this price that theory today marks its commodities with so many logos, and packages its distinctive wares in the strident bazaar of the contemporary public sphere.

But it would be wrong to interpret Simmel’s elaborate qualifications in terms of the familiar liberal mean: neither this nor that, somewhere in between too much and too little. Rather, I think that it is his commitment

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shom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Chicago, 1994), p. 599; see also Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 23 Dec. 1917, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 106.

2. Quoted in Donald N. Levine, introduction to Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Levine (Chicago, 1971), p. xiii.

to the particular that strategically interrupts a traditional philosophical movement towards the absolute of universal or abstract ideas. Unlike empiricism, it does not seek to replace that movement with some radically different positivist orientation; it rather identifies this movement as a process, which it wishes to assign to one specific moment of the inquiry, in order to set in place a change of direction and a new kind of movement in some second moment, which will have been motivated by some new acknowledgment of the rights of the particular. We have here, then, a combination of two distinct thought modes, without synthesis: a mechanical wiring together of two kinds of conceptual machinery; a careful and inveterate, yet provisional, splicing together of two radically different conceptual processes. It is a distinctive way of thinking that can no doubt be clarified by its distinctive historical context, but which, if it does not altogether explain Simmel's originality, at least lends that originality its unique style.

What is more old-fashioned in Simmel's sociology can then be identified as a breach in this systematic procedure, a kind of unwitting violation of his own method—even though it is a category mistake he shares with the whole first generation of the theorists of the entity called society, one that persists well on into the canonical Parsonian synthesis itself. This is the insistent effort—not yet present at all in Hegel, for example, and renounced by all the sociology we think of as contemporary—to deduce the larger social forms from the smaller ones and to build up notions and models of the collective from out of primary accounts of individual actions and immediate face-to-face encounters, as though these “simple” elements and forms, added together and combined in more elaborate ways, would somehow directly yield the forms of the “complex.” But the dialectic already knew, and contemporary thought has rediscovered, some fundamental incommensurability between the individual and the collective—that there was a gap and a leap between the two; that no careful Cartesian procedures could ever build the bridge from the logic of individual experience to that very different logic of the collective and the social; that no ingenious analysis of the social back into its individual components could ever conceptually master the properly dialectical paradox whereby the whole is always more (or less) than its individual parts. The category mistake—the will to maintain a continuity between these two incommensurable dimensions—does not often vitiate the striking power of Simmel's insights into their concrete and provisional relationships; perhaps, indeed, it was the condition of possibility of such insights and such discoveries. But it envelops his work as a whole with an anthropology and a metaphysic that draw a historically outmoded veil between the contemporary reader and Simmel's discrete analysis, something his editors have sometimes dealt with by breaking the longer works back up into the essay form he also practiced, as though in untheorized awareness of his own problems and real strengths.

Indeed, one may even see these anthropological underpinnings as a kind of allegory of their own content: "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society."<sup>3</sup> The inscription of individual psychology, then, into the collective system modeled by a nascent sociology is itself a figure for this attempt and this struggle, which is no longer grasped objectively as the banal tension between this or that real individual and this or that real society but rather as the incommensurability of theories, of those individual phenomenologies of individual experience whose discursive and theoretical fabric it proves difficult to weave into the greater collective structural and theoretical system.

Yet even as an anthropology—which Simmel's thought sometimes is—the balance struck between these two poles is less banal than one might expect, for the two poles are themselves immediately rethematized in the one place in which Simmel's work does take on the appearance of something like a system, namely, in that well-nigh metaphysical opposition between life and form (which afforded his student Lukács the title of one of his most significant early works). In those places in which Simmel is willing to spell this thematic out in the form of a philosophical position, if not a system—and it is characteristic of him that he is generally unwilling to do this, so that the untheorized thematic opposition seeps out laterally and, omnipresent, informs much of the texture of his other work—this is something like a dialectic of objectification, in which the life process requires externalization in order to come to its fullest expression. It thereby objectifies itself in a series of forms, which then begin to constrict it in their increasing rigidity. As they approach most closely to their condition as delimited form, the living impulses that gave rise to them are increasingly stifled. Form must therefore now be opened up and broken in order for some new life creativity to emerge in its turn (and produce a new form). One remembers the shift of registers in Lukács's climactic outcry in *History and Class Consciousness*: "history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man."<sup>4</sup> If Simmel was never willing to go so far as this, at least we have an acknowledgment, in other cultural essays, that the form modern life strives for may even be an absence of form: "a struggle of life against the form as

3. Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," trans. Edward A. Shils, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, p. 324, hereafter abbreviated "MM"; Simmel, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," *Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung zu Dresden* 9 (Winter 1902–3): 187, hereafter abbreviated "GG."

4. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 186. But juxtapose Simmel's equally significant position: "Money as such is the most terrible destroyer of form" (Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby [London, 1978], p. 272, hereafter abbreviated *PM*; Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* [1900; Berlin, 1958], p. 285, hereafter abbreviated *PG*).

such, against the *principle* of form";<sup>5</sup> but I think such cultural anarchism was not really acceptable to any of the members of this generation—not to Lukács or to Benjamin, finally, and certainly not to Simmel himself.

I take it that the passage of time has allowed such ideas to congeal into what they visibly were all along, namely, so many ideologies. Vitalism itself is, of course, the strong form of the *doxa* of the period, less a philosophy in its own right, perhaps, than the aesthetic solution to intractable philosophical contradictions, and this whether it takes the form of psychology or expressivism, evolutionism or spiritualism or primitivism. Thus one of the interesting stories of this turn of the last century is the way in which modern thinkers like Lukács and Benjamin—in their very different ways—managed to extricate themselves from a vitalism that they could not but breathe in everywhere during their formative years. Vitalism produced magnificent aesthetic expressions in its day, nor did it preclude the subtlest philosophical reflections of a Bergson. I think it is no longer a current temptation (save perhaps in Deleuze and in the Bergsonian revivals inspired by him); contemporary ecology, for instance, does not seem to need to appeal to the rich orchestral resonance and excitement of the vitalistic for its effects.

But it is not only vitalism as such that I have in mind at this point in the analysis; rather, I want to imply that contemporary antiessentialisms and antifoundationalisms—with which one must have all kinds of sympathy and which my diagnosis of Simmel clearly leans on here—all miss the mark insofar as they are themselves framed in the form of so many philosophical essentialisms and foundationalisms. What is more satisfactory philosophically, I want to suggest, is a repudiation of all forms of ontology and all hypotheses about human nature and human psychology, let alone about metaphysics, in the name of a conception of philosophical language as such. For it suffices to grasp all philosophical propositions (particular ones, I hasten to add, fully as much as universal ones) as *ideologies* for the analytic perspective to be utterly modified. It is clear enough to me that the repudiation of the term and concept of ideology was not only itself ideological but also premature, for, as we shall see in this reading of Simmel, we will not be able to identify and characterize what is truly original and energizing in his theoretical production without first being in a position to isolate its ideological elements, whose immobilities and static or ontological natures or essences it is precisely the mission of this discourse to set in motion and to redynamize.

Let me give a first illustration of all this by way of a reading of his great essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), whose kinship with some of Benjamin's most famous essays will readily be apparent. The essay begins with a series of what I have called ideological propositions, and

5. Simmel, "The Conflict in Modern Culture," trans. K. Peter Etkorn, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, p. 377.

in particular with a juxtaposition of the mental state of the city dweller with that of a rural or small-town life. The social situation of the latter is characterized by “lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them,” all of which develop a social life based “more on feelings and emotional relationships” (“MM,” p. 325; “GG,” p. 188); in contrast, Simmel identifies big-city life with the mental function of Reason, and even of calculation in all its forms, and it should be clear enough even at the outset how profoundly ideological any such allegory of the mental functions and faculties must necessarily be.

On the other hand, everyone will also recognize in this initial characterization the crucial theme of Benjamin's essay “The Storyteller,” as well as that of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: the historicist proposition—a simpler kind of social life, to which a specific *mentalité* corresponds, alongside a far more complex one, later in chronological and developmental time, to which a radically different constellation of mental properties may be ascribed. Thus, for both Benjamin and Simmel ideology is compounded, for to one profoundly historicist level is added another psychological or essentialist one, which we must now examine.

What we find—and what plays a far greater role in late nineteenth-century culture in general than scholars have been willing to investigate—is a whole iconography of nascent laboratory science and, in particular, of experimental psychology. The role of this weird and wholly outdated machinery in the theory and practice of the impressionist painters is well known; meanwhile, Bergson's own work is suffused with the imagery of all these experimental materialisms he so fiercely attacked and analytically undermined—rods, cones, stimuli, irritation, nerves and their movements, attraction and repulsion, magnetisms, light waves, intensities, synapses. Such is the bristling panoply of the nineteenth-century psychological laboratory, whose poetry, often remastered by even more energetic vitalisms, reaches out even into those modernisms that wish most violently to shake loose its cumbersome baggage. So also in Simmel himself, who characterizes big-city life as an “intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (“MM,” p. 325; “GG,” p. 188). Nor is this a merely incidental figure; the whole analysis is intricately indebted to the concept of the stimulus, as we shall see. Much the same could obviously be said of Benjamin, except that the latter had a signal literary advantage over Simmel, namely, that he could draw on Baudelaire, whose characteristic language on these matters—not unrelated, to be sure, to that nascent psychology contemporaneous with him—is certainly far more elegant; for him, the man in the crowd was “a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> Yet the ideo-

6. “Un kaleidoscope doué de conscience” (Charles Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler, 2 vols. [Paris, 1976], 2:692;



logical content is much the same; and we generally here confront the picture of a relatively placid organism now increasingly bombarded by the multiple stimuli of the big city, from street crossings to clock time and harried appointments, from "the passing glance" (here in Simmel not eroticized, but rather the bearer of repulsion and loathing) to the classic and henceforth Benjaminian or Baudelairean crowd, or *foule*. It is philosophically prescient of Simmel to have made this side of his pendant or diptych the place of sheer difference and ever more minute differentiation as such, something that should not distract us from the recognition of everything stereotypical about the characterization of its opposite number, the countryside, as a place of identities and the identification of everything with everything else.

Yet this initial hypothesis—multiple stimuli—is little more than the "foundation" on which a series of other characterizations will be based. The identification of the city with Reason is only the most incidental and functional of these, for what he really has in mind is *Verstand*, instrumental or sheerly calculating reason, and behind that, as an even more fundamental form, what he calls intellectualism. This concept is related not only by causality, as we shall see in a moment, but also by connotation to the whole notion of the nervous system, nerves playing a fundamental role in the ideology of this whole period from the "American nervousness" of the 1880s to Proust's "neurasthenia." For a big-city nervousness will be developed in two directions, both of which are significantly characterized as blasé or indifferent. On the one hand, indifference results from exhaustion of the nervous centers:

Just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all, so, less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form. ["MM," p. 329; "GG," p. 193]

A passage of this kind might, to be sure, serve as an exhibit for the medical ideologies of the period (which in any case themselves are profoundly complicitous with all the other social ones). What interests us here primarily is its inconsistency with the other account Simmel gives us of the blasé mentality, namely, its function as a defense mechanism *against* stimuli. Now, on the other hand, "indifference" is said to be somehow "unnatural" ("MM," p. 331; "GG," pp. 195–96), and it comes to be explained as

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quoted in Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York, 1968], p. 175).

“a protective organ” that guards “against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten” the city dweller (“MM,” p. 326; “GG,” p. 189). We thus move from homology (the blasé as the exhaustion of multiple stimuli) to an attempted negation (in which the blasé attitude holds the stimuli at bay or neutralizes them). The variation still lies in what I will call a vertical model, a relationship of synchronic levels to one another, but it foreshadows a very different structural solution, which I will come to in a moment and which may illustrate Simmel’s creative ability to break out of these initial ideological positions and stereotypes.

At any rate, it is clear that this is what Benjamin appreciated in Simmel’s essay, for he himself abandoned the medical stereotypes of exhausted nerves and only retained the conception of a defense mechanism, which, reinforced by the authority of Freud and Bergson, he then wheeled around in a different direction, to turn it on the question of experience and its expression in narrative form. Simmel was, however, to pursue his own urban diagnosis in a development unique to him, which did not, as far as I know, greatly interest Benjamin, and that is in the area of money as such. For the twin areas of indifference opened up by city life—a protective indifference to other people and a kind of numbing of perception to the qualitative distinctions between things—are insensibly combined and, under the dominance of the second of these forms, come to be identified as the indifference of the monetary form, of sheer equivalence as such. So in a final identification big-city “intellectualism” (with its precisions and calculations, its clock time, its measurabilities) finds its ultimate form in the money economy as such (and only much later, at the very end of the society, in the division of labor). At this point, and into this breach, all the intricacies of Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* may be expected to flow, but we have not yet reached the climax of this first section of the essay, which emerges when the metropolis and its multiple stimuli, the intellectualistic and the blasé, equivalence and the money form, are finally *interpreted*, and the word *freedom* is at length pronounced.

Now suddenly the whole structure of the essayistic discourse changes, and we witness a move from an essentially vertical or analytic thinking to a horizontal or oscillating one, which I will characterize as a transformation from the elaboration of an ideological position to the exercise of a kind of dialectical thinking (with all the qualifications we will want to make on the use of this term, particularly when we come to describe the arrested dialectic of *The Philosophy of Money*). However one wishes to characterize it, the change in thought mode is striking and inescapable indeed, for the first section of the essay seemed to offer, however reluctantly, a catalogue of alienations, without expressing any particular nostalgia for the opposite term—the simplicity of rural life. (On this score Benjamin is far more ambiguous, or perhaps industrialization in his pe-

riod had come to seem far more inevitable and inescapable. The wholeness of experience realized in the storytelling of the peasant village or sailors' and travelers' narratives can thus be affirmed without fear of any regression to the pastoral or to older modes of production.)

But where these characterizations of big-city life and its *mentalité* have mildly negative and unpleasant connotations—the loss of qualitative distinctions, the antipathy to other people aroused by their sheer multiplicity, if not by economic competition itself—the sudden introduction of the motif of freedom modulates to the major key and transforms the tonality of the previous, negative descriptions into a philosophical problem in its own right. Now, the specificity of the metropolis and its mental life having been secured, the deeper interest and attention of the reader is shifted in the somewhat different direction of the way in which such negative features can be reconciled with the evidently positive connotations of the concept of freedom.

In short, at this point, the properly dialectical problem of the unity of negativity and positivity arises, and the strategy of the essay must be modified to oscillate from the negative to the positive aspects of urban freedom as such. At this point, even the critique of urban equivalence and intellectualism is drawn into the argument in a new way: no longer outside the description, in the alternate social space of the countryside and the peasantry, but now within it and identified with the names of critics such as Ruskin and Nietzsche, whose popularity and readership become a big-city event, the critique of the city being consumed most avidly by the city itself.

This dialectical oscillation is pursued on into “historiosophy” itself, with a brief allusion to the opposition between left-wing ideals of social equality and right-wing glorifications of uniqueness, genius, and the individual personality, only to reach a peculiar moment of neutralization in which both political positions may seem to have been canceled out in favor of a third or contemplative one, which, as he puts it, “transcend[s] the sphere in which a judge-like attitude on our part is appropriate” such that “it is our task not to complain or to condone but only to understand” (“MM,” p. 339; “GG,” p. 206). It would be abusive to try to make Simmel over into a political figure (and the *The Philosophy of Money* will make it clearer why this would be a misplaced effort), but I believe that this conclusion of the metropolis essay does not amount to “a plague on both your houses.” Rather, it should be read as an effort to fulfill and complete the dialectic’s first function, namely, the suspension of the moralizing judgment, the transcendence of good and evil, which is to say, the neutralization of some choice between the negative and the positive judgment. But perhaps this suspension of judgment in the face of the unity of the positive and negative may be contrasted with that empty place of judgment Adorno thought he found to have been reserved for the absent reader of Benjamin’s great Arcades montages.

I would thus be less inclined to see Simmel's contemplative position here as a political symptom than as a hesitation to theorize, to produce the concept. If so, we need to seek the explanation elsewhere, in *The Philosophy of Money* itself (whose first publication in 1900, to be sure, preceded that of "The Metropolis and Mental Life" by some three years). The search will not be lightened by Simmel's methodological decision, in this his *Hauptwerk*, to organize his materials as it were vertically rather than horizontally, or, in other words, following what might be called the Thomas Mann principle ("only the exhaustive is truly interesting"), to say everything all at once, and on the occasion of each separate topic, in such a way that the text itself sometimes strikes one as a carefully lined up series of digressions, linked by the frailest of thematic threads. I think that in fact this is not so, but the method runs several significant risks: first, in the explanatory stance itself, which can quickly arouse the reader's subconscious resentment at being thus condescended to whenever the brilliance of the explanation flags in the slightest; and, second, in the tension thus aroused between what we may call the spatial and the temporal dimensions of this book. We have often heard it said of "modernist" long projects that they cannot be read but only reread; and something of the sort surely holds for *The Philosophy of Money*, where so much initial energy must be expended on the parts themselves—the explanations and digressions—that their sequence and temporal form can only be grasped on some secondary review, at fast-forwarding speed. One has to learn the parts, so to speak, before the whole can be "performed" as some immense Mahlerian continuity.

Add to this a certain perverseness in the adjustment of the subject matter itself. This "philosophy" will deal with everything about money save precisely its economic function as such, which can be left to the economists. It is a decision that will frustrate readers who had hoped this "metaphysical" approach might make economics more meaningful for them, and it will also mislead those like ourselves who are interested in the place of theory as such, which they may be tempted (wrongly, I think) to identify with this immense hole at the very center of the work. In any case, it is surely always a strategic mistake to exclude parts of a topic at the outset for disciplinary reasons; the disciplines and their territorial demarcations are always part of the problem, indeed, part of the content, and ought never to benefit from some blanket amnesty before the fact. It is clear that Simmel would have been perfectly capable of performing the same kind of logical dissection of economic pseudo-concepts that his contemporary Bergson so thoroughly enacted for the experimental psychology of his time. On the other hand, such misleadings may themselves turn out to have been misled, and we should be willing to entertain the possibility that Simmel's omission of economics as such is less a mark of respect than of contempt, and that the empty place assigned it here will also turn out to be a kind of interpretation in its own right.

At any rate the arrangement of the material in two sections (of three chapters each, each of those equally subdivided into three sections, whether out of some numerological impulse I cannot say, although the pursuit of such patterns down into the smallest details would certainly also tell us much about Simmel's thought processes) is a perfectly plausible one. It separates our topic into preconditions and consequences, and opens a phenomenological space *avant la lettre* for what, socially, historically, and psychologically, needs to be in place for the money mechanism to come into full play, just as it reserves a dimension of cultural speculation for the aftereffects of money on social life and *mentalité* (some of which we have already encountered in very abbreviated form in "The Metropolis and Mental Life"). The first section, then, on money's conditions of possibility, the so-called analytical part, aims "to construct a new storey beneath historical materialism" (*PM*, p. 56; *PG*, p. viii). Unsurprisingly, it begins with the question of value as such, whose internal conceptual problems must first be laid in place before the two concluding chapters can take up the problems—more immediately related to money as such—of the "substance" of coinage (must its material intrinsically have value independent of the money function?) and then of the again more philosophical issue of money as a means (and its subsequent effect on the very existence of ends as such).

Yet the style of these investigations is already set in the first chapter, which goes to great lengths not merely to stress the effect of the concept of value as an objectification of our desires but also to underscore its temporal variability, that is to say, its very nature as a distance from the desired object, from desire itself, and from my own subjective desire, a distance that will clearly enough vary with the possibility of consumption. To keep faith, then, with this temporal irregularity in the phenomena of value requires us to respect a certain oscillation in its concept, which must not be allowed to become overly objective, nor overly subjective, but rather variably open and released to this very fluctuation. This is to say that our mode of concept-formation must be adjusted accordingly.

Nor does the logical next step—the discussion of exchange—modify this conceptual state of things. Simmel's treatment of exchange is very different from Mauss's more famous and influential one, which projects a visionary typology of distinct social relationships, as well as from Marx's, which extrapolates the paradoxes and peculiarities of this form onto the structure of capitalism as a whole. Simmel wants to problematize exchange only in the sense of using its temporality, its nature as a process, to undermine our reified habits of grasping its elements as so many givens or things (in much the same way that the very notion of objectification is supposed to problematize our notion of objects as entities). Thus, "exchange is the representative of the distance between subject and object which transforms subjective feelings into objective valuation"; but if this is what exchange is, then any independent assessment of the subjective

or the objective becomes difficult indeed, and even more so if the phenomenon of exchange is a separate one that is the mere “representative” of that process (*PM*, p. 90; *PG*, p. 45). “Exchange,” Simmel adds, “is not the mere addition of two processes of giving and receiving, but a new third phenomenon, in which each of the two processes is simultaneously cause and effect” (*PM*, p. 90; *PG*, pp. 45–46). But this formula is also frustrating: for the welcome anticipation of the transformation of exchange into a phenomenon in its own right (a “representative,” a “third phenomenon”) about which we could finally form some thinglike or substantive concept is then at once dispelled again by the final clause, which returns us to its internal alternation.

At this point, Simmel seems to show his hand; he introduces a topic and a philosophical entity—relativism—which, far from being a precondition of the money economy, would seem to belong rather to its cultural consequences and to offer something like its social meaning. This is not so, I think, but the misinterpretation can only enhance the reading of the work as a whole by adding a question about what that possible meaning might ultimately be, if it is not this one. Let’s keep it in mind; the eventual answer is an astonishing one indeed, as we shall see.

But it is true enough that Simmel never solves the problem of priority here, if indeed he raises it at all: the problem of whether the achievement of a money economy demands the development of a relativistic world view, or the other way round. Presumably they happen simultaneously; furthermore, the search for phenomenological preconditions is not that kind of historical inquiry, even though the historical development of money does get outlined later on, for philosophical purposes (“the historical development of money from *substance* to *function*”) (*PM*, p. 168; *PG*, p. 151; my emphasis).

The topic of relativism serves a rather different purpose, which is to train us in the kind of thinking and conceptualization we will need to understand money itself. In other words, we do not only need to link the topic of relativism to that of money in order to understand each of them more fully; we also need to understand how to think relativistically in order to learn how to think money, and the way to do so lies not in some relativistic reduction of the truth content of each of the moments in a relativistic sequence but rather in maintaining the absolute truth content of each moment until we abandon it for the next one. Simmel’s relativism, in other words, does not mean a reduction in “truths” but a multiplication and intensification of them. But perhaps its spirit can be more accessibly conveyed by the now rather stereotypical distinction between a substance-oriented and a process-oriented kind of thinking. It would be fatuous to suggest that Simmel somehow “prefers” the latter; rather, the whole drama of the *The Philosophy of Money* lies in the visible demonstration of the imposition of process-oriented thought on the author by virtue of the very nature of his subject matter itself.

In a revealing phrase, indeed, he evokes the way in which, here, “relativity, i.e. the reciprocal character of the significance of criteria of knowledge, appears in the form of succession or alternation” (*PM*, p. 113; *PG*, pp. 77–78). It is precisely this momentum or temporality that forestalls concept-formation, postponing it indefinitely at the same time that it yields the elements and constituent parts of the concept that cannot be fully elaborated. Before quoting at greater length Simmel’s most elaborate theorization of this internal and structural hesitation before theory as such, we probably need to draw on the illustrative material that follows, not least in order to show how this technical problem is intimately related to the conceptual problems posed by money in itself, which might under other circumstances be characterized as antinomies.

For one thing, money is both multiple and infinitely various and, on the other hand, stable and unified as an expression of value; indeed, this philosophical tension between multiplicity and unity will be a central category problem throughout Simmel’s immense inventory of monetary phenomena. Thus, at the most abstract level,

money derives its content from its value; it is value turned into a substance, the value of things without the things themselves. By sublimating the relativity of things, money seems to avoid relativity. . . . Money as abstract value expresses nothing but the relativity of things that constitute value; and, at the same time . . . money, as the stable pole, contrasts with the eternal movements, fluctuations and equations of the objects. [*PM*, p. 121; *PG*, pp. 88–89]

This “dual role—outside and within the series of concrete values—” gives us one way of understanding why the conceptualization of money must always remain somehow incomplete, since its other dimension of existence lies outside the plane to which the theory in question belongs: “money is therefore one of those normative ideas that obey the norms that they themselves represent” (*PM*, p. 122; *PG*, p. 90).

Yet the dilemma can be formulated in more concrete or empirical terms than this, as with the notion of scarcity, for example, which can be meaningful only as a moment and not as an absolute (“scarcity can only become significant above a considerable volume”); or, above all, in the well-known tension between money’s two functions as a measure of value and as a means of exchange (*PM*, p. 72; *PG*, p. 20). These functions do not necessarily entail each other; thus, for example, “the function of money in measuring values does not impose upon it the character of being itself a valuable object” (*PM*, p. 142; *PG*, p. 115).

