



**NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE**  
NUMBER 83 • SPRING/SUMMER 2001

**WALTER BENJAMIN**

**MARKUS • COMMODITY AS PHANTASMAGORIA**

**STEINER • BENJAMIN'S CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL**

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# NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE

Number 83

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**CONTRIBUTORS**

NOAH ISENBERG teaches in the Department of German Studies at Wesleyan University.

DAVID KAUFMANN is the chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at George Mason University.

CHRISTOPHER P. LONG teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Richard Stockton College.

MICHAEL LÖWY is research director at the CNRS (National Center of Scientific Research) and a lecturer at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris.

GYORGY MARKUS teaches in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney.

UWE STEINER teaches in the Department of German and Slavic Studies at Rice University.



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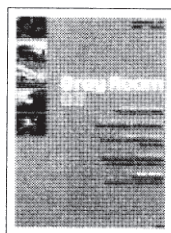
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## *Walter Benjamin or The Commodity as Phantasmagoria*

Gyorgy Markus

“The artwork as commodity”—such a title would seem to designate an approach to art that is particularly well suited to theories within the Marxist tradition as it is broadly conceived. In fact, however, it was not until the early 1930s that elaborate commodity analyses of art began to appear in this tradition. It was primarily Brecht and Adorno who tried to show that the commodity’s form not only affects its potential recipients and fundamentally influences its content, but also determines the fate of art under capitalism. For these writers, what was important were the conditions of modern capitalism under which works of art appeared as marketable goods of a specific type.

Marx’s own views concerning art, however, were deeply embedded in the humanist aesthetics of German Idealism. Marx regarded the progressive commodification of all products of human activities as constituting an aspect of capitalist production, which made it “hostile to art and poetry” in general.<sup>1</sup> The commodity form of aesthetic productivity proper, however, appeared to be an *externally* imposed, aggravating, and restricting condition that necessarily remains alien to the products’ own logic and norms. Actually this condition is already implied by the central notion of “socially necessary labor time.” In the Marxian analysis of commodity, “socially necessary labor time” determines the objective value of a commodity. Since it can only be applied to products which are socially *reproducible*, it has no meaning for genuine works of

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1. Marx-Engels, *Werke* 26.1 (Berlin: Dietz) 257.

#### 4 The Commodity as Phantasmagoria

art as strictly individual and irreplaceable objects of human creativity (characteristics Marx accepts as self-evident). The artwork as universal human value can thus have no economic value in the proper sense, only an irrational, both economically and aesthetically accidental, *price*. And this means that the “laws” of capitalist commodity production cannot explain the historical evolution of modern art, beyond positing the general conflict between these two.

In fact, beginning from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx’s oeuvre tends to treat artistic production as the prototype of unalienated human activity.<sup>2</sup> Thus he evokes in the *Grundrisse* musical composition as the existing example of “genuinely free laboring.”<sup>3</sup> Then, in the manuscript of 1865 (the so-called “seventh chapter of the Capital”), he contrasts the paid scribbler to the authentic poet, who produces his work “like the silkworm produces silk, as the active affirmation [*Betätigung*] of *his own* nature.”<sup>4</sup> This is the other reason why genuinely artistic (and scientific) activities can never come to the situation of “real subsumption under capital.” As he repeatedly stressed, they can be “formally” subsumed under capitalist relations of production only to a limited degree.<sup>5</sup>

In *History and Class-Consciousness* Georg Lukács departs from the Marxian analysis of commodity as the elementary and universal form of social wealth under capitalist conditions to develop the theory of reification. Lukács purports to demonstrate that “in the structure of commodity-relation one can discover the model of all forms of objectivity as well as that of the corresponding to them forms of subjectivity in capitalist society.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the form of commodity is able “to penetrate and to remold in its own image every life-expression of this society.”<sup>7</sup> Aside from the direct experiences of the commercialization of arts, especially palpable in the new, mass media, it was the Lukácsian

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2. This point has been underlined in the late writings of Lukács and by Ernst Fischer, and has been convincingly argued by R. H. Jauss, “The Idealist Embarrassment: Observations on Marxist Aesthetics,” *New Literary History* 7 (1975-76): esp. 199.

3. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* ([1856-1857] Berlin: Dietz, 1953) 505.

4. Marx, *Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses* ([1865] Frankfurt/Main: Neue Kritik, 1969) 70.

5. Cf. Marx-Engels, *Werke* 26.1: 385-86 and Marx, *Resultate* 70, 73-74ff.

6. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT, 1997) 257.

7. Lukács 259.



theory of reification that constituted the general starting point of attempts to utilize the basic categories of the Marxian commodity-analysis in the realm of aesthetics. Lukács himself, however, did not take this step. Following Marx, he actually regarded “authentic” art as an exemption from and a countervailing factor to the universal process of reification. Though in *History and Class-Consciousness* problems of art occupy a rather marginal place, Lukács’s whole conception of praxis as subject-object identity is not only essentially modeled upon artistic activity; he also explicitly treats art as the living example of the possibility of a non-reified relation to reality. It is, for him, “the creation of a concrete totality due to a conception of the form, which is directed at the concrete content of its material substratum.”<sup>8</sup> Lukács bases his critique of the “aestheticism” of Schiller and the young Schelling not on the denial of the defetishizing power of art, but on the argument that the aesthetic attitude necessarily remains both derivative and contemplative. Aestheticism is merely an ideal relation of the isolated subject to reality; alternatively the aesthetic must be transformed into the constitutive principle of reality itself through a mythologizing, irrationalist ontology.<sup>9</sup> Art therefore can only impose a form upon the antinomies of reification. It cannot provide a real, practical solution to them.<sup>10</sup>

In his brilliant essay of 1932,<sup>11</sup> Adorno draws the fundamental consequences from the Lukácsian theory of reification for the situation of the modern art: commodification is both the basic social precondition of its autonomy *and* the socioeconomic process which threatens irrevocable liquidation. He develops the aesthetic implications of this contradiction for contemporary production and reception of music. A year earlier and from a radically different orientation, Brecht employed elements of the Marxian analysis of commodity to characterize the contemporary situation of arts. Brecht used his own practical experiences with the filming of the *Threepenny Opera* and the ensuing legal process over author’s rights as a “sociological experiment” to test the accepted ideas about the autonomy of art, spiritual values, and authorial independence through

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8. Lukács 317-18. The explanation of this “defetishizing” capacity of genuine art is based at this time on the (later certainly abandoned) idea that art is primarily concerned with “man’s encounter with nature” (411).

9. Lukács 320-21.

10. Lukács 341.

11. Theodor Adorno, “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1932).

their confrontation with the practice of the production of the artwork as commodity.<sup>12</sup> This experiment made manifest the purely illusory character of these ideas. It demonstrated the “enormous power” and “reshaping force of the commodity-form,” the determination of the very structure of the work of art by the “viewpoint of its selling.”<sup>13</sup> In its early phases, commodification of art disrupts all direct contacts between the artist and his/her public<sup>14</sup> and creates the conditions for the emergence of a secularized conception of autonomous art. Its later development, especially in mass media, directly unmasks this idea as mere ideology. Brecht specifically underlines that this holds true for every genre of literature and art. “In reality, of course, it is the whole art which without any exception found itself in the new situation, . . . art as a whole becomes commodity or it does not become it at all.”<sup>15</sup> Due to this process, the traditional concept of a “work of art” loses its applicability in general.

Brecht, however, does not regard this commodification process as totally negative. By destroying the aesthetic ideology of authorial self-expression and empathic reception in the individual artwork, it at least negatively makes way for a new conception and practice of art as a collective “pedagogical discipline.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, especially within the sphere of commercialized mass culture, technological developments (such as the technique of montage) have deeply influenced aesthetic production in the “high genres” (such as the novel or drama) of allegedly autonomous art as well. Under the economic husk of commodity incubate new artistic materials and techniques, which can be put to a progressive use, *if*

12. See Bertolt Brecht, “Der Dreigroschenprozess. Ein soziologisches Experiment” [1931], *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* 1 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967) 139-209.

13. Brecht, “Dreigroschenprozess” 167 and 181-82.

14. “Through the centuries-long habituation of dealing with the written work on the market of opinions and descriptions, through the fact that the concern with the written work has been removed from the writer, he received the impression that his publisher or customer, the middle-man, will transmit what he wrote to everyone . . . ‘[W]riting for someone’ became simply ‘writing’. One, however, cannot simply write the truth; one must write it precisely for someone, who can do something with it.” See Brecht, “Fünf Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben der Wahrheit,” *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* 1: 229-30.

15. Brecht, “Fünf Schwierigkeiten” 159.

16. Brecht, “Fünf Schwierigkeiten” 158. Brecht’s advocacy of a non-autonomous, political-educative, “operative” art in fact amounts to the conscious espousal of returning to the pre-modern understanding of “art” as useful and teachable skill in general. “It would be much more useful not to comprehend the concept ‘art’ in a too narrow way. One could safely draw into the orbit of its definition such arts as the art of operating, lecturing, machine building, and flying.” See Brecht, “Notizen über realistische Schreibweise,” *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* 2: 350.

the re-functioning of the involved social apparatuses – and with them of the practice of art itself – become social reality. “[T]he recasting of spiritual values into commodities (works of art, contracts, legal processes are indeed commodities) is a progressive process and one can only approve it – presupposed that progress is understood as what advances forward, and not as the state of advancement, consequently that also the stage of commodity is regarded as capable of being overcome through further advancement. The capitalist mode of production smashes to pieces the bourgeois ideology.” Moreover, Brecht continues, “the technique, which is victorious here and which seems unable to deliver anything else but profit for some reptiles and thereby to promote barbarism, in the right hands will be able to do something completely different.”<sup>17</sup> This commodity analysis of art allows Brecht, in opposition to Lukács’s condemnation of modernist art in general as a phenomenon of decadence characteristic of a class in decline, to selectively affirm definite tendencies of aesthetic modernism and, of course, to make use of them in his own literary practice.<sup>18</sup>

17. Brecht, “Notizen,” *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* 1: 201-04.

18. On this well-known aspect of the Lukács-Brecht debate see Heinz Brüggemann, “Aspekte einer marxistischen Produktionsästhetik,” *Erweiterung der marxistischen Literaturtheorie durch Bestimmung ihrer Grenzen*, ed. Heinz Schlaffer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974). One point, however, needs to be made against Brüggemann’s rather one-sided representation of this dispute (in general characteristic of much of the relevant literature). Brecht’s spirited and admirable defense of the “standpoint of production,” of artistic innovation with its never avoidable risk of failure, is the demand of a *privilege* for the exceptional “producer” needing appropriate conditions of work – a privilege deserved by, and based upon, the trust in his unconditional commitment. What concerns the *rights* of the individual in general, Brecht’s denial of them in the coming, new social order is radical. “We approach the epoch of mass-politics. What sounds comical in the case of the individual (‘I do not give myself the freedom of thought’), does not sound so in the case of the masses. The masses do not think individually free. . . . The masses of our epoch, directed by common interests, constantly reorganising themselves in accord with them and nevertheless functioning in unison, these masses are moved by quite determined laws of thought which are not generalisations of individual thinking. . . . The kind of freedom, which the laws of competition force upon the capitalists, will not be preserved by thought in the next stage of development beyond capitalism. But an other kind of freedom” (Brecht, *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* 1: 178-79). One must, however, also add that similar ideas and sentiments can be found at this time in the writings of the majority of leftist intellectuals, not only with Lukács of the 1920s, but in the much later essays of Benjamin as well. “In order to endow the collectivity with humane features, the individual must be able to endure inhumane ones. Humanness must be sacrificed at the level of individual existence, in order to make an appearance at the level of collective existence.” Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2.3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 1102. An illiberal anti-individualism constituted a premise, which in a subterranean way was often shared by the representatives of the right and the left – a point which perhaps can offer some lessons for the present, too.

The later writings of Walter Benjamin seem to echo and supplement the views of Brecht discussed above. This is particularly true in the two essays that made him a cult-figures of the left in the 1960s: "The Author as Producer" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction." Even today their main ideas largely determine the general image of Benjamin as theorist: first, the inevitable demise of autonomous, "auratic" art due to the development of technologies of mass reproduction qualitatively altering the nature of a work of art. Secondly, there is the "politicization of art," its transformation into a laboratory of instruction and organization inseparable from an innovatory artistic technique as the requisite radical answer to the dissolution of aesthetic aura. Lastly, Benjamin affirmed the critical, emancipatory potential of mass culture, particularly film. This potential was conferred by the progressive technology and techniques of production. Benjamin, reconstructed along these lines, is often regarded as trying "to outbid Brecht in radicalism."<sup>19</sup> In comparison to Brecht, Benjamin's views are supposed to lead to a "fetishization of technology"<sup>20</sup> as an autonomously developing, in itself progressive, force. This is certainly a strange charge against a thinker who saw in the idolatry of technology and in the faith in an irresistible progress spurred on by the growing mastery over nature the "technocratic features later encountered in fascism."<sup>21</sup> But it is no stranger than Benjamin's own characterization of the post-auratic, emancipatory transformation of art endowing it with a particular "utilizability" [*Verwertbarkeit*], with a "revolutionary use-value" [*Gebrauchswert*]<sup>22</sup> – given the fact that he simultaneously thought of the emancipated world as one in which "the liberation of things from the compulsion to be useful"<sup>23</sup> becomes reality, since labor will then proceed according to "the model of children's play," being directed not at the production of values, but at making an "improved nature."<sup>24</sup>

Such criticisms are therefore not baseless. It is easy to indicate a whole series of formulations in the writings of Benjamin that make them perti-

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19. Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) 112.

20. John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 108. For an elaborate evaluation along these lines see Brüggemann.

21. Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," *GS* 1.2: 699.

22. Benjamin, "Der Autor als Produzent," *GS* 2.2: 693 and 695.

23. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 277.

24. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk* 456.



ment.<sup>25</sup> These formulations, however, constitute only one of the extreme poles<sup>26</sup> of that “no-man’s land” that Benjamin determinedly conquered for himself and the isolation he so hated and half-heartedly attempted again and again to overcome. The boundaries of this “no-man’s land”<sup>27</sup> were drawn by his relations to the three references of his intellectual life: Brecht, Adorno, and Gershom Scholem. His (very one-sided) solidarity with Brecht cannot and should not conceal the fact that their endeavors and ends were, even in the essays mentioned, fundamentally different.

For Brecht the autonomy of art is and always has been an ideological illusion hiding only its subservience to the interests of capital. Socio-economic changes, directly involving the position of the intellectual in

25. The designation of technical revolutions as those loci of rupture in the development of arts which predate, and direct, the changes both in the form and content of artworks. Cf. “Erwiderung an Oscar Schmitz,” *GS* 2.2: 752-53; technical progress as the foundation of the author’s political progress. Cf. “Der Autor als Produzent” 693. The possibility of predicting the developmental trends of “superstructure” from observations concerning the changes in the conditions of cultural production, primarily in the ways of reproduction of works of culture, and on the analogy with the Marxian prognoses in regard of the future evolution of the economic base of capitalism. See “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung),” *GS* 1.2: 473ff. Hereafter referred to as “Kunstwerk” in the notes.

26. “To act always, in all the most important matters, radically, never consistently”; “to decide not once for all, but in each moment-but *to decide*.” Benjamin, “Letter to Gershom Scholem (29.5.1926),” *Briefe* 1, eds. Scholem and Adorno (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1978) 425. All three of his critic-friends are, in their sharply opposed objections and advises, right against him: his writings ambiguously juxtapose, often without theoretical mediation and resolution, contradictory impulses. They are also fundamentally wrong: they miss the theoretical project and conception, which underlie this practical stand of welcoming seemingly irreconcilable extremes. At the most immediate level this stand corresponds to Benjamin’s conviction that the meaning of a concept/conception is to be found not in what all the subsumable phenomena identically *share*, but in the *extremes* it is able to encompass. And if the fundamental undecided ambiguity of Benjamin’s oeuvre is located in a problematic admixture of Messianism and Marxism, then this also should be seen on the background of his life-long striving: through its radical profanization both to overcome and to “save” the mythical. For an interpretation along these lines see Walter Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).

27. I borrowed this expression from Irving Wohlfahrt, “No-Man’s-Land: On Walter Benjamin’s ‘Destructive Character,’” *Diacritics* 8.2 (1978). The antagonistic impulses governing Benjamin’s oeuvre and the fragile unity of an underlying project were first outlined in the path-breaking essay by Habermas that actually initiated, after the various earlier attempts at the one-sided “appropriation” of Benjamin, a deeper reception and understanding of his work. See Jürgen Habermas, “Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik,” *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamin*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972). On the boundaries and limits of Benjamin’s “no-man’s land,” see also the enlightening paper of S. Radnóti, “Benjamin’s Dialectic of Art and Society,” *Philosophical Forum* 15.1-2 (1983).

the cultural apparatuses, belie its lie. Literary and sociological “experiments” should directly *demonstrate* these facts to create a *critical-political* consciousness that lays bare all phrases of creative freedom and eternal cultural values. The only freedom offered in this society is the freedom of expropriation of surplus value.

For Benjamin, on the other hand, the aura, which expresses and substantiates the autonomous existence of the artwork in the period of classical capitalism, is not a consciously created, misleading ideological façade. It is the historically-socially imposed relation of the recipient to the work of art. It is an objective feature of the “collective experience” of art which in this period guides the production of its works, the way they are structured. The collective experience of art equally determines the typical comprehension of works of the more remote past, created under different conditions of production and reception.<sup>28</sup> It defines not what a work means, but the *manner* in which it *can mean* something for the contemporary public, because the meaning of a work is not some fixed quality inhering in it, but is inseparable from the (historically changing) ways of its reception, and, more generally, from its pre- and post-history.<sup>29</sup> The dissolution of aura, associated with the new technical possibilities of mass reproduction, is seen in the context (and as a symptom) of profound changes in the collective apperception of reality in general,<sup>30</sup> themselves expressing altered ways of life and new modes of habituation to the world. And the illumination of these connections aims at the *awakening* of consciousness from the dream-like compulsion of its “natural” way of perceiving the world and endowing it with meaning, a way which is only the unintentional expression of a petrified and reified form of life. It aims to enable consciousness to decipher its images and in this way to set free that “weak Messianistic power” –

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28. “A medieval image of the Madonna was indeed not yet ‘authentic’ [*echt*] at the time of its making; it became ‘authentic’ in the course of the succeeding centuries and most strikingly so during the last one” (Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” 476).

29. “For someone who is concerned with the works [of art] from the standpoint of historical dialectic, they integrate both their pre- and their post-history – a post-history due to which also their pre-history becomes comprehensible as being drawn into a continuous change. The works teach this person how their function can outlive their creator, leaving behind his intentions; how their reception by his contemporaries is a part of the effect which the work of art has upon us today; and how this effect rests not solely upon the encounter with the work in question, but also upon that history which allowed it to come down to our own age.” See Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker,” *GS* 2.2: 467.

30. Cf. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung) 503.

the utopian potential which is dormant even in the most depraved forms of experiencing as collective unconscious meaning-creating activity.

Seen in this broader and, to my mind, more appropriate context, the “Artwork” essay appears directly related to the task that stood at the centre of Benjamin’s philosophical interests since the beginning of his literary activity: the creation of a new conception and theory of *experience*.<sup>31</sup> Through all the changes in the comprehension and realization of this task, some fundamental continuities remained in his approach. On the one hand, it always entailed a program of regaining “the fullness of the concept of experience of the earlier philosophers”<sup>32</sup> against its narrow Kantian understanding, based upon the subject-object paradigm and tendentially reducing it to scientific observation, that is, to “the minimum of meaning.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin conceived this reductive conception of experience as a “singularly temporal” and “temporally restricted” one.<sup>34</sup> That is, Benjamin insisted upon the radical historicity of experience, including the organization of sense-perception itself.<sup>35</sup> “During long stretches of historical time, with alterations in the entire mode of existence of human collectivity, changes take place also in the mode of sense-perception. The way and manner of the organization of human sense-perception – the medium in which it unfolds – is not only naturally, but also socially conditioned.”<sup>36</sup> Benjamin found the key to and model of this changing organization and mode of experiencing ultimately in *language*. “Every expression of human spiritual life can be conceived as a kind of language, and this conception implies, in the manner of a true method,

31. Cf. Benjamin, “*Erfahrung*” (1913) and “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie” (1918), *GS* 2.1: 54-56 and 157-71.

32. Benjamin, “Über die Wahrnehmung” (1917), *GS* 6: 35.

33. Benjamin, “Über das Programm” 159. Benjamin here defines his own task as providing “under the typics of Kantian thought the epistemological founding of a higher concept of experience” which would render “not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible” (160 and 164).

34. Benjamin, “Über das Programm” 158.

35. It is at this point that Benjamin, originally motivated primarily by metaphysical-religious considerations, finds an unexpected coincidence between his own views and those of Lukács concerning history as the sequence of alterations in the principles of object-constitution and the corresponding to them forms of subject-relation. In *History and Class Consciousness*, writes Benjamin in a letter to Scholem, much predating any general theoretical interest on his side in Marxism, “Lukács comes, on the ground of political considerations, to such propositions in epistemology which are – at least partially and perhaps not in such a far-reaching way as I originally supposed – either well familiar to me or confirm my views.” 16 Sept. 1924, *Briefe* 1: 355.

36. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung) 478.

new ways of posing the questions everywhere.”<sup>37</sup>

Experience rests upon a mimetic capacity: the ability to produce and apprehend similarities. Human experience is organized around “non-sensuous” similarities and correspondences, the apprehension of which is made possible by language alone.<sup>38</sup> Language, however, is not to be identified with a system of signifiers arbitrarily related – as *means* of communication – to some signified, externally associated content. This represents only one aspect of language. One can communicate *what* is meant *through* language, because the *way* it is meant is directly and unintentionally expressed, physiognomically revealed *in* language as the *medium* of communication.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, to understand the intentions of an interlocutor it is not sufficient to comprehend to what his or her words and sentences refer. It is also necessary to grasp the pragmatic force of the utterances, which may be directly expressed solely in countenance, tone of the voice, or the manner of speaking. And great historical changes concern primarily not *what* is experienced and meant, but the *way* they are experienced and meant: the ways the world is perceived and the modalities of meaning socially accepted as appropriate for its characterization.

But what is directly (“magically”) revealed *in* language cannot be formulated and stated *through* it. For the contemporaries their way of experiencing meaning is “natural” and takes on the appearance of an ahistorical “ever-same.” And although the ruinous remnants of other pasts, not least in their works of art, are at our disposal, their truth is deposited first of all in those insignificant details which jar our habitual sensitivity.<sup>40</sup> They are usually assimilated to our own way of perception

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37. Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (1916), *GS* 2.1: 140. Hereafter referred to in the notes as “Über Sprache.”

38. Cf. Tiedemann, *Dialektik im Stillstand* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) 18. Concerning Benjamin’s conception of language, see Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980).

39. Cf. Benjamin, “Über Sprache” 141-43; *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1921), *GS* 4.1: 14-15; Benjamin, “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” (1933), *GS* 2.1: 208-09ff.

40. “The ‘insignificant’ . . . is the inconspicuous, or even the shocking (the two are not in contradiction) which survives the times in the genuine works and constitutes the point, in which the content breaks through for the true investigator” (Benjamin, “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft (Erste Fassung),” *GS* 3: 366). And: “The appreciation or apology seeks to cover up the revolutionary moments in the course of history. It has the establishment of continuity at heart. It pays attention only to those elements of the work which already have been incorporated into its after-effect. It misses those points at which the transmission breaks down, thus it misses what is rugged and jagged in it, what offers a foothold to the person who intends to get beyond apology.” (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 592).



and receptivity. To free the historical energies of the present, its promise of a radically other future hidden under the spell of the “ever-same,” one needs to “resurrect” the past – not *any* past, but that which, as its “origin,”<sup>41</sup> discloses an affinity with our way of creating and apprehending meaning. In this way, what is the most natural to us appears in an unfamiliar garb as strange, and what is alien discloses itself as equally “natural.” This labor of recollection demands, however, not the description and explanation of *the* past, of what has been, the continuous sequence of dead facts in their totality causally conditioning the present, but the “blasting out” of *a* past from the continuum of homogeneous time. Out of its fragmentary remnants is constructed a “dialectical image” which makes it able to be literally re-experienced and brings it to sensuous presence [*Anschaulichkeit*] again.<sup>42</sup>

“I have nothing to say. Only to show. I will not steal anything valuable, nor appropriate some ingenious formulations. But the trivia, the debris; not to draw up their inventory, but to allow them to come into their own in the only way possible: by using them.”<sup>43</sup> Benjamin had an idiosyncratic method of “literary montage,” of the archaeology of the debris. This seemingly violent juxtaposition of fragments torn from their contexts contained isolated poetic images and literary modes of expression (of Baudelaire, Hugo, Blanqui, Nietzsche, and so forth) together with objects and facts of past social history (arcades, panoramas, department stores, middle-class *intérieurs*, and so on). Both share some typical ways of conduct and experience (of the *flâneur*, the collector, the gambler, the prostitute, etc.). All this is not, as Adorno suggested,<sup>44</sup> a misguided attempt to make philosophy “surrealistic,” nor is it a “poetization of causal analysis,” a development of an aestheticized Marxism in symbolist form.<sup>45</sup> It is connected with the fundamental theoretical premises and the ultimate practical ends of his thought: to endow the past with “a higher degree of actuality than it could have possessed in the moment of its existence,” for it is the ability to dialectically penetrate

41. On Benjamin’s concept of “origin” see Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* 76-84 and Kurz, “Benjamin: Kritisch gelesen,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 23.3-4 (1976): 179-80.

42. Cf. first of all Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *GS* 1.2: 693ff.

43. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 574. The first formulation of this thought had a different ending in Benjamin’s manuscript: “I will not describe, but exhibit them” (*Passagen-Werk*, *GS* 5.2: 1030).

44. Cf. Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 26.

45. Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 220.

and to bring to sensuous presence [*Vergegenwärtigung*] its past which constitutes “the test of truth of contemporary action.”<sup>46</sup>

Benjamin’s theoretical turn to Marxism, which significantly post-dated his practical solidarity with communist politics, was motivated by the recognition that the historically changing ways of collective experience and meaning-creation are inseparable from changes in the economic life-activities, manifested in the material-practical livelihood of human communities. To exhibit not only the “formal signature of a historical type of perception,” but also “to show the social transformations which found their expression in these changes of perception”<sup>47</sup> became his self-chosen task. In the underlying continuity of his theoretical project it meant for him an attempt “to combine the accomplishment of Marxist method with heightened sensuous emergence of presence [*Anschaulichkeit*].”<sup>48</sup> Benjamin was well aware of the eccentricity of this position within the Marxist tradition, of its deviation not only from simplistic economic determinism, but from ideology-critique as well. “Marx describes the causal connection between economy and culture. What matters here is the relation of expression. Not the economic genesis of culture, but the expression of the economy in culture—this must be described. In other words, what is attempted here is the comprehension of the economic process as a sensuously presentable primal phenomenon [*anschauliches Urphänomenon*] from which proceed all the manifestations . . . of the nineteenth century.”<sup>49</sup> Otherwise:

The question is the following: if the substructure to a certain extent determines the superstructure in respect of the material of thought and experience, but this determination is not that of the simple reflection [*Abspiegeln*], how is it then—quite independently of the question about its originating cause—to be characterized? As its expression. The superstructure is the expression of the substructure. The economic conditions, in which society exists, find their expression in the superstructure; just as in sleeping the full stomach, though it may causally ‘condition’ the content of dreams, finds in them not its reflection, but its expression. The collectivity expresses first of all its conditions of life. They find their expression in the dream, and their interpretation in awakening.<sup>50</sup>

46. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.2: 1026-27.

47. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung) 478-79; cf. also his critique of Wölfflin in “Eduard Fuchs,” GS 2.2: 480.

48. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 575.

49. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 573-74.

50. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 495-96.

The cursory and inadequate outline of Benjamin's views is necessary to understand the way he applies "commodity analysis" (of a sort) to the interpretation of cultural phenomena. It was, as he repeatedly underlined, the concept of the commodity that should have constituted the theoretical fulcrum of both the great interconnected and equally unfinished projects of his late intellectual career aimed at the disclosure of the origin of modernity: the *Arcades-Work* and the book on Baudelaire.<sup>51</sup> In spite of the fact that these projects remained in torso, the main characteristics of Benjamin's approach can be reconstructed.

Its most characteristic feature is undoubtedly a negative one: Benjamin's relative lack of attention to commodity as a specific type of the organization and integration of processes of production and exchange which increasingly draws into its orbit many branches of cultural activity and impacts all of them. He does make a number of acute observations related to this topic. He points, for example, to changes in literary genres and styles which follow upon the fact that the rivalry among poets now takes the form of competition on an open market.<sup>52</sup> He surveys the process of emancipation of forms of reproduction from art through their commodification, and its multifarious impact both upon artistic development and upon the expansion of goods for sale.<sup>53</sup> But clearly it is not through, nor due to, such observations that the concept of commodity acquires in his late projects a central theoretical significance.

It is, as Benjamin's own statements also underline, the Marxian theory of *commodity fetishism* which is consistently invoked by him as the conceptual centre of his own endeavors – although, one must add, in a rather specific understanding: as a theory about the depraved-reified form of collective experience under conditions of modernity determining also the alternative possibilities of contemporary art. "Capitalism

51. In a letter to Scholem (20 May 1935) about the *Arcades-Project*, Benjamin indicates that its center will be constituted by the overarching concept of the fetish character of commodity. (See Benjamin, *Briefe* 2: 654). The same point is made in a letter (20 Mar. 1939) to Gretel Adorno (*GS* 5.2: 1172). Similarly, the concluding, third part of the Baudelaire-book, which should have presented its "philosophical foundation," was intended to make manifest "the commodity as the fulfilment of the allegorical viewpoint of Baudelaire" (Benjamin, "Letter to Horkheimer" [16 Apr. 1938] and "Letter to Adorno" [9 Dec. 1938], *Briefe* 2: 752 and 791-93). Lastly, he designates the fetish character of commodity as the ultimate "point of convergence" of these two projects (Benjamin, "Letter to Horkheimer," *GS* 5.2: 1166).

52. Cf. esp. Benjamin, *GS* 5.1: 422-24.

53. Cf. Benjamin, *GS* 5.1: 48, 59, 824-46 and especially his remarkable essays on the history of photography (*GS* 2.1: 368-85 and *GS* 3: 495-507).

was a natural phenomenon with which a new, dream-laden sleep came over Europe, and with it the reactivating of mythical forces.”<sup>54</sup> Benjamin’s “physiognomic materialism,” reveals not only the “origin” of modernity; it simultaneously intends also to *defamiliarize* this way of apprehending reality as a “phantasmagoria” by invoking its early-transitory manifestations that are now present only in ruins, whose strangeness strikes us. At the same time it aims, precisely through such distancing, to bring our own way of perceiving the world to reflexive, but *sensuous, presence*, to make the veil, which our collective dream-images impose upon it, directly open to the waking gaze. This veil not only conceals reality, but its very distortions also vaguely outline the possibilities of another, desired future as well. “One can say there are two directions in this book: one which goes from the past to the present, and represents the arcades etc. as precursors, and the other, which goes from the present to the past, in order to let the revolutionary completion of these ‘precursors’ explode in the present . . .”<sup>55</sup>

The very essence of commodity production envelops everything encompassed by it with kaleidoscopically changing compulsive images [*Zwangsvorstellungen*]: things as commodities acquire the character of wish-symbols. A product of labor is a commodity if it’s actual utility, its use-value, constitutes only the external shell of its generic essence: universal exchangeability, exchange value. To live in a world which appears as the enormous collection of (real or potential) commodities means to endow objects with significations that have nothing to do with their useful properties. Such a world confers meanings that, while no longer transcendent but inner-worldly and in fact fabricated (through display, fashion, and advertisement), again become reified. Commodities actually repress their own making, their origin in human labor and construction. This endows the things of everyday with an illusory glitter, an *aureole*: a weak remnant of the sacred. The world of commodity is not so much that of an impoverished rationality, but rather a world of re-enchantment which overlays everything with a spell promising profane enjoyment, but what it offers for enjoyment is the alienation of the individual from his/her own product and from other individuals, a contemplative empathy with the aesthetic luster of exchange value. This lure of novelty is primarily responsible for the continuous maintenance

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54. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 494.

55. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.2: 1032.



of this phantasmagoric attraction.<sup>56</sup> “Newness is a quality not dependent upon the use-value of commodity. It is the source of the illusion that belongs inalienably to the image produced by the collective unconscious. It is the quintessence of false consciousness, of which fashion is the tireless agent.”<sup>57</sup> It is the externality and arbitrariness of the imposed, sensuously evoked meanings that allow their incessant change. This flux of significations ultimately mobilizes archaic, unconscious wish-images that reveal their hidden essence in the “ever-same”: the foundation of the world of commodity in the sheer meaninglessness of its ultimate source, abstract labor, work reduced to simple physical effort devoid of qualitative differences and independent of all ends. “The point consists not in the fact that ‘again and again the same’ happens, and, of course, even less is here the eternal return meant. The point is rather that the physiognomy of the world precisely in what is the newest does not change at all, that this newest in all its parts remains always the same. – This constitutes the eternity of hell.”<sup>58</sup> And: “The thing first exercises its effect in alienating people from one another as commodity. It exercises it through its price. The empathy into the exchange value of the commodity, into its identical substratum – this constitutes the decisive point. (The absolute qualitative identity of time taken by the labor that produces exchange value – this is the gray background against which the gaudy colors of sensation stand out in relief.)”<sup>59</sup>

The antinomy of novelty and the ever-same, which in its most elementary form manifests itself in the conjunction of incessantly changing

56. “[T]he new creations and forms of life which were primarily conditioned by commodity production . . . enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. It should be demonstrated that it is not first in theoretical elaboration, in ideological transposition that these creations become ‘glorified’ [verklärt], but already in their immediate presence, in a sensuous way. They manifest themselves as phantasmagories” (Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.2: 1256). “These images are images of wish and in them the collectivity strives simultaneously to overcome and to glorify both the immaturity of social product and the lack of a social order of production” (Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 46-47). “The world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of commodities. They create a framework within which their use-value recedes into the background. They open up a phantasmagoria into which people enter to let themselves be distracted. The entertainment industry makes it easier for them, since it lifts them to the level of commodity. They yield to its manipulations by enjoying their alienation from themselves and from the others” (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.1: 50-51). “Actually, one can hardly conceive the ‘consumption’ of the exchange value as anything else but empathy with it” (Benjamin, “Letter to Adorno” [9 Dec. 1938], *Briefe* 2: 799).

57. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 55.

58. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.2: 676.

59. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 488.

fashion and mass production, constitutes the essence of the experience of the fetishistic world of modernity.<sup>60</sup> “The aspect of primal history in the past – and this is both consequence and precondition of technology – is no longer, as it once was, disguised by the tradition of the church and family. The old prehistoric shudder surrounds already the enviroing world of our parents, since we no longer are bound to it by tradition. The technical sign-worlds [*Merkwelten*] are dissolved more rapidly, the mythic in them comes to light more rapidly and crassly, a completely different sign-world must be set up and opposed to them more rapidly.”<sup>61</sup> The practical relation of the individual to his surroundings is less and less characterized by competence based on the habitual handling of, and caring for, the stable objects of a familiar milieu at which he is at home – his relation to the “technical sign-world” is increasingly dominated by *taste*.<sup>62</sup> The very structure of contemporary experience acquires aestheticized features. Benjamin designates it with one of the favorite terms of aesthetic modernism: *Erlebnis*. In view of the fact that the objects of this world have lost their constant meaning fixed by tradition, “authentic” experience become privatized, transformed into an incommunicable inward event. With the disintegration of the traditional organization of experience, of the social cadres of memory, it acquires a shock-like instantaneity.<sup>63</sup> This instant, however, due to the direct coincidence of

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60. “The dialectic of commodity production in high capitalism: the novelty of the product acquires-as stimulator of demand-significance unknown till now. At the same time the ‘ever-again-the-same’ appears in an obvious manner in mass production” (Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 417). “. . . [T]he antinomy between the new and the ever-same . . . produces the illusion with which the fetish character of commodity overlays the genuine categories of history” (Letter to Horkheimer [3 Aug. 1938], GS 5.2: 1166).

61. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 576.

62. “The consumer . . . is usually not knowledgeable when he appears as a buyer,” while “the importance of his taste increases – both for him and for the manufacturer. For the consumer it has the value of a more or less elaborate masking of his lack of expertness. Its value to the manufacturer is a fresh stimulus to consumption” (Benjamin, “Methodenfragment,” GS 1.3: 1167-68). “Habits constitute the armature of collectively shared experience they are disintegrated by the subjective experience of the moment” (GS 5.1: 430).

63. In fact, *Erfahrung*, experience organized and articulated through collectively shared, traditionally fixed meanings *bifurcates* under the conditions of modernity: into *Erlebnis*, ineffably privatized, subjectively empathic experience, and *information*, which is unrestrictedly communicable and verifiable, but remains completely unrelated to, and unintegrable into, personal life. In this way the dualistic structure of modern culture, its antinomistic division into the arts and the sciences directly expresses the structure of everyday experience. Cf. first of all Benjamin, “Der Erzähler,” GS 2.2: 438-65; and Benjamin, “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” GS 1.2: 607-55.

present, conscious impressions with past, subconscious desires is invested with an empathic coloring. (Here Benjamin's theory of the shock again clearly parallels the Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean theories of the explosive instantaneity [*Plötzlichkeit*] of aesthetic perception.)

It is, of course, rich in irony that Benjamin finds the central categories of German aesthetics (beautiful illusion, taste, *Erlebnis*, *Plötzlichkeit*) directly realized in the depraved world, the "hell" of commodities. But this is also what is meant by the program of disclosing "the expression of the economy *in* culture," economy understood not as a complex, manifold, and mediated objective form of social-institutional organization, but as a "sensuously presentable primal phenomenon": the way their world is lived by the historically situated individuals in, and through, their material-practical activities. For *culture*, the very conception of which is of recent origin, connected with the triumph of commodity production,<sup>64</sup> is precisely what replaces genuine, effective, community-building tradition in the world of modernity. Or to put it differently: "culture" is a historically specific way of integrating past and present works of art, science, and so forth into a tradition which by its very character robs them of genuine effectivity: of the ability to guide collective action, to have a "transformative effect."<sup>65</sup> For as "cultural objects," such works are nothing but the "sedimentation of memorable things and events that never broke the surface of human consciousness because they never were truly, that is politically, experienced."<sup>66</sup> Benjamin's critique is primarily directed not against the ideological identification of culture with the "sum of privileges" of the rulers, nor against its actual dependence upon the "monopoly of cultivation" of a minority,<sup>67</sup> though, of course, he is well aware of both these facts. It is directed against culture as such, understood as the particular manner products of "mental" labor

64. Cf. Benjamin, GS 5.1: 584; and GS 5.2: 1256. At times Benjamin states this point in a sharper, more shocking (and rather more questionable) way: "The formation of the concept of culture seems to belong to an early stage of Fascism" (Benjamin, "Pariser Brief I" [1936], GS 3: 485).

65. Benjamin, "Pariser Brief" 489.

66. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs" 477. Cf. also: "To the notion of 'saving'. . . From what will the phenomena be saved? Not only, and not so much from the disrepute and contempt into which they have fallen, but rather from the catastrophic way they are very often presented in a certain manner of their transmission, in their 'appreciation as heritage' . . . There is a transmission which is the catastrophe" (Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 591.)