In ancient Egypt prices were determined by the *uten*, a piece of coiled copper wire, but payments were made in all kinds of goods. In the Middle Ages price was often determined in money terms, but the buyer was free to pay in whatever manner was convenient. In many

places in Africa at the present day the exchange of goods is carried out according to a monetary standard which is sometimes quite complicated, while money itself for the most part does not even exist. The business of the very important Genoese exchange market in the sixteenth century was based upon the standard of the *scudo de' marchi*. This standard was almost entirely imaginary and did not exist in any actual coinage. [*PM*, p. 192; *PG*, pp. 181–82]

It is as though here a fourth-dimensional reality intersected the world of three dimensions to leave its incomprehensible traces—impalpable mental categories and antinomies marking the real world in symptomatic ways that cannot be accounted for by commonsense physical or realistic laws. A similar inventory of empirically derivable paradoxes is to be found in the incommensurability of large and small coinage, which turns on the paradoxes involved in thinking quantity as such:

The largest coins even of precious metals are found almost exclusively among less developed peoples where barter still prevails. . . . The same sentiment about the importance of quantity reserved the privilege of minting the largest coins to the highest authorities, while the smaller coins, though of the same metal, were coined by lower authorities. . . . Under primitive barter conditions, money transactions took place not for the small needs of everyday life, but only for the acquisition of larger and more valuable objects. [*PM*, p. 145; *PG*, pp. 119–20]

These phenomena are then philosophically related to the matter of divisibility and the requirement that a monetary standard have the capability of expressing the smallest fractions of value and the multiplicity of valuable objects. They document Simmel's insistence on the gradual and historical extension and conquest of a universal monetary form as such: "actually, a general money value did not formerly exist at all" (*PM*, p. 267; *PG*, p. 279).<sup>7</sup> Analogous to Marx's insistence on the universality of wage labor as a condition for understanding capitalism, the historical universalization of money has perhaps an opposite epistemological effect in Simmel, where it may be said that everything that has come to seem natural to us in a money economy blocks our ability to grasp its conceptual peculiarities. Yet the paradigm case of all these antinomies and incommensurabilities remains, of course, the problem of precious metals and the question about the "real value" of the monetary vehicle (a prob-

7. This is the moment to note Simmel's interesting thoughts on Greece, in particular his account of the cultural and philosophical results of an incompletely monetary economy in ancient Greece, which produced an emphasis on consumption rather than, as in modernity, on production (uncertainty of time and the future, compensatory overemphasis on the concept of substance); see *PM*, pp. 323–24; *PG*, pp. 235–37.



lem related to those of prices and their fluctuations, and finally to the whole concept of the wealth of nations as such).

After all that has been said, we will not be surprised to find that Simmel's solution, if it can be called that, is a temporal one, in the spirit of the doctrine of "succession or alternation." He sets in place the more obvious contemporary solution to the dilemma, namely, the appeal to state power (along with the accompanying requirement of the unification of the national terrain within which the currency is to be respected), without being fully satisfied with this explanation, which of course obliterates the peculiarities of the money phenomenon and transfers the causality to a wholly different, political level. For what Simmel wants to stage here is the contradictory appeal of the two absolute alternatives, neither of which can be satisfactory in itself, but also not completely wrong, namely, the idea that money is wholly conventional (the henceforth standard appeal to "trust" in effect returns us to an explanation in terms of the state) along with the conviction that money must be intrinsically valuable and in practice take the form of this or that precious metal (see *PM*, p. 99; *PG*, p. 58). The temporality of the concept will allow both these explanations to be thought within a new kind of conceptualization, which I will wish to relate to the dialectic while distinguishing it from the latter in certain crucial ways.

For money must obviously be somehow valuable, yet the very conception of the value of its "substance" tends to project the whole phenomenon of value onto a quite different, nonmonetary plane (something which modern theory has described, following Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, as the exclusion of the material of value from the realm of exchange):

If it is claimed that the value of money consists in the value of its material, this means that its value is embodied in the qualities or powers of the substance which are not those of money. The apparent paradox indicates that money does not necessarily have to be based upon substances that are intrinsically valuable, i.e. valuable in some other respect. It is sufficient if the ability to function as money is transferred to any substance, the other qualities of which are quite irrelevant. [*PM*, p. 153; *PG*, p. 130]

In other words, as Simmel will here try to demonstrate by way of ethical and aesthetic examples, what counts is the memory of the preceding stage, and the fact that the monetary value was *once* based on precious metal: "the attraction," as he puts it quaintly, "that springs simply from the passing of a preceding form of life" (*PM*, p. 153; *PG*, p. 131). Value lies in the sequence of moments, not in the thing itself; and Simmel reaches his most dialectical register when he characterizes this phenomenon as the "influence of not-being on being" (*PM*, p. 153; *PG*, p. 131), as

also when he later tells us, "Money performs its services best when it is not simply money" (*PM*, p. 165; *PG*, p. 146). Meanwhile, in the next chapter, which seeks to localize the structural peculiarity of money in its initial mode of use as a tool, but as a means that can at any moment become a new end in its own right, the appreciation begins to modulate into the language of mediation, which vanishes when we seek to contemplate money in its own right:

Money is the purest reification of means, a concrete instrument which is absolutely identical with its abstract concept. . . . The tremendous importance of money for understanding the basic motives of life lies in the fact that money embodies and sublimates the practical relation of man to the objects of his will, his power and his impotence; one might say, paradoxically, that man is an indirect being [*das indirekte Wesen*]. [*PM*, p. 211; *PG*, p. 206]

All of which perhaps now puts us in a better position to grasp the implications of the lengthy meditation on theory, which I have postponed quoting until now but which can be said to offer Simmel's own description, not so much of his method, as rather of the conceptual dynamics into which this peculiar object has forced him:

It is necessary to consider our mental existence under two categories that complement each other: in terms of its content and in terms of the process that, as an event of consciousness, carries or realizes this content. The structure of these categories is extremely different. We must conceive the mental process as a continuous flux, in which there are no distinct breaks, so that one mental state passes into the next uninterruptedly, in the manner of organic growth. The contents, abstracted from this process and existing in an ideal independence, appear under a totally different aspect: as an aggregate, a graduated scheme, a system of single concepts or propositions clearly distinguished from one another. The logical connection between any two concepts reduces the distance between them but not the discontinuity, like the steps of a ladder that are sharply separated from each other but yet provide the means for a continuous movement of the body. The relation among the contents of thought is characterized by the fact that the foundations of thought, considered as a whole, seem to move in circles, because thought has to support itself 'by being suspended' and has no  $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\omega$  [Archimedean point] which supports it from outside. The contents of thought provide a background to each other so that each gets its meaning and colour from the other; they are pairs of mutually exclusive opposites and yet postulate each other for the creation of a possible world view. Every particular content becomes the ground of proof for the other through the whole chain of what is knowable. The process of thinking, however, by which this relation is psychologically accomplished,

follows a direct and continuous chronological course; it continues according to its own inner meaning, although the death of the individual brings it to an end. The two categories of our reflection are divided into these two forms, which make knowledge illusory in particular cases but possible in general. Knowledge follows a course of infinite regress, of infinite continuity, of boundlessness, which yet is limited at any particular moment—whereas the contents exhibit the other form of infinity, that of the circle, in which every point is a beginning and an end, and all the parts condition each other mutually. [PM, p. 115; PG, pp. 80–81]

The statement is no doubt in itself a kind of ontologization of the thought process and its dilemma, couched, however, in the language of content rather than process. It thereby illustrates the dilemma in question by virtue of its own inability to theorize it on its own terms; the revenge of this particular dualism is to force its own theory to adopt one or the other of its alternatives, both of which are unsatisfactory. If, as in this version, the content is emphasized at the expense of process, the opposition takes on the form of a kind of immense world structure, a sort of cosmic yin and yang; if, on the other hand, processes are emphasized then, as with relativism in the earlier discussion, the truth content of the various terms is lost and a frivolous temporal movement results, in which none of the moments of the process is taken seriously. This is, in effect, the practice of the dialectic without its theory, which is not to say that some stereotypical Hegelian “synthesis” ought to have been evoked at this point. Indeed, the spirit of the latter is perhaps better captured by C. S. Peirce’s doctrine of “thirdness,” or sheer relationality (“firstness” being immediacy, “secondness” being the resistance of an outside),<sup>8</sup> but we have already noted the way in which “thirdness” has been elided in all of Simmel’s formulations, most dramatically in the omission of the officially economic itself in the overall plan of the work. But “thirdness” would be the very place of dialectical theory as such, and this evasion or elision is what suggests that Simmel’s eminently dialectical thinking finally stops short of its own theory (or, as Hegel might say, does not manage to be equal to its concept). There are, however, other reasons for this, which we need to sketch out briefly in conclusion.

For one thing, the implications of the peculiar conceptual dilemmas that Simmel finds himself confronting again and again are redirected and even recontained by a discursive pathos we have already found at work in the conclusion to “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” a pathos which seals and certifies the impossibility of any resolution to these dilemmas by appealing to the tragic mode as such. In this case it is not, as elsewhere,

8. See, for example, Charles Sanders Peirce, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 8 vols. in 5 (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 1:182–95.

the impossibility of choosing between life and form that is at stake but rather a somewhat different dialectic, one that anticipates the developments in the second part of Simmel's work, which explores the consequences of a money economy: "What one might term the tragedy of human concept formation lies in the fact that the higher concept, which through its breadth embraces a growing number of details, must count upon increasing loss of content" (*PM*, p. 221; *PG*, p. 219). This view clearly enough spells the end of the historical optimism projected by the Hegelian attempt at a system; perhaps it also augurs, in a very different way, the culture pessimism of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. What Simmel has immediately in mind here, however, is our old friend "abstraction" or "intellectualization," which played so central a role in the shorter essay on the city and the money economy; and in fact this remark comes as a gloss on a first premonition of the blasé relationship to life that will be one of the central themes of the second half of *The Philosophy of Money*.

In that second part, which we will not deal with in great detail, this register of tragic pathos is also extended to the discussion of freedom as such and its paradoxes, which are analogous. But where the motif of freedom opened up the themes of the essay on the metropolis to some properly dialectical exercise of its negative and positive aspects, here the same logic is enlisted in a litany of the unresolvable (and thereby "tragic") paradoxes of modern freedom, at one and the same time more individualistic and more dependent on the complex networks of an interdependent social fabric. The rhetoric of this entire second section, which may be considered to be Simmel's contribution to a theory of modernity that takes its cue from the centrality of money in modern society, is suffused with the inescapable pathos of the double bind. Money's other juridical and social consequence in the emergence of property is grasped as an enrichment of the self at the same time that its static and object-oriented tendencies are denounced (one of the most interesting features of this discussion lies in Simmel's suggestion, which anticipates Sartrean existentialism, that we should think of ownership as an activity and a process rather than a state; this is, of course, very consistent with the methodological remarks previously quoted) (see *PM*, pp. 322, 304; *PG*, pp. 346, 323). Freedom itself is not only linked to the social division of labor but as a consequence becomes characterized as an "internal division of labour," in which the multiplicity of the older group becomes ascribed to the formerly individual entity who was once nothing but a constituent part of that group (*PM*, p. 313; *PG*, p. 333). But this formulation then immediately rehearses yet again the deeper tension between multiplicity and unity that was the drama of the money form itself. Thus the contradiction between individualism and group cohesion "has its origin in the fact that the individual is only one element and member of the social unity, while at the same time being himself a whole entity, whose elements form a

relatively closed unity" (*PM*, p. 350; *PG*, p. 381). As for abstraction in modern life, Simmel summarizes his position as follows:

We have pointed out in the preceding chapters how much money, on the basis of its general availability and objectivity, none the less facilitates the growth of individuality and subjectivity, how much its unchanging uniformity, its qualitatively communistic character, leads to each quantitative difference becoming a qualitative one. This extension of the power of money that is incomparable with that of any other cultural factor, and which gives equal rights to the most contradictory tendencies in life, is manifested here as the condensation of the purely formal cultural energy that can be applied to any content in order to strengthen it and to bring about its increasingly purer representation. [*PM*, p. 440; *PG*, p. 494]

This exceedingly dense and enigmatic passage foreshadows the most interesting subsection of this second part of Simmel's work, which deals with the whole question of styles in modernity, and which deserves a discussion and an appreciation in its own right.

What I must now observe, in conclusion, is that the organization of Simmel's dialectic around the irreducibly empirical form of money, which has enabled the extraordinary richness of his social *Darstellung*, now finally exacts its price, so to speak, in the form of some ultimate limitation and paradoxical constriction. What he was able to project as a pure form out of the phenomenon of money—an absolute unity that is at one and the same time a ceaseless multiplicity of contents and differences of all kinds—now returns to seal his conceptualization of modernity as being inseparable from money and from the money economy as such.

Already he had formally noted the conceptual or categorical kinship of the money form with theological speculations:

It may appear as an irony of history that, as the moment when the satisfying and ultimate purposes of life become atrophied, precisely that value that is exclusively a means and nothing else takes the place of such purposes and clothes itself in their form. In reality, money in its psychological form, as the absolute means and thus as the unifying point of innumerable sequences of purposes, possesses a significant relationship to the notion of God—a relationship that only psychology, which has the privilege of being unable to commit blasphemy, may disclose. The essence of the notion of God is that all diversities and contradictions in the world achieve a unity in him, that he is—according to a beautiful formulation of Nicolas de Cusa—the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Out of this idea, that in him all estrangements and all irreconcilables of existence find their unity and equalization, there arises the peace, the security, the all-embracing wealth of feeling that reverberate with the notion of God which we hold. [*PM*, p. 236; *PG*, p. 240]

Now this theological property of the money form seizes on Simmel's thinking itself and determines an ultimate ontological outburst:

Money is the symbol in the empirical world of the inconceivable unity of being, out of which the world, in all its breadth, diversity, energy and reality, flows. [*PM*, p. 497; *PG*, p. 567]

It is an astonishing climax, accompanied on the level of empirical decoration by a no less revealing remark in passing to the effect that "the roundness of coins which makes them 'roll' symbolizes the rhythm of the movement that money imparts to transactions" and by implication the rhythm of Being itself, in its unified yet infinite differentiation (*PM*, p. 506; *PG*, p. 578). The greatness of Simmel's work lies in its ceaseless and varied use of the money form to unearth and conceptually reveal incommensurabilities of all kinds, in social reality fully as much as in thought itself. Money was thus a ladder that he was unwilling to push away after use, and it was well that Benjamin, who learned so much from Simmel, was unwilling to follow him in this immensely productive fascination, which, however, like the coin itself, became a vicious circle in which the sociologist was ultimately trapped.

# Reinventing the Medium

**Rosalind E. Krauss**

1. This essay is about looking back: looking back at the path that led to the triumphant postwar convergence of art and photography that began in the 1960s, but looking at it from this moment at the end of the twentieth century when such a “triumph” must be bracketed by the circumstance that now photography can only be viewed through the undeniable fact of its own obsolescence.<sup>1</sup> It is as well about looking back at the theorization of this aesthetic convergence in the hands of all those poststructuralist writers who were themselves considering the historical reach of its operations by looking back at Walter Benjamin’s announcement of its effect in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” It

This essay was written on commission by the DG Bank in Munich for the catalog of its collection of twentieth-century photography. At the time of its conception my thoughts on the subject were directed by two events. The first was my recent experience of the work of James Coleman and the questions it raised for an earlier set of assumptions about photography; the second was the then upcoming Yale “*Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin*” conference for which I necessarily had to revisit my notions about Benjamin’s theorization of photography. There being no plans at the time to publish the Yale papers, I decided to structure my written argument so that I could present it in that context. This version of my Yale paper is published here by courtesy, then, of the DG Bank. That section of it which presents the example of Coleman’s work is a highly telescoped version of the argument developed in Rosalind E. Krauss, “‘And Then Turn Away?’: An Essay on James Coleman,” *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997).

1. Art and photography first converged in the 1920s, in Soviet photomontage practices and in the dada and then surrealist integration of photography into the very heart of their movements. In this sense the postwar phenomenon is a reconvergence, although it was the first to affect the market for “high art” itself in a significant way.

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will be significant, further, that though Benjamin's text was interpreted in all the thrust of its predictive and positive orientation to the future, his own favorite posture was that of looking back, whether in imitation of the surrealists' connection to the outmoded discards of recent history, or in the guise of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, who greets historical progress only by looking backwards at the storm of its destruction.

Several strands braid together, then. The first could be called photography's emergence as a theoretical object. The second could be identified as photography's destruction of the conditions of the aesthetic medium in a transformative operation that would affect all the arts. The third could be named the relationship between obsolescence and the redemptive possibilities enfolded within the outmoded itself.

2. Whether it was as the prime example of Roland Barthes's mythology or of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum, by the 1960s photography had left behind its identity as a historical or an aesthetic object to become a theoretical object instead. The perfect instance of a multiple-without-an-original, the photograph—in its structural status as copy—marked the site of so many ontological cave-ins. The burgeoning of the copy not only facilitated the quotation of the original but splintered the supposed unity of the original “itself” into nothing but a series of quotations. And, in the place of what was formerly an author, the operator of these quotes, in being redefined as *pasticheur*, was repositioned to the other side of the copybook to join, schizophrenically, the mass of its readers.

Barthes, in particular, was further interested in the structural irony that would allow photography, this wrecker of unitary being, to perform the semiological sleight-of-hand whereby in the seamlessness of its physical surface the photograph seemed to summon forth the great guarantor of unity—raw nature, in all its presumed wholeness and continuity—to cover the tracks of photography's own citational operations. Its participation in the structure of the trace, the index, and the stencil made photography thus the theoretical object through which to explore the reinvention of nature as “myth,” the cultural production of it as a mask behind which the operations of history and of politics could be kept out of sight.<sup>2</sup>

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2. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957); trans. Annette Lavers, under the title *Mythologies* (New York, 1972). Barthes's theorizations of photography include “The Photographic Message” and “Rhetoric of the Image,” *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), pp. 15–31, 32–51, as well as “The Third Meaning,” pp. 52–68, hereafter abbreviated “TM”; and *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981).



In Baudrillard's hands this mask became the model of a final disappearance through which the object-conditions of a material world of production would be replaced by the simulacral network of their reproductions, so many images peeled off the surfaces of things to enter the circuit of commodities in their own right. If in an earlier version of commodity culture the mobility of exchange-value relentlessly replaces the embeddedness of use-value, in its latest manifestation, then, both of these yield to the phantasmagoria of Spectacle in which the commodity has become image only, thus instituting the imperious reign of pure sign-exchange.<sup>3</sup>

But photography's emergence as a theoretical object had already occurred at the hands of Benjamin in the years that elapsed between his "A Small History of Photography" in 1931 and his more famous text of 1936.<sup>4</sup> In 1931 Benjamin is still interested in the *history* of photography, which is to say in photography as a medium with its own traditions and its own fate. He believes the genius of the medium to be the rendering of the human subject woven into the network of its social relations. Stamped on the photographic portraits made during the first decade of the medium's existence was the aura of both a human nature settling into its own specificity—due to the length of the pose—and a social nexus exposed in terms of the intimacy of its relationships—due to the amateur status of these early practitioners (Hill, Cameron, Hugo) making portrait pictures for their circle of friends. Even in the early stages of photography's commodification, after the spread of the commercialized *carte de visite*, the celebration of photography's inherent technical possibilities meant that precision lenses would marry the confidence of a rising bourgeois class to the technological prowess of a new medium.

The decadence that was soon to engulf this medium was thus not just due to its having yielded to the commodity but to that commodity's having been swallowed by kitsch, which is to say, the fraudulent mask of

3. See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, 1981).

4. "A Small History of Photography" was published in *Literarische Welt* in the September and October issues of 1931. See Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," "One Way Street" and *Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (New York, 1979); hereafter abbreviated "HP." Benjamin wrote a first draft of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in the fall of 1935 (completing it in December). He began to revise it in January 1936 for publication in the French edition of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (trans. Pierre Klossowski, under the title "L'Oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5 [1936]: 40–68). Because the French version imposed various cuts in Benjamin's text, he reworked the essay again in German, this ultimate version to be published only in 1955. See Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," *Schriften*, ed. Theodor Adorno and Gretel Adorno, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1955), 1:366–405; trans. Harry Zohn, under the title "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969); hereafter abbreviated "WA."

art.<sup>5</sup> It is artiness that erodes both the aura of this humanity and its possessor's authority, as the gum-bichromate print and the accompanying penumbral lighting betray a social class under siege. Atget's response to this artiness is to pull the plug on the portrait altogether and to produce the urban setting voided of human presence, thereby substituting, for the turn-of-the-century portrait's unconscious *mise-en-scène* of class murder, an eerily emptied "scene of a crime" ("WA," p. 226).

The point of Benjamin's "A Small History of Photography" is, then, to welcome a contemporary return to the authenticity of photography's relation to the human subject.<sup>6</sup> This he sees occurring either in Soviet cinema's curiously intimate rendering of the anonymous subjects of a social collective or in August Sander's submission of the individual portrait to the archival pressures of serialization.<sup>7</sup> If he also deplores the photographer's benighted struggle to acquire aesthetic credentials "before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning" ("HP," p. 241), this does not assume the radically deconstructive position Benjamin would take five years later, in which photography is not just claiming the specificity of its own (technologically inflected) medium but, in denying the values of the aesthetic itself, will cashier the very idea of the independent medium, including that of photography.

3. In becoming a theoretical object, photography loses its specificity as a medium. Thus in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin charts a historical path from the shock effects courted by futurism and dada collage, to the shocks delivered by the unconscious optics revealed by photography, to the shock specific to the montage procedures of film editing, a path that is now indifferent to the givens of a particular medium. As a theoretical object, photography assumes the revelatory power to set forth the reasons for a wholesale transformation of art that will include itself in that same transformation.

"A Small History of Photography" had pictured the decay of the aura as a tendency within photography's own history; "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" will now see the photographic—which is to say mechanical reproduction in all its modern, technological guises—as both source and symptom of a full-scale demise of this aura across all of culture, so that art itself, as celebrator of the unique

5. Benjamin speaks of the decadence and the "sharp decline in taste" that overwhelms photography by the 1880s (Benjamin, "HP," p. 246).

6. Benjamin, writing after the 1929 crash, comments: "It would not be surprising if the photographic methods which today, for the first time, are harking back to the pre-industrial heyday of photography had an underground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry" (Benjamin, "HP," pp. 241–42).

7. On the relation between Benjamin's analysis of Sander and the debates about photography engaged in by the Soviet avant-garde, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture," in Melissa E. Feldman, *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (exhibition catalog, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 9 Sept.–30 Oct. 1994).

and the authentic, will empty out completely. Its transformation will be absolute: "To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility," Benjamin states ("WA," p. 224).

The change that the theoretical object makes clear to Benjamin has two faces. One is in the field of the object where, through the structure of reproduction, serialized units are rendered equivalent, much as in the operations of statistics. The result is that things are now made more available, both in the sense of more proximate and more understandable, to the masses. But the other kind of change is in the field of the subject for whom a new type of perception operates, "a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" ("WA," p. 223). This extraction Benjamin also describes as prying objects from their shells.

In a variant of one of the sections of his essay, Benjamin comments on the recent appearance of a theory of art focussed precisely on this perceptual act of prying objects from their contexts, which in and of itself can now be reinvested with aesthetic force. Referring to the position Marcel Duchamp elaborates in the *Green Box*, Benjamin summarizes it as follows: "Once an object is looked at by us as a work of art, it absolutely ceases its objective function. This is why contemporary man would prefer to feel the specific effect of the work of art in the experience of objects disengaged from their functional contexts [*crossed out*: torn from this context or thrown away] . . . rather than with works nominated to play this role."<sup>8</sup>

Thus acknowledging the intersection between his own theoretical position and that of Duchamp, Benjamin's "work of art designed for reproducibility" is seen to have already been projected as the ready-made; and the perceptual act that extracts "the sense of the universal equality of things," even from a unique object, is understood as that of the photographer framing pieces of the world through the camera's lens whether he or she takes the picture or not. That this act alone is aesthetic means that an entire world of artistic technique and tradition drops away, not only the skill required to make the older forms of "works nominated to play this role"—painting, say, or sculpture—but also the technical skills of exposure, developing, and printing requisite to photography itself.

4. The triumphal convergence of art and photography that began in the late 1960s is contemporary with the sudden explosion in the market for photography "itself." But, ironically, the institutions of art—museums, collectors, historians, critics—turned their attention to the specifically photographic medium at the very moment that photography entered ar-

8. Benjamin, "Paralipomènes et variantes de la version définitive," trans. Françoise Eggers, *Écrits français*, ed. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer (Paris, 1991), pp. 179–80.

tistic practice as a theoretical object, which is to say, as a tool for deconstructing that practice. For photography converges with art as a means of both enacting and documenting a fundamental transformation whereby the specificity of the individual medium is abandoned in favor of a practice focussed on what has to be called art-in-general, the generic character of art independent of a specific, traditional support.<sup>9</sup>

If conceptual art articulated this turn most overtly (Joseph Kosuth: "Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. . . . That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a *kind* of art.")<sup>10</sup> and if one branch of its practice restricted the exploration of "the nature of art [in general]" to language—thus avoiding the visual because *it* would be too specific—most of conceptual art had recourse to photography. There were, perhaps, two reasons for this. The first is that the art interrogated by conceptual art remained visual, rather than, say, literary or musical; and photography was a way of adhering to the realm of visuality. But, second, its beauty was precisely that its way of remaining within this realm was itself nonspecific. Photography was understood (and Benjamin once again was the first to pronounce it so) as deeply inimical to the idea of autonomy or specificity because of its own structural dependence upon a caption. Thus as heterogeneous from the outset—an always potential mixture of image and text—photography became the major tool for conducting an inquiry on the nature of art that never descends into specificity. Indeed, Jeff Wall writes of the importance of photoconceptualism that "many of Conceptual art's essential achievements are either created in the form of photographs or are otherwise mediated by them."<sup>11</sup>

It is this inherently hybrid structure of photography that is recognized in one of the major gambits of photoconceptual practice, when Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966) or Robert Smithson's "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967) assume the guise of photojournalism, marrying written text to documentary-photographic illustration. This would become the model for many other types of photoconceptual work—from the self-imposed shooting assignments of

9. The theorization of the move from the specific to the generic that dominates artistic practice of the 1960s, although ultimately deriving from Duchamp, has occupied Thierry de Duve in essays such as "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 244–310 and "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," *October*, no. 70 (Fall 1994): 61–97.

10. Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," *Studio International* 178 (Oct. 1969): 135; rpt. as "Art after Philosophy, I and II," in *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1973), pp. 70–101.

11. Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (exhibition catalog, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 15 Oct. 1995–4 Feb. 1996), p. 253.

Douglas Heubler or Bernd and Hilla Becher to the landscape reportages of Richard Long or the documentary pieces of Allan Sekula—as it would also generate a variety of narrative photoessays, from those by Victor Burgin or Martha Rosler to those by younger artists like Sophie Calle. Its historical origins, as Wall points out, are to be found in the avant-garde's original embrace of photojournalism in the 1920s and 1930s as a way not only of opening fire on the idea of aesthetic autonomy so carefully preserved by "art photography" but of mobilizing the unexpected formal resources in the look of "nonart" contained in the haphazard spontaneity of the documentary photograph.

Indeed photography's mimetic capacity opens it effortlessly onto the general avant-garde practice of mimicry, of assuming the guise of whole ranges of non- or anti-art experience in order to critique the unexamined pretensions of high art. From Seurat's emulation of art nouveau posters to pop art's travesty of cheap advertising, a range of modernist practice has mined the possibilities of turning imitation to its own use. And, as the whole cohort of appropriation artists demonstrated in the 1980s, nothing is so inherently equipped for this strategy of impersonation as the mirror with a memory that is photography.

Photoconceptualism chose, as its second strategic dimension, the mimicry not of photojournalism but of brutishly amateur photography because, Wall further argues, the look of the utterly dumb, hapless picture, the image divested of any social or formal significance—indeed, stripped of any significance at all—and thus the photograph in which there is nothing to look at, comes as close as photography can to the reflexive condition of a photograph about nothing but its maker's own persistence in continuing to produce something that, in its resistance to instrumentalization, its purposive purposelessness, must be called art. A reflection thus on the concept of art itself, which as Duchamp had once put it can be seen as nothing more than the "impossibilité du fer"—his pun on the impossibility of making<sup>12</sup>—Ruscha's pointless gas stations or Los Angeles apartment buildings or Huebler's utterly artless duration pieces exploit the amateur's zero-point of style to move photography to the center of conceptual art.

5. Photography's apotheosis as a medium—which is to say its commercial, academic, and museological success—comes just at the moment of its capacity to eclipse the very notion of a medium and to emerge as a theoretical because heterogeneous object. But in a second moment, not too historically distant from the first, this object will lose its deconstructive force by passing out of the field of social use and into the twilight zone of obsolescence. By the mid-1960s, the amateur's Brownie camera

12. Denis de Rougemont, "Marcel Duchamp, mine de rien," interview with Marcel Duchamp (1945), *Preuves* 204 (Feb. 1968): 45; quoted in de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 166.

and drugstore print, which the photoconceptualist exploits in order to obtain the look of “no art,” have yielded to a new phase of photoconsumerism in which, as Wall notes, “tourists and picnickers sporting Pentaxes and Nikons” mean that “average citizens come into possession of ‘professional-class’ equipment,” and “amateurism ceases to be a technical category.”<sup>13</sup> What Wall does not say, however, is that by the early 1980s those same tourists would be toting camcorders, signalling that first video and then digitalized imaging will replace photography altogether as a mass social practice.

Photography has, then, suddenly become one of those industrial discards, a newly established curio, like the jukebox or the trolley car. But it is at just this point, and in this very condition as outmoded, that it seems to have entered into a new relation to aesthetic production. This time, however, photography functions against the grain of its earlier destruction of the medium, becoming, under precisely the guise of its own obsolescence, a means of what has to be called an act of reinventing the medium.

The medium in question here is not any of the traditional media—painting, sculpture, drawing, architecture—that include photography. So the reinvention in question does not imply the restoration of any of those earlier forms of support that the “age of mechanical reproduction” had rendered thoroughly dysfunctional through their own assimilation to the commodity form. Rather, it concerns the idea of a medium as such, a medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic. And if photography has a role to play at this juncture, which is to say at this moment of postconceptual, “postmedium” production, Benjamin may have already signalled to us that this is due to its very passage from mass use to obsolescence.

But to grasp Benjamin’s theorization of the outmoded, itself triggered by specific works of surrealism, and to interrogate its possible relation to the postmedium condition I’ve been sketching, one must follow Benjamin’s example by addressing particular instances in which the obsolescent could be said to have a redemptive role in relation to the very idea of the medium. I therefore wish to pursue such an instance, examining its various aspects—not just its technical (or physical) support, but the conventions it goes on to develop. This examination can lay before us, with greater vividness than any general theory, what the stakes of this enterprise might be.

The case I have in mind is that of the Irish artist James Coleman. Coleman, whose work evolves out of and past conceptual art in the mid-1970s, has used photography in the form of the projected slide tape as

13. Wall, “Marks of Indifference,” pp. 264, 265.

the almost exclusive support for his work. This support—a slide sequence whose changes are regulated by a timer and that may or may not be accompanied by a sound track—is of course derived from commercial use in business presentations and advertising (we have only to think of large displays in train stations and airports) and is thus, strictly speaking, not *invented* by Coleman. But then neither did Wall *invent* the illuminated advertising panel he adopted as the support for his postconceptual photographic practice. In both practices, however, a low-grade, low-tech commercial support is pressed into service as a way of returning to the idea of a medium. In Wall's case, the medium to which he wishes to return, taking it up where it left off in the nineteenth century just before Manet would lead it down the path of modernism, is painting, or more specifically history painting. His desire is to move that traditional form forward but now with constructed photographic means.<sup>14</sup> Thus though Wall's activities are symptomatic of the present need to reconsider the problem of the medium, they seem to partake of the kind of *revanchiste* restoration of the traditional media that was so characteristic of the art of the 1980s.

But Coleman cannot be said to be returning to a given medium, although the fact that the luminous projections occur in darkened rooms sets up a certain relation to cinema, and the fact that in them actors are portrayed in highly staged situations evokes a connection to theater. Rather, the medium Coleman seems to be elaborating is just this paradoxical collision between stillness and movement that the static slide provokes right at the interstice of its changes, which, since Coleman insists that the projection equipment be placed in the same space as the viewer of his work, is underscored by the click of the carousel's rotation and the new slide's falling into place or by the mechanical whir of the double projectors' zoom lenses changing focus to create the effect of a dissolve.

6. Roland Barthes had circled around a similar paradox between stillness and movement when in his essay "The Third Meaning" he found himself locating the specifically filmic—what he thinks of as film's genius as a medium—not in any aspect of cinematic movement but rather, paradoxically, in the photographic still. It is in the horizontal thrust of movement itself that Barthes sees all of narrative's drive toward symbolic efficacy, which is to say, the various levels of plot, theme, history, psychology on which narrative meaning operates. What the photographic still can deliver in opposition to this is something that strikes Barthes as counternarrative, which is to say a seemingly aimless set of details that

14. That Wall wishes to "redo" the masterpieces of nineteenth-century painting is obvious from his decision to stage a variety of recognizable narratives, such as Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* in his *Picture for Women* (1978), or Courbet's *Source of the Loue* in his *The Drain* (1984), or a combination of Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* and Meissonier's *The Barricades* in his *Dead Troops Talk* (1991–92). Wall's supporters see this staging as a strategy for reconnecting with tradition. I feel, however, that such a reconnection is unearned by the works themselves and must therefore be characterized, negatively, as pastiche.

throws the forward drive of diegesis into reverse as it were, scattering the coherence of the narrative into a disseminatory set of permutations.

This counternarrative, with its resistance to the filmic illusion of real time, is where Barthes locates the specifically filmic. A function of the still, the counternarrative is not, however, merely opposed to movement. Rather, it is to be sensed in the context of the “diegetic horizon” of the rest of the story against which the still photograph unfolds its contents, but in negative relation to which the still is able to generate what Barthes will call “an inarticulable third meaning,” or also an “obtuse” meaning. If painting or photography are deprived of this diegetic horizon, the still internalizes it not by being a “specimen extracted from the substance of the film” but rather because the still is the fragment of a second text that itself must be read vertically. This reading, open to the signifier’s permutational play, institutes what Barthes calls “that *false* order which permits the turning of the pure series, the aleatory combination . . . and the attainment of a structuration *which slips away from the inside*” (“TM,” p. 64). And it is this permutational play that he wishes to theorize.<sup>15</sup>

It might be possible to think of a film like Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*, made up entirely of stills, as having proposed an instance of such theorization in practice. For *La Jetée* is about staging the film’s final image—in which the hero sees himself in the impossibly suspended, immobilized instant of his own death—as a vision that can be prepared for narratively but can only be finally realized as an explosively static “still.” For all its focus on stillness, however, *La Jetée* is intensively narrative. Proceeding in what turns out to be a series of extended flashbacks—memory images, each of them understood as grasped from the flow of time and slowed to a stop—*La Jetée* moves slowly but relentlessly toward what turns out to be the retrieval and explanation of the barely intelligible glimpse of the hero’s collapse with which it had opened. Indeed, in its peculiar drive toward climax it might be said to want to essentialize film itself in terms of that framing moment in every movie where “The End” hangs motionless against a blackened screen in an apotheosis of narrative understood as the production of an all-embracing, all-explaining structure of meaning.

In contradistinction to this, many of Coleman’s works evoke endings in the form of actors lined up as if for a final curtain call—in fact *Living and Presumed Dead* is nothing but forty-five minutes of such a lineup—although since these are staged and restaged within the works as finality without any closure, they both underscore the motionlessness of the slides themselves and set the image of the final curtain into what Barthes had

15.

If . . . the specific filmic . . . lies not in movement, but in an inarticulable third meaning that neither the simple photograph nor figurative painting can assume since they lack the diegetic horizon . . . , then the “movement” regarded as the essence of film is not animation, flux, mobility, “life,” copy, but simply the framework of a permutational unfolding and a theory of the still becomes necessary. [“TM,” pp. 66–67]





FIG. 1.—James Coleman, *Living and Presumed Dead* (1985).



FIG. 2.—James Coleman, *Background* (1992).

called the permutational play of the still's relation to the diegetic horizon of the sequence (figs. 1 and 2). Indeed, Coleman's *Living and Presumed Dead* is entirely conceived on the idea of permutation, as its linear assembly of serialized characters (generated by alphabetic sequence: Abbax, Borrax, Capax, and so on) do nothing throughout the work but change

places among themselves to form different enigmatic groupings in the exaggeratedly horizontal lineup.

In Coleman's work the diegetic horizon is not only registered in the naked fact of the photographic sequence itself but is further coded in the individual images by the sense many of them exude of having been shaped by other types of narrative vehicles, most specifically the photonovel. And indeed it is this resource, this most degraded form of mass "literature"—comic books for adults—that Coleman will exploit in his transformation of the physical support of the slide tape into the fully articulate and formally reflexive condition of what could finally be called a medium.

For in the very grammar of the photonovel Coleman finds something that can be developed as an artistic convention, both arising from the nature of the work's material support and investing that materiality with expressiveness. This element, which I will call the *double face-out*, is a particular kind of setup that one finds in scene after scene of the story (whether in the photonovel or, nonphotographically, the comic book), especially in the dramatic confrontation between two characters. A film would treat such an exchange through point-of-view editing, with the camera turning from one interlocutor to another, interweaving statement and reaction. But a book of stills can afford no such luxury and must sacrifice naturalism to efficiency, since the multiplication of shots necessary to cut back and forth from one character to another would dilate the progress of the story endlessly. Therefore the reaction shot is conflated with the action that has instigated it, such that both characters appear together, the instigator somewhat in the background looking at the reactor who tends to fill the foreground, but, back turned to the other, is also facing forward out of the frame. Now with both shot and reaction shot projected with a single frame, what we find in both photonovel and comic strip is that in the highest pitches of emotional intensity, the double face-out presents us with the mannerism of a dialogue in which one of the two participants is not looking at the other.

For Coleman's project it does not matter that the double face-out breaks with dramatic illusionism. What counts is the way it addresses itself to the structure of his medium. At one level this operates in relation to the double face-out's subversion of suture, that filmic operation in which the viewer is bound into the very web of the narrative. A function of point-of-view editing, suture describes the viewer's identification with the camera as it turns back and forth within the dramatic space, causing the viewer to leave his or her externalized position outside the image to become visually and psychologically woven—or sutured—into the fabric of the film.<sup>16</sup>

16. The classic text on point-of-view editing and suture is Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* 18 (Winter 1977-78): 35-47.

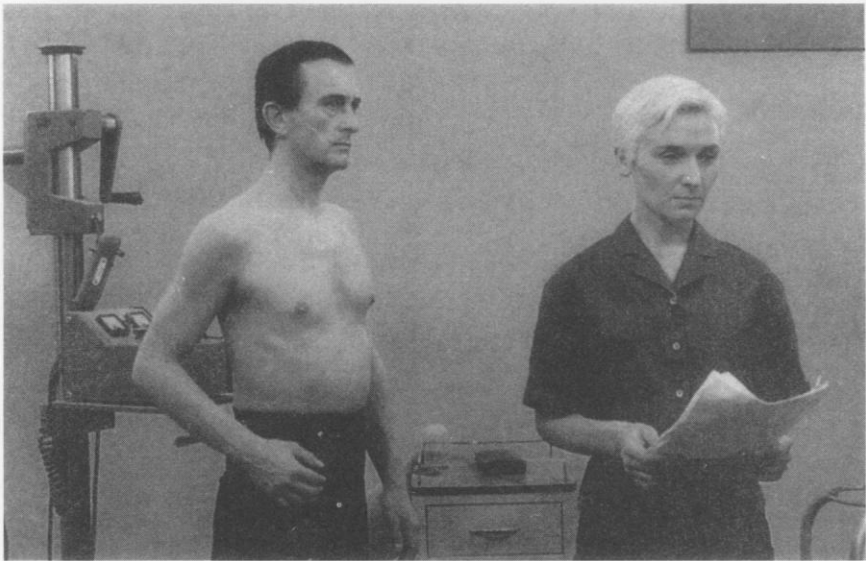
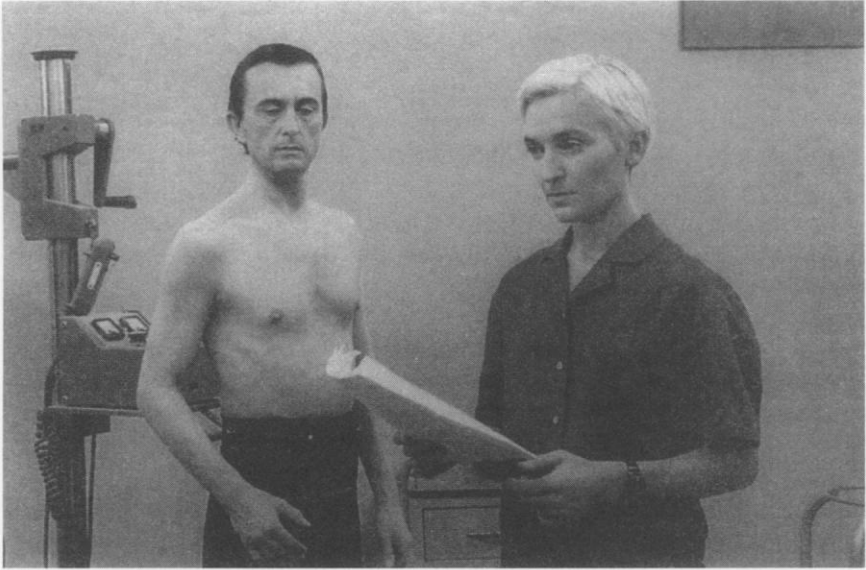


FIG. 3.—James Coleman, *Seeing for Oneself* (1987).

Yet this very refusal of suture allows Coleman to confront and underscore the disembodied planarity of the visual half of his medium; his work being photographically based, there is no other recourse than to unroll the density of life onto a flat plane. In just this sense, the double face-out's own flatness takes on a compensatory gravity as it becomes the emblem of this reflexive acknowledgement of the impossibility of the visual field to deliver its promise of either lifelikeness or authenticity.

The frequency of the double face-out's occurrence within Coleman's work signals its importance as a grammatical component of the medium he is using it to invent (figs. 3, 4, and 5). For this convention not only operates to articulate his medium along its visual dimension but can as well be doubled at the level of the sound track that gives it added gravity, as when in a work like *INITIALS* the narrator keeps returning to a question that serves as the poetic description of just this mannerism: "Why do you gaze, one on the other . . . and then turn away . . . and then turn away?"

The fact that this question is quoted from a dance drama by Yeats, his 1917 *The Dreaming of the Bones*, indicates, though it does not insist on, the seriousness with which Coleman intends to invest the lowly materials from which he is fashioning his medium. For if Coleman turns toward the by-now outmoded, low-tech support of the promotional slide tape or the degraded mass-cult vehicle of the photonovel, it is not with the post-war avant-garde's attitude of a parodic embrace of the trashy look of non-



FIGS. 4 and 5.—James Coleman, *Initials* (1994).

art or its violent critique of the alienated forms of Spectacle. It is not, that is to say, in the conviction that there is no longer a possibility for something like a medium to exist. Rather, in this drive to invent a medium, Coleman's determination to mine his support for its own conventions is a way of asserting the redemptive possibilities of the newly adopted support itself; although at the same time—it must be emphasized—the produc-

tion of the medium *within* the commercialized support disallows from the outset any notion that the site of this invention will be that of a pre-given, privileged space called Art.<sup>17</sup>

7. The photonovel had been named by Barthes as one of several cultural phenomena to have access to the “third meaning” in which a signifier is set in play against the background of a narrative it never serves. If this group, which Barthes calls “anecdotalized images,” works collectively to place obtuse meaning in a diegetic space, Barthes nonetheless singles out the photonovel; “these ‘arts,’” he says, “born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier (related to the obtuse meaning). This is acknowledged as regards the comic-strip,” he adds, “but I myself experience this slight trauma of *signifiance* faced with certain photonovels: *‘their stupidity touches me’* (which could be a certain definition of obtuse meaning)” (“TM,” p. 66 n. 1).<sup>18</sup>

Not all of Barthes’s examples of this kind of pictogram, however, are from the lower depths of culture. The *images d’Epinal*, cheap, colored woodcuts popular in the nineteenth century, do share this condition, but not other examples on Barthes’s list, such as Carpaccio’s *Legend of Saint Ursula* or the general category of stained glass windows.

Perhaps it is Barthes’s deep allegiance to Proust, as intense as Benjamin’s own, that provides the context in which the relationship among these various objects seems not only justified but somehow satisfying. For we only have to think of the opening pages of *Swann’s Way* and the young Marcel’s enchantment with the projections of the magic lantern slides on his bedroom walls to realize that childhood’s endless capacities for narrative invention married to the dreaminess of the luminous image are preparing us for Marcel’s later glimpse of the Duchesse de Guermantes kneeling below the stained glass windows of Combray Church.<sup>19</sup>

The argument has been made that for Benjamin, too, the magic lantern show was endowed with a complex power. For not only could it be

17. In Cindy Sherman’s adoption of the “film still” as the beginning of a photographic practice that will go on to evoke other narrative forms, such as the love comic, the fairy tale, the horror story, and so on, we see another highly consistent and sustained practice of the kind of permutational play against the diegetic horizon that Barthes theorizes in “The Third Meaning.” It is clear that Sherman’s work needs to be examined in relation to the phenomenon of inventing a medium rather than the almost exclusively photoconceptualist concerns that have been projected onto it.

18. Barthes uses Julia Kristeva’s term *signifiance* to signal the play of the signifier as it eludes meaning (the signified) and registers instead the rhythms and the materiality of the body’s opening onto pleasure.

19. Proust himself compares the effect of the slide projection to the colored glass: “In the manner of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colors, in which legends were depicted, as on a shifting and transitory window” (Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff [1913; New York, 1928], p. 7).

said to be the very embodiment of phantasmagoria as ideological projection, but it could also be thought to produce the inverse image of ideology, which is to say phantasmagoria as constructive rather than merely reflective, the magic lantern as the medium of the child's permutational powers at play against the diegetic horizon.<sup>20</sup> Indeed the magic lantern functions in Benjamin's thought as one of those outmoded optical devices, like the stereopticon slide (Benjamin's model for the dialectical image), which can brush the phantasmagorical against its own grain to produce an outside to the totality of technologized space.

For Coleman as well, this resource of the magic lantern show, lodged within the commercial slide tape as a kind of genetic marker, is central to his project. It tells of an imaginative capacity stored within this technical support and made suddenly retrievable at the moment when the armoring of technology breaks down under the force of its own obsolescence. To "reinvent" the slide tape as a medium—as I am claiming it is his ambition to do here—is to release this cognitive capacity, thereby discovering the redemptive possibilities within the technological support itself.

Benjamin's "A Small History of Photography" had already described certain photographic practices of his own day performing a retrieval of the "amateur" condition of photography's first decade, although he was not using *amateur* in the sense given it by a postwar avant-garde to mean incompetent. Rather, it conveyed what Benjamin thought of as the ideal of a relation to art that was nonprofessional in the sense of nonspecialized. Benjamin had spelled out such an ideal in a text he wrote one year after "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," his "Second Paris Letter: On Painting and Photography," undertaken for the Moscow edition of *Das Wort* but refused for publication. There he connects the amateur status of early photography to the preimpressionist situation in which both the theory and practice of art arose from the continuous discursive field maintained by the academies. Claiming that Courbet was the last painter to operate within this continuity, Benjamin pictures impressionism as the first of the modernist movements to have courted a studio-based esoterica with the result that the artists' professional jargon both gave rise to and depended upon the critics' specialized discourse.<sup>21</sup> Once again, then, this first decade of photography's history operates as a kind of promise folded within its medium of an openness and invention before the rigidification of the image as commodity.

In 1935 Benjamin had articulated his idea of the onset of obsolescence as a possible if momentary revelation of the utopian dreams encoded within the various forms of technology at the points of their

20. See Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 229.

21. See Benjamin, "Lettre parisienne (no. 2): Peinture et photographie," *Sur l'art et la photographie*, ed. Christophe Jouanlanne (Paris, 1997), p. 79.

inception. If he had steadily claimed a political future for photography, that was not how Benjamin described its birth in the two essays straddling "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (in 1931 and late 1936). There we get a glimpse of photography's both hooking into the cognitive powers of childhood and opening up the promise of becoming a medium. At the moment, now, of its obsolescence photography can remind us of this promise: not as a revival of itself or indeed of any of the former mediums of art, but of what Benjamin had earlier spoken of as the necessary *plurality* of the arts (represented by the plurality of the Muses), a plural condition that stands apart from any philosophically unified idea of Art. This is another way of stating the need for the idea of the medium as such to reclaim the specific from the deadening embrace of the general.<sup>22</sup>

22. See Benjamin, "The Theory of Criticism," *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 218. The relationship (and opposition) between the plurality of the Muses, with each Muse the genius of a specific medium—visual art, music, dance, and so on—and the general, philosophical concept of Art is explored by Jean-Luc Nancy in "Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One?" *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif., 1996), pp. 1–39.

# Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street

Miriam Bratu Hansen

More than any other contemporary film practice, Hong Kong cinema seems to me to resonate with Benjamin's efforts to theorize mass-mediated modernity, with its twin etiologies of technical reproduction and capitalist consumption. To paraphrase Benjamin in the most general terms, these efforts concern the impact of the industrially altered environment on the human sensorium, the epochal restructuring of subjectivity and collectivity, the crisis of the aesthetic, and the conditions of possibility for postauratic forms of experience and memory, intersubjectivity and agency. Hong Kong films of the last decade, with the clock ticking toward the 1997 handover, reformulate these concerns for an age of digital, gene, and transplant technologies; of accelerated speed, escalated violence, and refined mechanisms of power; of globalized economies and new, at once local and transnational, media publics.

The most recent instance of such cinematic inquiry, *Face/Off*, a Hollywood production directed by emigrant director John Woo, raises the question of the fate of sense perception and personal identity to splendidly nightmarish proportions. The FBI agent originally played by John Travolta, having lost his face and voice, by way of a transplant scheme

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that misfired, to the terrorist who killed his son, ends up in a fascistic top-security prison without evidence of his "true" identity, while his nemesis, the terrorist originally played by Nicholas Cage, walks free wearing Travolta's face and voice, is about to take over the FBI, sleeps with Travolta's wife, and covets his daughter. Whatever you may think of this plot device, it effectively dramatizes the question of what it means to "trust your senses" in a world in which fundamental parameters of human appearance and character can be altered and simulated, in which experience (in Benjamin's emphatic sense) not only has lost its currency but instead is deployed to deceive—a world in which people are no longer capable, in Benjamin's words, "of telling . . . proven friend . . . from mortal enemy."<sup>1</sup>

While we might expect such concerns in a sci-fi inflected version of the gangster/killer film or, for that matter, in so many versions of the transnational action genre, they emerge more surprisingly in the supposedly softer genre of romantic comedy. The most successful Hong Kong film of 1996, *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (*Tianmimi*, directed by Peter Chan), is an epic romance about two immigrants from the mainland, played by Maggie Cheung and local pop star Leon Lai. The process of acculturation, in particular the young man's, is staged through the old comic trope of the country rube encountering technological modernity—in this case, an advanced capitalist late modernity that is no longer centered in the West (in fact, New York, where both characters have emigrated by 1993, is marked as backward and uncivilized compared to Hong Kong). The high-tech accoutrements of daily life, such as pagers, TV monitors, and video and audio cassettes, are ubiquitous, as are automatic teller machines,<sup>2</sup> and economic activities range from the neighborhood food business through McDonald's to the stock market ("stocks and

1. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 184; "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89), 1:2:642. For a more sustained elaboration of the affinity between Benjamin and the problematics of Hong Kong cinema, see M. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis, 1997).

2. In a running gag, the protagonists are repeatedly shown at an automatic teller machine through an alternation between the balances on the monitor and reaction shots from the viewpoint of the machine (which may or may not be that of an internal surveillance camera).