67. "It would be absurd to conceive the forms of existence of a classless society on an analogy with the image of a humanity of culture [*Kultur Menschheit*]" (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk* 583).

acquire nowadays social acknowledgment and significance, an objectively imposed relation to these works which conditions both their creation and their receptive understanding, and which the concept of culture only makes explicit.<sup>68</sup> For Benjamin, the centrality of the concept of commodity for analyzing the culture of modernity does not mean just concentrating upon the commodification of “spiritual values.” It rather concerns the transformation of products of artistic, intellectual etc labor into spiritual *values*, the “spiritualization” of exchange value. Culture is the phantasmagoria, as it were, of a second order in which “the bourgeoisie enjoys its own false consciousness.”<sup>69</sup>

Culture *is* a reified-reifying relation to, and conception of, those human accomplishments that fall into its sphere: it transforms them into available objects, into valuable “goods” that (at least ideally) constitute the possession of the whole humankind.<sup>70</sup> Their claim to universality follows from being posited not as everyday, material goods, but as spiritual values; culture means to conceive them as “ideal objects”: unique, self-enclosed, independent, seamlessly coherent *totalities of meaning*. Like the reified-fetishistic experiences of everyday life, cultural experience also acquires its fetishistic character because it conceals and/or mystifies the way these meanings are made and can be re-made. “As a sum-total of all those formations [*Gebilde*] which are considered independent, if not from the process of production in which they originate, then from that process in which they endure, the concept of culture carries a fetishistic trait. It appears in a reified form.”<sup>71</sup> When Benjamin underlines that every document of culture is at the same time a document of barbarism, since it suppresses what its existence owes to the drudgery of the anonymous many,<sup>72</sup> he means not only the soulless, physical labor of those who – excluded from culture – produce the

68. In this respect it is characteristic that in his review of the work of the Frankfurt School (*Ein deutsches Institut freier Forschung* [1938]), referring to Marcuse’s famous paper about “affirmative culture,” Benjamin emphasizes only the *negative* aspect of this concept (Benjamin, *GS* 3: 525-26). His pronouncedly distanced attitude to the acknowledged “masterpieces” of cultural history also belongs to this context: as thoroughly assimilated to, and foundational to the constitution of, “culture,” these works cannot be in the present made into the object of genuine, effective experience. Beyond that, it is, of course, also true that in general “permanence and obsolescence mean . . . little to him: for he does not understand this history as a legitimate critical authority.” See Radnóti 163.

69. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 55.

70. Cf. Benjamin, *GS* 2.2: 477; *GS* 3: 525; *GS* 5.1: 584 etc.

71. Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs” 477.

72. Benjamin, “Über den Begriff” 696.



material conditions which make the “creative effort of great geniuses” possible, but also the equally anonymous labor of the recipients and transmitters of “cultural goods” who keep their meaning not simply preserved, but open and capable of actualization. In the conception of culture, “the awareness is lost that these goods owe to a continuous social labor not only their origin, but also their transmission in which, moreover, they are further worked upon, that is, become changed.”<sup>73</sup> The emphasis upon the exceptional “creativity” of artistic production as an irrational process fundamentally opposed to all kinds of “fabrication” pertains to the notion of “culture.” This emphasis actually fulfills the function of fixing the recipient in a purely passive attitude, making him/her the ideal *consumer* of spiritual “goods.”<sup>74</sup>

The transformation of works of art into “cultural values” therefore implies a correspondence under conditions of modernity between the fundamental structural features of the everyday experience of the commodity-world and the *sui generis* aesthetic experience. This parallelism is also institutionally organized and imposed. The practice of art criticism, and more generally the press, creates a genuine market of cultural goods in which they compete with each other.<sup>75</sup> Industrial exhibitions and department stores represent the “secret schema of construction” of the museum.<sup>76</sup> In general what is meant today by aesthetic attitude and experience represents the “spiritualization” of the experience of commodity. First of all, the integration of the work of art into the context of tradition as a unique “cultural treasure,” imposing upon its public the attitude of an empathic and contemplative surrender,

73. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.2: 1255. One of Benjamin’s main objections against the usual practice of ideology critique follows from this standpoint of the creativity of reception and historical openness of meaning. Ideology critique, exclusively emphasizing the connection between the aesthetic signification of a work and the social structure of its time of origin, makes the structure relevant to the deciphering of its meaning fixed, given once for all. “In truth its aspect should change with the different epochs which direct their glance back upon the work” (Benjamin, “Pariser Brief II” [1936], GS 2.2: 500).

74. Cf. Benjamin, “Pariser Brief I” 493.

75. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.1: 56, 422-423.

76. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk* 239 and 522; but see also the characterization of museums as violently intensified *intérieurs*. It should, however, be strongly underlined that these parallelisms do not involve with Benjamin the supposition of some causal dependence of the forms of cultural organization upon those of economic ones, or a temporal antecedence of these later. In fact the actual historical relation between the two may well be the inversed: “The contemplative attitude which is educated on the work of art, is slowly transformed into a more covetous one in respect of the stock of commodities” (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.1: 521).

the literally meant “reception” of its pre-existent, unchangeable and inexhaustible meaning-content, transforms the sensuous aureole of the commodity into the *aesthetic aura* of the work: spiritual elevation creates the awareness of distance.<sup>77</sup> “What is properly aura? . . . [t]he unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.”<sup>78</sup> “The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one . . . The closeness one may attain to its material aspect does not impair the distance which it retains in the aspect of its appearance.”<sup>79</sup>

At the same time aesthetic aura – being not only a spatial, but equally a temporal phenomenon of experience – implies also the return of the basic antinomy between the “new” and the “ever-same” in the realm of the aesthetic. Aura knits together “uniqueness and permanence,”<sup>80</sup> both objectively and subjectively. The aura as a characteristic pertaining to the work itself is identical with its “authenticity.” Authenticity, however, means precisely the empirical singularity of the art-object, its existence “here and now” but only *insofar* as this uniqueness bears witness (in opposition to forgeries) to its belonging to a tradition posited as universally valid, that is, as enduring forever. “The authenticity of a thing is the sum-total of all that is transmissible [*Tradierbares*] in it from the time of its origin, ranging from its material duration to its historical testimony . . . The uniqueness of the work of art is identical with its embeddedness in the context of tradition.”<sup>81</sup> This contradictory enmeshment of temporal singularity and permanence constitutes a basic phenomenological trait of the subjective aesthetic-auratic experience: the experience of an instantaneous gripping illumination in which time itself seems to come to a standstill, the paradox of the “fulfilled present” as the unity of momentariness and eternity. Lastly, the contradictory temporal structure of the everyday experience of commodity is equally expressed in the opposed tendencies of modern artistic activity: in the compulsion to ever more radical innovation, on the one hand, and the tendency toward instantaneous “musealisation” (e.g., creation of works from the very beginning intended for exhibition in museum), on the other hand.<sup>82</sup>

It has often been argued in the interpretative-critical literature that the

77. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.2: 1255.

78. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” (Erste Fassung), GS 1.2: 440.

79. Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung), GS 1.2: 480.

80. Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung), GS 1.2: 479.

81. Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung), GS 1.2: 477 and 479.

82. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.1: 55–56 and 514.

connection Benjamin establishes between his own project and the Marxian theory of commodity, or even more narrowly: with Marx's theory of fetishism, is at best tenuous, and is largely based on misunderstanding. In his critical reaction to the first exposé of the *Arcades-Project* from 1935,<sup>83</sup> Adorno objects to two large problem-complexes. On the one hand, he criticized what he regarded as the hypostasis of collective consciousness, or the unconsciousness into a supraindividual subject and the allied equation of the archaic elements in dream-images with the truth of utopia (through reference to the classless character of "primitive" societies). Both the appropriateness of these remarks in respect of the first exposé itself and their pertinence to the whole of the *Arcades-Project* (especially to its later elaboration) are a matter of debate into which I cannot enter here. Suffice to say, Benjamin to some degree acknowledged the legitimacy of these critical observations: passages directly giving rise to them disappeared from the later exposé of the project (1939) and also, so it seems, from his later notes to the work as well. On the other hand, a very good case can be made for the essential continuity of the *Arcades-Project* from the time of the inception of its idea and for the centrality in it of the notion of collective dream-images and their utopian potential.<sup>84</sup>

Adorno's second main objection, however, is directly relevant to our discussion. He charges that Benjamin in an illegitimate way "psychologizes" the Marxian conception of commodity fetishism by transposing it into consciousness, owing to which it loses its "dialectical power." Notes Adorno, "[t]he fetish character of commodity is not a fact of consciousness at all, but dialectical in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness."<sup>85</sup> From this he draws then some basic methodological conclusions concerning the notion of "dialectical image" as an objective constellation which is the self-representation of the social situation, and therefore cannot have some separate social "effect."<sup>86</sup>

In general it is difficult to disentangle in Adorno's objections genuinely apposite criticism from arguments based upon the unconscious misrepresentation of the basic intentions of Benjamin's project, on a silent substitution of Adorno's own premises in the place of his. Leaving aside

83. Cf. Adorno, "Letter to Benjamin" (2 Aug. 1935), *Benjamin Briefe* 2: 671-83.

84. This point was most convincingly argued by Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT, 1985) esp. 279-86.

85. Adorno, "Letter to Benjamin," (2 Aug. 1935) 672.

86. Adorno, "Letter to Benjamin," (2 Aug. 1935) 678.

the point that Adorno's categorical formulation (fetishism not being a fact of consciousness at all) is, as a case of Marx-interpretation, at least as questionable as Benjamin's use of these ideas, the charge of "psychologism" (in its more empathic and nastier formulation: "falling under the spell of bourgeois psychology"<sup>87</sup>) is at some level rather absurd. Benjamin's fundamental concern is to bring to presence the way experience is historically constituted under the conditions of capitalist modernity. He uses the Marxian theory of fetishism for *this* purpose: to disclose basic commonalities in the perception and the lived, direct interpretation of the world as expressions of the way individuals are socially inserted into it by the very character of their material practice – commonalities which under these conditions remain "unconscious," but *can* be transformed into community-forming powers. This *whole* enterprise is "psychologizing" if one regards the notion of "experience" as a (solely) psychological concept – but it certainly does not operate (at least not at this level of the generality of intent) with psychological principles of explanation. And in fact it would seem that Adorno questions the meaningfulness of such a project in principle. His formulations suggest that for him the only legitimate way of analyzing contemporary society is in terms of a dualistic relation between the objective, reified social structure, on the one hand, and (as its correlate and effect) the alienated, completely atomized individual subject, on the other.<sup>88</sup> Whatever the merits or demerits of such a position, it implies a complete rejection of what Benjamin attempts to do, and this hardly represents a propitious basis for critical understanding.

On the other hand, Adorno's charge concerning the misapprehension and misuse of the Marxian conception of fetishism, is, in some respects, legitimate and well founded. Marx consistently underlined the "objectivity" of fetishistic phenomena. At the most elemental level this meant that within the framework of a functioning capitalist economy fetishistic representations *correctly* orient the isolated individual in his/her economic

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87. Adorno, "Letter to Benjamin," (2 Aug. 1935) 672.

88. "... [W]ho is the subject of the dream? In the nineteenth century certainly only the individual; ... [T]he objective surplus value realises itself precisely in the individual subjects and against them. Collective consciousness was invented only in order to divert attention from the true objectivity and its correlate, ie. alienated subjectivity. It is up to us to polarise and to dissolve in a dialectical manner this 'consciousness' between society and the individual, instead of galvanising it as the image-correlate of the commodity-character." Adorno, "Letter to Benjamin" (2 Aug. 1935) 674-75.



activities, so that they are pragmatically effective. Precisely for this reason they are also constantly confirmed and reinforced by the life-experiences these individuals gain in the overall process of reproduction, to the possibility of which these representations themselves contribute. Benjamin's notions of "phantasmagoria," "dream-image," and "wish-symbol" hardly seem reconcilable with these ideas of Marx, for whom the content of such representations was quite narrowly circumscribed by the requirements of their pragmatic efficacy and economic functionality. In fact Benjamin's views point to a conceptualization of commodity which was repeatedly and resolutely rejected by Marx: to its (among others: Hegelian) understanding as objectified social *sign*.<sup>89</sup>

There are, however, much more fundamental theoretical oppositions involved in this divergence of views indicated by Adorno. Marx and Benjamin share a dialectical understanding of alienation and reification as historical processes which have not only a "negative" significance, but in all the human devastation they cause, also simultaneously create the positive conditions for a future emancipation. They also both agree that not only are fetishistic everyday representations objectively conditioned by the character of the life-practices in capitalist society, but also acknowledge their sociohistorical effectivity. They understand, however, both these points in completely different ways.

Marx's theory was primarily that of the *historical process*, centering on the problem of *reproduction*, which allowed him to reconcile the viewpoints of continuity and discontinuity in history. It first of all aimed at dissolving the appearance of the thing-like fixity of social relations, arrangements and institutions that for the isolated individual are *de facto* pre-given realities to which he can only adapt. He tried to demonstrate how these relations are produced and reproduced from day to day in the combined social activity of historically situated individuals, who in this process themselves constantly recreate the "external" conditions of their own activity.<sup>90</sup> Fetishistic representations were socially effective for him because he regarded them as *functional* to this process of

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89. It should be noticed, however, that Benjamin in his notes to the *Arcades-Project* excerpts one of the places from *Capital*, in which Marx criticizes this conception of commodity. See Benjamin, *GS* 5.2: 805.

90. This constituted also the most general premise of the Lukácsian theory of reification: "History consists precisely in the degradation of every kind of fixation into an illusion: *History is nothing but the history of the unceasing transformation of the forms of objectivity that shape the existence of men*" (Lukács 372).

reproduction. As practical interpretations of environing reality in terms of which actions are understood and motivations formed, they insert individuals in a definite way into this system of relations – in a way that contributed to its historical emergence and continues to contribute to its maintenance. Any idea of their potentially emancipatory role or utopian content was completely alien to his thought, at least in the later period of his theoretizing.<sup>91</sup> His dialectics located the potential of its revolutionary overcoming, created by capitalism, decidedly elsewhere. Partly in “objective” conditions: The incessant extension of economic reproduction simultaneously makes the conditions of its own possibility increasingly insecure. Partly, and not less importantly, he located it on the “subjective” side: in the fact that in the course of this development the direct producers acquire in their everyday working and life-activities such (not merely technical, but broadly social) needs, attitudes, and abilities that can only be satisfied and exercised under fundamentally different social conditions, whose establishment they also make possible. It is this accelerated “accumulation” of forces of production and intercourse – which ultimately are “nothing more than the development of individual capacities”<sup>92</sup> and the evolution of which constitutes the axis of continuity in history – that confers upon the world epoch of capitalist alienation a “progressive” character, and makes it a watershed in the history of human *progress*.

Thus Benjamin’s devastating critique of the concept of progress,<sup>93</sup> though directly addressed to German Social Democracy, necessarily implicates some of the basic premises of Marx’s own theory too. The motives of this criticism are inseparable from the peculiarities of his own intellectual development, from the roots of his thought in the traditions of

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91. In this respect it may be worthwhile to recall Marx’s attitude to the related question of the effectivity of “historical myths.” Marx was no less aware than Benjamin of the great role, evoking “the spirit of the past” has played, especially in epochs of revolutionary crisis. He, however, unambiguously restricted this role to the political revolutions of the past. The coming social revolutions cannot draw their motivation and enthusiasm (“their poetry”) from world-historical reminiscences—this would only obscure the consciousness of their unique task. They must be oriented toward the future. They “should let the dead bury their dead” (Marx-Engels, *Werke* 8: 115-16). For Benjamin, on the other hand, the image of the working class as “the redeemer of future generations” actually undercuts the sources of its strength. “Such a schooling made it to unlearn both its hatred and its will to sacrifice. For both of these are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors, and not by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.” (Benjamin, “Über den Begriff,” *GS* 1.2: 700.)

92. Marx-Engels, *Werke* 3: 67-68.

93. Cf. primarily Benjamin, “Über den Begriff” 697-701.

Jewish Messianism and German Romanticism. But there are also much less idiosyncratic and personal reasons which Benjamin himself formulated with exemplary clarity: "The experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death."<sup>94</sup> In this respect it is irrelevant whether Marx himself did or did not assume the historical "inevitability" of socialist revolution. He certainly did suppose that its *conditions* mature "naturally" (that is, as the result of the immanent necessity of the economic process of reproduction) in the course of capitalist development.

A whole generation of theorists who lived through the failure of German (and more generally Western) revolution and the rise of fascism experienced the untenability of this presupposition. Since they accepted as evident empirical fact (and the experiences of the early 1930s only seemed to confirm this view) the presence of a general, objective-economic crisis of the capitalist system, the problem appeared to them primarily as that of a "deficit of radical motivation" on the side of the revolutionary subject, the proletariat. "Western Marxism" of the 1930s and the early 1940s represented a series of attempts to find a theoretical orientation as to how this gap between the "objective" and "subjective" conditions can be closed. It was dominated by a search for new sources of revolutionary *motivation*. Gramsci, who perceived the problem largely in political-organizational terms, found the answer in the myth of the "organic intellectual." Lukács invoked the idea of the emancipatory potential of the great cultural tradition, first of all the defetishizing capacity of "realist" art. In spite of all the differences in their views, especially concerning their respective judgment upon aesthetic modernism, in its most general direction such a solution was not alien to Adorno, either. Only he recognized that this is not a solution at all: under contemporary conditions works of high culture lack mass social effectivity, and he drew from this fact the inevitably pessimistic conclusions for the historical present. Benjamin clearly recognized the latter problem as well. It motivated him to search for those forms of *everyday* mass experience upon whose foundations a *counterculture* of revolutionary will and commitment could be built. In this general intention, Benjamin is closer to Marx than most of his contemporaries.

But these sought for life-experiences Benjamin could identify no longer with those "positive" collective traits that the working class – as both the subject and the object of the "civilizing progress" of capitalism

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94. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.2: 819.

– inevitably acquires in its course. For from the vantage point of later historical experiences these civil accretions appear as just those characteristics, which *integrate* the proletariat into capitalist society. The uniqueness of Benjamin's project lay in the fact that he thought he could uncover an emancipatory potential in those forms of experience, which in the whole Marxist tradition have been regarded – as illusory misrepresentations of its real nature – precisely as “integrative.”<sup>95</sup> Benjamin transposed an argumentative move central to ideology-critique from the level of high cultural creations to that of everyday experience. High ideologies, it was usually argued, as “idealizations” of capitalist society, also create a distance to its empirical reality and therefore in their very “affirmative” character contain also a moment of negation, a utopian potential as well. Benjamin applies this idea to the fetishistic consciousness of the everyday. But while in the case of cultural-ideological formations their critical potential was seen as the function of the consciously undertaken effort at the totalization, universalization, and rationalization of the *de facto* relations, endowing them with normative validity, the fetishistic images and experiences of the everyday have for Benjamin the same capacity, due to their dream-like “irrationality,” internal incoherence, and fragmentation, which transposes what are in fact normative expectation into brute facts.

This shift involved also a basic change in the very meaning of dialectics. For Benjamin it no longer meant a theory of the contradictory tendencies of a historical process, which in the very reproduction of its structuring characteristics necessarily eliminates or undermines the conditions that alone make this reproduction possible. For him it became a theory of *ambiguity*, of the “frozen unrest” of a historical *moment*<sup>96</sup> that in its essence is only emptily repeated in all its kaleidoscopic

95. Adorno, I think, quite legitimately points to the fact that these experiences are certainly not class-specific: “. . . [I]n the dreaming collective there remain no differences between the classes” (Letter to Benjamin, [2 Aug. 1935], *Werke* 2: 675). Benjamin rigidly upholds the idea of the working class as the sole revolutionary agent. From a Marxist standpoint this is perhaps the most orthodox feature of his thought. The content of his theory, however, points toward a more heterogeneous conception of revolutionary action. Whenever he invokes its *image*, it is not the organized proletariat, but the amorphous and spontaneous *urban crowd* that appears in his writings.

96. “Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectics, the law of dialectics at the standstill” (Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 55). This ambiguity underlies Benjamin's whole conception of history: it is the past whose mythic power is to be destroyed, the past that is “one single catastrophe,” which is at the same time the sole legitimate ground of hope for a redemptive future.



change – as long as it is not blasted apart. Ultimately the theories of Marx and Benjamin operate with irreconcilable conceptions of historical time. Benjamin understood the specificity of this latter as a “historical index” which pertain to each “time of the now” [*Jetztzeit*] establishing its figurative affinity with particular moments of the past that only become “legible,” that is, capable of being re-evoked as experience in the present.<sup>97</sup> Marx, on the other hand, meant primarily the irreversibility of long-term historical change, in which discontinuous social metamorphoses are superimposed structures upon an underlying accumulative material continuity.

These considerations do not aim at answering the sterile questions whether Benjamin was a “genuine” Marxist, were his views a supplementation, a corrective revision, or some unassimilable, alien addition to the “orthodox/original” meaning (as some invariable datum) of Marx’s theory? These questions not only rest on untenable hermeneutic presuppositions, but are of no real consequence. From the 1950s on Benjamin’s views were received (not exclusively, but predominantly) within the context of a Marxist tradition, and they became, at least for understanding the culture and art of modernity, an integral constituent of its (in any case highly heterogeneous) corpus. (Though, of course, even this process has not been unambiguous. In several cases Benjamin was the stepping stone on a path leading far away from Marx.) The contact and contrast with Marx (and primarily with the views expressed in his late economic works)<sup>98</sup> that we drew here served only one purpose: to bring into a clearer focus the fundamental theoretical intention and attitude of Benjamin as it is particularly embodied in his conception of a “dialectics of ambiguity.”

This dialectics demands and hopes to find the historically “positive,” the potentially radical motivating force for transcending the hell of the present in those socially “negative” forms of experience, which as deceptive illusions in their direct effect bind the individuals to its conditions since they endow them with the false radiance of seemingly ever new pleasure and beauty:

97. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 576-78.

98. In any case such a comparison alone does not answer the broader question concerning Benjamin’s relation to, and connection with, the whole of the Marxist tradition, quite complex (and contradictory) already in the thirties. Beyond a number of his explicit references to ideas from early writings of Marx, one should consider Benjamin’s relation and indebtedness to Bloch, Korsch, and Kautsky. These later, of course, should not be overemphasized.

It is very easy to establish, according to definite viewpoints, for any given epoch, in respect of its various “spheres,” binary divisions of the kind that posit on one side what is “fruitful,” “forward-looking,” “vital,” “positive,” while the futile, backward, defunct parts of this epoch all fall on the other side. Even the contours of this positive side will not emerge clearly but only if they are profiled against the negative one. On the other hand, however, every negation has its value only as the background for the outlines of the vital, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance to apply again to this, distinctly separated negative part a new division of the kind that, with a shift of the point of view (but not of the standards of judging!) reveals even in it a positive element, different from the one previously indicated.<sup>99</sup>

Conversion [*Umschlag*], in which “the positive in the negative and the negative in the positive coincide,”<sup>100</sup> constitutes for Benjamin the supreme principle of dialectics.

Therefore he consistently strives to uncover the conversion and coincidence of the “utopian” and the “cynical,” of the “threatening” and “alluring” elements in the fetishistic experiences of the commodity world.<sup>101</sup> These experiences, and precisely in those aspects through which they – as phantasmagorias – mask reality, at the same time divulge an unconscious drive that in principle transcends the present, a utopian wish as the potential source of radical energies. Thus fashion, on the one hand,

prescribes the ritual by which the fetish commodity wills to be worshiped . . . It stands in opposition to the organic. It procures the living body for the inorganic world. It affirms the rights of the corpse over the living. Its vital nerve is the fetishism that underlies the sex appeal of the inorganic. The cult of the commodity takes it into its service.<sup>102</sup>

It also serves recognizable class interests: fashion is “the camouflage of well-defined concerns of the ruling class.”<sup>103</sup> At the same time, Benjamin equally underlines “the eccentric, revolutionary and surrealist possibilities of fashion,” its “extraordinary anticipations,” its “precise contact

99. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 573.

100. Benjamin, “Ein Jakobiner von heute [1930],” GS 3: 265.

101. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 51 and 96.

102. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk* GS 5.1: 51. Cf. “Fashion opens up here a space of dialectical conversion between woman and commodity-between pleasure and the dead body” (111). It is the medium that “lures sexuality in the world of the inorganic” (118). On Benjamin’s theory of fashion, see Buck-Morss, esp. 97-101.

103. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 121.

with the things to come”;<sup>104</sup> “the motif of redemption”<sup>105</sup> in it. Similarly with advertisements: false allure and economic functionality cohabit in them with their “being a simile for the everyday life of the utopia.”<sup>106</sup> Of course, as long as these practices evoke only unconscious dream-images projected on the objects of the commodity world in privatized subjective experience, images, the collective character of which appears only in their compulsive-obsessive nature, they function *solely* by masking and transfiguring the catastrophic present. In their unconsciousness they merely channel utopian energies to the service of its hell. Only “waking up” from the dream can set their radical motivational potential free: they have to be raised to consciousness by transforming their mute commonness, communality into a matter of *collective experience*.

This dialectics of ambiguity – a dialectics at standstill – finds its clearest elaboration in the central concept of Benjamin’s aesthetics: the notion of *aura*. At one place he explicates its meaning by almost directly reproducing the Marxian definition of fetishism: “The experience of aura thus rests on the transference of a form of response at home in human society to the relation of the inanimate or nature to man.” In a sense only this explains the *unity* of those two “definitions,” which *prima facie* have nothing in common and which are merely juxtaposed by Benjamin: the experience of the aura as the endowment of the thing “with the ability to return the glance,”<sup>107</sup> on the one hand, and its being “the unique manifestation of a distance however close it may be,” on the other hand.<sup>108</sup> For both of these are experiential manifestations of the same fetishistic “personification of things” (Marx). The unapproachability created by the auratic distancing of the object transfers the inviolability of personal space upon the inanimate.

As I tried to indicate, the auraticization of the work of art which in its secularized form underlies the autonomy of art in modernity<sup>109</sup> is for

104. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 116 and 112.

105. Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” GS 1.2: 677.

106. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.1: 236.

107. “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” GS 1.2: 646.

108. “Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung) 480.

109. Benjamin explicitly equates the aura of art with “the illusion of its autonomy” (“Kunstwerk” 486). Under conditions of modernity it replaces the embeddedness of pre-modern art in cultic ritual with its contextual integration into the alienated tradition of “culture.” It therefore retains in a secularised form the “theological foundation” of art, its association with, and service to, the illusion of mythic powers governing the fate of human beings (“Kunstwerk” 441).

Benjamin the “spiritualization” of the fetishism of commodity, “an intensification of the universal fetishistic deception.”<sup>110</sup> With a distancing “elevation” it separates art from the context of everyday life, and normatively fixes its recipient in the attitude of passive, privatized absorption, thereby makes aesthetic experience an isolated instant in life, lacking effectivity, or potentially “political” (that is, community-creating and orienting) significance. The progressive disappearance of the aura—a process initiated by changes in the conditions of reproduction of works of art—is therefore a precondition of its refunctioning, of its regaining a socially active, but now demystifying, possibly emancipatory role.

But: “The decline of aura and the withering away—under conditions of a defensive position in the class-struggle—of the fantasy image of a better nature are the same. Therewith the decline of aura and the decline of potency are ultimately the same.”<sup>111</sup> The auratic experience of the work of art (and of definite natural objects or phenomena) contains—and precisely in its very reifying character by which it withdraws its object from the context and reach of human action — also an anticipatory-redemptive aspect, the complete loss of which would signal the exhaustion of a fundamental source of radical impulses. The auratic experience offers for a fleeting instance the purely subjective fulfillment of the promise of a “nature” that no longer is the resistant object of our efforts at its utilization and exploitation, but encounters us in an uninforced way with “favor” [the Kantian *Gunst der Natur*]. In this experience the rigid division between subject and object is dissolved in a reciprocal, mimetic-communicative relation between human beings and their world, a world, the things of which became “liberated from the compulsion to be useful.” This, of course, constitutes one of the most fundamental and constant elements in Benjamin’s idea of an emancipated future. The aura of the work of art is a historically created and socially imposed (second order) phantasmagoria—but phantasmagorias are both (as compulsive-obsessive ideas) the very *opposite*, and at the same time the *depraved exercises* of creative social imagination. This is also why Benjamin did not accept without qualification Adorno’s suggestion that unambiguously identified aura with reification: “[A]ll reification is forgetting . . . Is not the aura always the trace of the forgotten human element in the

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110. Schweppenhauser, “Die Vorschule der profanen Erleuchtung,” in Benjamin, *Über Haschisch* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 22.

111. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 457.



thing. . . ?” Adorno specifies this human element (in accord with the Marxian-Lukácsian conception of reification) as “the moment of human labor.”<sup>112</sup> Benjamin responds: “If it were the case that in aura one genuinely had to deal with a ‘forgotten human element’, then nevertheless not necessarily with that which is present in labor . . . There must be a human element in things which is *not* brought about by labor.”<sup>113</sup>

Thus the decay of the aura which Benjamin registers as an ongoing process is itself ambiguous: it designates an emancipatory possibility connected with the radical refunctioning of art *and* a danger, the disappearance not only of the privatized, empathic, autonomous, aesthetic experience, but also of the ability to imagine and experience fulfillment, the *gift* of happiness. The traceless vanishing of the aura would mean just this latter. No doubt, under contemporary conditions the “exhibition of aura” is “the affair of fifth rank poets,”<sup>114</sup> and such an “aestheticism” is serviceable to Fascism.<sup>115</sup> But genuine art, not in complicity with the horrors of the present, has its task in making precisely what in privatized experience unconsciously evokes the impression of auraticity into the consciously recognizable and examinable object of a potentially collective experience. At places Benjamin calls this task the transformation of aura into the “trace” [*Spur*]:

Trace and aura. The trace is the manifestation of a closeness however distanced it may be. The aura is the manifestation of a distance however close it may be. In the trace we enter into the possession of the thing, in the aura the thing overpowers us.<sup>116</sup>

112. Letter to Benjamin (29 Feb. 1940) in Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin* 159-60.

113. Benjamin, Letter to Adorno (7 May 1940), *Briefe* 2: 849. An unpublished paper by Andrew MacNamara drew my attention to the significance of this exchange.

114. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 475.

115. Benjamin, “Pariser Brief I,” GS 3: 487-89.

116. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 560. In a surprisingly one-sided and rather hostile essay, Jauss argues that Benjamin has never realized the insight expressed in this quote: he ultimately could not overcome a nostalgic relation to the aura and therefore a negative attitude to the development of post-romantic, non-autonomous art. See Jauss, *Studien zum Epochenwandel der ästhetischen Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 189-215. This is certainly a reversal of the usual criticism of Benjamin, but overall it is perhaps less convincing than the more common charge overestimating the potential of post-auratic, “technically progressive” art. Ultimately Jauss’s criticism follows from the fact that he (so it seems) rejects, along with Benjamin’s Messianism and catastrophic conception of the history of the present, any principally critical attitude to contemporaneity. He accepts as unproblematic – and both in the aesthetical and social sense – the success of the “basic intention” of post-romantic art: “to humanize through beauty the materialism of industrial development” (195).



This is how Benjamin interprets the achievement of Baudelaire: an artistic accomplishment that makes him – a poet who has “imposed a taboo upon the future” and whose poetic attitude is “at least in appearance thoroughly ‘untimely’” – a “secret agent” of dissatisfaction with the domination of his own class, whose dream is the sister of Blanqui’s revolutionary action.<sup>117</sup> This achievement lies, not in the conscious intentions or in the “message” of his poetry, but what they allow to be brought into the realm of full, genuine experience. Baudelaire, writes Benjamin, “has given the weight of a collective experience” to private, subjective experiences. He paid for it the price: “the destruction of the aura” of his own oeuvre.<sup>118</sup> The “destructive rage” of his poetry is directed “not least against the fetishistic notion of art.”<sup>119</sup> But he destroyed the aura because he transformed the profane basis of its *production* into the form-giving principle of his own poetry. He transposed the way fetishistic private experiences of the commodity world are structured into the poetic device of meaning-creation, into the “technical” scaffolding of his work. “It was the undertaking of Baudelaire to make manifest on the commodity the aura specific to it.”<sup>120</sup>

This is the way Benjamin understands the restitution by Baudelaire of an aesthetic form that his contemporaries regarded as irretrievably outdated, which nevertheless constituted “the guiding principle of his imagination” and “the armature of his poetry”: *allegory*.<sup>121</sup> Jolting between image and meaning, lacking any “natural mediation,”<sup>122</sup> and with its fragmentation and destruction of the familiar context of significations that habituation confers upon things, Baudelairean allegory fills these “hollowed out ciphers” with subjectively imposed sense.<sup>123</sup> These allegories by purely poetic means (and quite unintentionally) recreate the structure of experience which is objectively and unconsciously

117. Benjamin, GS 1.2: 657 and 677; GS 1.3: 1161; and GS 1.2: 604.

118. Benjamin, “Über einige Motive,” GS 1.2: 653.

119. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 399.

120. Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” GS 1.2: 471.

121. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 465 and 408.

122. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 466.

123. “Every intimacy with the things is alien to the allegorical intention. To touch them means to it: to violate them. To apprehend [*erkennen*] them means to it: to see through them. Where it reigns, habit cannot be formed at all. It barely has taken up the thing, it already casts away the situation. They grow for it out of date more rapidly than a new cut for the milliner. To grow out of date, however, means: to become alien” (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS 5.1: 423). Cf. also GS 5.1: 582.

imposed upon the subject of the world of commodity, to be “veiled,” “glorified,” and “sentimentalized” by its aureole.

The objective environing world of man ever more ruthlessly takes on the expression of the commodity. At the same time the advertisement aims at blurring over the commodity-character of the things. The deceptive glorification of the world of commodity is opposed by its disfiguring transposition into the allegorical. The commodity tries to look itself in the face.<sup>124</sup>

Benjamin continues by stating that “allegories stand for what the commodity makes out of the experiences that people of this century have.”<sup>125</sup> He also mentions that “[t]he commodity-form comes to light as the social content of Baudelaire’s allegorical form of apprehension [*Anschauungsform*].”<sup>126</sup>

This characterization is, however, still too general. It does not sufficiently capture what is so striking and individual in Baudelaire’s use of allegories. To bring out this specificity Benjamin repeatedly compares them with allegories of the Baroque. “Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire presents it from the inside.”<sup>127</sup> And: “The key figure of early allegory is the corpse. The key figure of later [i.e., Baudelairean – G. M.] allegory is the ‘souvenir’ [*Andenken*].”<sup>128</sup>

The souvenir is the secularized relic. The souvenir is the complement of subjective experience. In it is sedimented the increasing self-alienation of man, who takes stock of his past as dead possession. Allegory in the nineteenth century has vacated the external world, in order to settle into the internal world. The relic comes from the corpse, the souvenir from the defunct collective experience which calls itself, euphemistically, lived experience.<sup>129</sup>

Baudelaire’s allegories do not so much endow events of the world and external life with some alien-transcendent meaning that strips away from

124. Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” *GS* 1.2: 671.

125. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 413.

126. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 422. Cf. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 438-39 about the *failure* of Baudelaire “to trace back the experience of commodity to the allegorical,” since it is more “difficult to dissolve the illusion of ‘value’ than that of the ‘meaning.’”

127. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, *GS* 5.1: 415.

128. Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” *GS* 1.2: 689.

129. Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” *GS* 1.2: 681.

them all their immanent sense and inner vitality. His allegoric intention finds rather its expression in the often brutal transposition of the most intimate, inward subjective states, moods, and also of elevated thoughts into not merely prosaic, but frequently sordid, anorganic objects and happenings of the everyday. The “hollowing out of the inner life”<sup>130</sup> is the ultimate achievement of his poetry. The allegoric-aesthetic transformation which allows “commodity to look itself in the face,” i.e., to raise to the level of conscious recognition the unconscious structure of its experience, discloses behind the seemingly free play of subjective meanings the compulsive fragmentation of the subject of experience. And this transforms the reconciling, pseudo-aesthetic halo of commodity into the impulse of a destructive rage, even if this latter remains undirected and objectless. “Baudelaire’s allegory bears – in opposition to the Baroque – the traces of the rage which was necessary to break through this world, to lay its harmonious formations in ruins.”<sup>131</sup>

“The destructive impulse of Baudelaire is nowhere interested in the abolition of what comes to its way. This finds expression in allegory, and this constitutes its regressive tendency. On the other hand, however, allegory – precisely in its destructive fervor – is concerned with the dispersal of the illusion that proceeds from every ‘given order,’ be it of art or life, the transfiguring order of the totality or of the organic, all that which makes it appear bearable. And this is the progressive tendency of allegory.”<sup>132</sup>

The unique significance of Baudelaire consists in being the first who in the most impeccable way apprehended self-alienated man and fixed him with a thing-like solidity [*ding-fest gemacht*], in the double meaning of this word: established his identity and armed him against the reified world.<sup>133</sup>

The case of Baudelaire demonstrates how works of art, which are seemingly “untimely” and thoroughly apolitical in the common sense of this

130. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 440.

131. Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” GS 1.2: 671.

132. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 417.

133. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 405. I have attempted here to follow through only a single thread in Benjamin’s complex interpretation of Baudelaire’s poetry, and, of course, I merely tried to give a summary account of his views on the role of allegory in it. For an approach to the same topic, indebted, but in its basic thrust polemically opposed to that of Benjamin, see Jauss, *Studien zum Epochenwandel der ästhetischen Moderne* 166–88. For a “defense” of Benjamin against Jauss, see Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P) 65–70.

word, can nevertheless retain a critical potential even under the alienated conditions of cultural modernity. "There is a place in every true work of art at which the person, who places himself into it, is touched by a freshness like the wind of a coming dawn."<sup>134</sup> But this still requires the ability and the interest to "settle in" at this "place of the new" in the work of art (a place which can only be disclosed by the labor of critical commentary). Benjamin has no illusions about the spread of such capacities:

At no point of time, be it ever so utopian, will one win over the masses for a higher art, but always only for an art that is nearer to them . . . The masses in general demand from the work of art something warming. Here is the fire of hatred waiting to be ignited. Its heat, however, bites or scorches, it does not offer that "comfort of the heart" that qualifies art for use. Whereas kitsch is nothing more but art with the character of a hundred percent, absolute and instantaneous use. Thereby, however, kitsch and art stand in the canonized forms of expression directly, irreconcilably opposed to each other. What concerns, however, the emerging, living forms, they contain in themselves something warming, useful, ultimately something blissful, they take dialectically the 'kitsch' into themselves, in this way bringing themselves near to the masses, and nevertheless they are able to overcome kitschiness. Nowadays perhaps only film is up to this task. . .<sup>135</sup>

Benjamin discusses the "progressive" possibilities opened up by the "emerging, living" forms of mass culture, connected with the new techniques of mechanical reproduction, especially film. Film takes a strategic and systematic function in his later writings. Only with its help can he provide some kind of answer and solution to the *practical* problem which it faces: that of the "motivational deficit."

In some respects Benjamin's analysis of the film, presented in its most elaborate form in the "Artwork" essay,<sup>136</sup> runs parallel to his discussion of the emancipatory possibilities of "higher" art, most fully exemplified by the Baudelaire-file of the *Arcades-Project*. For he is again almost exclusively concerned with the way materially conditioned and historically specific modes of experiencing are, or can be, transformed into the

134. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 593.

135. Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 499-500.

136. Many of the formulations and ideas concerning film in the "Artwork" essay were, however, taken directly over by him from his earlier (1931) paper, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie."



meaning-creating devices, the technical facture of the works that raise these ways of spontaneous experience to the level of conscious recognition which liberates their radical potential and which now, in the case of the film, possesses also a directly communal, or at least “massed” character. The great accomplishment of the film (and the photography) consists for Benjamin in the conquest of the “optical unconscious” (an achievement he compares with the discovery of the instinctual unconscious by psychoanalysis) and thus in the opening up of a “new region of consciousness.”<sup>137</sup> He means by this not only the enrichment of the field of perception by these new media, their ability to radically extend (both spatially and temporarily) the limits of visibility. He at least ascribes an equal importance to the fact that film constantly interrupts the ingrained processes of association, replaces intimacies by the illumination of details.<sup>138</sup> And this refers not merely to the perception of the external world of objects, but to the unconscious mechanisms of self-apprehension as well, both in respect of the maintenance of “normal” self-identity,<sup>139</sup> and in that of the empathic identification with others. Given Benjamin’s strongly anti-individualistic image of the emancipated future, it is easy to understand that the expected overcoming of “uniqueness and permanence” by the accentuation of what is “repeatable” and “transitory” in experiences<sup>140</sup> (together with the leveling of the distinctions between author and recipient in a new, generalized cultural “literacy”) had for him a radical, transcending significance.