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shares are national products of Hong Kong, just like oil in the Middle East,” the heroine explains to the marvelling comrade). The overt catalyst for the formation of the romantic couple is Taiwanese pop singer Teresa Tang, with her eponymous song “Tianmimi,” who is herself emblematic of the vicissitudes of an emerging pan-Asian culture industry.

The catastrophic downside of romantic and economic success, however, is embodied by a star of a different medium and period: Mickey Mouse.<sup>3</sup> Reduced by the 1987 stockmarket collapse to earning her living as a massage girl, Qiao (Cheung), confronts a particularly intimidating client, gangster boss Pao (Eric Tsang). Since she is not afraid of anything—“only rats,” as she replies to his taunts—he returns for the next session with, as he puts it, “a friend, heard you’re afraid of him,” and we get a close-up of a Mickey Mouse design tattooed on his already densely ornamented back. She refuses to laugh—except for an extra tip, as she explains in good Brechtian style—but Mickey becomes the mascot of her subsequent life with the gangster, who is further aligned with the Disney figure by way of his squat shape, violent energy, robustness, and basic kindness. The affinity of laughter and fear, as of laughter and horror (which Benjamin had pinpointed in the figures of Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin), is reinforced toward the end of the film, after Pao has been killed in a scuffle with street kids in New York. Taken to the morgue to identify him, Qiao asks that he be turned over; the viewer, unlike the coroner, knows what she sees and why she smiles, even chuckles, only to break into violent sobbing, exacerbated by a slow zoom into her face. The reverse shot closing in on the tattoo may be redundant and excessive by Western (art-film) standards, but the emphatic gesture condenses in the figure of Mickey both the shock of real loss and the possibility of a happy ending. The inscribed skin that identifies the gangster’s body, his corpse, becomes a screen for the recovery of sensory affect, suggesting in turn a film practice that might pierce the scar tissue formed in the adaptation to the regime of capitalist technology. “In the cinema,” to quote Benjamin not quite out of context, “people whom nothing moves or touches any longer learn to cry again.”<sup>4</sup> *Comrades* ends happily, if barely so, moving us by a “sentimentality . . . restored to health” of the kind that Benjamin perceived in 1920s commercial cinema and advertising, and it does not

3. In his 1989 Hong Kong feature *The Killer*, Woo paid hilarious homage to Disney by having the perversely paired cop and killer refer to each other as Mickey Mouse and Dumbo. In Chan’s film, the romantic counterpart to Mickey Mouse is Hollywood icon William Holden, whose image and memory are invoked as the elusive American dream, as it were, of the character of Rosie, the male protagonist’s dying aunt.

4. Benjamin, “One-Way Street” (1928), trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 476, hereafter abbreviated “OW”; *Einbahnstrasse*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:1:132, ed. Tillman Rexroth, hereafter abbreviated “E”; trans. mod.

shy away from kitsch (in Benjamin's rather than Clement Greenberg's sense) ("OW," p. 476; "E," 4:1:132).<sup>5</sup>

What I wish to do in this essay is not only to restore Mickey Mouse to Benjamin's theory of cinema (which I've done elsewhere)<sup>6</sup> but, more generally, to reactivate a trajectory, suggested by my two examples, between the alienation of the senses that preoccupied the later Benjamin and the possibility of undoing this alienation that he began to theorize as early as "One-Way Street" (1928), particularly through the concept of innervation. I am not trying to offer a Benjaminian reading of Hong Kong films (and do not claim expertise in that area), nor do I intend to impose a theoretical framework developed in relation to Western modernity onto cultural phenomena that are incommensurate. What I want to suggest, however, is that Benjamin's speculations speak to the concerns of these films, and vice versa, because the problems he articulated vis-à-vis film and mass culture and the antinomies in which his thinking moved persist today—in different forms and on a different scale, to be sure, but with no less urgency and no more hope for easy solutions. In this regard I share the emphasis on the antinomic structures in Benjamin's work that critics have discerned in various ways, following Benjamin's own observation that his thinking, like his life, "moved by way of extreme positions."<sup>7</sup>

5. For Benjamin's revisionist approach to kitsch, see his "Traumkitsch" (1927), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:2:620–22; "Einiges zur Volkskunst" (c. 1929), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6: 185–87; and *Das Passagen-Werk*: "Kitsch . . . is nothing else but art with a one-hundred-percent, absolute, and momentary use-value" (Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:1:500 [Konvolut K 3 a, 1], hereafter abbreviated *PW*; rpt. as *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Tiedemann, 2 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1982], 1:500, [Konvolut K 3 a, 1]). For a related, though distinct, reevaluation of kitsch, see Ernst Bloch, "Hieroglyphs of the Nineteenth Century," *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (1935; Berkeley, 1990), pp. 346–51.

6. See Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (Jan. 1993): 27–61.

7. Benjamin, letter to Gretel Adorno, June 1934, quoted in Tiedemann and Schwenpnhäuser, "Anmerkungen der Herausgeber," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:3:1369; see also his letter to Gershom Scholem of May 1926, in which he characterizes his attitude in all things that really matter as "always radical, never consistent" (Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 29 May 1926, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno [Chicago, 1994], p. 300; trans. mod.; Benjamin, letter to Scholem, *Briefe*, ed. Scholem and Adorno, 2 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1978], 1:425). On the antinomic structure of Benjamin's thinking, see, among others, Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch, and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique*, no. 34 (Winter 1985): 78–124; Irving Wohlfarth, "The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin's Actuality Today," *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993): 16–17; Wohlfarth, "No-Man's-Land: On Walter Benjamin's 'Destructive Character,'" in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (New York, 1994), pp. 155–82; Gillian Rose, "Walter Benjamin: Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism," *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993): 59–81; and John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), hereafter abbreviated *WBA*.

But this “radical ambivalence” (John McCole) or “ontology of extremes” (Irving Wohlfarth) was not just a matter of his temperament or his friendships, nor even of his strategic self-positioning within the contemporary “intellectual field” at a time of major upheaval and crisis (*WBA*, pp. 3, 21).<sup>8</sup> Rather, Benjamin’s imperative to “actuality”<sup>9</sup> compels us to realize that the structure of his thinking, in particular with regard to the technical media, corresponds to irresolvable contradictions in media culture itself, in the very fact of mass-mediated culture, now more so than ever.

Let me try to define this particular antinomy in Benjamin’s thinking as succinctly as possible, at the risk of being reductive. Position A, developed under the traumatic impact of World War I, welcomes the technical media—photography, film, gramophone, radio—because they promote the “liquidation” of the cultural heritage, of bourgeois-humanist notions of art, personality, and experience that have proved bankrupt in, if not complicit with, the military catastrophe and the economic one that followed, inadequate to the social and political reality of the proletarianized masses. At this historic crossing, Benjamin turns his back on the decaying “aura,” which cannot be salvaged anyway, and tries to promote “a new, positive concept of barbarism” whose outlines he finds in the contemporary “culture of glass” (Loos, Le Corbusier, Klee, Scheerbart).<sup>10</sup> This presentist, collectivist, “liquidationist” position (*WBA*, p. 9), which is commonly taken to be the message of his famous essay, “The Artwork in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” (1935–36), has by and large dominated Benjamin’s reception in cinema and media studies, from Brechtian film theory of the 1970s to more recent cultural studies.

Position B, formulated under the shadow of the rise of fascism and the “coming war,”<sup>11</sup> which Benjamin foresaw in 1933, and largely to be found in his essays on Baudelaire, Proust, and Leskov, laments the decline of experience, synonymous with “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.”<sup>12</sup> The decline of experience, “*Erfahrung*” in Benjamin’s emphatic sense, is inseparable from that of memory, as the faculty that connects sense perceptions of the present with those of the past and thus enables us to remember both past sufferings and forgotten futures.<sup>13</sup> In this account, the media of visual and acoustic recording

8. Wohlfarth, “The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment,” p. 16.

9. See *ibid.*, p. 19.

10. Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut” (1933), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1: 217, 215, 218.

11. *Ibid.*, 2:1:219.

12. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” p. 194; “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” 1:2:653.

13. The trope of a forgotten future appears frequently in Benjamin; see, for instance, “Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert” (1933–34), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:1:252; “A Berlin Chronicle,” *Reflections*, trans. Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), pp. 59–60; and “A Short History of Photography” (1931), trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13 (Spring

merely consummate the process inflicted on the human sensorium by the relentless proliferation of shock in Taylorized labor, city traffic, finance capital, and industrial warfare, by thickening the defensive shield with which the organism protects itself against an excess of stimuli. Furthermore, by vastly expanding the archive of voluntary memory or conscious recollection, the technical media restrict the play of involuntary memory or remembrance. What is lost in this process is not merely the peculiar structure of auratic experience, that of investing the phenomenon we experience with the ability to return the gaze, a potentially destabilizing encounter with otherness; what is also lost is the element of *temporal disjunction* in this experience, the intrusion of a forgotten past that disrupts the fictitious progress of chronological time.

But Benjamin's positions on film and mass-mediated modernity cannot be reduced to the antinomy of "liquidationist" versus "culturally conservative" (McCole), nor to the antinomic opposition of "distraction" and "destruction" (Gillian Rose) (*WBA*, p. 9).<sup>14</sup> For both positions hook into each other in ways that may generate a dialectic, but may just as well turn into a *mise-en-abîme*. The problem Benjamin recognized is that each position contains within itself another antinomic structure whose elements combine with those of its opposite in more, or hopefully less, destructive ways. The most destructive combination was at that point pioneered by fascism, while the alternative possibilities were increasingly polarized between the liberal capitalist media and the cultural politics of Stalinism.

Let me elaborate this point by way of the logic of "aesthetics and anaesthetics," which Susan Buck-Morss has pinpointed as the linchpin of what Benjamin means by "politics" in the artwork essay. Specifically, Buck-Morss links Benjamin's pessimistic adaptation of Freud's concept of shock in the 1939 Baudelaire essay, with its emphasis on the defensive numbing of the sensorium, to his polemics against "the aestheticization of politics" in the artwork essay, his somewhat curious assertion that the fascist spectacularization of the masses and of war consummates the tra-

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1972): 7; "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:371. On Benjamin's concept of experience, see Marleen Stoessel, *Aura: Das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich, 1983); Martin Jay, "Experience without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel," *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Amherst, Mass., 1998), pp. 47-61; and, more recently, Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (New York, 1998), a study that usefully brings to bear Benjamin's early writings on perception and color on his theory of experience but neglects the ways Benjamin's concept of aura, developed in conjunction with his shift of attention (rather than simply in opposition) to urban industrial modernity, informs key aspects (temporality, reflexivity) of his effort to reconceptualize the possibility of experience in modernity.

14. Gillian Rose, "Walter Benjamin," p. 76. For a discussion that complicates these oppositions, in particular with regard to Benjamin's analysis of fascism, see Alexander García Düttmann, "Tradition and Destruction: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Language," trans. Debbie Keates, in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, pp. 32-58.

dition of *"l'art pour l'art."*<sup>15</sup> What makes this link compelling, according to Buck-Morss, is a dialectical relation between *anaesthetization*, the numbing that splits momentary perception from experience (synaesthetics, memory), and *phantasmagoria*, the deployment of ever more powerful aesthetic techniques, ever more spectacular thrills and sensations, to pierce the protective shield of consciousness, yet only momentarily and on isolated occasions that distill auratic effects into a kind of false sublime (world fairs, wax museums, Wagner). As a result of such overstimulation, experiential numbing is aggravated to a degree of "self-alienation" that makes humanity "experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" ("K," 7:1:384). In terms of the antinomic structure of Benjamin's thinking, this means that in the fascist mass spectacles and glorification of war, the negative poles of both positions outlined above, the anachronistic perpetuation of the aura in position A and the anaesthetizing effects of technology in position B, combine to enter into the most fatal, violent, and destructive constellation.

The key to the politics of the artwork essay, in Buck-Morss's analysis, is that Benjamin casts his critique of the aesthetic tradition, the aesthetic narrowly understood as pertaining to the bourgeois institution of art, which turns on the category of autonomy, within the larger project of the aesthetic more broadly understood as the "theory [*Lehre*] of perception that the Greeks called aesthetics," which pertains to the entire domain of human perception and sensation ("K," 7:1:381). At this point in history, Benjamin warns fellow intellectuals, the aesthetic can no longer be defended in terms of the idealist values of the few that make it complicit with the suffering of the many, nor even in terms of style and artistic *technique*; rather, the political crisis demands an understanding of the aesthetic that takes into account the social reception of *technology*, the effects of sensory alienation on the conditions of experience and agency. And it is at this juncture that Benjamin locates the historic function of film: "to establish a balance between humans and technology" ("K," 7:1:375), "to make the vast technical apparatus of our time an object of human innervation."<sup>16</sup> The cinema emerges as the foremost battleground of contemporary art and aesthetics, not because of a futurist or constructivist enthusiasm for technology, but because film is the only medium that might yet counter the catastrophic effects of humanity's (already) "miscarried [*verunglückte*] reception of technology" that had come to a head with World War I.<sup>17</sup>

15. Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung)," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:1:384, hereafter abbreviated "K." See Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, no. 62 (Fall 1992): 3–41.

16. Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Erste Fassung)," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:445.

17. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian" (1937), trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique*, no. 5 (Spring 1975): 34; "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der

In Buck-Morss's reading of Benjamin, however, the historical trajectory of shock-anaesthetics-aestheticization appears less like a dialectic than an accelerating spiral or vortex of decline, culminating in a catastrophe that only the revolution or the messiah could stop. The crucial issue is therefore whether there can be an imbrication of technology and the human senses that is not swallowed into this vortex of decline; whether Benjamin's egalitarian, techno-utopian politics could be conjoined with his emphatic notion of experience/memory; whether and how the "profane illumination" he discerned in the project of the surrealists could be generalized into a "bodily collective innervation," the universal and public integration of body- and image-space (*Leib- und Bildraum*) that had become structurally possible with technology.<sup>18</sup> If that possibility amounts to nothing less than the revolution, troped in at once messianic and anthropological-materialist terms, its weak version is the more pragmatic option of a "general and mild politics of distraction," as Rose puts it, which Benjamin appears to endorse in the artwork essay.<sup>19</sup> This second option, however, willingly puts up with the loss of experience/memory entailed by the technological media and thus risks underwriting its anaesthetizing opposite, that is, a new barbarism that, as Adorno cautioned Benjamin more than once, comes close to identifying with the aggressor.<sup>20</sup>

If there is a key term in Benjamin's efforts to imagine an alternative reception of technology, it is the concept of innervation. Related to the notion of an optical unconscious familiar from the artwork essay, *innervation* refers, broadly, to a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers. The term still appears in the second and in the third (French) ver-

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Historiker," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:2:475. See also Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Jünger" (1930), trans. Jerolf Wikoff, *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979): 120–28, esp. pp. 126–28; "Theorien des Deutschen Faschismus: Zu der Sammelschrift *Krieg und Krieger*: Herausgegeben von Ernst Jünger," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:238–50, esp. 3:247–50.

18. Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), *Reflections*, p. 192, hereafter abbreviated "SLS"; "Der Surrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:310, hereafter abbreviated "SLM."

19. Gillian Rose, "Walter Benjamin," p. 75.

20. See Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 18 Mar. 1936, trans. Zohn, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (London, 1977), p. 123; see also pp. 123–24. In his letter responding to the artwork essay Adorno makes this point with particular reference to Benjamin's enthusiasm for Mickey Mouse and slapstick comedy, whose revolutionary implications, he argues, are belied by the (bourgeois-) sadistic laughter of the cinema audience; this laughter, as Adorno was to expound in his critique of jazz and the culture industry, promoted only the internalization of terror and masochistic conformism. Adorno invokes Anna Freud's concept "identification with the aggressor" verbatim in "Benjamin's *Eisenbahnstrasse*" (1955), *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols. (New York, 1991–92), 2:326.

sions of the artwork essay, but is missing in the essay's fourth, dubiously canonic version.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of innervation emerged with a new "cycle of production" that Benjamin inaugurated with "One-Way Street" and that, as he told Gershom Scholem in a letter of January 1928, he hoped to complete the following year with his "very curious and extremely precarious project" on the Paris arcades. The latter project was to bring the new cycle of work to a close "in much the same way in which the *Trauerspiel* book concluded the German cycle."<sup>22</sup> Benjamin never completed his arcades project and did not return to it until 1934, but during the hiatus of the late 1920s, and early 1930s, he wrote a number of texts that are more important to film and media theory today than even the most thorough reading of the artwork essay.<sup>23</sup> In addition to "One-Way Street" (and the few pieces specifically devoted to film and photography), these texts include the essays on surrealism and on Proust and Kafka, the speculations on the mimetic faculty, the texts on (Berlin) childhood, "Hashish in Marseilles" and other *Denkbilder*, and the programmatic piece "Experience and Poverty," as well as the early layers of the *Passagen-Arbeit*.<sup>24</sup> If the Germanist cycle of production remained largely within the genres of literary history and criticism, shot through with metaphysical and theological concerns, the new cycle took on the question of modernity in its profane actuality, having to do with the impact of industrial-capitalist technology and commodity production, with the emergence of mass society and the resulting political crisis.

"One-Way Street" is commonly understood as documenting Benjamin's turn to Marxism, under the influence of Asja Lacin, the "engineer" who, as he puts it in his dedication to her, "cut it [the street] through the author" ("OW," p. 444; "E," 4:1:83). But the work is also part of a more

21. My references to the artwork essay here are largely to the second version, which was Benjamin's first typed and, for him, definitive version. This typescript was not published until 1989; see "K," 7:1:350–84, and Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser's notes to this version, "Anmerkungen der Herausgeber," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:2:661–65. Adorno's letter of 18 March 1936 responds to—and contains references that only make sense in relation to—this version. The English version of the essay that appears in *Illuminations* not only suffers from an unreliable translation but also is based on the most compromised German version of the essay, as edited by Adorno and Friedrich Podszus and first published in 1955.

22. Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 30 Jan. 1928, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 322, trans. mod.; *Briefe*, 1:455.

23. See Tiedemann, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:1:39, and "Anmerkungen des Herausgebers," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:2:1067–1205. See also Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 47–54.

24. Some of the implications of these texts for film theory are explored in my essay "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique*, no. 40 (Winter 1987): 179–224.



general turn, around 1925, among critical intellectuals as strongly influenced by Jewish messianism and gnosticism as Benjamin, from lapsarian critiques of modernity to a more curious and less anxious look at contemporary realities, in particular the marginalized, ephemeral phenomena of everyday life and leisure culture. "Access to truth is now in the profane," was Siegfried Kracauer's parting shot in his 1926 polemic against Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig's translation of the Bible.<sup>25</sup> The concern with "actuality," shared, though understood differently, by Benjamin, Kracauer, and Ernst Bloch, shaped their reception of Marx in idiosyncratic ways.<sup>26</sup> More than either of his interlocutors, however, Benjamin focused on the question of technology; and, more than they, he sharpened his approach to modernity with recourse to psychoanalysis, including the neurological, anthropological, and surrealist fringes of Freud. This twin orientation marks "One-Way Street" not only in its thematic and analytic concerns but also in its avant-garde mode of presentation (which Bloch somewhat glibly heralded as the "revue form in philosophy"),<sup>27</sup> in textual strategies that articulate—or, as it were, "innervate"—the political, erotic, and aesthetic implications of the *Bahnung* or pathway cut by modernity, the street that entwines technological and psychic registers in the book's title trope.

If Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis feel compelled to say that "the term 'innervation' may pose a problem for the reader of Freud," one can only wonder what they would say about Benjamin's use of the term. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, in Freud's earliest writings the term refers to a "physiological process: the transmission, generally in an efferent direction, of energy along a nerve-pathway."<sup>28</sup> This definition by and large tallies with the term's usage in the discourse of physiology since the

25. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Bible in German: On the Translation by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig" (1926), *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 201; trans. mod.

26. See, for instance, the exchange of letters between Bloch and Kracauer in 1926, in Ernst Bloch, *Briefe, 1903–1975*, ed. Karola Bloch et al., 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 1:269–75.

27. Ernst Bloch, "Revue Form in Philosophy" (1928), *Heritage of Our Times*, pp. 334–37.

28. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1973), p. 213. See also the *Standard Edition's* note to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "'Innervation' is a highly ambiguous term [*keimeswegs eindeutig*]. It is very frequently used in a structural sense, to mean the anatomical distribution of nerves in some organism or bodily region. Freud uses it . . . often (though not invariably) to mean the transmission of energy into a system of nerves, or . . . specifically into an efferent system—to indicate, that is to say, a process tending towards discharge" (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. [London, 1953–74], 5:537 n. 2; *Die Traumdeutung*, in *Studienausgabe*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and Strachey, 11 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1972], 2:513 n. 1).

1830s, where it denotes the process by which “nerve-force” is supplied to organs and muscles, or the “stimulation of some organ by its nerves.”<sup>29</sup> In his (and Breuer’s) work on hysteria, however, Freud uses *innervation* more specifically to describe the phenomenon of “conversion,” the transformation of an unbearable, incompatible psychic excitation into “*something somatic*.”<sup>30</sup> As in physiological discourse, this process is assumed to be unidirectional, which for Freud means an energy transfer from the psychic to the somatic. But instead of effecting a normal functioning of the organism, innervation in the hysteric facilitates a pathway related to the “traumatic experience” (which itself is repressed); excitation is “forced into a wrong channel (into somatic innervation),” which, as a “mnemonic symbol,” remains other and strange, lodged “in consciousness, like a sort of parasite” (“NP,” 3:49, 50, 49, 50).<sup>31</sup>

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *innervation* appears in the more general, “structural” sense, though with a significant twist. In his discussion of the “psychical apparatus” as a composite instrument comparable to various systems of lenses used in optical devices, Freud again asserts that the psychic apparatus has a definite direction:

All our psychical activity starts from stimuli (*whether internal or external*) and ends in innervations. Accordingly, we shall ascribe a sensory and a motor end to the apparatus. At the sensory end there lies a system which receives perceptions; at the motor end there lies another, which opens the gateway to motor activity. Psychical processes advance in general from the perceptual end to the motor end.<sup>32</sup>

While in the context of the studies on hysteria innervation represents a response to an *internal* excitation (whatever traumatic experience may have caused the excitation), here the sources of stimulation also include *external* ones. Freud resumes this distinction, along with the model of the psychic apparatus, in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), when he discusses the case of traumatic neurosis caused by sensory overstimulation through mechanical violence (most acutely, in the recent war)—which returns us to Benjamin’s account of the decay of experience under the urban-industrial-military proliferation of shock. In Freud’s speculation, traumatic neurosis does not simply result from a thickening of the protective shield against excessive stimuli (*Reizschutz*), but from an “extensive breach being made in the protective shield,” to which the psyche responds by summoning massive amounts of “cathectic energy” around

29. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “innervation.”

30. Freud, “The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence (I)” (1894), *Standard Edition*, 3:49; hereafter abbreviated “NP”

31. See also Freud, “Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence” (1896), *Standard Edition*, 3:175.

32. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 5:537; emphasis mine.

the area of the breach: "An 'anticathexis' [*Gegenbesetzung*] on a grand scale is set up, for whose benefit all the other psychical systems are impoverished, so that the remaining psychical functions are extensively paralysed or reduced."<sup>33</sup> The term *innervation* does *not* appear in this context, and for good reasons, because it refers to the very process that is *blocked* in the configuration of shock-breach-anticathexis, the discharge that alone could undo and counteract the anaesthetizing effects pinpointed by Benjamin.

Whether Benjamin borrowed the term from Freud or from the neurophysiological and psychological discourse of the period, innervation comes to function as an antidote—and counterconcept—to technologically multiplied shock and its anaesthetizing economy. In Buck-Morss's words, "'innervation' is Benjamin's term for a mimetic reception of the external world, one that is empowering, in contrast to a defensive mimetic adaptation that protects at the price of paralyzing the organism, robbing it of its capacity of imagination, and therefore of active response."<sup>34</sup> To imagine such an enabling reception of technology, it is essential that Benjamin, unlike Freud, understood innervation as a *two-way* process, that is, not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form, but also the possibility of reconverting, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation (as distinct from the talking cure advocated by Freud and Breuer).<sup>35</sup> This possibility would make the protective shield against stimuli, the precarious boundary or rind of the bodily ego, a bit less of a carapace or armor and a bit more of a matrix or medium—a porous interface between the organism and the world that would allow for a greater mobility and circulation of psychic energies.

Imagined as a two-way process, Benjamin's concept of innervation may have less in common with Freudian psychoanalysis than with contemporary perceptual psychology, reception aesthetics, and acting theory, in particular the Soviet avant-garde discourse of biomechanics that may have reached Benjamin through Lacis. A major reference point in this regard is Sergey Eisenstein who, drawing on and revising William James and the conservative philosopher Ludwig Klages (the latter an important influence/irritant for Benjamin), sought to theorize the conditions of transmitting or, more precisely, producing emotion in the beholder through bodily movement.<sup>36</sup> Seeking to adapt Klages's (metaphysically

33. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Standard Edition*, 18:31, 30, 30; "Jenseits des Lustprinzips," *Studienausgabe*, 3:241, 240, 240.

34. Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," p. 17 n. 54.

35. Freud, too, speaks of a "conversion in the opposite direction" but assumes that such a conversion, as pursued by Breuer, would be effected "by means of thought-activity and a discharge of the excitation by talking" ("NP," 3:49, 50).