Nevertheless, and in spite of this close analogy in the strategy of analysis and argumentation, there is a fundamental theoretical break between the *Arcades-Project* and the writings directly associated with it, on the one hand, and Benjamin’s essays dealing with the problems of the new mass media of “mechanical reproduction,” on the other hand. These latter writings have nothing to do with the idea of a “dialectics of ambiguity,” with the conversion of the negative into the positive, that constitutes the theoretical and methodological premise of the former group of works. They operate with the conception of an accumulative change in the technical conditions of artistic production to which an

137. Cf. Benjamin, “Erwiderung an Oscar Schmitz” [1927], *GS* 2.2: 752; “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie,” *GS* 2.1: 371 and “Kunstwerk” (Zweite Fassung), *GS* 1.2: 500.

138. Cf. Benjamin, *GS* 1.2: 503 and *GS* 2.1: 379.

139. “In the film one does not recognizes one’s own carriage, on the gramophone one’s own voice.” (Benjamin, “Franz Kafka” [1934], *GS* 2.2: 436).

140. See Benjamin, *GS* 2.1: 378-79 and *GS* 1.2: 479.



unambiguously “positive” function, or at least potential, is ascribed, the unfolding of which is then arrested, or perhaps only retarded, by their superimposed conditions of employment.<sup>141</sup> This is just that explanatory scheme of “orthodox” Marxism which has been elsewhere radically rejected by Benjamin with reference to the historical experiences of his generation. This represents, I think, the fundamental, unresolved theoretical perplexity of his late oeuvre (which is inadequately signaled by the frequently encountered charge of “technological determinism”). Fundamental, because it is directly related to the solution of that practical task with which he was above all concerned. And the theoretical break in question directly manifests itself in a number of sharply pronounced shifts of conceptualization or emphasis when one compares these two, by and large simultaneously executed, groups of writings with each other. Here belongs the often made observation that in the “Artwork” essay (but also in such earlier pieces as the essay on the history of photography) the “decay of aura” has an unequivocally progressive significance—all the historically retrogressive tendencies, to which Benjamin refers in these contexts (be they the artificially built up cult of movie stars or the “aesthetization of politics” by Fascism), are connected with the socially-economically dictated efforts at the conservation or recreation of aura. The idea of the ambiguity and “danger” of the process of its decay is completely absent in these works. Even more significant is perhaps the fact that the notion of commodity fetishism—the focal point in Benjamin’s analysis of the “origins” of modernity and a concept that is particularly pertinent when it comes to the phenomena of mass culture—is introduced into these writings, if at all, then only as a marginal and external consideration.

There remains the question whether this changed, more “orthodox” conceptualization achieves its end: whether it provides a coherent argumentation for the existence of an untapped potential associated with the new media. This is at best doubtful, already on the basis of the internal evidence of the texts themselves. Ultimately one has to say that — even if one fully accepts Benjamin’s analysis — the connection between the changing structure of experience and a motivation for emancipatory change (a connection which is never explicitly asserted by him,

141. “At present the international bourgeois cinema could not find a consistent ideological scheme. This is one of the causes of its crisis. For the conspiring of the technique of film with the milieu that constitutes its most direct reproof, is not compatible with the glorification of the bourgeois” (Benjamin, “Erwiderung an O. Schmitz,” *GS* 2.2: 753).

but certainly strongly suggested by the whole argumentative thrust of the "Artwork" essay) remains extremely tenuous. The stance of a "distracted expertise and examination," the fostering of which is, according to him, the main accomplishment of the technologically progressive forms of mass culture, may well have a value for the attitudinal "enervation of the masses" to the conditions of a constantly and rapidly changing life world, but it is a world apart both from the notion of a "critical consciousness" in Marx and from that of a "revolting consciousness" in the spirit of the anarchist tradition. And Benjamin himself states this with complete clarity: "As long as film-capital sets the tenor, one can ascribe to contemporary film no revolutionary merit other than of facilitating a revolutionary critique of the traditional ideas concerning art."<sup>142</sup> "Radio and film transform not only the function of the professional performer, but equally the function of those who represent themselves before these equipments of recording, as do those who govern . . . This results in a new selection, a selection before the equipment, from which the star and the dictator emerge victorious."<sup>143</sup> However, these interspersed cautionary remarks are, as it were, overridden and cancelled out by the relentless directional power of an argumentation that intends and promises to deliver so much more.

Benjamin's project thus ends in a double *échec*: even the abandonment of his most original and hard-won theoretical insights does not advance the achievement of the practical ends of his theory. One could even query whether this task itself has not been rendered senseless by his own initial diagnosis: the masses look in art for something warming and ultimately blissful. For once the motivating force of the "ideal of the happy grandchildren" (and with it, of the prefigurative, directly utopian function of art) is denied, what could art then offer the masses that would be able to compete with the luster and pseudo-aesthetic satisfaction of the phantasmagoria of commodity? One could comprehend from this perspective his most dubious and troubling proposal: that of the direct "politicization of the aesthetic" (without, of course, claiming to explain thereby its genesis) as a desperate and failed attempt to close these glaring theoretical and practical gaps in his project. Ultimately his critic-friends, these jealously fighting, self-appointed mentors, agreed on only one point, which turned out to be prophetically right: the internal ambiguities of the idea of

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142. Benjamin, "Kunstwerk" (Zweite Fassung), 492.

143. Benjamin, "Kunstwerk" (Zweite Fassung), 491-92.

profane illumination and this-worldly, revolutionary salvation resulted in an oeuvre that represents a torso of unresolved contradictions.<sup>144</sup>

We “unhappy grandchildren” cannot simply accept this evaluation of his committed contemporaries. From our viewpoint as latecomers, Benjamin was clear-sighted enough to explicate the theological motivation behind the idea of a final human emancipation, once and for all solving the antinomies besetting the whole of history. He thereby gave a dramatic poignancy to a failure that he *shared* with the whole *Pleiad* of the brilliant representatives of western Marxism of the thirties and forties. They all attempted to find in culture, and particularly in art, a motivating power enabling to solve the great social and political problems of the age. In this way they resurrected, under much changed historical conditions, those expectations and hopes in the context of which the very notion of culture was originally formed in the Enlightenment. Their shared failure demonstrated how incapable “culture” is for such a task. It is not their answers, but primarily their questions which constitute the legacy for our – much less desperate than their own, but also much more muddled – times.

The continuous fascination with Benjamin’s writings may partly be due to a personal charisma which permeates his oeuvre: a strange combination of receptivity with an idiosyncratic originality, of an almost narcissistically sensitive defense of individuality with the lure of community, and the deep moral earnestness of thinking that is always motivated by a search for answers to the sufferings of anonymous others. Beyond its rich, but negative lessons and personal magnetism, this oeuvre offers something more, and more positive, to the present: his idea of a *dialectic of ambiguity*.

“Critical theory of society” has undergone so many transformations and has been embodied in such a number of diverse and partly opposed theoretical projects that it becomes questionable whether one can still ascribe a coherent meaning to this term. If there remains something which nevertheless unifies and perpetuates this tradition today, it is the general idea that one has to find in contemporary social reality itself – and not in some system of atemporal norms and values – the foundation and the principles of its own critique and the potential of its transcending. In this

144. I emphasize here the “structural” difficulties and gaps of Benjamin’s theory, since they seem more symptomatic (at least for the particular ends of this discussion) than the meritorical objections one can raise against some of the substantive presuppositions of his theoretical construction.

respect, the conception of a “dialectic of ambiguity” suggests an approach more fertile than the idea which envisages the realization of this program along the scheme of the “struggle of the (objective and subjective) forces of progress with those of reaction.” Benjamin discloses the deep ambiguities of cultural modernity: in its constitution (the confluence of the most archaic and the most modern, of the unconscious and the conscious, and atomization as a new bond between individuals) and in its potential historical function (the unity of its cynical-apologetic or regressive and its utopian, transcending aspects). Even if these potentials can only be “discovered” in light of and through social practices beyond the cultural sphere, Benjamin’s ideas still retain a suggestive power that survives the collapse of his more concrete historical diagnoses and hope.<sup>145</sup>

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145. These concluding remarks are indebted to my wife, Maria Markus, and to David Roberts. I would like also to thank Professor Roberts for correcting the defective English in my manuscript.

## *The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political*<sup>1</sup>

Uwe Steiner

How wonderful these humans are, indeed,  
Who do explain the inexplicable,  
And what was never writ, they read;  
The intricate they, subjugating, bind,  
And thru external darkness paths they find.<sup>2</sup>

These lines, bemusedly spoken by Death at the close of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's drama, *The Fool and Death*, come to mind when one attempts to present Walter Benjamin's political philosophy. This is not only because Benjamin himself occasionally invoked the line, "what was never writ, they read." Indeed, those key texts in this context must be considered lost, if they were ever written at all. Other texts that were planned but never written have been handed down to us under the nimbus of the apocryphal titles and developed a remarkable, independent

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1. The text is based on lectures held in Fall, 1998 at Yale University, the Deutsches Haus of Columbia University, Northwestern University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Indiana University in Bloomington and Princeton University. In this revised version, I have sought to do justice to the lively and, for me, inspiring discussions that followed the lectures. I would also like to use this opportunity to thank my hosts for their invitation and hospitality. In particular, I am grateful to Cyrus Hamlin and Brigitte Peucker, Harro Müller and Andreas Huyssen, Otto Karl Werckmeister and Géza von Molnár, Gerhard Richter and Hans Adler, Fritz Breithaupt, William W. Rasch and Marc A. Weiner as well as, last but not least, Michael W. Jennings and Anson Rabinbach.

2. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Death and the Fool; a drama in one act*, trans. with the consent of the author by Elisabeth Walter (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1914) 45.



life, surrounded by speculation. Benjamin reinforces the impression that one can only search in vain for the single comprehensive and definitive presentation of what he calls his "politics." In a letter from 1934 he states that he has always written in accordance with his conviction, "yet seldom and only in conversation . . . attempted to bring to expression the whole contradictory foundation from which it stems in its various manifestations" (*GB* 4:408).<sup>3</sup>

Under these circumstances, I can offer no more than an attempt restricted to reconstructing several basic strands of Benjamin's reflections on politics and pursuing the manifestations in which they take on a more or less coherent form. I will first sketch the systematic and philosophical-historical framework within which Benjamin articulates his politics. As we know from his correspondence, during the 1920's Benjamin was trying to set down his thoughts regarding politics in a large-scale study. Secondly, I will turn to this constellation of works that has been handed down fragmentarily, and includes the lost essay, which is alluded to in the title of this essay. Finally, I will concentrate on the part of Benjamin's oeuvre that has always been interpreted under the category of the political. During his stay on the island of Capri in the autumn of 1924, Benjamin transmitted those "communist signals" (*GB* 2:511) to which he remained committed throughout the rest of his life. His "turn to political thought" (*GB* 2:60) has been interpreted primarily as a programmatic rejection of the metaphysical orientation that had dominated his thought up to this point. Yet when he notes in the same context that he intends "no longer to mask in an old-Frankian manner the current and political moments in my thought, but rather to develop them, experimentally, in the extreme" (*GB* 2:511), it is clear that he does not plan to turn away from his past motifs, but instead to focus his undivided attention on them in order to think them through further under altered circumstances.

## I

At first Benjamin was attracted to politics under quite different influences. In the autumn of 1919, after successfully completing his doctoral

3. Benjamin's works and letters are referenced with the following abbreviations: *GS*: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Theodor W. Adorno, Gershom Scholem, Rolf Tiedemann, & Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds., 7 vols., suppl. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-89). *GB*: Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, Christoph Gödde & Henri Lonitz, eds., 6 vols. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995-2000).

degree at the University of Bern, he read Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*. Although he came across "horrendous deficits" in the book, which appeared in the last year of the war, it seemed to him nonetheless "the only book" to which he could respond and make "a truly contemporaneous and contemporary statement." He notes that his association with the author was even more useful than the book itself, since "his conversation was so often critical of my rejection of any and all current political tendencies that I was finally forced into a deeper acquaintance with this matter, which, I hope, will prove to have been worthwhile" (GB 2:46).

Bloch's interest in contemporary political issues was not accidental. Like Benjamin, who was released from military service, Bloch went to Switzerland in the spring of 1917. He had a mandate to draw up a report on pacifistic ideologies in Switzerland for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* [Archive for Social Sciences and Politics]. In addition, he had begun in September to write for the *Freie Zeitung*, a journal funded by the Entente, for which Hugo Ball was initially a contributor and later chief editor. A close friendship and cooperation developed between Bloch and Ball for at least half a year, nourished as much by common philosophical interests as political engagement, particularly their strong rejection of Prussian-German militarism and their struggle for democracy and a republican constitution. Ball and his later wife, Emmy Hennings, were neighbors of Benjamin and his wife in Bern's Marzili-district, where the two women soon established contact with one another. Through the mediation of Hugo Ball, contact between Benjamin and Bloch also developed.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to determine whether Benjamin's review of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*, which was written at the request of the author, was the first attempt to write down his philosophical-political thoughts. This review, frequently mentioned in the correspondence until the end of 1920, must be considered lost. In a letter that refers to the review as a recently completed piece, Benjamin grants that the book corresponds to his own

4. On the historical-political and the biographical background, cf. Martin Korol's informative introduction in Ernst Bloch, *Kampf, nicht Krieg. Politische Schriften 1917-1919*, ed. Martin Korol (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 45-54 and, further, Chrysoula Kambas, "Ball, Bloch und Benjamin. Die Jahre bei der Freien Zeitung," *Dionysius DADA Areopagita. Hugo Ball und die Kritik der Moderne*, ed. Bernd Wacker (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996) 86-91 and Anna Stüssi, "Politik und Mystik. Aus dem Leben und Denken einiger Emigranten in Bern 1912-1919," "Der sanfte Trug des Berner Milieus". *Künstler und Emigranten 1910-1920*, eds. Josef Helfenstein & Christoph von Tavel (Bern: Stämpfli, 1988) 169-90.

convictions in several important arguments, but he emphasizes unambiguously that it is “diametrically opposed” to his own idea of philosophy (GB 2:73; cf. 75). If Bloch’s book contributed in any way to the clarification of Benjamin’s thoughts on politics, then it is only in the critical and largely abstract fathoming of its philosophical premises. Politics is, for Benjamin, in the first order a philosophical problem, which remains a persistent foundation of his later political remarks and leads to frequent misunderstandings. Indeed, in the early 1920s, he is primarily concerned with determining the relation of politics to the idea of philosophy, which delineates the boundaries he shares with Bloch. A statement in the “Theological-Political Fragment” (which, it should be remembered, was edited and given its title by Adorno) is quite informative and pertinent. Here, Benjamin states that the greatest merit of the book is the fact that it “denied with all intensity the political importance of theocracy” (GS 2.1:203).

Yet it was not Bloch, but rather Hugo Ball who stated decisively that the “Kingdom of God on Earth” was sacrilege, that “theocracy, a might installed by God,” was “the sacrilege of sacrileges.”<sup>5</sup> His pamphlet, *Toward the Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, which Benjamin might already have read in the year of its publication, 1919,<sup>6</sup> is an ardent protest against any form of bond between religion and the state with a view to the defeat of the theocratic system of the Central Powers dominated by Prussia-Germany. It culminates in a call upon the “solidarity of the European mind against the theocratic claim of any and every metaphysics of the state.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea of a Kingdom of God also plays a central role in Bloch’s “System of Theoretical Messianism.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the *Spirit of Utopia*, in its

5. Hugo Ball, *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (Bern: Freier Verlag, 1919) 229.

6. This is substantiated by the *Verzeichnis der gelesenen Bücher* (GS 7.1: 443, Nr. 601) as well as by Scholem’s memoirs. Cf. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975) 101.

7. Ball 238, VI. In his precise and convincing interpretation of the *Critique*, Anson Rabinbach concludes that in the end Ball fell victim to the dialectic of his own polemic against political theocracy. “Finally, Ball’s own theological criticism perpetuates and reenacts the very link between religion and politics that he ostensibly rejects [. . .]. The *Critique* recapitulates the theologization of politics that, according to Ball, is Luther’s first sin.” Rabinbach, *In the Shadows of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 90. On the history of the text’s editions and its original anti-Semitic tenor, apparently suppressed through the censor of later editors, cf. Rabinbach 227-28.

8. Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, Faksimilie der Ausgabe von 1918, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1959-78) 16:337 (emphasis in original).

crusade against “the cold devil’s fist of failure,” refers explicitly to the soul, the Messiah and the Apocalypse, greeting them as the “*a priori* of all politics and culture.”<sup>9</sup> Thus Bloch reformulates the message of socialism with his entreaty for a Kingdom of God, the “necessary and *a priori* church posited after socialism.” For him, “the organization of the Earth” contains, “in the mystery of the Kingdom of God, its immediately effective and immediately deducible metaphysics.”<sup>10</sup> Bloch incorporated these thoughts, in part verbatim, in the final section of his report for the *Archiv*, in which he confronts the “social-anarchistic ideas” of his friend Hugo Ball. Bloch claims that the “Christian Bakuninist” Ball, is justified in his rejection of “every objectively fixed transcendence,” and that he “glimpsed nowhere the paths leading to a different, a purely spiritual and nowhere mundanely fixed series of structures and transcendence.”<sup>11</sup> But Bloch believes to have identified and forged this metaphysical-transcendent path. In other words: There is considerable evidence that *Spirit of Utopia* tends to emphasize, rather than vehemently deny, the political importance of theocracy.<sup>12</sup>

From this view, Benjamin’s words would have to be understood as an admonition rather than a result of his reading. This would correspond to the lost review’s general tenor, which Benjamin characterized as “most thorough, most academic, most decisively full of praise, most esoterically reprimanding” (*GB* 2:72). This interpretation is further supported by a review published in the autumn of 1920 in Kurt Hiller’s *Ziel* under the title “The Antichrist and Ernst Bloch,” that Benjamin described as a “most remarkable, essential discussion of Bloch’s book, which displays its weaknesses with great rigor” (*GB* 2:109). The author was Salomo Friedlaender, whose philosophical magnum opus *Creative Indifference* (1919) was admired by Benjamin just as much as the grotesqueries he

9. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* 433.

10. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* 410-11.

11. Bloch, “Über einige politische Programme und Utopien in der Schweiz” (first published: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik* 46 [1918/19]: 140-62), Bloch, *Kampf, nicht Krieg* 558-59.

12. Thus Norbert Bolz, *Auszug aus der entzauberten Welt: Philosophischer Extremismus zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Munich: Fink, 1989) 23. On this, see also Raulet, who, in his interpretation of the *Theologisch-Politischen Fragment*, concludes that “Benjamin attributed to Bloch his concept of Jewish theology in a sense that is in no way in accordance with Bloch’s intention.” Contrary to Raulet, however, I would with a view to the juxtaposition of the orders of the profane and the messianic, insist on not calling Benjamin’s conception of politics messianic. Gérard Raulet, *Le caractère destructeur. Esthétique, théologie et politique chez Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Aubier, 1997) 190.



published under the pseudonym of Mynona. Friedlaender, who occasionally described his "Anti-Bloch" as the "most radical rejection of Christianity in every form"<sup>13</sup> since Nietzsche's *Antichrist*, rebuked Bloch's indecisiveness with regard to transcendence and immanence as the starting point for a devastating critique of *Spirit of Utopia*. Nietzsche's *Of the Apostates* provides an excessively well-stocked metaphorical arsenal, which is deployed heavily in the text, oscillating between biting polemic and malevolent mockery. He is willing to grant no "third possibility that is neither crucifix nor thyrsus," and accuses Bloch of "obtaining by fraud a third moment out of the clear alternative between Dionysus and the crucified."<sup>14</sup> Bloch, he argued, ruined the here and now with his fanatical enthusiasm for the "'time of the Kingdom' as the final age of revelation" and his fraudulent hereafter. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Nietzsche's critique of ascetic ideals left no third possibility between Christ and Dionysus. It became incumbent to decide, with Zarathustra, against all hereafters and for life. Friedlaender writes: "Abandon all priestliness! Become sober and profane! . . . Write your Anti-Bloch immediately!"<sup>15</sup>

Bloch had praised Nietzsche as a precursor of his thought, but he accused him of metaphysical obscurity in his struggle against traditional, cold, non-dionysic, non-metaphysical man. Ultimately, according to Bloch, the conception of the will to power and the philosophy of the eternal return represent "the failed attempt at a third Testament."<sup>16</sup> Thus Friedlaender was able to take the key phrase of his polemic from its object and use it against that object. Though the review did not compel him to a serious confrontation, it did provoke a polemical response from Bloch. He dismissed its author *en passant* as a "miniature Nietzsche" [*Nietzschel*], who was seeking his Wagner

13. Salomo Friedlaender to Alfred Kubin, 13 June 1919, Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona-Alfred Kubin, *Briefwechsel*, eds. Helmut Geerken and Sigrid Hauff (Linz: edition neue texte, 1986) 111.