36. See S. M. Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions" (1923) and "The Montage of Film Attractions" (1924), *Selected Works*, trans. and ed. Richard Taylor (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), 1:33–38, 39–58; and Ludwig Klages, *Ausdrucksbewegung und Gestaltungskraft* (Leipzig, 1923). On Eisenstein and Klages, see Oxana Bulgakowa, "Sergej Eisenstein und die

grounded) concept of expressive movement for a materialist theory of signification and reception, Eisenstein, like his teacher Vsevolod Meyerhold, returned to James's axiom that "emotion follows upon the bodily expression" ("we feel sorry because we cry"), although Eisenstein modified James by insisting on the two-way character and indivisible unity of movement and emotion.<sup>37</sup> Without going into distinctions here, what seems important to me regarding Benjamin's concept of innervation and its implications for film theory is the notion of a physiologically "contagious" or "infectious" movement that would trigger emotional effects in the viewer, a form of mimetic identification based in the phenomenon known as the Carpenter Effect.<sup>38</sup> The recourse to neuro-physiological, mechanistic, and reflex psychology may not be as sophisticated as the insights of psychoanalysis; yet it may have been more in tune with new, technically mediated forms of aesthetic experience, predicated on mass production, unprecedented circulation and mobility, and collective, public reception.

In "One-Way Street," the term *innervation* appears only twice, but the idea or concept pervades the text in a series of variations, culminating in the grand finale of the book, "To the Planetarium." In the two places where the term is used explicitly it involves two distinct senses of *Technik*, technique and technology, in one case referring to the practice of yoga meditation, in the other to the tools of writing. In the section labelled "Antiques," under the subheading "Prayer Wheel," Benjamin states axiomatically: "No imagination without innervation." The preceding senten-

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deutschen Psychologen: Sergej Eisenstein und sein 'psychologisches' Berlin—zwischen Psychoanalyse und Gestaltpsychologie," in *Herausforderung Eisenstein*, ed. Bulgakowa (Berlin, 1989), pp. 80–91; McCole discusses Benjamin and Klages in *WBA*, pp. 178–80, 187, 236–40, 242–52.

37. In James's famous assertion, it is "the more rational statement . . . that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be" (William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [Cambridge, Mass., 1983], pp. 1065–66; hereafter abbreviated *PP*). James's critique of Wundt's category of "Innervationsgefühl" (1880) is directed not against the concept of innervation as such but against the idealist notion of innervation being coupled with, and depending upon, a sentient, conscious "feeling" rather than the physiological fact of "discharge into the motor nerves" (*PP*, p. 1105). On Eisenstein's and Meyerhold's reception of James, see Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia* (Jefferson, N.C., 1996), esp. pp. 36–37, 207.

38. Named after Dr. William B. Carpenter, a nineteenth-century British physiologist who first discovered that we tend unconsciously to mimic the movement of another person whom we are observing. See William B. Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology, with Their Applications to the Training and Discipline of the Mind, and the Study of Its Morbid Conditions* (New York, 1878); and Bulgakowa, "Sergej Eisenstein und die deutschen Psychologen," p. 83. See also James, on "ideo-motor action," *PP*, pp. 1130–38. I am much indebted to Yuri Tsivian for drawing my attention to, and sharing his wisdom on, the Carpenter Effect and its implications for theories of acting and identification.

ces, alluding to both Aristotle and Schopenhauer, assert that “exact pictorial imagination” (*genaue bildliche Vorstellung*) is essential to the vitality of “the will,” in contrast with the “mere word,” which at best inflames the will and leaves it “smouldering, blasted.” The following sentences exemplify the connection between imagination and innervation in terms of an at once bodily and spiritual practice: the discipline of breathing in yoga meditation. “Now breathing,” Benjamin states just as tersely, is “[innervation’s] most delicate regulator.” And the sound of the formulas, he goes on, is “a canon of such breathing.”<sup>39</sup> Inverting the traditional Western cliché that associates the Buddhist prayer wheel with mindless mechanicity, Benjamin sees in the ascetic integration of external rhythm, physical posture, and mental processes a source of the imagination and, therefore, of power. “Hence [the yogis’] omnipotence [*Allmacht*],” he concludes—which, like a prayer wheel, returns the reader to the initial sentence on the vitalness of the pictorial imagination to the force of the will (“OW,” p. 466; “E,” 4:1:117).

If yoga meditation provides a model of imaginative innervation, it can only do so under the heading “Antiques.”<sup>40</sup> Its imbrication of physical and mental energy harks back to a ritualistic, premechanical conception of the technical that Benjamin sought to theorize, in the early versions of the artwork essay, with his distinction between a first and second technology (*erste und zweite Technik*), as part of his effort to redefine the relationship between aesthetic technique and industrial technology (see “K,” 7:1:359–60).<sup>41</sup> This distinction revolves around the human body and the degree of its implication: “the first technology involves the human being as much, the second as little as possible” (“K,” 7:1:359). The second technology originates as “man attempts, with unconscious cunning, to gain distance from nature” (a motif that Max Horkheimer and Adorno were to elaborate in their historico-philosophical reading of the *Odyssey*, but that also recalls Ernst Jünger’s reflections in his famous essay on pain) (“K,” 7:1:359).<sup>42</sup> As Benjamin explains, “the greatest feat of the first tech-

39. In a fragment of 1929–30, “Notizen zu einer Theorie des Spiels” (Notes toward a Theory of Gambling), Benjamin parenthetically equates the term “motoric innervation” with “inspiration,” foregrounding the etymological connection between inspiration and breathing (Benjamin, “Notizen zu einer Theorie des Spiels,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:189).

40. Both the appeal and the anachronism of the recourse to yoga practices in Western modernity are registered by Freud in a sarcastic comment in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929–30), *Standard Edition*, 21:72–73.

41. See also the French version, “L’Oeuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:716–17.

42. See Max Horkheimer and Adorno, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. pub. (1944, 1947; New York, 1972); see also the new translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” *New German Critique*, no. 56 (Summer 1992): 109–41. See also Ernst Jünger, “Über den Schmerz” (1934), *Sämtliche Werke*, 18 vols. (Stuttgart, 1978), 7:143–91, esp. pp. 158–59, 181–88.

nology is, in a manner of speaking, the human sacrifice; that of the second is in the line of remote-controlled airplanes that do not even require a crew." Yet, where a contemporary reader might prolong this line into the Gulf War, Benjamin makes an amazing turn: "in other words," he continues the speculation on the second technology's constitution through distance, its origin "lies in play [*im Spiel*]" ("K," 7:1:359).

Unlike Frankfurt school critiques of technology from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through the work of Jürgen Habermas, Benjamin does not assume an instrumentalist trajectory from mythical cunning to capitalist-industrialist modernity. The telos of *Naturbeherrschung* or "domination of nature" defines the second, modern technology only "from the position of the first," which sought to master nature in existential seriousness, out of harsh necessity. By contrast, Benjamin asserts, "the second technology rather aims at the interplay [*Zusammenspiel*] between nature and humanity" ("K," 7:1:359).<sup>43</sup> And it is the training, practicing, or rehearsal (*Einübung*) of this interplay that Benjamin pinpoints as the decisive function of contemporary art, in particular film. Film assumes this task not simply by way of a behaviorist adaptation of human perceptions and reactions to the regime of the apparatus (which seems to be the tenor of parts of the artwork essay) but because film has the potential to reverse, in the form of *play*, the catastrophic consequences of an *already failed* reception of technology. For instead of providing humans with a "key to happiness," technology, in its capitalist-imperialist usage, had become a tool for the domination of nature and thus of humanity's (self-) destruction; bourgeois culture had been complicit with that process by disavowing the political implications of technology, treating it as "second nature," while fetishizing an ostensibly pure and primary nature as the object of individual contemplation.<sup>44</sup> Because of the medium's technicity, as well as its collective mode of reception, film offers a chance—a second chance, a last

43. See also the section "To the Planetarium," "OW," p. 487; "E," 4:1:147. The emphasis on play and interplay, that is, on both ludic and ecological possibilities, in Benjamin's notion of second technology, is key to his critique of fascism. Against Nazi efforts "to fold second nature back into the first (blood and soil)," it is necessary "to accentuate the ludic aspects [*Spielform*] of second nature: to oppose the serenity [*Heiterkeit*] of communism to the beastly seriousness of fascism" (Benjamin, draft notes for the first version of the artwork essay, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:3:1045).

44. The notion of technology as a "key to happiness" rather than a "fetish of doom" appears in Benjamin's "Theories of German Fascism," a text that represents an important, if problematic, relay between Benjamin's speculations on technology in "One-Way Street," especially in "To the Planetarium," and the respective passages in the artwork essay (Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," p. 128; "Theorien des Deutschen Faschismus," 3:250); on the upsurge of the "German feeling for nature" in the context of World War I, see *ibid.*, p. 126, 3:247. On the concept of second nature, a key source for which was Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), see Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany, N.Y., 1996), esp. p. 17. The term goes back to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*; see G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. and ed. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1942), § 151.

chance—to bring the apparatus to social consciousness, to make it public. “To make the technical apparatus of our time, which is a second nature for the individual, into a first nature for the collective, is the historic task of film” (notes to “K,” 7:2:688).

Innervation as a mode of regulating the interplay between humans and (second) technology can only succeed (that is, escape the destructive vortex of defensive, numbing adaptation) if it reconnects with the discarded powers of the first, with mimetic practices that involve the body, as the “preeminent instrument” of sensory perception and (moral and political) differentiation.<sup>45</sup> Where Jünger turns his equally astute observations on the impact of technology into a paean to anaesthetization, self-alienation, and discipline (celebrating a “second and colder consciousness” capable of seeing its own body as object), Benjamin seeks to reactivate the abilities of the body as a medium in the service of imagining new forms of subjectivity.<sup>46</sup> For Benjamin, negotiating the historical confrontation between human sensorium and technology as an alien, and alienating, regime requires learning from forms of bodily innervation that are no less technical but to a greater extent self-regulated (which ties in with Benjamin’s autoexperiments with hashish, gambling, running downhill, eroticism). Hence, when (in the second version of the artwork essay) he speaks of revolutions as “innervations of the collective,” he specifies, “more precisely, efforts of innervation on the part of a new, historically unprecedented collective which has its *organs* in second technology.” And he goes on to illustrate the utopian excess of such innervation with recourse to developmental psychology: the child learns to grasp “by reaching for the moon the same way she or he reaches for a ball” (“K,” 7:1:360 n. 4; emphasis mine).<sup>47</sup> This crossing of political history and the history

45. Benjamin, “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem” (1922–23), trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, p. 396; “Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:81. Benjamin’s reflections on the body involve the distinction, in German, between *Körper* and *Leib*, which, however, is not crucial in this context; see translator’s note, p. 401.

46. Jünger, “Über den Schmerz,” 7:181. On Jünger’s aesthetics/politics of technology, see Andreas Huyssen, “Fortifying the Heart—Totally: Ernst Jünger’s Armored Texts,” *New German Critique*, no. 59 (Spring–Summer 1993): 3–23, and, for a different approach, Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), esp. pp. 187–202.

47. This image, from the second version of the artwork essay, also appears in the section on Fourier in *PW*, 5:2:777 [Konvolut W 7, 4], dating from the middle period (June 1935–December 1937) during which Benjamin was working on the artwork essay; see Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 50–51. On Benjamin’s interest in cognitive development, especially in comparison with the theories of Jean Piaget, see *ibid.*, pp. 262–64. It is striking how Benjamin’s montage image of child, moon, and ball resonates with the poetics of imagism, specifically T. E. Hulme’s neoclassicist inversion of Benjamin’s trope:

Above the quiet dock in midnight,  
Tangled in the tall mast’s corded height,

of the human physis defines a key concern of Benjamin's anthropological-materialist politics, which he sought to elaborate in *Das Passagen-Werk*, in particular the sections on Fourier and Saint-Simon, but which no less informs the artwork essay, at least its early versions. What breaks through—and is as soon marginalized—in modern revolutions, he observes in a footnote, is a “double utopian will”: alongside the “utopias of second nature,” concerning society and technology (the Soviet experiment), there emerge the “utopias of the first,” concerning in particular the “bodily organism of the human individual” and its repressed “existential questions [*Lebensfragen*],” “love and death” (Fourier, de Sade) (“K,” 7:1:360, 7:2:665, 666).

The concept of innervation, then, has to be seen in the context of Benjamin's speculations on “natural history” (*Naturgeschichte*), as bridging not only aspects of the first and the second technology but also the gap between human history and a history that encompasses all of creation (*Kreatur*) in its transience and contingency, including mutations of the physis caused/enabled by technology.<sup>48</sup> In Benjamin's messianically inflected science-fiction scenario, technology not only transforms but has the capacity to redress the discrepancies of human existence in (to some extent, Western) history. These discrepancies include, in particular, the perceptual limitations constitutive of the human being qua individual

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Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away  
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.

[T. E. Hulme, “Above the Dock,” *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (1924; London, 1936), p. 266]

48. See, for instance, the last of Benjamin's “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

“In relation to the history of organic life on earth,” writes a modern biologist, “the paltry fifty millennia of *homo sapiens* constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would fill one-fifth of the last second of the last hour.” The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the history of the entire species in a gigantic abridgment, coincides exactly with *that* figure which the history of mankind cuts in the universe. [Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, p. 263; “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:703; trans. mod.]

On Benjamin's concept of natural history, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, 1998), a study that forcefully traces Benjamin's effort to reconceptualize history from a materialist, nonhumanist, non-hermeneutic perspective, though it occludes the significance of technology for such a history. For the latter, consider Benjamin's intense interest in the utopian visions of Fourier and the science fiction of Paul Scheerbart, to whose novel *Lesabéndio* (1913) Benjamin returned repeatedly; see *PW*, 5:2:764–99, esp. Konvolut W; “Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:2:618–20, 2:3:1423–25 and “Erfahrung und Armut,” 2:1:216–18. See also Burckhardt Lindner, “‘Natur-Geschichte’: Geschichtsphilosophie und Welterfahrung in Benjamins Schriften,” *Text und Kritik* 31–32 (1971): 41–58, and Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York, 1977), pp. 52–57 and *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 58–77, 160–61.



body (such as the old Machian problem that we cannot view our own body as an integral shape);<sup>49</sup> the anthropocentrism that maintains the hierarchic polarization of humans over the rest of creation; and capitalist society's perpetuation of the self-identical individual against the realities of modern mass experience.

It is from the perspective of this "negative" or "refracted anthropology," as Gertrud Koch calls it, that Benjamin's utopian—and by the 1930s largely counterfactual—overvaluation of the radical potential of film has to be understood.<sup>50</sup> As Koch compellingly argues, film appeared as the one medium capable of overcoming the physiological, historical, and ideological limitations of the human body. As a prosthetic extension of our perception that gives us a more complete vision of ourselves (through variable framing and editing), the camera, for Benjamin, assumes "Messianic-prophetic power," making the cinema a "technical apparatus which permits one to forget anthropological lack."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the cinema has spawned creations, like Mickey Mouse, that unhinge experience and agency from anthropomorphic identity and thus resume Fourier's project of "cracking the teleology of nature" (*PW*, 5:2:781 [Konvolut W 8 a, 5]).<sup>52</sup> Finally, the cinema provides a structural equivalent to the radical integration of "image space" and "body space" that Benjamin discerned in the experiments of the surrealists, projecting a "world of universal and integral actuality," but one that, in the case of cinema, is institutionally, *qua* mode of reception, predicated upon the sensorium of a collective ("SLS," pp. 191–92; "SLM," 2:1:309; trans. mod.).

Benjamin is well aware that the "leap into the apparatus," effected by the collapsing of "body- and image-space,"<sup>53</sup> is itself an image, just as the lap dissolve from human physiognomy to alarm clock (at the end of

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On account of our corporeality, in the end most immediately through our own body, we are placed into the world of perceptions, that is into the highest layers of language. [We are,] however, blind, and for the most part incapable of distinguishing between the natural body, between appearance and being according to the measure of the messianic shape. It is very significant that our own body is in so many ways inaccessible to us: we cannot see our face, our back, not even our whole head, that is, the most noble part of our body. [Benjamin, "Wahrnehmung und Leib," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:76]

50. Gertrud Koch, "Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' Essay," trans. Nancy Nenno, in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, p. 208.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 209. For a contemporary reflection similar to Benjamin's, see Freud's famous pronouncement that, thanks to modern technology, "man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God" (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:91–92).

52. See also Benjamin, "Zu Micky-Maus," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:144.

53. Sigrid Weigel, "Passagen und Spuren des 'Leib- und Bildraums' in Benjamin's Schriften," in *Leib- und Bildraum: Lektüren nach Benjamin*, ed. Weigel (Köln, 1992), p. 52. See also Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl, and Jeremy Gaines (New York, 1996) and *Entstelte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamin's theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997).

the surrealism essay) remains a metaphor, albeit a surrealist one; the tension in the relation between human physis and the technical persists, even if recast as interplay. To a degree, therefore, innervation is necessarily based on miscognition, constituted within the register of the Imaginary (in Lacan's sense): the child will never succeed in grasping the moon. But from this miscognition arise creative and transformative energies (different from the Lacanian scenario), in art as well as politics.

Whether the relation with technology will be transformative and cooperative (or, at the very least, benign) or whether it will continue on its destructive course turns on the classical polarity of "semblance and play" (*Schein und Spiel*) that Benjamin traces back, past Goethe and Schiller, to ancient practices of mimesis. Since the oldest forms of imitation, "language and dance," knew only one material of creation, the imitator's body, semblance and play were two sides of the same process, still folded into one another: "The person imitating makes a thing apparent [*macht eine Sache scheinbar*]. One could also say, he plays [or performs] the thing [*er spielt die Sache*]: Thus one touches on the polarity that rests at the basis of mimesis." In Benjamin's genealogy of art, this polarity has been tipped toward semblance, autonomized in the Western tradition of "beautiful semblance" (*schöner Schein*), which has dead-ended in aestheticism (illusion, phantasmagoria, aura in the narrow sense).<sup>54</sup> Play, by contrast, is linked to repetition and iterability, as both an internal principle and the modality of imagining a second chance, the hope of sidetracking a catastrophic history. This is why Benjamin conceives of second technology not only in terms of its destructive, anaesthetic trajectory but also, and significantly, as grounded in a ludic and performative impulse. A mimetic innervation of technology would counter the perpetuation of illusion promoted by fascism with an aesthetics of play, an imagination that plays games—but also, to invoke Kracauer, gambles—with technology's otherness.<sup>55</sup>

54. Benjamin, draft notes for the second version of the artwork essay, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:2:667, 666, 667. The concept of *Schein* is of course central to Benjamin's major early essay, "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (1919–22; 1924–25), trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings*, pp. 297–360; see also the unpublished fragments "On Semblance" (1919–20), trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, pp. 223–25, and "Beauty and Semblance" (1920–21), trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, p. 283.

55. The meanings of the German *Spiel* ("play," "game"), *spielen*, *Spieler* also include "gamble" or "gambling," "to gamble," and "gambler," a topic that Benjamin explored as a particular figure of modern temporality (boredom, empty time, chance); see, for instance, Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," pp. 177–80; "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," 1:2:633–37. Kracauer speaks of the turn to the photographic media as the "*vabanque*" or "*go-for-broke* game of history" in his important essay "Photography" (Kracauer, "Photography" [1927], *The Mass Ornament*, p. 61). The affinity of photography with chance and material contingency (versus narrative, dramatic "fate") is crucial to Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1960), especially the early drafts written in Marseille following Benjamin's suicide; see Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair': Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993): 437–69.

As my excursion into Benjamin's speculations on first and second technology should have made clear, these speculations cannot be easily assimilated to contemporary media theory, certainly not the teleological variant (for example, in Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler, or Norbert Bolz) that marshalls a vast number of sources to demonstrate—celebrate or decry—the subject's inevitable abdication to the *a priori* regime of the apparatus.<sup>56</sup> While Benjamin no doubt participates in the critique of Western bourgeois conceptions of the subject, beginning with Nietzsche, he would hardly have reduced “the subjective factor” to an element in a loop that processes information and sensory signals. On the contrary, the very impulse to theorize technology is part of his project to reimagine the aesthetic—in reponse to the technically changed sensorium, to be sure, but in a desperate effort to reassess, and redefine, the conditions of experience, affectivity, memory, and the imagination. By the same token, however, we should guard against reading Benjamin too optimistically as assuming that the anaesthetization and alienation wreaked by technology on the human sensorium could be overcome, that “*the instinctual power of the human bodily senses*” could be “*restore[d]*” “*for the sake of humanity's self-preservation,*” and that this could be done, “*not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them.*”<sup>57</sup> For Benjamin there is no beyond or outside of technology, neither in immanent political practice, nor even in his visions of messianic reconstitution. There is no way he would conceive of a restoration of the instinctual power of the senses and their integrity that would not take into account the extent to which the apparatus has already become part of human subjectivity; and there is no strategy for preventing humanity's self-destruction in which technology would not play an essential role. It is *because* Benjamin so clearly recognizes the irreversibility of the historical process, the second fall that is modernity, that he pursues a “*politicization of art*” in terms of a “*collective innervation of technology,*” rather than a restoration of the sensorium to an instinctually intact, natural state. The issue is not how to reverse the historical process but how to mobilize, recirculate, and rechannel its effects.

To return to “*One-Way Street,*” the philosophy of technology that subtends the artwork essay emerges, in outline, in the trajectory from reflections on techniques of the individual body, particularly in the section “*Madame Ariane: Second Courtyard on the Left,*” to the book's con-

56. See, for instance, Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (1980; New York, 1991), *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (1984; New York, 1989), and *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (1988; Bloomington, Ind., 1994); Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin, 1986); and Norbert Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* (Munich, 1990). For the notion of a “*historical a priori of mediality,*” see Jochen Hörisch and Michael Wetzel, introduction to *Armaturen der Sinne: Literarische und technische Medien 1870 bis 1920*, ed. Hörisch and Wetzel (Munich, 1990), p. 13.

57. Buck-Morss, “*Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,*” p. 5.

cluding piece, “To the Planetarium.” If the former suggests a productive recourse to first technology through the category of a “bodily presence of mind,” the latter presents a short-circuiting of bodies and (second) technology on a grand scale, on the battlefields of World War I. Generically another “antique,” “Madame Ariane” contrasts modern forms of prophecy and superstition with ancient practices that had in the naked body their “most reliable instrument of divination” (Benjamin’s often quoted example here is Scipio’s gesture of throwing himself on the Carthaginian soil and exclaiming, “teneo te, terra Africana!”) (“OW,” p. 483; “E,” 4:1:142).<sup>58</sup> What makes this example appear more relevant to the contemporary crisis than that of the “Prayer Wheel” is that it defines “presence of mind” as the key to averting danger, “to turn the threatening future into a fulfilled ‘now’”; in other words, it reminds us that “precise awareness of the present moment” is the very condition of possibility of effective agency (“OW,” pp. 482, 483, 482; “E,” 4:1:141, 142, 141).

The other proleptic strand in “Madame Ariane” is thrown into relief at the end of the book, with Benjamin’s disturbing *mise-en-scène* of World War I as an ecstatic, collective communion with the cosmos, “an attempt at new and unprecedented mating [*Vermählung*] with the cosmic powers” (“OW,” p. 486; “E,” 4:1:147; trans. mod.). The provocative link between these two kinds of bodily communion is his implicit invocation of Klages, whose treatise *On the Cosmogonic Eros* (1918) ostensibly dealt with the erotic, ecstatic, and mystical practices of antiquity but strongly resonated with the ideologies that had fuelled German (intellectuals’) enthusiasm for the war.<sup>59</sup> In a language barely less pornographic than Klages’s, Benjamin takes up the cosmic mating fantasy but radicalizes and detonates it through the very term that Klages, like other proponents of *Lebensphilosophie*, had disavowed and opposed: technology.

Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were

58. Scipio’s exclamation puts this gesture into closer vicinity with a modern history of colonialism and imperialism than Benjamin might have intended. On a similarly repressed ambivalence toward that history, see John Kraniuskas, “Beware Mexican Ruins! ‘One-Way Street’ and the Colonial Unconscious,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy*, pp. 139–54.

59. See Ludwig Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, in *Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 3 of *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ernst Frauchiger et al. (Bonn, 1974), pp. 353–497. Klages emerges as a significant influence on Benjamin himself, particularly his phenomenology of dreaming and waking (a key motif in *Das Passagen-Werk*) and the temporal inflection of distance and nearness as key terms in the transformation of sensory-somatic perception (compare Benjamin’s concepts of aura, masses, and kitsch). In “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,” p. 398, Benjamin lists Klages’s essay on dream consciousness, “Vom Traumbewußtsein” (1919), *Philosophische Schriften*, pp. 155–238, but not *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, the more specific source on distance and nearness; see esp. chaps. 4 and 5, pp. 410–41.

dug into Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale—that is, in the spirit of technology. [“OW,” pp. 486–87; “E,” 4:1:147]

Instead of scapegoating technology as such, Benjamin shifts his critique to the capitalist and imperialist harnessing of technology for the purpose of mastering nature. And it is here that he begins to sketch an alternative relationship with both nature and technology predicated on pedagogy (as a discipline ordering intergenerational relations rather than one of mastering children), which points to the politics/aesthetics of interplay and innervation developed in the artwork essay.

As in the later text, Benjamin’s critique of capitalist-imperialist technology by and large elaborates the Marxian axiom that the productive relations which keep the productive forces fettered also, by propelling the development of those forces, produce the conditions for their own abolition;<sup>60</sup> the subject of this process would be a collective that organizes its relations with both nature and technology in different ways than through “nations and families” (“OW,” p. 487; “E,” 4:1:147). What is more astounding, however, is that Benjamin phrases even the alternative reception of technology in the language of ecstasy, cosmic communion, and orgasmic convulsion, an affective terrain more typically occupied by the enemy. The “moderns” who dismiss this kind of experience as individual rapture commit a “dangerous error,” he argues, because the desire for ecstatic communion with the cosmos is not only real and powerful but is, above all, communal and ultimately therapeutic (“OW,” p. 486; “E,” 4:1:147; trans. mod.). “The ‘Lunaparks’ are a prefiguration of sanatoria” (“OW,” p. 487; “E,” 4:1:147). Bringing the new collective physis enabled/projected by technology under control may demand as violent a “paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience” as the mass destruction that brought it into recognition in all its negativity, that is, as the historic failure of innervation whose repetition has to be prevented at all cost. Having opened the Pandora’s box of therapeutic violence, Benjamin tries to close it again by handing the key to the proletariat, whose power is “the measure of [the new body’s] convalescence.” It is no coincidence, then, that the proletarian “discipline,” which has to grip the new physis “to the very marrow,” is cast in phallic, heterosexual terms: “Living substance [*Lebendiges*] conquers the frenzy of destruction only in the ecstasy of procreation” (“OW,” p. 487; “E,” 4:1:148).