14. Friedlaender, "Der Antichrist und Ernst Bloch," *Das Ziel: Jahrbücher für geistige Politik* 4 (1920): 103, cf. 115. Klaus Vondung discusses the text in order to provide a clearer view of the specifically religious, enthusiastic dimension of *Spirit of Utopia* in the constellation of Bloch, Friedlaender and Hiller, who added to the reviews reprinted an epilogue that surpassed his own polemic. Though Vondung's characterization of Friedlaender needs to be corrected in certain respects, his rendition, in my view, gets at the heart of the matter. Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (Munich: dtv, 1988) 251-57.

15. Friedlaender 114.

16. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* 269; cf. Friedlaender 105.



and thought to have found him in *Spirit of Utopia*.<sup>17</sup>

Using the term ‘profane’ in his review of Bloch’s book, Friedlaender had named one of the central concepts of the “Theological-Political Fragment.” The fragment opposes the order of the profane to the Kingdom of God, which cannot be “the telos of the historical dynamic,” not its “aim,” but rather, if anything, its “end” (GS 2.1:203). Benjamin calls this order ‘profane’ because it is aimed at the “idea of happiness” and does not refer to the Messianic as its telos. It is, in this respect, identical with the political. Benjamin calls this order profane – and, emphatically, a “profane order of the profane” (GS 2.1:204) – because it is not merely opposed to the Messianic; but because of this opposition it is also bound to it. On this view, politics pursues the business of the Messiah only when it is completely and unconditionally devoted to earthly striving for happiness. “But seek ye first for nourishment and clothing, and the Kingdom of God will be added unto you” – clearly, Benjamin found the expression of his own conviction in Hegel’s inversion of the message of the New Testament, which he cites at the opening of the fourth of his “Theses on the Concept of History.”<sup>18</sup> According to the idea of the “mystical understanding of history” (GS 2.1:203) expounded in the “Theological-Political Fragment,” all things earthly are bound to the divine realm only at the price of their destruction. The goal of politics is happiness; its method, however, as Benjamin puts it at the close of the text, is “nihilism” (GS 2.1:204). Wherever politics sets goals, it must restrict them to the order of the profane. And because politics is restricted to the profane, its aims are in the final analysis vain.

The proximity and the distance of these reflections to Bloch become more apparent in Bloch’s book on Thomas Münzer, which he characterized retrospectively as a coda to *Spirit of Utopia*. It emphasizes, with unconcealed sympathy, the theological-political strivings of Münzer’s brethren in faith. They “fought not for better times, but for the end of

17. Bloch, “Einige Kritiker” (1922), *Durch die Wüste: Frühe kritische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981) 65. Bloch clearly seeks to denounce Friedlaender’s dual authorial presence as Friedlaender-Mynonas when he writes that “as a grotesque, the little Dionysus trots along next to philosophy.” In the context touched upon here, it is remarkable that Bloch had already incorporated the 1913 text “Der Impuls Nietzsches” into the essay collection, which is the apparent basis for the comments on Nietzsche in *Spirit of Utopia*. Cf. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* 267-70 and Bloch, “Der Impuls Nietzsches” (1913), *Durch die Wüste* 105-09.

18. GS 1.2: 694. The Hegel quote stems from a letter from Hegel to Knebel of 30 August 1807; cf. Matt. 6.33.

all time . . . , not to overcome earthly tribulations in a eudaimonistic, reconstructed, free-standing civilization, but rather for the derealization of civilization at the break-through point of the realm."<sup>19</sup> Bloch has no doubts as to its relevance. He sees himself writing in "days close to Münzer," in which the theologian of revolution appears again in images and intentions, related to Karl Liebknecht and not far from Lenin, "illuminating for the revolution, in place of all merely earthly eudaimonism, its most mighty aim."<sup>20</sup>

Benjamin, in contrast, places happiness at the center of his conception of politics, which belongs to the order of the profane. Yet happiness is a political category in the strict sense of the word not only because it belongs to the order of the profane. The subject of the struggle for happiness is not the individual human being alone, but rather the individual as a part of humanity. This interpretation of the "Fragment" is born out by a series of notes written in connection with it. In these notes, Benjamin takes up the time-honored philosophical problem of the *commercium mentis et corporis*, the so-called psycho-physical problem, and gives it a very peculiar spin. Without taking into consideration the conditions necessary for the cooperation of mind and body, Benjamin simply presupposes their unity as given. His anthropology is not predicated upon a contradictory, double human nature qua mental and physical being. Instead, Benjamin considers the human being as an entity belonging to two distinct "universal structures" by virtue of a body always already bound to a mind (*GS* 6:80). Thus the traditional distinction between mind and body is replaced by the distinction between *Leib*

19. Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1921), *Gesamtausgabe* 2:63-64.

20. Bloch, *Münzer* 109-10. Cf. Vondung 232-33. In private letters accompanied by a request for discretion, Benjamin commented devastatingly on the book shortly after its appearance, without allowing himself to be drawn into a substantive argument. After reading three-fourths of the book, he says, he has learned little that was instructive, whereas each page requires that the reader swallow the most unappetizing material. "On the whole," in his final judgment, "these theological discussions are ruled by the spirit of a subaltern, expressionistic reporter." (*GB* 2:216-17, cf. 226) Benjamin found his verdict confirmed in Siegfried Kracauer's review of the book, which Scholem had pointed out to him. (*GB* 2:271) What is more, Kracauer alters Friedlaender's reproach against *Spirit of Utopia*. The bearing pronounced in the book on Münzer is "*pseudo-Chiliasm of a literary variety*, and its admixture with Communism does justice neither to religious nor to political-historical reality." Kracauer, "Prophetentum" [Review of Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, first published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* 27 Aug. 1922] Kracauer, *Schriften*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990) 5.1: 200 (emphasis in original).

[body] and *Körper* [corpus]. According to Benjamin, the human being belongs with his *Leib* to “humanity, with his *Körper* to God.”<sup>21</sup> Since this distinction is specific to the German language, Benjamin’s original terms will be maintained.

A series of antithetic categories connected to this fundamental distinction appear in the “Theological-Political Fragment” as well. There, it was the “inner, particular human being” who experienced the “immediate Messianic intensity of the heart” in “unhappiness, in the sense of suffering” (*GS* 2.1:204); the corresponding notes ascribe pain and desire to the sphere of the *Körper*. Benjamin’s distinctions are plainly based on reflections stemming from the psychology of perception. Whereas everything perceived by the human being with a Gestalt perception and thus perceived in a limited fashion belongs to the *Leib*, the *Körper* manifests itself in those perceptions in which no limitation of any kind is experienced. Other than pain and desire, one experiences the body in the state of ecstasy when the human being exceeds the boundaries of his *Körper* without losing oneself. It is in this manner that one first perceives one’s own individuality. For Benjamin, this perception is bound up with solitude, which he defines as the consciousness of “immediate dependence upon God” and, in a speculative addendum to the psychology of perception approach of his notes, ascribes to “resurrection” as a characteristic of the human being’s *körperliche Natur*. (*GS* 6:80).

In contrast, *leibliche Natur* tends towards its “dissolution.” Just as the “Fragment” assigned the idea of happiness to the profane order, the notes connect it with the sphere of the *Leib*. Benjamin defines the *Leib* as the “function of historical presence in the human being.” This definition contains the premise that the *Leib* is essentially perceived as limited. As Benjamin remarks in another note, the *Leib* is in many respects unavailable to us. We cannot see our face, our head or our back, and hence we enter the world of perception “so to speak with our feet and not with our head” (*GS* 6:67). At issue here is that Benjamin defines the sphere of interaction of *Leib* and mind not only as limited in form, but also attributes temporality to this interlocution. Though the concept of *Geistesgegenwart* [presence of mind] does not belong to this context, the roots of this notion, which became a central political category for

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21. *GS* 4:80. Benjamin offers no more detailed justification for his distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*. Cf. “Leib,” Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 32 vol. ([1854-1960] Munich: dtv, 1991) 12:579-90.

Benjamin, reach back to his notes on the psycho-physical problem from the early 1920s. It comes to the fore in Benjamin's conception of *Geistlichkeit* [corporeality] as a form of the historical, or, more precisely, as "its momentary appearance as transitory-nontransitory." Just as the present is subject to the course of history, the *Leib* appears "as an appearance in the illumination of the historical Now" because of its relation to the present. Given this temporal determination of its mode of appearance, the *Leib* becomes a category of the history of philosophy. In the historical event, the *leibliche Geist* [bodily mind] takes on the shape of humanity; the particular *leibliche Individualität* [bodily individuality] enters into the form of *Leib der Menschheit* [body of mankind] at the price of its completion and destruction. History, where it strives toward this goal, is characterized by happiness as the epitome of *leibliches Leben* [bodily life]. "Technology" (*GS* 6:80) functions in the notes as a means to this end in the use of nature, and consequently makes its way into the center of Benjamin's reflections on politics.

The concepts Benjamin employed to expound his thoughts on politics permit us to discern broad and diffuse allusions to the philosophical tradition. Without doubt, one decisive impulse for the peculiar metaphysics of the body is to be found in Nietzsche, who calls upon us to recognize in the body "grand reason" and to see the soul as "a word for something proper to the body,"<sup>22</sup> and whose doctrine of the super-man culminates in the vision of a "higher body" still to be created.<sup>23</sup> Among the broad currents of *Lebensphilosophie* [philosophy of life] that fed upon this same source, one must mention in particular Henri Bergson and Ludwig Klages. Bergson's *Matière et Mémoire* explicitly presents itself in the subtitle as an "Essay sur la relation du corps à l'esprit."<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the bibliography of his works contained in Benjamin's notes (*GS* 6:84), the "great philosopher and anthropologist" (*GS* 3:44), as Benjamin later referred to Klages, is clearly present in his reflections on the problem of perception. Klages's understanding of life as a unity of soul and body into which the mind intrudes from the outside

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Kritische Studienausgabe, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich, Berlin, New York: dtv/ de Gruyter, 1993) 4:39 ("Von den Verächtern des Leibes").

23. Nietzsche 37 ("Von den Hinterweltlern").

24. Henri Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1896). In *Verzeichnis der gelesenen Bücher*, which dates back only to 1916/17, a German translation of the book is listed (*GS* 7.1:438, Nr. 503).



like a wedge is based explicitly upon Nietzsche, and attacks just as emphatically the “intellectualistic misjudgment of life” in the Cartesian philosophy of consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Descartes, at the beginning of modernity, initiated “the age of the soul’s decline,”<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche appears to Klages as a “dithyramb of decline” whose “well-fortified religion of life” found its resigned successor in Klages’s own pessimistic critique of culture.<sup>27</sup> Benjamin continued to hold Klages in very high esteem throughout his life. Therefore the emphasis with which he distanced himself from Klages in one decisive point is particularly remarkable. Already in 1929, Benjamin considered it absolutely necessary to challenge the “inexorable rejection of the given, ‘technical,’ ‘mechanized’ condition of the world” advocated by Klages (GS 3:44). Here he implicitly confirms the positive role that he had once ascribed to technology in his own earlier essays.

Numerous connections to Benjamin’s notes and reflections can be discerned in addition to those from extra-academic philosophy. It is true that Benjamin the philosophy student issues a withering evaluation of his studies in Berlin and Freiburg when, in a letter of 1914, he writes that “the university is simply not the place to study” (GB 1:242). Still, the letter ultimately expresses no more and no less than the disappointment of obviously unusually high expectations. As a

25. Ludwig Klages, “Bewußtsein und Leben” (1915), *Der Mensch und das Leben* (Jena: Diederichs, 1937) 45.

26. Klages, “Mensch und Erde” (1913), *Der Mensch und das Leben* 23. Klages wrote the essay as a contribution to a Festschrift on the occasion of the meeting of the *Freideutsche Jugend* on the Hoher Meißner in 1913. It provided the reason for Benjamin to visit Klages in Munich in the spring of 1914, on which occasion he invited Klages to hold a lecture. Benjamin noted the title in GS 6:84. Benjamin’s relationship to Klages has been repeatedly touched upon in the secondary literature, but what is of interest here has not been dealt with. Along with the early and in many respects inadequate study by Werner Fuld, “Walter Benjamins Beziehung zu Ludwig Klages,” *Akzente* 28 (1981): 274–87, I would emphatically urge the reader to refer to the nuanced and well-informed treatment of the topic in John McCole’s study, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 178–80 and 236–40. Finally, Richard Wolin has highlighted Klages’s importance for Benjamin with a view to the theory of dialectical images. He claims that Benjamin, following Klages, shares with Jünger the fear of a progressive technologization of the lifeworld. This notion strikes me, however, as untenable. Cf. Wolin, “Introduction to the Revised Edition,” in Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: U of California P, 1994) xxix–xl, on Jünger and Benjamin, xxxiv).

27. Klages: “Bewußtsein und Leben” 54; cf. Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher des Lebens* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1972) 906–10 and 919–20. In the passage dealing with Nietzsche, he quotes himself from *Kosmogonischer Eros* (1922), which is also listed in GS 6:84.



pupil of Gustav Wyneken he failed to find a teacher in the emphatic sense at the university. Nonetheless, he is indebted to his academic teachers for important stimuli and impulses, however peculiarly he transforms these inducements in his own thought. Heinrich Rickert's course "Exercises in Metaphysics in Conjunction with the Writings of Henri Bergson" afforded him the chance to study the works of the philosopher and future Nobel laureate for literature, who already enjoyed celebrity status in Europe.<sup>28</sup> Rickert himself had drawn the contours of his own philosophy of value in the course of confronting the philosophy of life, which he first explicated in his teachings during Benjamin's studies in Freiburg (*GB* 1:117). His critical study of the philosophy of life as a "philosophical fashion of our time," published in 1920, emphatically attests to this.<sup>29</sup> Benjamin's announcement of his own dissertation was published in the same issue of the *Kant-Studien* in which one of the journal's editors discussed Rickert's book at length.<sup>30</sup> Rickert identified the demonstration "that, in philosophizing about life, life itself is not sufficient material" as the principal aim of his text.<sup>31</sup> Next to Nietzsche, whom Rickert acknowledges as the connection between the older and newer philosophy of life, he sees Bergson, despite the latter's relative lack of independence in his basic thoughts, as the genuine philosopher of life of the present day. The entire fashionable current of the philosophy of life and its most important initiator and its current regent are subject to the verdict of biologism. In contrast, it is Rickert's explicit aim to break through the governing principle of pure immanence of life and to do justice to the latent value character of the philosophy of life in a comprehensive study of evaluating life.<sup>32</sup> One can find in various moments of Benjamin's work the content, if not the direction, of both Rickert's accusation that Nietzsche overestimates mere life and his

28. Cf. *GB* 1:108. As a student in Bern Benjamin gave a talk on Bergson as late as 1918 (*GB* 1:422).

29. Heinrich Rickert, *Philosophie des Lebens. Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmung unserer Zeit* (Tübingen: Mohr / Paul Siebeck, 1920).

30. Benjamin, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" [Selbstanzeige], *Kant-Studien* 26 (1921): 219 (*GS* 1.2:707-08) and Max Frischeisen-Köhler, "Philosophie und Leben. Bemerkungen zu Heinrich Rickerts Buch: *Die Philosophie des Lebens*," *Kant-Studien* 26 (1921): 112-38.

31. Rickert, *Philosophie des Lebens* iii.

32. Cf. Rickert 189-93. Cf. Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994) 219-25.

objection that Bergson lacks an adequate understanding of history.<sup>33</sup>

In Bern, Benjamin found Paul Häberlin und Richard Herbertz to be two professors who were close in several respects to southwest German Kantianism and to Rickert, whose teaching included psychology as well as philosophy. Psychology, which had previously been considered a part of philosophy, had first achieved status as an independent science in the 1880's. Herbert Schnädelbach has pointed out that its peculiar status within the university structure of disciplines led to a great number of double professorships in philosophy and psychology.<sup>34</sup> Psychology was a mandatory minor for Benjamin in his philosophical doctoral exam in Bern.<sup>35</sup> He attended courses such as "Introduction to Logic and Epistemology" and "Epistemological Presuppositions of Modern Psychology" taught by Herbertz, who later became his doctoral advisor. In his epistemological lectures, Herbertz seeks to overcome Rickert's approach, which he characterizes as "critical idealism" and considers part of the most important modern epistemological project of achieving a standpoint from which the subject-object distinction can be overcome. His formulation of this standpoint as the "philosophical primal experience" owes much to Gundolf's Goethe-book. Herbertz's explicit intent is to reconcile

33. Cf. Rickert 136, 178 and 183. On Benjamin's understanding of Nietzsche, see below. Benjamin mentions Bergson briefly in the second version of the Baudelaire essay. Next to Dilthey, Klages and Jung, Bergson counts for him as one of the protagonists of the philosophy of life. Benjamin's discussion culminates in the accusation that Bergson above all has ignored the historical contingency of experience (GS 1.2:608-09). Later in the essay, Max Horkheimer rather than Rickert is called upon as a witness for this point of view (GS 1.2:643). After all, Benjamin described himself in a letter from this period – to be sure, not entirely seriously, rather in the sense in which Adorno called himself a pupil of Cornelius's – a "pupil of Rickert's." *Adorno / Benjamin. Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994) (letter of 7 May 1940) 434.

34. Cf. Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland* 96-97 and 126. On the institutionalization of the discipline of psychology in the canon of the German university, cf. also Mitchell G. Ash, "Psychologie in Deutschland um 1900. Reflexiver Diskurs des Bildungsbürgertums, Teilgebiet der Philosophie, akademische Disziplin," *Kultur, Wissen und Universität um 1900*, eds. Christoph König and Eberhard Lämmert (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1999) 78-93. On the stature of Herbertz und Häberlin in the philosophy faculty of the University of Bern, cf. *Hochschulgeschichte Berns 1528-1984: Zur 150-Jahr-Feier der Universität Bern 1984*, ed. Pietro Scandola (Bern: Hallwag, 1984) 726-30.

35. The records of the examination held on 27 June 1919 note a mark of 2 for the written exam in Philosophy, otherwise the candidate's performance was evaluated by the examiners, Herbertz, Häberlin and Maync, chaired by the Dean, Schulthess, with a mark of 1 in the subjects Psychology and Modern German and given a complete mark of *summa cum laude*. Cf. *Protokolle der Philosophischen Fakultät I*, vol. 11 (1 Febr. 1915- 26 Feb. 1920). Dekanat der Philosophischen Fakultät I der Universität Bern.

neo-Kantian logic with Bergson's pure intuition – a project for which he expects an important contribution from psychoanalytic research as well.<sup>36</sup>

Herbertz's interdisciplinary teaching of philosophy and psychology hardly succeeds in getting beyond a philosophically unconvincing syncretism. Though Häberlin had nothing more to offer Benjamin in this respect, it is likely that he stimulated Benjamin in a decisive manner to develop thoughts of his own. During Benjamin's studies in Bern, Häberlin's interest lay primarily in psychology, a discipline that had been concerned since the middle of the previous century to distinguish the object of its investigations from philosophy and the natural sciences. Friedrich Albert Lange, in his influential *Geschichte des Materialismus*, had greeted the new discipline with the remark that in the future it could be called a science only if it no longer proceeded from the concept of the soul, but rather from that "of the psychic functions." Thus the relationship between body and soul in the sense of older metaphysics would not have to be decided in materialistic terms. It simply was not a matter of consideration, for it was not something to which real research within the boundaries of possible experience could lead.<sup>37</sup> Lange arrived at this insight as a result of his re-interpretation of Kantian criticism through the physiology of sense perception, in which the "physical-psychical organization of the human being"<sup>38</sup> takes the place Kant had accorded to the transcendental aesthetic and the doctrine of the categories in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For a Kantianism corrected or further developed in accordance with the physiology of the sense organs, it was "practically a matter of no concern whether one speaks of a mental or a physical organization."<sup>39</sup> It is less Lange's "standpoint of the ideal" than the theoretical foundation it is built upon which influenced Nietzsche. It also provides the framework within which Häberlin takes

36. Cf. Richard Herbertz, "Erkenntnistheorie," *Einführung in die Philosophie*, ed. Franz Schnaß (Osterwieck-Harz: A. W. Zickfeldt, 1928) 33-72. In his study guide from 1914, an annotated bibliography of philosophical literature, Herbertz deals with Freud in a rather reserved manner. With regard to the interpretation of dreams, he remarks that the majority of scientific psychologists take "provisionally skeptical" view of Freud's hypotheses. Herbertz, *Die philosophische Literatur. Ein Studienführer* (Stuttgart: Spemann, 1912) 108. Cf. Herbertz, *Das philosophische Urerlebnis* (Bern, Leipzig: Ernst Bircher, 1921) vi-vii and 11-13. Benjamin had already decisively rejected Gundolf's Goethe book in 1917 (*GS* 1.3:826-28).

37. Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* ([1866] Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 578.

38. Lange 481.

39. Lange 852.

up again the psycho-physical problem, which was discarded by Lange as a metaphysical problem.<sup>40</sup> Before publishing his investigations in *Der Leib und die Seele* in 1923, he offered numerous courses on the subject. Benjamin was among the participants of the seminar “The Problem of Body and Soul” in the summer semester of 1918.<sup>41</sup>

Though Häberlin’s long-term interest was an empirically based ethics, he focuses in this text only on a “purely empirical-theoretical clarification” of the question. He stakes out his approach in a discussion of the already existent and seemingly incompatible attempts to explain the interaction of body and soul. On Häberlin’s view, their incompatibility results from a “conflation of perception and experience, of material and the result of thinking reality.” Contrary to this conflation, the investigation must turn away from experience and concentrate on the question how the relation of body and soul appears to unreflected perception.<sup>42</sup> The results of his investigations lead Häberlin to distinguish terminologically between *Körper* and *Leib*. At the base of this distinction is the conviction that the human being is “in his entire reality soul and nothing but soul.” Soul, however, not in the restricted sense which denotes the part of reality capable of consciousness. Rather, the whole soul appears

in alien form as a sensuous form, hence as *Körper* in this sense. The *Leib*, however – if we use the expression not identically with *Körper*, but rather as something itself real – is either identical to the whole soul and thus represents it under a consistently biological perspective – or, in narrower sense of *Leib*, it is the incomprehensible part of the soul incapable of consciousness, and thus distinguished from the ‘soul’ in the restricted sense as a partner, structural and causally-genetically tied to it in the constitution of the whole human being, the soul in the broad sense.<sup>43</sup>

40. On Lange’s position in Neokantianism cf. Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986) 233-57; also Jörg Salaquarda, “Nietzsche und Lange,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 7 (1978): 236-53.

41. Cf. Quästurkassabuch der Universität Bern, SS 1918, Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, Sign. BB III b 786, 281 and Quästurhauptbuch der Universität Bern, SS 1918, StAB, Sign. BB III b 871, 251.

42. Paul Häberlin, *Der Leib und die Seele* (Basel: Kober C. F. Spitteler’s Nachfolger, 1923) 27. Since my initial assessment, my assumption of Benjamin’s interest in Häberlin, even his knowledge of Häberlin’s book, has been validated by a series of unknown letters, which I recently published. Cf. “Von Bern nach Muri. Vier unveröffentlichte Briefe Walter Benjamins an Paul Häberlin im Kontext,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 75 (2001): 463-90.

43. Häberlin 208.



It is from this perspective that Häberlin, who knew Freud personally and took an avid interest in his work, formulates his rejection of psychoanalytic drive theory. Since he considered himself to have developed a sufficient empirical basis for ethics with his conception of the psycho-physical problem, he was offended by "Freud's derivation of the phenomenon of conscience (censorship) from drive."<sup>44</sup>

In a fragment most likely from the Bern years, Benjamin's reflections on the relationship of psychology and morality adopt Häberlin's premise that there exists no mental form of comportment different from the bodily appearance. To the extent that one's own mental life as well as those of others, appears in the bodily ["im Leiblichen" (*GS* 6:65)], it is available to perception. Yet Benjamin immediately adds his own spin by denoting language as the "canon of perception" (*GS* 6:66). Here, Benjamin establishes a connection to his earlier philosophy of language and it becomes evident once again that he encounters and works through foreign impulses against the background of a body of thought that has already been largely articulated.

That is also true for Benjamin's attempt to found the concept of politics through speculative recourse to the psycho-physical problem and the peculiar distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps Benjamin's terminology have their roots in contemporary psychology. In his

44. Quoted by Peter Kamm, *Paul Häberlin. Leben und Werk*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Schweizer Spiegel, 1977) 1:256. Cf. also 386-91. According to Scholem, Benjamin attended a Freud seminar in 1918 and expressed his rejection of the psychoanalytic drive theory in a seminar paper. According to the schedule of courses, Häberlin did not hold a Freud seminar in the years 1917-19, but did deal extensively with Freud in his courses; cf. Kamm 386. As one of the few testimonies of Benjamin's early studies of Freud, the fragment "Capitalism as Religion" attests to a critically reserved attitude towards Freudian theory (*GS* 6:101); cf. on this my essay: "Kapitalismus als Religion. Anmerkungen zu einem Fragment Walter Benjamins", *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 72 (1998): 162-65. Along with Häberlin, Klages and Friedlaender, who had already emerged as decided opponents of Freud, were probably the chief influence upon Benjamin's reception of psychoanalysis. Klages also describes Freud explicitly as the "founder of a religion" and thereby anticipates the basic idea of Benjamin's fragment; cf. Klages, *Die Grundlagen der Charakterkunde* ([1910] Bonn: Bouvier, 1966) 224. In Friedlaender's case, cf. Mynona (Salomo Friedlaender), *Das Eisenbahnglück oder Anti-Freud* ([1925] Hamburg: Junius, 1988).

45. Siegrid Weigel has remarked in Benjamin's early notes the attempt at an analytic and systematic juxtaposition of *Leib* and *Körper* and called for a more detailed investigation of this "terminology." This should be accompanied by a clarification of his reception of psychoanalysis, which in Weigel's study unreflectively forms the vanishing point of her interpretation of the conception of the body-image space in Benjamin. Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1997) 111-29.



notes, however, he grants this psychology an entirely independent and speculative sense. The political is, as a profane order, directed towards happiness as its telos. In his metaphysical reinterpretation of the concept of *Leib*, which was initially derived from the psychology of perception, the outlines of a collective subject begins to appear. It is assigned the yearning for happiness and uses technology as a means of approaching his vocation through the use of nature. Although this conception may appear hermetic at first, the concepts and images stemming from the field of traditional political philosophy have made their way into it.

Aristotle already designated happiness, *eudaimonia*, as the aim of the political art,<sup>46</sup> and, in correspondence with his doctrine of the *zoon politikon*, emphasized that this goal was the same for the individual and the polis.<sup>47</sup> For the Greeks, the origin of politics was characterized by the development of action directed at the polis, as the relationship among the citizens *qua* citizens [*politai*], which led to the identification of polis and citizenry [*politeia*].<sup>48</sup> One finds in Aristotle traces of the homonoia-literature of the fifth century B.C.E., in which the organic idea of the State has its roots. It was passed on in later times by the fable of Menenius Agrippa.<sup>49</sup> Via the Stoa, it makes its way into the conceptual world of Christianity. The image of the congregation as the *corpus Christi* repeatedly employed by Paul (e.g., Romans 12:4) not only entered into Christian dogmatics, as Ernst Kantorowicz has shown, by way of entangled paths it can be found in medieval doctrines of constitutional law.<sup>50</sup> The political, which was originally applied to the polis, becomes synonymous with the state. According to Hobbes,<sup>51</sup> the community or the

46. Aristoteles, *Nikomachische Ethik*, ed. Günther Bien (Hamburg: Meiner 1985), 1095a 14-20.

47. Aristoteles 1094b, 5-10.

48. Christian Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995) 40.

49. Cf. Wilhelm Nestle, "Die Fabel des Menenius Agrippa," *Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 21 (1927): 350-60.

50. Ernst Kantorowicz, *Die zwei Körper des Königs: Eine Studie zur politischen Theologie des Mittelalters* ([1957] Munich: dtv, 1994) 206-17.

51. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, ed. W. G. Pogson Smith (1651, London: Oxford UP, 1952) 8 (Introduction) resp. 132 (Chap. 17) (Emphasis in original). In his all but unproblematic treatise, which lies outside the narrower sphere of interest here, Horst Bredekamp assumes, with a view to the *Trauerspiel* book, that Benjamin was familiar with the *Leviathan*; cf. Horst Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 247-66.

state manifests itself in the mythical form of the Leviathan, which is however nothing other than an "Artificiall Man," or, more devoutly, a "*Mortall God*" artificially created by man. The mundane definition of the body of the state has been coded since the Enlightenment with the key concept of the epoch: the concept of happiness. Whereas Hobbes and the materialistic Enlightenment still modeled their ideal on the concept of the automaton and described the state as a mechanical work of art, this idea loses its suggestive force when it is juxtaposed to a new concept of organism in which a decidedly anti-mechanistic, organic set of metaphors enters into the political philosophy of modernity, namely political Romanticism.<sup>52</sup>

In light of Benjamin's later writings, a further point is worth considering. The organological conception of the congregation or the Church as the body of Christ achieved its triumphal expression not least in Christian sacral architecture.<sup>53</sup> In the architecture of the nineteenth century and the constructions Benjamin discerned as its epitome, the Paris arcades, technology enters into the domain of art with iron, the first artificial construction material.<sup>54</sup> A new, constructive-functional conception of architecture is bound up with iron and glass as building materials. Architecture turns away from residential building and towards the shaping of public spaces. This modern architecture, which destroys the private, attains in the nineteenth century only an inauthentic expression, still concealed by the ornamental. But in the arcades and other public buildings, its organizing function, which

52. Hans Blumenberg is right to warn against projecting the opposition of mechanism and organism arbitrarily in an historical context; cf. Blumenberg, "Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 6 (1960): 70-83. Cf. Ahlrich Meyer, "Mechanische und organische Metaphorik politischer Philosophie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 13 (1969): 128-99, and Carl Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes: Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols* ([1938] Köln: Hohenheim, 1982) 61-64 also Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* ([1919] Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1982) 156-59.

53. Cf. Art. "Kirche, Kirchenbau," *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 8 vols., ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum SJ (Rome, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1994) 2:514-29.

54. Cf. the groundbreaking essay by Michael Müller, "Architektur für das 'Schlechte Neue'. Zu Walter Benjamins Verarbeitung avantgardistischer Positionen in der Architektur," *'Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln . . .'* *Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt/Main: Syndikat, 1978) 278-323, and on the self-understanding of the *Bauhaus* see Hermann Sturm, "Künstler, Architekten, Designer, die Schuster der gläsernen Galoschen des Glücks," *Heilsversprechen*, ed. Norbert Bolz & Willem van Reijen (Munich: Fink, 1998) 87-113. From an entirely different perspective, which is therefore all the more attractive, the relationship between architecture and politics is discussed in the essay by Otto Karl Werckmeister, "Hitler the Artist," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 270-97.

makes possible the collective self-experience and politicization of the urban masses, begins to take shape for Benjamin. This context also explains why architecture assumes a position next to technology in his political philosophy. It is clear that his review of *Spirit of Utopia* already sought to show that architecture would become the “canon of all productions” (GS 6:148) in the wake of the crisis of the contemplative conception of art.

It would be difficult and perhaps senseless to attempt to trace the origins of the particular keywords with which Benjamin outlines his concept of politics. Instead, I will try to concretize his reflections through a study of the projected work on politics, which I have already touched upon.

## II

Benjamin’s correspondence repeatedly mentions a larger study of politics, the idea of which first appeared in the plan for the review of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*. Out of the “arsenal” of his political works surveyed by Benjamin in January 1925 (GB 3:9), there remain only a few fragments and the “Critique of Violence,” published in 1921. The remaining documents hint at a large-scale work divided into three more or less independent parts: It was to begin with a study entitled “The True Politician,” and followed by “The True Politics,” which would be divided into the chapters “The Decomposition of Violence” (perhaps identical with the Critique of Violence), and “Teleology without Final Purpose.” As a conclusion, Benjamin planned a philosophical criticism of Paul Scheerbart’s utopian novel *Lesabéndio*, in which he also intended to discuss Friedlaender’s review of Bloch.<sup>55</sup>

A note which sets down Benjamin’s “definition of politics” stems also from the period in which he was working on this project. There, politics is “the satisfaction of unenhanced humanness.” Put into the

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55. This image emerges from those passages in the letters which speak of the complete plan of the work on politics (GB 2:54, 109, 119, 127, 177, and GB 3:9). The most important testimony may well, also in light of the new edition of the letter, be the letter to Scholem of 1 Dec. 1920. However, a different reading of the decisive passage (GB 2:109: “third” instead of “first” part), which the editors plead for on the basis of convincing arguments, provides grounds for correcting the schema of the planned work put together by Chrysoula Kambas on the basis of the version of the letter contained in the two-volume edition of the letters; cf. Kambas, “Walter Benjamin liest Georges Sorel: *Réflexions sur la violence*,” *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin*, eds. Michael Opitz & Erdmut Wizisla (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992) 265.

right context, this disconcerting definition becomes legible as a turn of phrase in opposition to Nietzsche. For in the fragment, "Capitalism as Religion," Benjamin reads the conception of the super-man, which culminates in the doctrine of the death of God, as an attempt at "shattering heaven through enhanced humanness" (GS 6:101). The fragment reads Zarathustra's tragic heroism, which Nietzsche deliberately draped in religious solemnity, as the most radical and most magnificent realization of the religious essence of capitalism. Benjamin intended to portray it as a cult religion characterized by guilt and debts [*Schuld und Schulden*].

The implicit reference to Nietzsche and its specific accent warrant placing Benjamin's reflections on politics in the context of the Nietzsche-reception in the milieu of early Expressionism. The names connected to the individual sections and chapters of the great work on politics – Kurt Hiller, Salomo Friedlaender, Erich Unger, Paul Scheerbart, and not least of all Georges Sorel – are closely related to one another in the contexts of Nietzsche and Expressionism. Here, too, we need not be concerned with the particular influences or possible dependencies. Instead, I will sketch the general context that in all likelihood informed Benjamin's concept of politics at this time.

Nietzsche's influence on literary Expressionism can hardly be exaggerated.<sup>56</sup> In particular, the Activism propagated by Kurt Hiller is a thoroughly Nietzschean vitalism. Hiller's apotheosis of the spiritual, the "logocracy," does not contradict Nietzsche's glorification of life, since Hiller praises the deed and not the conscience, the most mundane, energetic realization and not the abstract ideal. Seth Taylor was right to entitle his presentation of Hiller's philosophy as 'Nietzschean Politics.'<sup>57</sup> Among the most influential exegetes of Nietzsche in the early Expressionistic circles was one of the most enigmatic and fascinating figures in a milieu by no means devoid of eccentrics: Salomo Friedlaender. From *Creative Indifference* an immediate bond of affiliation can be retraced

56. Cf. Gunter Martens, "Nietzsches Wirkung im Expressionismus," *Nietzsche und die deutsche Literatur*, 2 vols., ed. Bruno Hillebrand (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978) 2: *Forschungsergebnisse* 39-49, and Wolfgang Rothe, "Einleitung," *Der Aktivismus 1915-1920*, ed. Rothe (Munich: dtv, 1969) 7-21. Although it is stirring as a temporal montage, it is ultimately of little use: Dieter Schuhmacher, "Kurt Hiller und Friedrich Nietzsche," *Kurt Hiller, Erinnerungen und Materialien*, eds. Rolf von Bockel & Harald Lützenkirchen (Hamburg: von Bockel, 1992) 65-85.

57. Seth Taylor, *Left Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism 1910-1920* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1990) 60-88.



to Benjamin's conception of politics.<sup>58</sup>

Friedlaender's approach has been aptly characterized as a "Promethean revolution" with respect to transcendental philosophy.<sup>59</sup> The process of transcendental apperception constitutive for knowledge becomes for Friedlaender a creative faculty. The title of his main work must be understood programmatically. While Kant opened the path to insight into the conditions of the possibility of all experience, Friedlaender went one step further. He contended that thought and volition must be conceptualized by an indifference prior to all polarity and all partition into subject and object, a point that serves as a creative principle from which the I and the world first emerge. This creative principle is unmistakably akin to Nietzsche's Dionysian will to live, in spite of the characteristic distance from Nietzsche's maintained. Nietzsche, in Friedlaender's view, "unfortunately" erred "physiologically" in his conception of the superman. On Friedlaender's interpretation, the creative principle is not demonstrable. It is "no human being, nor is it a great human being," and by no means a "genius." It is graspable only in its effects.<sup>60</sup> As such, the superhuman overcoming of the merely human is replaced by the call for a "self-overcoming," which aims at "the mastery of the empirical pseudo-I by the absolute I."<sup>61</sup> Or, as he puts it elsewhere in more pathetic terms, the aim is a "final self-reflection as the divine, internal Creator." The aim is to take the step Kant shied away from, by means of which alone "the spiritual revolution is completed, through which one becomes master of oneself and thereby necessarily, if at first arduously, master of the world."<sup>62</sup> In his review of *Spirit of Utopia*, Friedlaender,

58. On Friedlaender's importance for the Expressionistic reception of Nietzsche, cf. Martens 47. Scholem has already pointed out Benjamin's knowledge and high estimation of Friedlaender's literary works; cf. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin* 62-63. *Creative Indifference*, published in 1918, is mentioned in the letters for the first time in December 1919. In January 1921, one month after the publication of "Anti-Bloch," Benjamin met Friedlaender on the occasion of a reading by Erich Unger of his *Politics and Metaphysics* (GB 2:128). In May 1921, Benjamin reports that he has "purchased *Creative Indifference* and read thus far with a great deal of pleasure many of the aphorisms." (GB 2:152) To be sure, this does not necessarily imply that he was not already familiar with the work's basic idea (see n. 73).

59. Peter Cardorff, *Friedlaender (Mynona) zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1988), 43. On Friedlaender cf. also Lisbeth Exner, *Fasching als Logik: Über Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona* (Munich: belleville, 1996), which is invaluable above all for its wealth of material and meticulous documentation.

60. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1918) xxii-iii, cf. 151-61.

61. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* xxv.

62. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* 133.



in accordance with the spirit of his basic philosophical idea, accuses Bloch of having no eye for the "Dionysian ideal of the body, this cosmic instrument of the soul."<sup>63</sup> In *Creative Indifference*, he writes that the human self misunderstands "the psycho-physical sign language of its polarization," which merely implies that "it is indeed the spirit which builds the body for itself."<sup>64</sup> But this *Leib* does not yet exist, "it is yet to come – as the most ideal apparatus for the objectification of the subject for itself."<sup>65</sup> Thus Friedlaender denotes the human psyche in another passage as the "Minotaur of the physiological labyrinth, which ought rather to give up its Ariadne."<sup>66</sup>

Friedlaender, not without a sense for the provocative appeal of the paradox, understands the act of simultaneously theoretically and practically gaining sway over the self as a magical event. The magic consists essentially in the learnable art of translating the unconditional creative force into the language of determination [*Bedingtheit*] that is to be deciphered arduously. In his later works, Friedlaender describes this as magic; here, in *Creative Indifference*,<sup>67</sup> he conceptualizes it

63. Friedlaender, "Der Antichrist und Ernst Bloch" 109

64. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* 97 and 108.

65. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* 148. Friedlaender develops his argument in this chapter through repeated discussions of Bergson, whose fundamental importance is pointed to by Exner. Cf. Exner 214-16.

66. Mynona, "Fasching der Logik. Vortrag eines Marsbewohners," Mynona, *Rosa die schöne Schutzmansfrau* (Leipzig: Verlag der Weißen Bücher, 1913) 41.