It is hard to think of a smooth transition from this scene of Theweleitian male fantasy to the cultural politics of the late Weimar Republic. It

60. This argument appears in all versions of the artwork essay; see Benjamin, preface to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, pp. 217–18. Benjamin further elaborates his critique of capitalist-imperialist technology in “Theories of German Fascism” and, specifically in view of contemporary fascist aesthetics, in “Pariser Brief (I): André Gide und sein neuer Gegner” (1936), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:482–95.

is not surprising that Benjamin pursues the question of collective innervation by turning to surrealism, a movement whose publications and activities he sums up as revolving around the project of “[winning] the energies of intoxication [or ecstatic trance, *Rausch*] for the revolution” (“SLS,” p. 190; “SLM,” 2:1:307). (In fact, where “To the Planetarium” goes beyond the vitalistic bombast reminiscent of Klages—as in its reference to Lunaparks, or in phrases such as “in the nights of annihilation of the last war, the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic”—the language seems closer to the archive of surrealism, in particular Bataille and Artaud [“OW,” p. 487; “E,” 4:1:148].) To imagine a collective innervation of technology in the German context, and not as a “last,” or latest, “snapshot of the European intelligentsia” (the subtitle of the 1929 surrealism essay) but on a wider social basis, was likely to be a more problematic enterprise for Benjamin; there was no clear and direct path from that utopian snapshot to the cinema. For the collective assembled in the movie theaters was hardly that of the heroic proletariat (not an empirical category to begin with); rather, the cinema audience was in tendency part of “the mass,” the blind, instinctual, insensible, self-destructive formation that Benjamin had denounced in an earlier, more pessimistic, section of “One-Way Street.”<sup>61</sup>

But perhaps the question of how the cinema figures in Benjamin’s effort to theorize an alternative reception of technology requires opening up the framework of his philosophy of natural history and anthropological materialism to include economic and social processes not entirely synchronized with the logics of technology. For the leap into the apparatus, enabled by and rehearsed in the cinema, also entailed a leap into the capitalist market, into the world of commodities, into mass consumption. It is significant that Benjamin did not reserve the concept of innervation for Soviet film, though Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov no doubt helped him confront, to some extent, the problem of reconciling utopian claims with the actual possibilities—and limitations—of contemporary film culture. Rather, he discerned specifically cinematic forms of innervation in two

61. See the section “Imperial Panorama: A Tour Through the German Inflation,” “OW,” p. 451; “E,” 4:1:95–96. In a long note to the second version of the artwork essay, Benjamin takes up this pessimistic discourse with explicit reference to Gustave LeBon and mass psychology, as he contrasts the “compact mass” of the petit bourgeoisie, defined by “panic-prone” behavior such as militarism, anti-Semitism, and blind striving for survival, with the “proletarian mass” (“K,” 7:1:370 n. 12). The latter in fact, Benjamin argues, ceases to be a mass in the LeBonian sense in the measure that it is infused with class consciousness and solidarity. Ultimately, the proletariat “works toward a society in which both the objective and the subjective conditions for the formation of masses no longer exist” (“K,” 7:1:371 n. 12.). For a discussion of Benjamin’s concept of the mass(es) in relation to Kracauer’s, see Hansen, “America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 362–402, esp. pp. 379–82.

highly popular figures of American provenance: Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse. In the following, I will take up the concept of innervation as it relates to industrial-capitalist commodity production and mass/market culture, in particular the experience of a new relationship with “things” and with it the possibility of new forms of mimetic practice. This perspective not only foregrounds specifically modern forms of sensory perception, affectivity, and temporality; it also brings into view new modes of writing, reading, and reflexivity. Complicating Benjamin’s focus on technology with his equally intense interest in the collective phenomenology of commodity culture will allow us, in conclusion, to bring the concept of innervation to bear on the more familiar, though highly elusive and underexplored, notion of the optical unconscious.

As already suggested, the possibility of collective innervation is bound up with the fate of the “mimetic faculty,” the capacity to relate to the external world through patterns of similitude, affinity, reciprocity, and interplay. Like other writers reviving the concept of mimesis (such as Roger Caillois and Adorno), Benjamin takes up the anthropological, paleontological, zoological, and language-theoretical strands in the tradition, rather than the aesthetic strand more narrowly understood as pertaining to works of art and standards of verisimilitude.<sup>62</sup> (In fact, as we saw with his speculations on the polarity of “semblance and play,” it is the very dissociation of these strands, the monumentalization of the aesthetic and its isolation from social experience, that motivates Benjamin’s recourse to a more comprehensive concept of mimesis in the first place.) Beyond naturalist or realist norms of representation and a particular relation (copy, reflection, semblance) of the representation to reality, the mimetic is invoked as a form of practice that transcends the traditional subject-object dichotomy and its technologically exacerbated splittings of experience and agency—a process, activity, or procedure, whether ritual, performance, or play, of “producing similitudes”; a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile forms of perception; a noncoercive engagement with the other that opens the self to experience, but

62. For a historical survey situating Benjamin and Adorno in relation to other revivals of the concept of mimesis (notably Erich Auerbach’s), see Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Kultur—Kunst—Gesellschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1992). See also Jay, “Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe,” *Cultural Semantics*, pp. 120–37; Michael Cahn, “Subversive Mimesis: T. W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique,” in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Mihai Spariosu and Ronald Bogue, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1984), 1:27–64; the section on Benjamin in Josef Früchtel, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg, 1986), pp. 17–29; and Karla L. Schulz, *Mimesis on the Move: Theodor W. Adorno’s Concept of Imitation* (New York, 1990). For an interesting reanimation of Benjamin’s concern with the mimetic from an anthropological perspective, see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York, 1993) and *The Nervous System* (New York, 1992).

also, in a darker vein, “a rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become and behave like something else.”<sup>63</sup>

Like the concept of the aura, equally central to Benjamin’s theory of experience, the mimetic faculty is a category that comes into view only at the moment of decay; one might say that its conceptualization depends on the withering away of that which it purports to capture. Benjamin seems, for the most part, well aware of the concept’s historicity and resists idealizing mimetic experience as a kind of Edenic merging. More important, his inquiry is framed by the possibility of a resurgence of mimetic powers *within* the disenchanting modern world: “The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation” (“OM,” p. 334; “UM,” 2:1:211). One major area in which this question poses itself is language, in particular written language, which he calls an archive, “our most complete archive,” of “nonsensuous similitudes, nonsensuous correspondences” (“OM,” pp. 336, 335; “UM,” 2:1:213; trans. mod.); that is, the mimetic qualities of script and reading are not obvious or commonplace, but hidden, encrypted, hinging (as in astrology) on a past conjuncture, a lost indexical bond. With the emergence of new technologies of inscription such as photography and film, however, this archive not only is vastly expanded but the new *modes* of inscription have significantly altered the terms under which mimetic relations can be actualized—possibilities Benjamin designates with the shorthand of the optical unconscious.

The other area in which Benjamin discerns at once a persistence, albeit diminishing, and a historical transformation of the mimetic faculty is childhood—the ways in which children perceive, organize, and interact with their environment. “A child plays at being not only a grocer or a teacher, but also a windmill or a train” (“OM,” p. 333; “UM,” 2:1:210; trans. mod.). The physis thus engaged is not that of an immutable organic nature, but the historically formed, constantly changing nature of urban industrial capitalism, with its growing heap of ever-new commodities, gadgets, masks, and images. Children practice an inventive reception of

63. Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933), *Reflections*, p. 333, hereafter abbreviated “OM”; “Über das mimetische Vermögen,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:210, hereafter abbreviated “UM”; trans. mod. See also the first, longer version, “Lehre vom Ähnlichen,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:204–10; trans. Knut Tarnowski, under the title “Doctrine of the Similar,” *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979): 65–69. For the darker implications of the mimetic gift, see the same phrase in “Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert,” 4:1:261, where Benjamin recalls the impossibility of resemblance with oneself in the alienating nineteenth-century environment of the photographer’s studio (“I am distorted by resemblance with all the things that here surround me”). Adorno prolongs this negative connotation of mimesis as an unreflected mimicry of/onto reified and alienated conditions, a compulsion to self-reification and self-alienation, in his analysis of mass culture; see especially the sequel to the excursus on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” trans. Nicholas Walker, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London, 1991), pp. 53–84.



this new world of things in their games and modes of collecting and organizing objects, producing a host of bewildering similitudes and hidden correspondences, tropes of creative miscognition.<sup>64</sup> What interests Benjamin in such mimetic explorations is not the discovery of a Heideggerian “thingness” of things, but the index of a *temporality* that he considered key to capitalist modernity: the return of archaic, cyclical, mythical time in the accelerated succession of the new (fashion, technology), the mingling of the recently obsolescent “with what has been forgotten of the pre-historic world”<sup>65</sup>—the same temporal slippage that attracted him to the surrealists’ visions of Paris, their efforts to turn the mythical energies activated by capitalism into revolutionary ones (see “SLS,” pp. 181–82; “SLM,” 2:1:299–300).<sup>66</sup> Where adult society naturalizes the new as “merely” fashionable, children have the capacity to “discover the new anew,” that is, in both its otherness and its utopian promise, and thus to incorporate it into the collective archive of images and symbols (*PW*, 5:1:493 [Konvolut K 1 a, 3]).<sup>67</sup> In other words, children pioneer a model of innervation on a par with modernity’s destructive and liberating effects.

It is in “One-Way Street” that Benjamin begins to think more systematically about the possibility of the mimetic in modernity, by juxtaposing various sites, forms, and models of mimetic innervation—writing, childhood, dreaming, eros, politics. In most of these cases, the process of

64. See the section on childhood in “One-Way Street,” “Enlargements” (“OW,” pp. 463–66; “E,” 4:1:113–16), and the autobiographical texts on turn-of-the-century Berlin childhood, “Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert,” 4:1:235–304, the recently discovered later version of that text, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:1:385–433, and the earlier draft, “A Berlin Chronicle,” pp. 3–60, “Berliner Chronik,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:465–519. The emphasis on the figural, rather than overt, quality of mimetic correspondences relates to the mnemonic status of childhood experience, the element of distortion (*Entstellung*) that characterizes both memory traces and the forgotten/remembered moment of similitude, and it is no coincidence that Benjamin develops the notion of a “distorted similitude” in his essay on Proust, “The Image of Proust” (1929), *Illuminations*, p. 205; “Zum Bilde Prousts,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:314; trans. mod. On the significance of Freud’s concept of memory for Benjamin, and on the distinction between “distorted similitude” and “non-sensuous similitude,” see Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, p. xvii, and chaps. 8 and 9; and Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit*, pp. 9–11, 27–51.

65. Benjamin, “Franz Kafka” (1934), *Illuminations*, p. 131; “Franz Kafka,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:2:430.

66. See also *PW*, 5:1:494, [Konvolut K 1 a, 8], 5:2:1045–46. Benjamin’s vision of modernity as *Ur*-history, combined with the notion of capitalism as a “dreamsleep” and the political project of “awakening” the collective from that dream while preserving its utopian energies, is of course central to his work on the Paris arcades, especially in its early stages; see, in particular, *PW*, 5:1:490–510, Konvolut K “[Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung].” See also Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, chaps. 5 and 8.

67. Interpretive translation in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 274. On Benjamin’s insistence on the historicity—and historiographic significance—of childhood, especially children’s experience of technology, see *ibid.*, pp. 261–65, 273–79.

mimetic innervation entails dynamics that move in opposite, yet complementary, directions: (1) a decentering and extension of the human sensorium beyond the limits of the individual body/subject into the world that stimulates and attracts perception; and (2) an introjection, ingestion, or incorporation of the object or device, be it an external rhythm, a familiar madeleine, or an alien(ating) apparatus. The prototype of the former is the lover's gaze at the wrinkles in the beloved's face, an affectively charged perception or sensation that is anything but the critically distanced, testing look of the Brechtian observer: "If the theory is correct that sensory perception [*Empfindung*] does not reside in the head, that we perceive a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but rather in the place where we see them, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, *outside* ourselves" ("OW," p. 449; "E," 4:1:92; trans. mod.; emphasis mine).<sup>68</sup> I'd like to think that Benjamin recognized something of this affectively charged, excentric perception at work as well in the dispersed subjectivity of the cinema experience.

The prototypical figures of the *incorporative* dynamic, on the other hand, are the child, the cannibal, the screen actor, the clown: "Suspension of inner impulses and the bodily center. New unity of dress, tattoo, and body. . . . Logical choice of deep expressivity: the man sitting on a chair will remain seated even after the chair has been removed."<sup>69</sup> In this image of extreme concentration the apparatus becomes part of the body; that is, the performance enacts, in an expressive, imaginative form, a process more commonly—and destructively—imposed upon people in everyday life. Both aspects of mimetic innervation are personified in the figure of the "excentric" ("K," 7:1:377), a precursor to Chaplin who, by "chopping up human expressive movement [*Ausdrucksbewegung*] into a sequence of minute innervations," internalizes the law of the apparatus, whether conveyor belt or filmic montage, thus giving the encounter with technology an expression in the "image world."<sup>70</sup> One might say that Benjamin finds in Chaplin an allegory, one allegory, for the very concept of innervation in and through film.

As mentioned above, the grounding of innervation in the mimetic faculty entails a link between innervation and written language. While in his speculations on the mimetic faculty Benjamin stresses the practice of *reading* (invoking graphology and physiognomy, as well as Hugo von Hofmannsthal's maxim "to read what was never written"), in "One-Way Street" he is rather concerned with the activity of *writing* ("OM," p. 336;

68. See also Benjamin, "Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert," 4:1:244, 262–63.

69. Benjamin, "Negativer Expressionismus" (ca. 1921), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:132.

70. Benjamin, draft notes for the artwork essay, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:3:1040, 1047. See also Benjamin's draft notes for "Franz Kafka," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:3:1256–57. See also Benjamin, "Rückblick auf Chaplin" (1929), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:157–59; "Chaplin" (1928–29), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:137–38; and the fragment in which he compares Chaplin and Hitler (in 1934, six years before *The Great Dictator*), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:103–4.

“UM,” 2:1:213). In a number of variations on his own craft, Benjamin sketches the principles, conditions, and rituals of successful writerly innervation, including the correct use of writing tools (see, for instance, “Post No Bills: The Writer’s Technique in Thirteen Theses” [“OW,” pp. 458–59; “E,” 4:1:106–7]). This is the other context, besides “Prayer Wheel,” in which the term *innervation* appears verbatim, significantly in a reflection on the future—and to some extent already outdatedness—of the typewriter.

The typewriter will alienate the hand of the man of letters from the fountain pen only when the precision of typographic forms will enter directly into the conception of his books. This will likely require new systems of more variable typefaces. They will replace the pliancy of the hand with the innervation of the commanding fingers. [“OW,” p. 457; “E,” 4:1:105; trans. mod.]

What Benjamin would like, obviously, is a computer, and a word processing program that operates in the graphic mode. Better yet, he wants to be wired—provided the new systems of writing are precise, flexible, and variable enough to play a productively mimetic role in the conception of his books. Only then will he give up the beloved fountain pen, with its more intimate, habitual relation to the writer’s hand, a traditional mimetic bond that makes the old-fashioned writing tool superior to the typewriter in its present form.

As new technologies of inscription emerge, there are indications that “the book in [its] traditional form is nearing its end” (“OW,” p. 456; “E,” 4:1:102). For Benjamin, the passing of the Gutenberg era is signalled by poetic texts like Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*, which was “the first to incorporate the graphic tensions of the advertisement” into the “script-image” (*Schriftbild*) of the printed page (“OW,” p. 456; “E,” 4:1:102; trans. mod.). The models of poetic experiment are the more profane formations of film and advertisement (“a blizzard of changing, colorful, conflicting letters”) which have forced script from its refuge, the book, into the street and into the “dictatorial perpendicular,” just as the card index has expanded it into three-dimensionality. Thus writing “advances ever more deeply into the graphic regions of its new eccentric figurativeness” or pictoriality (*Bildlichkeit*) (“OW,” p. 456; “E,” 4:1:104). And if poets are farsighted enough to collaborate in the development of this “picture-writing” (*Bilderschrift*), which includes learning from statistical and technical diagrams, they will renew their cultural authority in and through the medium of an international “Wandelschrift.” More than simply a “moving script,” *Wandelschrift* implies two senses in which writing has become at once more moving and more mobile: a new mutability and plasticity of script (*Wandel* in the sense of change), which heralds a resurgence of writing’s imagistic, sensuous, mimetic qualities; and the connotation of the verb *wandeln*

(to walk, amble, wander), which suggests writing's migration into three-dimensional, public space and which makes reading a more tactile, distracted experience ("OW," p. 457; "E," 4:1:104).

The new graphicity that evolves with modern media and advertising not only hybridizes pictorial and scriptural qualities, but it also makes writing part of a new economy of *things*, a changed phenomenology of nearness and distance, a different kind of sensory, aesthetic experience.<sup>71</sup> In "One-Way Street," Benjamin articulates this new relationship with things most strikingly in "This Space for Rent," a piece that anticipates key concerns of the artwork essay. The terms of opposition here are not art and technical reproducibility but criticism (*Kritik*) and advertisement (*Reklame*), which, in Benjamin's words, is today "the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things" ("OW," p. 476; "E," 4:1:132). While criticism used to be defined by a stable vantage point and "correct distancing" (just as art, as he says elsewhere, used to "begin two meters off the body"),<sup>72</sup> advertising tears into the liberal space of contemplation and "all but hits us between the eyes with things," in the same way that "a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen" ("OW," p. 476; "E," 4:1:132).<sup>73</sup> And as the cinema renders furniture and façades sensational by means of their insistent, jerky nearness, advertising "hurls things at us with the tempo of a good film" ("OW," p. 476; "E," 4:1:132). In other words, advertising, like film, is a thing that both depicts the new world of things and, in its tactile, visceral appeal, significantly redramatizes our relation to things.<sup>74</sup>

The emphasis on physicality, speed, and directness aligns Benjamin with the enthusiasm for Hollywood films and all things American that was pervasive among avant-garde artists and intellectuals of the period, whether French, German, Soviet, Chinese, or Japanese. What is less common, however, certainly among German proponents of Americanism, in particular the technophile modernists of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, is the way Benjamin entwines this new relation to things with dimensions of affect

71. On the question of a particular modern(ist) sense of "things," I am much indebted to discussions with Bill Brown and to his work-in-progress, "The Meaning of Things: Literary Objects in America"; see Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Summer 1998): 935–64, and "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)" (forthcoming in *Modernism/Modernity*).

72. Benjamin, "Traumkitsch," 2:2:622.

73. The alignment of nearness with things (and, implicitly, of distance with the image, *Bild*) can be found at great length in Klages, *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros*, pp. 416–41, a text whose generally antimodernist, antitechnological pathos must have provided a contrasting foil for "One-Way Street."

74. Commenting on "This Space for Rent," Taussig emphasizes the two-layered character of Benjamin's modernist mimetics, the interconnectedness of the copying functions of the technical media with their ability to effect psychosomatic contact, that is, a new, corporeal form of understanding or embodied knowing; see Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, pp. 24–31 and *The Nervous System*, p. 145.

and sentimentality, even kitsch.<sup>75</sup> Here we encounter the quotation I used in connection with the Hong Kong films at the beginning of this essay:

Thereby [with advertisement's foreshortening of space and time in relation to things] "matter-of-factness" [*Sachlichkeit*] is finally dismissed, and in the face of the huge images spread across the walls of buildings, where toothpaste and cosmetics [*"Chlorodont" und "Sleipnir"*] lie handy for giants, sentimentality is restored to health and liberated American style, just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again in the cinema. ["OW," p. 476; "E," 4:1:132; trans. mod.]<sup>76</sup>

Skirting the critical cliché about moving the masses with clichés, Benjamin envisions a regeneration of affect by means of technically produced images, that is, the possibility of countering the alienation of the human sensorium with the same means and media that are part of the technological proliferation of shock-anaesthetics-aestheticization. The chance to engage the senses differently lies in the epochal reconfiguration of "body-and image-space," in the emergence of new modes of imaging that refract the given organization of space, its forms and proportions, and articulate a new relation with the material world.

Benjamin observes a mode of reception, corresponding to this new image world, that combines sensational affect with reflexivity and, conversely, reflexivity with sensory immediacy. For it is not the message of the advertisement that moves people, even if they are moved to buy. Benjamin never loses sight of the fact that it is money that "effects [this] close contact with things," that the means of innervation are subject to "the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos" (which should make us hesitate, *pace* Kittler and Bolz, to turn Benjamin into a McLuhanite *avant la lettre*) ("OW," p. 476, 456; "E," 4:1:132, 103; trans. mod.).<sup>77</sup> But his primary concern here seems to be neither message nor medium (nor the priority of the latter over the former). Rather, he is fascinated, at a more phenomenological level, with the sensory-aesthetic effects of advertising, in particular a new imagination of color that blurs the fixed lines of objects, spaces, and institutions: "What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt" ("OW," p. 456; "E," 4:1:132).<sup>78</sup>

75. See above, note 5.

76. "Wird die gesundete Sentimentalität amerikanisch frei, wie Menschen, welche nichts mehr rührt und anrührt, im Kino wieder das Weinen lernen."

77. When Benjamin evokes the force of money in this context, the field of reference is more likely Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* than Marx's *Capital*.

78. This "speculative image," to use Howard Caygill's term, resonates with Benjamin's early reflections on the philosophy of color, which Caygill (*Walter Benjamin*, p. 82, see also pp. 9–13, 82–88, 150–52) has shown to be central to his concept of experience; see Benjamin, "Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie" (1915), *Gesammelte Schriften*,

Profane illumination, indeed: The trope of commercial lighting, literalized and refigured in the manner of Kracauer's vignettes on the same theme, suggests an excess of sensation over the capitalist design, a mimetic connection with the afterlife of things.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, the red pool becomes a medium of reflection, albeit an ephemeral one, exemplifying a type of reflexivity that inheres in the material.<sup>80</sup> This reflexivity is anything but contemplative, assuming a safe distance between observer and object; on the contrary, it implies a momentary fusion of vision and object, related to the curious condition that Benjamin refers to in the 1929 surrealism essay as a "nearness that looks out of its own eyes" ("wo die Nähe sich selbst aus den Augen sieht") ("SLS," p. 192; "SLM," 2:1:309; trans. mod.). If we agree that Benjamin sought the equivalents of auratic experience (in the sense of investing the other with the ability to return the gaze) through and in the rubble of modern history, we should also heed what he insisted upon concerning the psychopoetic experiments of the surrealists: that they were on the trail—track, trace, *Spur*—"less of the soul than of things."<sup>81</sup> In other words, they (like Benjamin) were less interested in things as a means for experiencing "structures of frail inter-

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7:1:19–26; "Aphorismen zum Thema [Phantasie und Farbe]" (1914–15), "Die Farbe vom Kinde aus betrachtet" (1914–15), and "Zu einer Arbeit über die Schönheit farbiger Bilder in Kinderbüchern: Bei Gelegenheit des Lyser" (1918–21), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:109–12, 123–25, trans. Livingstone, under the titles "Aphorisms on Imagination and Color," "A Child's View of Color," and "Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children's Books: Reflections on Lyser," *Selected Writings*, pp. 48–51, 264–66; and other fragments in the section "Zur Ästhetik," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:109–29. Specifically, the image of the "fiery pool" reflecting, and dissolving, the actual neon sign recalls qualities of "chromatic phantasy" or imagination that Benjamin discerns in children, their fascination with rainbows, soap bubbles, and pictures produced by decals and magic lanterns—color's fluidity ("moistness"), its freedom from contours and substance (color in opposition to form), its intensive infinity of nuances, its availability for shifting patterns and transformations. These qualities may also have played a part in Benjamin's adult fascination with animated film, in particular the metamorphoses of objects and characters, the freewheeling interchange between the animate and inanimate world, in early Disney films; see "Erfahrung und Armut," 2:1:218–19.

79. For examples of Kracauer's play with the trope of commercial lighting, see "Boredom" (1924), *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 331–34; "Lichtreklame" (1927), in Kracauer, *Aufsätze, 1927–1931*, vol. 5, pt. 2 of *Schriften*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), pp. 19–21; and "Ansichtspostkarte" (1930), *ibid.*, pp. 184–85. Benjamin recognized, and appreciated, Kracauer's mimetic sensibility for the afterlife of things in characterizing him as a *Lumpensammler* or ragpicker (Baudelaire's *chiffonnier*); see his review of Kracauer's *Die Angestellten*, "Ein Aussenseiter macht sich bemerkbar" (1930), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:219–25, esp. p. 225.

80. See Benjamin's fragment, "Die Reflexion in der Kunst und in der Farbe" (1914–15), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:118, in which he claims that color has an inherent reflexivity: "Das Aussehen der Farben und ihr gesehen Werden ist gleich / Das heißt: die Farben sehen sich" (The look of the colors is the equivalent of their being seen / This is to say: the colors see themselves).

81. Benjamin, "Traumkitsch," 2:2:621.

subjectivity" (as Habermas would have it) than in innervating the "secret life of things," their different temporality, their nexus with an "other" history.<sup>82</sup>

How does one make things look out of their own eyes, as it were, from inside out?<sup>83</sup> Here is where the concept of innervation intersects with the notion of an optical unconscious. And this juncture should help us understand more systematically why Benjamin needed the cinema to think both of these concepts—and why the cinema, like other technical media but more so, was central to his effort to both articulate and mobilize the antinomies of modernity. The answer, tentatively, will turn on the double mediation involved in the cinematic process, that between the film and the depicted world and that between the projected film and the audience, that is, distinct yet mutually interdependent mediations both at the level of film as a technology of *inscription* and at the level of cinema as the social, collective, public space/time of *reception*.

When Benjamin first uses the term in his "Little History of Photography" (1931), *optical unconscious* refers primarily to the level of inscription, specifically the ability of the apparatus and particular photographic techniques to register aspects of material reality that are invisible to the unarmed human eye—the microtexture of plants, the way people walk. The mimetic, cognitive capacity of photographic inscription rests, almost paradoxically, with the element of chance or contingency inherent in mechanical vision, however constructed and manipulated; the camera's otherness, one might say its track with the look of the other, translates into an affinity with the unseen, the overly familiar, the repressed—with anything that eludes conscious, intentional perception: "It is, after all, a different nature [*eine andere Natur*, an-other nature] that speaks to the camera than to the human eye; different in particular in the sense that an unconsciously permeated space takes the place of the space that man has interwoven with consciousness."<sup>84</sup>

Since the element of contingency pertains to the *indexical* dimension of photographic representation, that is, the material bond with the world depicted (the camera having been there at a particular point in time, light rays having linked the object with the photochemical emulsion for

82. Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin" (1972), trans. Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979): 46. For a related attempt to think "things" in terms other than the philosophical subject/object relation, see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (1966; New York, 1995), pt. 2; see also Brown, "The Secret Life of Things," and Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*.

83. See Benjamin, "Einiges zur Volkskunst," 6:187: "Die Kunst lehrt uns in die Dinge hineinsehen <.> / Volkskunst und Kitsch erlauben uns, aus den Dingen heraus zu sehen" (Art teaches us to see into [the inside of] things / Popular art and kitsch allow us to look out from the inside of things).

84. Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," p. 7; "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," 2:1:371; trans. mod.

fractions of a second), the notion of the optical unconscious involves a distinct and heightened temporality—a temporality that inevitably implies and implicates the beholder. Looking at the wedding picture of the photographer Dauthendey and his wife who was to commit suicide after the birth of their sixth child, Benjamin observes:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency [*Zufall*], of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the character of the image, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the thusness [*So-sein*] of that minute long past the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.<sup>85</sup>

The eruption of the uncanny into representational space/time is experienced—and provoked—by the beholder, but the forgotten future that answers to the searching gaze is assumed to be deposited, seared, encrypted in the photographic image. This unconscious archive makes photography, early photography at least, a mnemotechnical device capable of compensating for the historical loss of “all natural, physiological aids of memory,” which Benjamin saw as the precondition of the “Copernican turn” in both remembrance and historiography (*PW*, 5:1:490 [Konvolut K 1, 1]). This is to say that, *pace* Proust and contrary to Benjamin’s own pessimistic analysis (in the Baudelaire essay) of photography’s erosion of the *mémoire involontaire*, the optical unconscious marks a spot that re-admits dimensions of temporality and memory via, and into, the very technologies capable of eliminating them. Like the images of involuntary memory (“developed in the darkroom of the lived moment”), the optical unconscious does not just reactualize a lost prior vision: rather, it makes us see “images that we have never seen before we remember them.”<sup>86</sup> Unlike Proust’s elegiac, personal quest, however, photography’s mobilization of an unconscious past points toward a form of memory that is trans-individual and potentially collective—both in spite and because of its technically mediated character.

“The possibility of creating an openness to the future,” which Howard Caygill locates as the gist of the optical unconscious, assumes a more overt political significance in relation to film.<sup>87</sup> It is no coincidence that Benjamin begins to develop the notion of an optical unconscious (without naming it) in his defense of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, around the time he was completing “One-Way Street.” In a polemical exchange over “collectivist art,” he speaks of the “conspiratorial relationship between

85. *Ibid.*; trans. mod.

86. Benjamin, “Aus einer kleinen Rede über Proust, an meinem vierzigsten Geburtstag gehalten” (1932), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:3:1064.

87. Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 94.



film technique and milieu” as the “most intrinsic project [*Vorwurf*]” of film, arguing that this aesthetic affinity advances an irrefutable class perspective.<sup>88</sup> In language that anticipates the famous passage on the optical unconscious in the artwork essay, Benjamin outlines the functions of film vis-à-vis the “prison-world” of urban industrial modernity as simultaneously revelatory, mnemonic, and transformative. The mimetic capacity for capturing traces of social experience in the ostensibly dead world of things draws on both the representational qualities of photography (including indexically grounded contingency) and procedures specific to film (such as slow motion, variable framing, and editing). Thanks to these fracturing, alienating techniques film does not merely depict a given world, but makes that world visible for the first time, produces it for the sensoria of a spectating collective. Hence Benjamin underscores that film in fact opens up “*a new region of consciousness*”; it provides a “prism” that transforms the past forgotten in the hopeless present into the possibility of a future:

[Film] is, succinctly put, the only prism in which the immediate environment—the spaces in which he lives, goes about his business, and takes his pleasures—reveals itself intelligibly, sensibly, and passionately to the contemporary observer. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, bars, city streets, train stations, and factories are ugly, unintelligible, and hopelessly sad. *Rather, they were and they appeared to be that way until the advent of film.* Having discovered the dynamite of tenths of a second, film exploded this old world of incarceration, leading us into wide-ranging, adventurous journeys among the scattered ruins. [“DR,” p. 626; “EO,” 2:2:752; trans. mod.; emphasis mine]

The dynamic temporality suggested in this passage is one of historical transition and social transformation. For the adventurous spaces Benjamin explores in his defense of *Potemkin* are spaces of the collective, and they apprise the bourgeois intellectual of the passing of his own class: “The proletariat is the hero of those spaces to whose adventures, heart pounding, the bourgeois gives himself over in the cinema, because he must enjoy the ‘beautiful’ precisely where it speaks to him of the destruction of his class” (“DR,” p. 627; “EO,” 2:2:753; trans. mod.).

But the cinema’s most important collective space is, or at least used to be, the cinema itself—the movie theater as a public space of exhibition and reception, moviegoing as a specifically modern, technically mediated

88. Benjamin, “Erwiderung an Oscar A. H. Schmitz” (1927), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:2:753, hereafter abbreviated “EO”; trans. Don Reneau, under the title “A Discussion of Russian Filmic Art and Collectivist Art in General,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, 1994), p. 627, hereafter abbreviated “DR,” trans. mod.

form of collective sensory experience that most clearly distinguishes the reception of a film from that of literature and the fine arts, including the stage. The moviegoing experience would therefore seem to be the logical site for thinking through the possibility of a bodily collective innervation, as the condition of an alternative interaction with technology and the commodity world. For the optical unconscious, as the medium of a transformed mimetic capacity, to become effective as/in collective innervation, the level of inscription would have to be hinged into that of reception, that is, the psychoanalytically inflected temporality of the former would have to mesh with the collective subjectivity of the latter. Only then would the technically enabled extension and decentering of the sensorium (at the level of the filmic text) translate into an imaginative, empowering incorporation of the apparatus on the part of the audience. Benjamin seems to suggest as much when he asserts that it is only with the “human collective that film can complete the prismatic work that it began with milieu,” though he subsequently limits his discussion to the moving masses depicted in Eisenstein’s film, the collectivity on, rather than in front of, the screen (“DR,” p. 627; “EO,” 2:2:753).

It is this step, the extension of the optical unconscious to the spectating collective, which Benjamin attempted in the early versions of the artwork essay, specifically in his remarks on the “globe-orbiting” Mickey Mouse (whose name headed the entire section on the optical unconscious in the first, handwritten version). As I have elaborated elsewhere, Benjamin’s reading of Mickey Mouse as a “figure of the collective dream” maintains a sense of disjunctive temporality, the mnemonic/psychoanalytic slant that marks the optical unconscious at the level of filmic inscription (leaving aside for the moment that Benjamin makes his case with an animated creature rather than a figure from photographic live-action film; he could have chosen Chaplin). The dream memory that Mickey innervates, however, is inseparable from that of nightmares, in particular modern nightmares induced by industrial and military technology. The early Disney films function as a form of “psychic inoculation,” Benjamin argues, because they effect a “premature and therapeutic detonation” of mass psychoses, of sadistic fantasies and masochistic delusions in the audience, by allowing them to erupt in the collective laughter. And the films provoke this laughter not only with their “grotesque” actions, their metamorphic games with animate and inanimate, human and mechanical traits, but also with their precise rhythmic matching of acoustic and visual movement—through a series of staged shocks or, rather, countershocks that effect a transfer between film and audience and, one hopes, a reconversion of neurotic energy into sensory affect (“K,” 7:1:377).<sup>89</sup>

The politics of innervation I have tried to delineate in Benjamin involves an understanding of the cinema as a form of sensory, psycho-

89. See Hansen, “Of Mice and Ducks,” pp. 41–44.

somatic, aesthetic experience that includes but does not reduce to poststructuralist notions of writing and reading, however psychoanalytically inflected. For the promise the cinema held out was that it might give the technologically altered sensorium access to a contemporary, materially based, and collective form of reflexivity that would not have to surrender the mimetic and temporal dimensions of (historically individualized) experience. At this juncture, the cinema appeared as the only institution capable of linking the antinomic trajectories of modernity and thus wresting them from their catastrophic course. Which is to say that the cinema, rather than thriving on and exacerbating the spiral of shock, anaesthetics, and aestheticization, could work to diffuse the deadly violence unleashed by capitalist technology, could yet be revolutionary in the sense of "a purely preventive measure intended to avert the worst."<sup>90</sup> If the Medusan gaze of the camera is affiliated with the backward-flying angel of history, then Mickey Mouse embodies the possibility of meeting that gaze and countering it—with apotropaic games of innervation.

But Mickey disappeared from the final version of the artwork essay, and with him the term *innervation*. In that version, the section on the optical unconscious opens with a reference to Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which Benjamin invokes to illustrate the enrichment of our perceptual world with the advent of film. Just as this book has "isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception," "film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception" "for the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical," phenomena.<sup>91</sup> Benjamin introduces the comparison with an example from the sphere of language, "a slip of the tongue," but then retreats, on the side of film, to the discourse of surgery (introduced in a previous section), as he extols the filmic representation of a scene or situation for its ability to "isolate" a performance or behavior "like a muscle of a body," which illustrates the importance of film's "tendency to promote the mutual penetration of art and science."<sup>92</sup> In either case, the optical unconscious is lodged at the level of inscription; its actualization remains a matter of individual analysis, whether conceived as reading, deciphering, or dissecting. What drops out of the concept is the specificity of the cinema experience, in particular its sensory-somatic immediacy, anonymous collectivity, and unpredictability. Accordingly, collective reception is segregated into the following section, subsumed under the notion of distraction, which in turn is reduced to a Brechtian attitude of critical testing and thus robbed of its mimetic, "excentric," as well as mnemotechnical dimensions.

90. Wohlfarth, "The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment," p. 14; see also the section "Fire Alarm" in "OW," pp. 469–70, "E," 4:1:122.

91. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 235.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Why did Benjamin give up on innervation? It is easy to blame Adorno for the mutilation of the artwork essay, but we should not overlook Benjamin's own ambivalence, not least regarding the figure of Mickey. In a note accompanying the early drafts of the essay he remarks on the "usability of the Disney method for fascism,"<sup>93</sup> and in a footnote to the second version he expands this remark to suggest that the most recent Disney films manifest a tendency already implicit in the earlier ones: "to put up comfortably with bestiality and brutality as corollaries of existence" ("K," 7:1:377 n. 14). Nor can we ignore the problems that Benjamin might have had with the actual collective assembled in urban movie theaters, a collective whose demographic profile was not predominantly and simply working class, let alone consciously proletarian. The heterogeneous mass public that congregated in, and was catalyzed by, the cinema of the Weimar period consisted largely of people who bore the brunt of modernization—women, white collar workers of both sexes; its demographically most salient feature was gender rather than class.<sup>94</sup> And as a new social formation this mass public was just as unpredictable and politically volatile as German society at large. It would have been conceivable to think of the moviegoing collective as being made up of individual viewers, with the kinds of mimetic engagement Benjamin found in the surrealists, the child, the beholder of old photographs, or, for that matter, Proust. But it is also historically understandable why Benjamin, unlike Kracauer, did not make that leap of faith—why he submerged the imaginative, mnemotechnical possibilities of the medium into a presentist politics of distraction, renouncing the cinematic play with otherness in view of the increasingly threatening otherness of actual mass publics.

Collective innervation as an alternative to anaesthetics, the apotropaic game with technology, seems to have failed, at least in Benjamin's lifetime; the cosmic mating fantasy in the spirit of technology that he pictured the First World War as at the end of "One-Way Street" returned in the Second World War as a bloodbath of exponentially vaster scope and efficiency. But we have to admire Benjamin for having taken on the gamble, the "*vabanque* game" with technology. For if anything was *not* an antinomy for Benjamin, nor even cause for ambivalence, it was the connection between aesthetics and politics: the insight that the fate of the "beautiful" was inseparable from the transformation of the human senso-

93. Benjamin, note for the second version of the artwork essay, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:3:1045.

94. See, among others, Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 1989). Kracauer was among the first to recognize and analyze the formation of this new mass public, particularly in and through the cinema and other institutions of leisure culture; see his pathbreaking study, *Die Angestellten: Aus dem neuesten Deutschland* (1929), ed. Karsten Witte, vol. 1 of *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), pp. 205–304, as well as his important, if notorious, series, "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" (1927), *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 291–304.

rium; and that the fate of the human senses, pertaining to the very conditions of social experience, the ecology of public life, was a political question of utmost urgency. This is why his turn to a profane, materialist understanding of “actuality” involved recognizing the centrality of the question of technology, as the medium in which the decisive confrontations over humanity’s future were taking place.

And this is why taking Benjamin’s imperative to “actuality” seriously today means recognizing that the cinema, once celebrated for articulating the secret affinities among things in an age of accelerated obsolescence, may itself have become a thing of the past. As video and digital technologies are replacing the medium of photographic film (with its indexical dimensions of temporality and contingency) and as the cinema, as an institution of public, collective reception, has ceased to be the primary venue in which films are consumed, Benjamin’s reflections on film and media culture may likewise have lost their actuality and may stand, as Bolz has recently proclaimed, as nothing more than “beautiful ruins in the philosophical landscape.”<sup>95</sup> But reconstructing these reflections in their complexity and extremity is not just a philological endeavor, nor a matter of getting Benjamin “right” versus oversimplifying readings and appropriations. Rather, understanding the issues he struggled with as genuine antinomies, and the limitations of his argument as limits posed by historical and political realities, should help us not only to guard against idealizations of either individualized or collective subjectivities and identities but also to discern similar antinomies in today’s media culture—that culture which, whether we like it or not, is the framing condition of any cultural practice today. Whether the cinema, having lost its economic, social, and epistemic centrality, will remain open to the future depends in part on whether the electronic and digital media that have displaced and transformed it will allow for new forms of innervation, different possibilities of mimetic experience, temporal disjunction, and reflexivity; it also depends on whether the cinema can remain open to its own forgotten futures in other than merely nostalgic ways. If Mickey Mouse confronted Benjamin from the elsewhere of America and in the mode of cel animation, we confront Mickey Mouse today from the elsewhere of Hong Kong, as part of a film practice that engages with technologies of incorporation and embodiment that indeed make the cinema a memory, in more than one sense.

95. Bolz, “Die Zukunft der Zeichen: Invasion des Digitalen in die Bilderwelt des Films,” in *Im Spiegelkabinett der Illusionen: Film über sich selbst*, ed. Ernst Karpf, Doron Kiesel, and Karsten Visarius (Marburg, 1996), p. 57. Bolz also includes Kracauer in this assessment.

# Benjamin in Hope

Geoffrey H. Hartman

The dramatic—and nomadic—circumstances of Walter Benjamin's life are such that it is difficult not to be justly distracted by them: the political background competes with the enormous erudition, the sheer bookishness, of the foreground. Yet the attention of Benjamin the critic to what he reads or analyses, that attention called by Malebranche the natural prayer of the soul, is so strong that he comes across with revisionary perspectives and startling trains of thought that make one stop and wonder at the physiological and mental mechanisms he reveals.

That wonder, at the same time, does not dissolve into either specialized knowledge or philosophy, although the pressure of conceptualization is always there, and philosophy is acknowledged to be a sibling of the work of art, useful in questioning art's strangeness, its combination of intimacy and discretion. Yet while art remains central as a structure of feeling, Benjamin sees it changing according to contemporary social and economic conditions. Art is no longer quite the cultural value it was; he is not tempted to say to it, in its singularity, charm, or *in situ* monumentality, "Verweile doch, du bist so schön."

With film, especially, distraction (*Zerstreuung*) and concentration (*Sammlung*) enter into a new relationship, quite different from what used to characterize the plastic or verbal arts. Indeed, film helps us to become used to a new form of awareness or, rather, unconsciousness, which goes beyond the optic of intense individual contemplation that marks art criti-

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cism at its empathic best. The older contemplative attitude, or the capacity for attention I have just praised with words taken from Malebranche, may not be able to resolve dilemmas imposed on our receptive faculties by a fast-changing era. Intimacy and distance are being replaced by shock and diversion; and Benjamin refuses to value them negatively. Signaling an increase in the size of the proletariat and the formation of the masses, they promise a collective achievement, a structure of feeling beyond the concept of experience based on the privileged individual. At the same time, fascism and imperialism exploit the mass spectacle. In different ways they force mankind to enjoy the prospect of war and large-scale destruction by filtering them through the lens of the older contemplative aesthetics. At this crucial point, Benjamin breaks off the essay on art and technology I have been summarizing and cites without comment communism's answer to fascism: don't aestheticize politics; rather, politicize art.<sup>1</sup> At the end, then, nothing is clear except that the merging of art and technology has produced an apparatus that penetrates perception more deeply and subliminally so that art graduates from being a cultural object, an *objet d'art*, to a matter of life and death.

I admire the speculative vigor of the later Benjamin. I have suggested that for him art is not transcended; indeed, it may still be overestimated by him. His worried engagement with the status of art, exploited by politics and altered by technology, could be a desperate gesture of hope, a defense against his own dispersion. What I want to do in this brief comment is to understand his perspective on the past, a perspective that not only persists but counterpoints the future shock he anticipates so uncannily.

After 1936 Benjamin's emphasis is history as much as art, and his paradoxes become more startling. He talks of the historian as "kindling a spark of hope in the past," a sentiment directed against cheap versions of progress.<sup>2</sup> He refuses to place hope exclusively in the future, as if the

1. See Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" [The Work of Art in the Era of Its Technical Reproduction] (1936), *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1972-89), 1:2:431-69.

2. Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:695; hereafter abbreviated "BG."

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past were transcended—nothing but inert, ruined choirs. He talks less of faith or love than of that more revolutionary virtue, hope, which refuses to leave even the dead undisturbed. Like Scholem, who restored the neglected Kabbalah to high profile, the true historical thinker addresses the past—or has the past address us, like the dead at Thermopylae from whom Demosthenes kindles an eloquent adjuration. Yet, is there not something spooky in resurrecting the dead this way or, conversely, suggesting they could be undone a second time: “even the dead will not be secure, if the enemy wins” (“BG,” p. 695)?

Hope, though envious and all too human, is the cardinal virtue for Benjamin, but it is not eudaemonistic. The hope for others competes with the hope for oneself. Missed opportunities for happiness (“women who could have given themselves to us”) seem to have an intimate relation to past generations, *their* missed opportunities, *their* abortive desires or claims (“BG,” p. 693). It is as if the quantity of hope allotted us had already been preempted by this demanding link to the past and the dead. Benjamin praises Goethe’s recognition in *Elective Affinities* that hope (*elpis*), the last of the *Urworte*, can only be dramatized in the form of symbols (such as the rising of the stars); it cannot be explicitly transmitted as doctrine or message.<sup>3</sup> His concluding sentence on Goethe’s novel reverses a saying of Kafka’s: “Only for the cause of those who have no hope is hope given us.”<sup>4</sup> But he fails to give that hope to himself, as if his own message had not gone through.

One would certainly like to know what news the famous angel brought to him: Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, so often reproduced that it has become, retroactively, Benjamin’s logo. How could Benjamin think of expressing historical materialism through this childlike and uncertain signifier? It is true that the astonishing ecphrasis describing the angel of history in the famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History” tries to incarnate his message that hope is the revolutionary virtue, however ruinous it may be. But is any one who compares Klee’s picture and Benjamin’s reading of it convinced? It only adds the enigma of the messenger to that of the message.

What kind of *novum*, then, does this evangelist bring, with his thick candelabra fingers and heady excrescences, curlers that it is tempting to see as unfolding scrolls, possibly Torah scrolls? I cannot make out extended wings and staring eyes. I see a grotesque being, dissymmetric, demon rather than angel, helplessly reading itself and becoming in

3. Perhaps Benjamin is thinking that this symbol is really an allegory, as he had explicated the concept in his *Trauerspiel* book.

4. Benjamin, “Goethes Wahlverwandschaften,” *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Sigfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main, 1961), p. 147; hereafter abbreviated “GW.”



this way a symbol after all, a sacred papier-mâché. The image has more expressionless than expressive force, to borrow a Benjaminian category. The angel is, to adapt a phrase of Stanley Cavell's, a European "hobo of thought" or, rather, the caricature of a priest pretending to be a hobo.<sup>5</sup>

In Benjamin, truth seems to stand in the way of truth, or, more exactly, truth and its transmission get in each other's way. He explicitly ascribes that dilemma to Kafka, but he could have pointed to Klee's forests of signs pretending to be correspondences. Truth is always too deadly and transmission deceptively accommodating. Benjamin, as is well known, would have liked to circumvent this dilemma: he dreamt of writing a book made up solely of quotations, as if there were still, within speech, pristine fragments, moments of impersonal directness. No leakage of attention, no distraction, nothing but concentration absorbing the shock of words. The sounds of proper names, he suggests, which we try to make meaningful through etymology, are residues of an original God-given language.

But in a postprophetic age proclamation and revelation are dangerous simulacra. In one way or another Benjamin refuses to confine the identity of the literary work to a message or reader-directed intention, one that could reach its destination. A counterpropagandistic reticence always intervenes—a reticence that is not particularly cryptic but rather aesthetic, a shade or veil (*Hülle, Verhülltes*) that still allows us to recognize heart or body in hiding but asks us to forgo imagining that from which we are excluded.

In the older aesthetics, this nonmessaging, this extreme discretion, is how the beautiful veils the sublime because (or so I understand it) naked truth is on the side of excessive hope and can only be attained by not being attained. The angel of history moves on, but from ruin to ruin. Though he has passed beyond hedonism, he remains messianic; he would like to pause, to wake the dead and make whole the maimed and mangled. A rivalrous pleasure principle, however, a storm called progress, blows in from Paradise; revolutionaries are children of Paradise who do not rest content, any more than Faust would, with "a green thought in a green shade."

Benjamin does not give up completely on the beautiful. He sets the beautiful appearance against its illusory promise of happiness and har-

5. I am told that a study of Klee's notebooks at the time the picture was composed reveals that it may have rendered his impression of Hitler, who often passed through Klee's district. But pictures, like books, have their own fate. The New Angel motif, as Scholem knew and communicated to Benjamin, plays a peculiar role in midrash Genesis Rabbah, where a commentator suggests that God creates each dawn a new host of angels to sing his praise, who are then dissolved. The dawn song is their swan song.

mony. Erotic passion in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* is touched by that promise. What Goethe's lovers actually discover is something in stillness that is beyond words, not in the sense of being transcendent, but converging on a mythic or mute substratum, and so representable only by a music of the ordinary. Goethe blends the motif of music with the most prosaic nature descriptions, as prose and poetry anticipate, working together, a sort of reconciliation: that of the lovers with each other or, rather, with their pain, an "incurable imperfection found in the very essence of the present," as Proust said.<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin, in fact, darkens the possibility of reconciliation. "The redoubled happiness [enjoyment] of sound," Goethe's "das Doppelglück der Töne," which, orgasmic or not, raises prosaic words to the power of music, is no crowning of earthly pleasure, according to Benjamin, but "the first weak intimation" of a dissolution, a perverse kind of aubade, "a still almost hopeless glinting of day which dawns for the tormented lovers" ("GW," p. 137).

There is also, of course, an aggressive side to Benjamin's discretion. With the pressure of time, as we enter the 1930s, he becomes assertive as well as gnomic. Yet he never abandons his own version of what the modernist tradition named impersonality. This topic raises the issue of whether Benjamin's methodical turn to a socioeconomic interpretation of art and a materialistic philosophy of history displaces the spirituality that so often breaks through—not only in his refusal to abandon hope but also in such passing suggestions, which I have called spooky, that we have a "geheime Verabredung" with the dead, a secret date with previous generations ("BG," p. 694).

Benjamin is always alert to what he names the "saving correspondence," using the word in its Baudelairean sense: some link that keeps us attached to this world, vesting in it what sacredness—redemptive possibilities—there might be. More than ideology prompts the thought that we are unconsciously in contact with a buried energy, suppressed by positivistic history writing or the fear of a bad-news revelation. The cultural critic takes responsibility for the anonymous victims of historical progress, victims of the un-lived life, ghostly revenants expecting their due. In 1985, forty years after the war and the Holocaust, Jürgen Habermas develops Benjamin's hint about that "geheime Verabredung" by joining it to an adjacent phrase in the second of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History": the phrase that each new generation is endowed with a "weak messianic power" on which the past has a claim ("BG," p. 694). Habermas

6. "L'imperfection incurable dans l'essence même du présent" (quoted in Benjamin, "Zum Bilde Prousts," *Illuminationen*, p. 357).

suggests that young Germans can still identify with Jewish victims, but only through cultivating memory's "weak power of solidarity."<sup>7</sup>

There are forces, however, that move us away from memory and the Baudelairean intuition of *correspondances*. They purge a mythic and literary language and seek relief in a transparent society—freed from the bondage of the past and given over to an economy of commodification or, alternatively, to a demystification that is so sure of itself that it sees nothing but one and the same thing. What is at risk is not only human variety or nonconformity, although they are indeed endangered by the reduction of human relationships to things, but also a certain quality of perception. For the thinker's constituted sensibility, his *Wahrnehmungsaparat*,<sup>8</sup> is in danger of seeing everything in the same light, tainted by a "heroic melancholy" (an expression borrowed by Benjamin from Melanchthon) that cannot escape the ennui emanating from the massive, interchangeable conformity it is always uncovering.<sup>9</sup> One of Benjamin's most chilling aphorisms from "Central Park" is "the stars represent in Baudelaire the enigma [*Vexierbild*] of the commodity. They are en masse that-which-is-always-the-same" ("Z," 1:2:660). More sinister still, if it alludes to the *novum* of "The New Angel," is the following: "For humanity, as it is today, there exists only one radical piece of news—and that is always the same: death" ("Z," 1:2:668). Even the concept of *correspondance* does not escape Benjamin's radical reduction of everything to an allegory of commodification, as if the scientist had succumbed to the infection he sought to cure.

It is this ad absurdum and melancholy clarity that inspires Benjamin's Counter-Enlightenment. It cannot be gainsaid except by Levinas's intuition that to see the other as other and not as an assimilable commodity requires more than bodies arranged in a lighted space. "The interval of space opened up by light is instantaneously absorbed by light."<sup>10</sup> Except for this deadly, totalizing clarity without a breach (against which he launches the mystical dart of a *Jetztzeit* illumination), I see no superstition in Benjamin, any more than in Baudelaire or the great romantics. His

7. "Diese Toten haben erst recht einen Anspruch auf die schwache anamnetische Kraft einer Solidarität, die Nachgeborene nur noch im Medium der immer wieder erneuerten, oft verzweifelten, jedenfalls umtreibenden Erinnerung üben können" (Jürgen Habermas, "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung," *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung* [Frankfurt am Main, 1987], p. 141).

8. Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," 1:2:505. Compare: "In the film studio the machinery of production [*Apparatur*] penetrates reality so deeply" (*ibid.*, 1:2:495).

9. For Melanchthon and "Melancholia illa heroica," see Benjamin, "Zentralpark," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:689; hereafter abbreviated "Z."

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris, 1983), p. 47.

turning to the past, to that *underground* of stars, is a utopian form of hope—the dead must be saved from the enemy by flashing into the present with a different light, by escaping their equivalence as the dead and so their indifference to memory. Benjamin's materialistic commentary (anticipated in the opening remarks to his essay on *Elective Affinities*) reactivates the inertial mythic dimension. The triumph of the latest political religion is resisted by remembering its victims, those who have no temple or who lie waiting for the messiah in mass graves.

We now understand better Benjamin's concern for the human *Wahrnehmungsgapparat*. The day of the media begins to appear like the day—that is, the night—of the locusts, and from McLuhan to Debray mediology has played a fatal role in the attempt to achieve a paparazzi kind of full exposure: always exciting, of course—whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. The videosphere, to use Debray's word, yields no cover; to be is to be seen. All of history returns not as farce but as film, and the antitheatrical prejudice finally gives up its ghost. Zappers, we can now be as protean and forgetful as we want.

Given a society that is a scene of perpetual transformation (as Valéry has said), and media that have conquered ubiquity, telluric virtues called character or ethos are undermined by the very intensity of our nostalgia for them, so that we shuttle between, on the one hand, a desperate, credulous search for the one good man or woman and, on the other, the suspicion that everything is hypocrisy or *trucage*. The plastic demon of mutability, fed by the media, is no longer typified by the eternally maligned semite in comparison to the solidly rooted burgher-patriot: everyone now is tarred with the same brush.

Yet some thinkers hold out the possibility of finding a new grounding without relapsing into mystification. Vattimo is one of them, seeking to revive hermeneutics, refusing to give up the verbal and historical sedimentation—call it a weak semantic power—that grounds the interpretive enterprise.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin is another; he perseveres in this project through the density, sometimes severity, of his phrasing, through moral and often contrarian reflections in which abstract thought is almost obscured by the most homely imagery. “The destructive character,” he writes, for example, “is the enemy of the etui-man.”<sup>12</sup> Reading this we suddenly see how important—almost as important as for the Japanese—packaging is for us, even though the etui, of course, is a more permanent and less discardable frame for the precious or comforting object.

The etui with its velvet lining is what we would like to fit into; though uncomfortably close to a casket, its miniaturizing of our desire to collect ourselves condones the small hope for integrity we have left. The etui is to

11. See Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Baltimore, 1992).

12. Benjamin, “The Destructive Character,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), p. 302.

be homely, not *unheimlich*, a negation of the jack-in-the-box, or exploding parcel. It allows us to hide out, as in childhood, not hide in. But when we read, again in Benjamin, that “the destructive character stands in the front line of the traditionalists,” we are discomfited; and Benjamin’s paradox leads by an insidious demarche to an impasse. “The destructive character stands in the front line of the traditionalists. Some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.”<sup>13</sup>

Whose liberal pride does not suffer a shock on reading this? The traditionalist and the progressive are both put in question by the impossible choice Benjamin offers. You either conserve tradition by giving it sacred and untouchable status, and so remove it from circulation, or make it more practicable, fungible, that is, modernize it—but that is to play a game which could gamble away what you wish to transmit.

In his famous essay on technology and art Benjamin realized that art was itself at risk in this game. An era of mechanical reproduction, of printing and photography, facilitates translatability from place to place and culture to culture so that art suffers the same fate as the sacred, losing its aura in the very process of transmission. By aura Benjamin meant primarily the prestige and testimonial power that come from originating in a particular time and place, even if that localization seems accidental. Perhaps the only way we can preserve the idea of the unique, or truly local and material, is by the peculiar fact that a religion, though *urbi et orbi*, claims to start in a particular place (“*Terribilis est locus iste*”) and is committed to an idiom that resists translation. The accident of origin is viewed not as an accident but as a revelation, and to depreciate or discount the event’s proper names, wild images, and other erratic details would be to disembody an appearance lodged firmly in the familiar, phenomenal world and kept there as “holy.” The material conditions, in short, become part of the sacred event and are counterconceptual to the quest for transparency.

I have taken too long. Perhaps because commentary today has no rhetorical form like the poem of ancient midrash. The darshan, or preacher, had his home plate; he knew the verse with which each portion of Scripture recited on a specific Shabbat began; and the aim of his sermon was to chose a verse as far away from home as possible, so that no one but he knew how he would get back. My problem is that I have no home base, that a diasporic and disseminative fling is all I can offer. But it is not unfitting to leave Benjamin the last word, which I translate from his essay on Goethe. “Neither the veiling form [*Hülle*] nor the veiled object is the beautiful, but the object in its veiled containment. Unveiled it would prove to be infinitely withdrawn from appearance [*unendlich un-*

13. Ibid.

*scheinbar*]. . . . Thus, in the face of everything beautiful, the idea of unveiling turns into the impossibility of unveiling. This impossibility is the idea inspiring criticism of art. Its task is not to remove or elevate the veiled form, but rather through the most precise knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] of that form to raise itself to a true perception [*Anschauung*] of what is beautiful” (“GW,” p. 141).<sup>14</sup>

14. See also the translation of this passage in “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 351.

# On Jonah and the Concept of Justice

Gershom Scholem

Translated by Eric J. Schwab

A natural point of departure for contemplating the Book of Jonah can be found in its exceptional position within the books of the Old Testament canon. Along with the Book of Micah this book stands in the middle of the books of the twelve minor prophets. All of the other writings in the prophetic canon differ from the Book of Jonah in that they contain essentially the prophecies and speeches of the prophets themselves; nowhere is any noticeable biographical interest taken in the prophet, the medium of the divine word. These books do not speak *of* prophecy, rather prophecy itself speaks. By contrast, the Book of Jonah contains no extensive prophecies whatsoever, and considered from this viewpoint its contents would be exhausted by chapter 3, verse 4b. Thus a superficial consideration might sooner expect this book to appear in the third part of the canon among the hagiographies—as it obviously seems to contain an episode from the life of a prophet, in the same way that the books of Esther and Ruth are episodes—but not in the middle of the prophetic writings. Why is it placed nevertheless at its present position, and what are the ideas and teaching of this book?

In truth the Book of Jonah is not only rightfully included among the prophetic writings but moreover it contains the very key to understanding the prophetic idea in general. It is the ironic and at the same time

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Translations of biblical verses reflect the author's German renditions, which do not always follow standard translations.

utterly earnest expression of that which achieved its shape in prophetism. It is a *pedagogical* book; it is a *didactic* book. It presents the theory, one might say, for that which the other books deliver in detail. It will prove to be the necessary and most central part of the canon of the prophets. In this perspective, its purpose is to introduce that spiritual continuum of Judaism which is its ethics—and hence its purpose is to inaugurate a problem. Every such inauguration expresses itself in a question, and precisely in this the highest education is achieved. The teacher educates through questions, not through answers.

A human being is taught a lesson about the order of what is just. And there is indeed no figure more representative for the teacher than God himself, nor one more representative for the student than the prophet, considered as he is by Judaism as the highest order of man. That God himself gives the prophet instruction is the ultimate expression of the idea that the education in question here is truly the central and decisive education. Likewise, all other relations in this book are reduced to the most simple and obvious level. The relationships are pure and the characters taken as absolutes. This clearly exemplifies the generally valid proposition that the projection plane of the canonical coincides with the phenomenological layer of absolute experience. Which means this is not a matter of pragmatic reports about facts; rather, the canonical presents its teaching in the most easily accessible way (in a pragmatic *style*), and in this second degree—simplicity—it simultaneously warns of the widespread misunderstandings that have been and will remain bound to the problem of its applicability. The object of this instruction is the idea of justice. Education is a religious-prophetic category.

The inner structure of the Book of Jonah is entirely symmetrical, and the following symbolical representation, which is more than a simile, will show this. What happens in this book? It contains an episode. This episode presents itself as the neighborhood of the critical point on a line that completes itself in the infinitude of what occurs.

1. From the infinity of the divine word a *command* is sent forth to Jonah.
2. Jonah evades the mission imposed upon him, flees, and is punished. (The movement drops.)
3. In the hymn, the movement rises to its original-unitary height.
4. Jonah carries out God's command and proclaims the destruction of Nineveh. (What happens corresponds with the divine command. This

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occurrence sets itself perpendicular to the occurrence that makes up the command, just as forces relate in physics.)

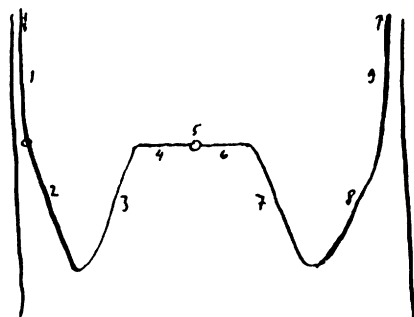
5. (Structurally the center or the point of crystallization, for this center is *neutral*.) Nineveh repents; God “turns law into justice” (Psalm 94).

6. God does not execute the sentence of destruction proclaimed by Jonah. (Numbers 4–6 are accomplished according to God’s plan, hence symbolically perpendicular to his command. The repentance of Nineveh and the transformation of law are single points, metaphysically; the non-execution by contrast is extended.)

7. Jonah quarrels with God, his misunderstanding becomes obvious.

8. God teaches Jonah the meaning of his mission in the *question*, and

9. in the infinitely echoing resonance of this question the circle of events completes itself in the unsaid.



Already this structure shows how false the widespread opinion is that number 3, that is, the hymn in chapter 2, is a later interpolation. Without this hymn the book’s completed and rigorous shape would fall apart; particularly the one cardinal point of the story’s upper plateau, the human grandeur in 4, which corresponds to the divine one in 6, would fall away completely. Command and question are the two antithetically oriented absolute acts of language’s positing that enclose the entire domain of language asymptotically.

The Book of Jonah has been characterized as a popular book, and in a certain way this is justified, namely, in the unsurpassed popularity of its style (taking this concept in its most comprehensive sense, which also primarily includes the principal plane of projection of all that occurs). This most profound book is simultaneously the most purely childlike; one could derive the concept of children’s literature from it. *Jonah is a childlike person.*

In Jonah the prophetic correlate to Job is given. Job and Jonah, these are the two great questioners, and the books that carry their names represent the two key questions in which the idea of justice constitutes and overconstitutes itself. Both books are themselves questions; both offer no

answer, rather the question itself is the solution. Jonah concludes with a question, the question through which history is called into life as opposed to the law of nature. Job as a whole is a question, which with every single “Where wast thou . . .” (chapter 38)—the cosmogonical question—becomes permanent. The Book of Job does not have the prophetic method. Jonah has it, and therefore this book stands among the prophets. Jonah is a didactic poem of prophetism, if you will. Its object—God’s justice—seems the same yet nevertheless totally different, for in the very last instance Job questions what cannot be questioned about this justice, what eludes all prophecy and is incommensurable with it. But Jonah presents precisely what can be questioned about justice (*not* the answerable, for that does not exist at all), and this is the root of prophetism. Both address the boundary of the “good” versus the “real,” but in entirely different directions. Jonah, the prophetic book, brings these boundaries into effect for the very first time and simultaneously destroys them because the good and justice are all-encompassing and everything else in contrast to them is weightless. In the Book of Jonah the boundary is a metaphysical semblance; in Job it is not, but only because a question is raised that is not fitting for us—that is the irony of Job. (In this we also find one of the reasons why the Book of Job is intrinsically related to lamentation, while such a relation is lacking in Jonah. One cannot lament about semblance.) The irony of Jonah is different, it is a prophetic irony. The prophet does not understand prophetism; what he does is essentially politics.

The structure of Jonah is directly opposed to that of the other prophetic books, for the main concern is not the objects of prophecy, other humans, but instead the prophet himself—the subject or rather the medium of prophecy. Precisely this mediumistic transparency makes it such a crystalline presentation of the prophetic problem. The evildoers in this book are virtually eliminated; Nineveh repents. The autochthonic difficulty of their problem is cancelled, the threads of the problem never get confused.

The question is an unending cycle; the symbol of this infinitude, in which the possibility of an empirical end is given, is the rhetorical question. This (“Jewish”) question can be justly characterized as medial; it knows no answer, which means its answer must in essence be another question; in the innermost basis of Judaism the concept of an answer does not exist. In the Torah there are neither questions nor answers. The Hebrew word for answer is *teshuvah*, which, correctly translated, means: response, reversal—reversal of the question, that is, which is assigned a new value and thus returns, as it were. Viewed in this way the principle of Talmudic dialectics is easily comprehensible.

The deep conflict of the Book of Jonah resides in Jonah’s desire to see an identity between prophecy, which from an empirical point of view is a prediction of the future, and historiography, which is a prediction of the past. The prediction about the future should not be any different

from one about the past: Nineveh is annihilated in the prophecy (precisely from a historian's standpoint). Chapter 3, verse 4b expresses this with a deeply rooted double meaning, "Forty days more and Nineveh is overturned," which from Jonah's standpoint is meant as a statement of fact, from God's standpoint as a warning. God Himself teaches the meaning of prophecy to the one He has sent by showing him that the categories that Jonah applies to nature (and in the first chapter even to himself) He applies to history. Jonah takes the standpoint of the law, and from this side he is indeed in the right; God takes that of justice; God denies the (mythical) law in history. In the act of repentance, the law is overcome and the judgment is not carried out. (On this, compare Psalm 94:14–15, particularly the interconnection of the two verses.) This, and nothing else, is the meaning of justice in the deepest sense: that judgment is allowed, but the execution of it remains something entirely different. The unequivocal connection of the judge's decision to the executive power—a connection that defines the actual order of law—is suspended by the deferment on the part of the executive power. This is what God does with Nineveh. The conclusion of 4:10—he had passed a sentence in order to carry it out, and he did not (yet) do it—is a classic statement of the idea of justice. Where the court pronounces a verdict, justice raises a question. As Daniel says: "In the counsel of the guardians a decree and in the verdict of the holy ones a question"—this is justice.

The following theses are intended to give expression to the content of this idea as it permeates not just the Book of Jonah but also all of Judaism in the widest scope.

1. Justice is the idea of the historical annihilation of divine judgment, and just is that deed which neutralizes divine judgment upon it. Justice is the indifference of the Last Judgment; that means, within it unfolds that sphere in which the enactment of the Last Judgment is infinitely deferred.<sup>1</sup> Messianic is that realm which no Last Judgment follows. Therefore the prophets demand justice, in order infinitely to eliminate the Last Judgment. In just actions, the messianic realm is immediately erected.

2. All prophetic concepts are concepts of distance. The just man (*zad-dik*) lives in the true distance: "The just man lives in his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4); for faith is a relationship based on a distance. Deferral, and hence the order of distance most important for the constitution of the concept of justice, contains in itself the ground of duration, the *being* of justice. Distance is the methodical idea of all prophetic concepts, and, therefore,

1. In monotheistic religions, death is thought of as a movement. And because the concept of movement was misinterpreted into meaning something mechanical, death became the movement into the other world. In the religious topography it had to stand in the middle and thus where life was viewed as a straight line, this line had to be extended. The true concept of movement, however, implies a concept of life that is not just a straight line. The life fulfilled within this order is the tribunal; the idea of the Last Judgment is the absolute positing of a temporal order whose pure life is death.

precisely, the “nearness to God is his [the just man’s—trans.] good” (Psalm 73:28).

3. The positing of the question is the verdict of justice (see above); the Book of Jonah ends with a question.

4. Divine judgment is the judgment that is its own execution.

5. Divine judgment is anticipation of the Last Judgment applied in a special case. The theory of divine judgment and its various categories is the border domain between ethics and religion. But this concept, the only one in Judaism that in its essence includes anticipation, gets neutralized and annihilated in prophetism. Those systems of order in which this neutralization is carried out are themselves in no way capable of anticipation, and this comprises one of the deepest differences between the concepts of Judaism and the mythical ones of Christianity, to whose innermost essence the possibility of their anticipation belongs. (Faith, love, and hope can be anticipated.)

6. The deferral that has become action is justice as deed (*zedakah*). From this can be deduced the meaning “good deed,” which this concept has (almost) exclusively in later Judaism. The good deed, for example the giving of alms, as that work which the poor may claim in the name of God but no longer in the name of the law (S. R. Hirsch), is a deferral of one executive power by another. Over the poor shall come judgment as over the rich. (“Thou shalt not prefer the poor man before the tribunal.”) But this judgment is not to be carried out; the poor man stands under God’s command. *And this nonexecution is not possible other than through another execution, which in regard to the poor man becomes a good deed.* Accordingly, this concept is unknown in Hebrew since justice already contains it. (*Gemilut hesed* is an utterly different concept and not really central; it means humanity in one’s behavior.)

The fundamental difference between justice and love, as well as their fundamental affinity, cannot be developed here in detail. Love is the annihilation of judgment, justice that of the execution; one who loves does not judge. Justice and the law complement each other and coincide; love and the law exclude each other.

7. The famous saying in Proverbs 10:2 means: “To act in deferral delivers from death,” and specifically not just the one who acts, but all beings. This may also account for the great triumph of justice in Talmudic law and in rabbinical Judaism. A court of law that in seventy years had executed one sentence of death was named homicidal. The Torah knows the death penalty; Talmudic law does not question it but enacts the idea of deferral by imposing an extraordinary burden of proof in all criminal cases. Through such a burden judgment is rendered practically impossible. The underlying idea, however, always remains the same: judgment is possible, its execution is not possible. The human court’s verdict does not entail its execution; justice fills the abyss between them.

8. The symbolical deed is the just deed. The deed void of meaning

is the just deed. To act in deferral implies to eliminate meaning. The meaningful deed is the mythical one and answers to Fate. *Justice eliminates Fate*. Isaiah 65:19–24 not only indicates the elimination of Fate in messianic time but also provides the method of this elimination in the idea of deferral. For the messianic center of justice is expressed there *ironically*, since in truth there are not any sinners in messianic time.

9. The historical ideas of the Bible all relate to the temporal concept of the eternal present. Messianic time as eternal present, and justice as something that is present and substantial, are corresponding notions. Were justice not present, then the messianic realm too would not only not be present but would be altogether impossible. Justice, like all Jewish concepts, is not a border concept, not liminal, not some mechanically infinite, ever-approachable regulative idea. (Whatever is liminal can be anticipated: the secret of Christianity.) “The reason for what the wise men call the world to come is not that this coming world is not already present, and that only after the demise of this world the other one would come. This is not how things are; rather, that world is continually present” (Maimonides). Prophetism is the prediction of the eternal present.

10. In Judaism it is the idea of justice that designates the relationship of the canonical to tradition. Without this idea, tradition and the canonical remain strangers without any actual connection to each another. But precisely in the justice that arises from the canonical, tradition is attained and founded at the deepest level. For the idea of tradition means just this: the (written) Torah cannot be applied. It is the Law of God, the right that is not yet justice but rather transforms into it in the unending deferral of tradition. In it, revelation and messianic time are bound together inseparably.

11. Ethically different actions form a steady stream of transformations;<sup>2</sup> the self-transforming deed is just. The singular, unsteady deed is the unjust and evil one. There is no continuity of Evil. The world of transformation is the messianic realm, the Time of Justice. (The story is told of Baal-Schem that he said the following about an ascetic who performed mystical deeds, and thus distinguished himself through singular actions: “In the world of transformations they’re laughing about him.”) In justice the absolute constancy of the highest ethical sphere is presented. Justice is the order of the world (*tikkun shel olam*) and the messianic realm the world of order (*olam hatikkun*).

12. In the same way that the world to come already exists, the justice to come also exists. This coming is its unfolding; *zedakah* does not become but reveals, unfolds itself (Isaiah 56:1). Its coming is only the breaking

2. Transformation—compare Tikkune Sohar 60b/61a f: “The transformation—that is the lower *shekhinah* (the ‘realm’), which is transformation.” But in messianic time nothing transforms any more; the name of God becomes *speakeable*, which now can only be written (*Mishnah!*). The manifold paradoxicality of this passage is symbolic: the realm itself is read messianically!!

through of the shining medium through a darkening. Therefore, as well, the *zaddik*, the just man (for instance in chassidism) is only *mitgaleh*. Nobody can become a *zaddik*, he can only be one. The “hidden just man” however is the category in which prophetism unfolded the concept of tradition. This category is the living heritage of prophetism in the midst of the Jewish people. The fellow human is the hidden just man; he hands down the nameless things. Upon these just ones, who shine invisibly, Jewish popular belief builds the existence of the world (the sayings of the thirty-six hidden ones, the *niztarim*). The death of the just ones is hidden; it is the *zedakah* that happens to them, no longer the one that they do. This death is the last, absolute deferral in which the distance transforms the poles of its relation and *faith* passes over to God.

Seen from this standpoint, the problem of the Book of Jonah can also be grasped in this way: its conflict is based on a fundamental confusion. For why does Jonah want to identify prophetism with historiography? It is clear that he is confusing the eternal and the noneternal present. In Nineveh he is supposed to make a prediction about the eternal present, but he himself considers this prediction as bearing on the noneternal one. The times that *transform* themselves within the eternal present are supposed to be identical. But what is identical does not transform itself, and what transforms itself is not identical. This is the basis of the story’s jokelike aspect. (In the same way, many jokes are based on a shifting of accent in expression. In this sense, 3:4 is the point of the joke.) It would be an error to claim, as often happens, that the inner center is to be found in the repentance of Nineveh, hence in the proof of the positive effect of the prophetic word, and therefore that its contrast to the rest of the prophetic books consists exclusively in the focus having shifted from the prophet to those at whom the prophecy is directed. Rather, the repentance only serves to inaugurate the more significant problem of the divine deferral, and in this way also is to be understood why in the Jewish liturgy the Book of Jonah has its place as *haftarah* in the Mincha-prayer of the Day of Atonement. The temporal idea of this holiday is expressed by the Book of Jonah in a distinct way. One who prays on this day learns what it means to be just, and what else does the Day of Atonement demand from him but this?

### *Remarks about Individual Passages*

*Chapter 1.* Although the episodic “and” is entirely customary in the usage of historical narrative, perhaps it may be permitted here to take it in its original meaning as a symbol of the infinitude of the event in which God’s word goes out to Jonah. Chapter 1 likewise already states indirectly the idea of justice. Achad Ha’am might rightfully have drawn on this

chapter in order to illustrate the arguments he puts forward in “Die Schwankenden” [The Undecided Ones]. All the more so since the decision here is given from the outset because the whole thing is presented as a divine judgment. The sailors are right to call for a twofold divine judgment. The double meaning of the end of 1:14 once again points to the problem of the whole: (1) “as it *has* pleased you, so you (will) actually do”—Jonah’s view, and (2) “as it pleases you, you can do.”

*Chapter 4:4* can be translated: “Are you right to be angry?” or “To do a good deed, does it anger you?” That the double meaning in the text is intentional could be concluded from the accentuation, which differs from that of the isophonic word in 4:9; the word *haheytev* [that is, “one who does good”—trans.] has a dividing accent (*tipcha*) in the first, a connecting accent (*mercha*) in the second.