67. Cf. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* xxvii. "The ideal of this art of reading would be magic, the automatic objectification of the will," is Friedlaender's summary towards the end of the foreword. (xxxii, cf. 109 and 148). In the foreword to a later work, he writes, "if one bases magic, as one must, on the power of our will, one must grasp this will as an in itself rational force essentially tied the intelligent foresight of purpose, an active force by means of which man learns to make himself the master of nature, as he unconditionally should do and therefore can do. On this basis . . . magic becomes for the first time true science. It is the magical power . . . of the *rational*, aesthetically and ethically superior will, which thinks all nature, including that which is inborn within us. . . . If Magic fails to attain its own scientific sobriety, as demonstrated by Kant and Marcus, towards whose doctrines the present text is oriented, it can produce nothing but mischief and only serve the vain decoration of idle conjurors." Friedlaender, "Katechismus der Magie. Nach Immanuel Kants *Von der Macht des Gemüts*" and Ernst Marcus, "Theorie der natürlichen Magie," *Frage- und Antwortform gemeinschaftlich dargestellt* ([1925] Freiburg: Aurum, 1978) xii. Here, both the title and the basic idea of the novel *Graue Magie* are outlined. Mynona, *Graue Magie: Ein Berliner Nachschlüsselroman* ([1922] Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1989). Friedrich Kittler has pointed to the peculiar interaction of magic and technology in *Graue Magie*. Cf. Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986) 121-22.

primarily by using the image of the machine. If it is the spirit's task to build for itself the body, then it has already granted the perspicuous observer several unmistakable signs of its still slumbering mastery. In human technology, the *Leib*, which the spirit is slowly building with such torment, enters into appearance mediatedly, "mechanical wings are at work in advance of the living wings."<sup>68</sup> Friedlaender has no doubt that the "divine engineering art of the soul . . . is superior to all mechanical technology because the latter merely follows upon the former and is nothing more than the scaffold and the concealing shell beneath which its more natural products lie hidden."<sup>69</sup> Releasing the creative principle in oneself is not "awakening from a heavy dream, it means attaining mastery of this dream and attuning it to a lightness and levity of all objective being, of which technology, however advanced, can only give a coarse foretaste."<sup>70</sup> Particularly relevant is the fact that the act of gaining sway over the self is accompanied by the overcoming of individual volition in favor of its efficacy in the community. Thus Friedlaender celebrates the "self-securing of the individual" as the "begin of all genuine politics," as "the principle for the creation of the State, of the cohesive multiplicity of political animals."<sup>71</sup> The State that arises in this fashion would be nothing but "the machine for the externalization of the individual inner realm," and would be "the whole in person, the communal solitary."<sup>72</sup> Like in the ideal case, the mind employs the body as an instrument, the creative principle produces a corresponding instrument in the State.

Yet Friedlaender pursues primarily, in *Creative Indifference*, an explicit and comprehensive metaphysical concern rather than a genuinely political matter. However, the possibility that Friedlaender's metaphysics might be a "disguise for a gargantuan ethical appeal" was already considered by Kurt Hiller. Thus Hiller was not willing to preclude a certain proximity between Friedlaender and the political program of Activism, though with the reservation that "no love is lost

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68. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* 109. The pilot in his aircraft is for Friedlaender "an artificial God." 120.

69. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* 125.

70. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* 148.

71. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* xxvii.

72. Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz* xxviii-iv.

between the political and the metaphysical temperament."<sup>73</sup>

In contrast, Erich Unger enthusiastically greeted Friedlaender's *Creative Indifference* with the firm conviction that the answer for politics was to be expected from metaphysics and called it "the most important philosophical event since Nietzsche."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, one cannot fail to note the similarity between Unger's own attempt in *Politics and Metaphysics*, to develop a different understanding of politics through the use of the psycho-physical problem, and the above-sketched conception of Friedlaender's. For Unger, the task of politics is to lay the practical groundwork for the emergence of an "ethically satisfying order of human co-existence."<sup>75</sup> This goal was to

73. [Kurt Hiller, editor's note following] Friedlaender, "Individuum," *Tätiger Geist! Zweites der Zieljahrbücher* (1917/18) 281. The text is, except for minor alterations, identical to an excerpt from the foreword to *Schöpferische Indifferenz* (xii-xxix), and despite the identity of the titles not to be confused with that work's chapter entitled "Individuum" (*Schöpferische Indifferenz* 198-205). Benjamin had, to be sure, distanced himself in his letter to Buber of 17 July 1916 from the *Ziel-Jahrbüchern* and had in particular excluded the possibility of publishing anything there (*GB* 1:327); nonetheless, he apparently remained a loyal reader, as the letters attest to his reading of Friedlaender's review of *Spirit of Utopia*. Thus, one must assume his familiarity with the proofs and hence with the basic idea of *Creative Indifference* as well his with the political relevance of the work, which was emphasized by Hiller prior to its publication.

74. Erich Unger, "Schöpferische Indifferenz," *Die Zukunft* 24 Sep. 1921, quoted in Unger, *Vom Expressionismus zum Mythos des Hebräertums. Schriften 1909 bis 1931*, ed. Manfred Voigts (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1992) 76. Unger also studied the second edition of the work from 1924 and accused its author of betraying its original, Nietzschean intuition by professing fealty to Kant and Marcus. Cf. Unger, "Verteidigung eines Werkes gegen seinen Autor. Eine Polemik zum 60. Geburtstag S. Friedlaenders-Mynona," *Die literarische Welt* 1 May 1931, quoted in Unger, *Vom Expressionismus* 144-45. In contrast, Cardorff accords no decisive meaning to the emphasis on the Kantian tradition which can be observed in the mid-1920s (Friedlaender polemically describes himself as an "old-Kantian"); cf. Cardorff 24. In this context, the influence of the above-mentioned Ernst Marcus on Friedlaender can, in his own words, hardly be overvalued. To pursue these matters more closely would mean opening a chapter of Kant's influence that has received little attention, one that received decisive impulses from the publication of Kant's *Opus postumum*. If one considers that the question of an *a priori* embodiedness of the subject plays a major role in Kant's posthumously published notes, the proximity to the questions dealt with here is quite apparent. What is more, for Marcus and Friedlaender the so-called aether theory is of primary importance. Erich Adickes's ground-breaking study of the *Opus postumum* appeared in 1920: Adickes, *Kants Opus postumum, dargestellt und beurteilt* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1920). It, too, reviewed in the same issue of *Kant-Studien* in which Benjamin published the announcement of his dissertation; cf. Hermann Schneider, "Kants Opus postumum nach Erich Adickes," *Kant-Studien* 26 (1921): 165-73.

75. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, ed. Manfred Voigts (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989) 4, cf. 16. The text is quoted according to the pagination of the original, which is maintained in the present edition; the original, published in 1921, bore the full title *Politik und Metaphysik (Die Theorie. Versuche zu philosophischer Politik, I. Veröffentlichung)*.

be reached neither materialistically, as resignation in the face of economic necessities, nor idealistically, as a sort of reign of the spiritual as propagated in Activism. Instead, in accordance with the title of his work, Unger hopes to forge a path toward a metaphysical politics, that is, a politics which would organize the interaction of mind and matter. The quite literally intended paradigm of this conception of politics is expressed as a “physiological mastery of the body through spiritual moments.”<sup>76</sup> The founding of a future people is the practical field in which it would have to prove itself. Nietzsche’s error lay in considering this task to be fulfilled in a biological fashion through the idea of breeding. Unger wants to fulfill the task metaphysically. Whereas earlier people found their spiritual definition in themselves, the point now was to found a people “on the basis of a spiritual reality.”<sup>77</sup> At the apex of modernity, Unger equips the true politician with the features of an archaic priest. To be fit for government, one had to possess the “organizational principle of human totalities, which operates with the irresistibility of physical certainty.”<sup>78</sup> This poses, in the final analysis, a problem of technology rather than power politics. Unger compares the exercise of spiritual power to the manner in which technology today intervenes in and alters the relationships within the community. Success is only a question of capability, not of good intentions.<sup>79</sup> Because capability takes on bodily form within the community, responsibility is also bodily. The politician, like the leader of an ancient army, answers

76. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* 15. One year after publishing *Politics and Metaphysics*, Unger received his doctorate from the Philosophy Department of the Friedrich Alexander University in Erlangen for an (unpublished) dissertation entitled: *Das psychophysische Problem und sein Arbeitsgebiet. Eine methodologische Einleitung*.

77. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* 38.

78. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* 27.

79. Cf. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* 28 and 46, and, on the proximity of magic and technology, his closing remarks in “Philosophie und Politik,” *Vom Expressionismus zum Mythos des Hebräertums* 74-75. Michael Rumpf, in my view, gives a misleading account of Unger’s intentions when he sees them in general as culminating in “aristocraticism.” Whereas he localizes Unger in this manner in proximity to Hiller, it remains unclear what the basis is for the subsequent critique of Hiller. And in general, the polemic tenor of the work seems to prevent the author from attaining a clear view of the texts he discusses; Rumpf, “Walter Benjamin und Erich Unger,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 71 (1997): 651-52 and 660. Manfred Voigt is to be thanked not only for having made Unger’s writings accessible again. Beyond this, his prologues and epilogues to the texts edited by him first brought to attention the affinities connecting Unger and Benjamin. I am personally grateful for his patient willingness to come to my aid with his never-ending knowledge in all things having to do with Unger and Friedlaender, and not least of all for opening the treasures of his library to me.



with his life for the failure of the communal enterprise he initiated.

The archaic and the modern intermingle in Unger's political philosophy so that his cultic-magical conception of political power appears as the other side of the modern belief in the omnipotence of technology.<sup>80</sup> Benjamin came across ideas in Unger's work which were "surprisingly close" to his own "with respect to the psycho-physical problem" (*GB* 2:128). Otherwise, he viewed Unger's cultic, if not *völkische* (racist-nationalistic) speculations with skeptical reserve.<sup>81</sup>

Benjamin and Unger would probably have agreed that the title of the true politician could only be granted ironically to Hiller. It is quite possible that the relevant section of the large work on politics contained material from the "Note on the Mental Worker," which is occasionally mentioned in preliminary writings, and which under the title, "There Are no Mental Workers" was a polemic aimed at Hiller's "Council of Mental Workers." The note, mentioned in early 1920 (*GB* 2:76, 89), has been lost. Yet these early thoughts on politics remain present in a review of a collection of Hiller's journalistic works written by Benjamin for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* twelve years later. Benjamin is prepared here to accord to the creed of Activism, of logocracy, "no political meaning whatsoever." On his view, thinking politically means "setting the masses in motion," or, in Brecht's words, "the art of thinking in other people's minds" (*GS* 3:341). Logocracy provided no solution. At most, it presented a symptom of the circumstance that the "corpus of the community" is indeed "empty of spirit" (*GS* 3:352).<sup>82</sup> In

80. Cf. Jakob Taubes, "Vom Kult zur Kultur," *Vom Kult zur Kultur. Bausteine zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, eds. Aleida and Jan Assmann (Munich: Fink, 1996) 273. What Taubes says here of Oskar Goldberg applies no less to Unger, who was personally and intellectually close to Goldberg.

81. As late as 1930, Benjamin confronted the authors of the anthology *Krieg und Krieger*, edited by Ernst Jünger, with the example of the Jewish philosopher Erich Unger, who investigated the origins of the cultic glorification of war on the basis of material from Jewish history. Unger, according to Benjamin, made his observations "to be sure in a partially problematic manner," yet they were nonetheless well suited "to dispel into nothingness" the schemata appealed to in the anthology (*GS* 3:241). Cf. *GB* 2:225.

82. Benjamin dealt with Hiller and Activism once again in his 1934 essay *Der Autor als Produzent* (*GS* 2.2:689-90), which also contains wordings formulated in the review written years previously. Benjamin takes up again the basic idea of the review when, in the larger text, he emphasizes the reactionary "principle of the formation of the collective" adopted by activism. On the historical and work-historical background of the text's production and the role played in this context by Benjamin's dispute with activism, cf. Kambas, *Walter Benjamin im Exil: Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Ästhetik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983) 16-20 resp. (on activism) 46-55.



1932, the psycho-physical issue still posed the problem that for Benjamin was to be solved by politics in theory and practice.

The same issue is present in the background of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Benjamin shows that the existing structures of power in law are based on violence and remain under its influence. Thus the topic of violence enters into the discussion of the strictly political question regarding the conditions for the possibility of civic agreement. Originally, this large-scale essay, published in 1921, was to be included in the middle section of the larger work on politics. As such it is fair to glance into the essay as part of our search for Benjamin's concept of politics without going into its complicated argumentation in detail. I would particularly like to focus on Benjamin's confrontation with George Sorel.

"The Critique of Violence" presents the conception of the proletarian general strike as an example of the possibility of "non-violent resolution of conflicts" (GS 2.1:191). The proletarian general strike anarchically interrupts the cycle of violence, since it "does not so much give rise to as carry out the revolution" (GS 2.1:94). This thought becomes clearer when we compare it to Sorel's definition of the general strike. For Sorel, the general strike is a "myth." By myth, he means "an arrangement of images capable of involuntarily calling forth all convictions which correspond to the various proclamations of the war that Socialism has taken up against modern society."<sup>83</sup> The myth – conceptualized by Sorel through a recourse to Nietzsche's belief in the culture-founding force of myth and to Bergson's theory of intuition – brings about the intuitive formation of a revolutionary mass.<sup>84</sup> It is this

83. Georges Sorel, *Über die Gewalt*, ed. George Lichtheim (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981) 145.

84. Cf. Hans Barth, *Masse und Mythos. Die ideologische Krise an der Wende zum 20. Jahrhundert und die Theorie der Gewalt: Sorel* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1959); his discussion also merits notice for pointing out the importance of pain in Sorel's adaptation of the philosophy of life. Although it is quite common to speak of the anarchism in the early Benjamin, there are few works which deal with the topic in any depth. A laudable exception is the already mentioned essay by Kambas on Benjamin and Sorel. But Benjamin apparently studied anarchism quite intensively. Thus, as noted in the *Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften*, he read – most likely during work on "Critique of Violence" – the short study by Rudolf Stammeler, *Die Theorie des Anarchismus* (Berlin: Häring, 1894), along with Bakunin and Landauer (GS 7.1:447, Nr. 740). Stammeler distinguishes between two basic currents within anarchism; one of which he calls 'individual anarchism,' and it is traced back to Stirner. It represents in his opinion the minority in contradistinction to the dominant 'communistic' current, which he locates in Proudhon as an ancestral figure, and whose most important representatives in that day were Bakunin and Kropotkin.

mass which, rather than giving rise to the revolution, carries it out through its own formation.<sup>85</sup> Without explicitly mentioning Sorel, Benjamin later criticizes Bergson's concept of action on the grounds that Bergson used to conceive of action biologically and not socially. Thus his understanding of action is influenced in its entirety by pragmatism. When juxtaposed to this, Bergson's conception must be modified "if he were aware of the possibility of organized collective subjects of action" (*GS* 7.2:769). Benjamin, adopting Sorel's perspective, has this possibility in view as early as "Critique of Violence." To be sure, Benjamin wants to make a sharp distinction between the proletarian general strike and the "unfolding of genuine violence in revolutions" (*GS* 2.1:195). Yet the legitimacy of revolutionary violence, in his view, ultimately rests on the fact that it destroys an existent order dependent upon the force of law in an act which manifests a different form of violence free of all force of law. The archetype for this violence, which is directed against the mythical foundation of law, is justice defined as the principle of all divine determination of purposes (*GS* 2.1:198). A "new historical age" was to be founded through revolutionary force as "the highest manifestation of pure violence by the human being" (*GS* 2.1:202). This age would no longer bear the characteristics of a community based on law; its features would be those of a community based on justice. Yet the essay concludes by relegating the question of whether a particular historical moment actually constitutes such a manifestation of justice – "the decision as to when pure violence was real in a particular case" (*GS* 2.1:203) – to a *non liquet*. With this self-restraint, Benjamin restricts once again the jurisdiction of politics to the order of the profane.

According to a note from the preparatory work on the "Critique of

85. Stammer argues that the Proudhonian version of anarchism contains the idea of a 'natural order' for the common social life of man, the model of which is the natural organism (Stammer 7). In addition, he emphasizes that the scientific importance of anarchism, regardless of its highly various manifestations, lies in the struggle against the traditional compulsory force of law, which he has rightly revealed in its violent character (Stammer 33-36). Although he comes to a negative conclusion in his discussion of the anarchistic vision of a social order that would rest on conventional rules, free from all compulsory force of law, numerous points of contact with Benjamin's reflections in "Critique of Violence" can be recognized. Carl Schmitt, incidentally, refers to Sorel as late as 1926 as an author hardly known in Germany; cf. Schmitt, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* ([1923/26] Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1926) 78-82. On Benjamin's proximity to Schmitt's critique of parliamentarism, cf. Gérard Raulet, *Le caractère destructeur* 58-62.

Violence,”<sup>86</sup> the “meaning of anarchy for the profane domain,” (*GS* 6: 99) consists in respecting the boundaries of the profane without positing them as absolute. Like Benjamin’s reflections on language, his thoughts on politics are not aimed at substantial definitions, but rather at defining concepts through functional classifications in distinct orders. In this manner, it is possible both to describe the particular order contrastively with its concepts and give shape to the profane order through a relation of mutual exclusion with the order of divine justice. In this fashion, “the idea of the realm of God,” as it is called in the “Theological-Political Fragment,” determines the horizon of Benjamin’s reflections on politics, but not his concept of politics itself. If divine force can only manifest itself in the secular world destructively, we must not anticipate it. The anarchic negation of law may not lay claim to the execution of divine justice.

The problem of politics may well have come into sharper focus for Benjamin in the early 1920s, along with the psycho-physical problem and prompted by his readings of Friedlaender, Unger and Sorel with respect to the question of the collective subject of politics. Read as a

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86. Derrida had already emphatically pointed out this passage; Jacques Derrida, *Gesetzkraft. Der 'mystische Grund der Autorität'* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1991) 110-12. Following Derrida, and with recourse to Benjamin, numerous essays collected in the volume *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit. Derrida-Benjamin*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), accord a central role to the interpretation of this passage. In particular, I would point to Dominick La Capra: “Gewalt, Gerechtigkeit und Gesetzkraft,” (143-61) who mentions Sorel (150 and 153) and whose reference to the ‘separation of cognition and action’ (156) hits upon the very center of Benjamin’s reflections. Yet I would prefer to designate the result of this separation anarchistic rather than decisionistic or existentialistic. Bettine Menke’s essay, “Benjamin vor dem Gesetz: Die Kritik der Gewalt in der Lektüre Derridas,” (217-75) mentions at least in passing the importance of technology for *Critique of Violence* (229) and convincingly explicates the proximity to the “Theological-Political Fragment” (233-34). Her reference to the category of ‘postponement’ (249-52) strikes me as particularly illuminating, which I grasp in the context of Benjamin’s political philosophy as a profane category; Menke deals only briefly with the planned work on politics, in conjunction with Scheerbarth and the importance of technology (262-63; the reconstruction of the structure of the work offered here is untenable; see above). Benjamin appeals in his early notes to Scholem’s “Notizen über Gerechtigkeit” (*GS* 6:60). These notes have only recently become available; cf. Scholem, “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 353-61. On the entire discussion of “Critique of Violence” following Derrida, cf. first conclusively Burkhardt Lindner, “Derrida. Benjamin. Holocaust. Zur politischen Problematik der ‘Kritik der Gewalt’,” *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* 3 (1997): 65-100, whose painstaking and convincing interpretation of “Critique of Violence” was of great assistance in the clarification of my own thoughts, such that I am unable to do justice to him in the form of footnotes.

critical confrontation with Nietzsche's conception of the super-man, Friedlaender's *Creative Indifference* articulates a decidedly profane metaphysics and anthropology, whose political core comprises a "magical" self-overcoming of the individual towards the self-creation of the collective. It is then tested politically by Unger. Benjamin was able to confirm this basic idea with Sorel's theory of the proletarian general strike and adopted a position in the extreme left spectrum of the Weimar Republic's political topography, even prior to sending the communistic signals from Capri. The technique, which takes a central place in the planned large work on politics, is only visible in unreflected form in Friedlaender and Unger, as metaphor and illustrative example. It does not appear as a concept. In Benjamin's politics, the technique also remains within a framework determined by the psycho-physical problem and the question of the subject of politics. It may well have been outlined in the first two parts of the planned study, "The true Politics" and "The true Politician." In the early writings and notes, the concept of anarchy brings into focus the paradoxical vision of a community whose constitutive principle is destruction. Benjamin expressed this idea in his later works with the conception of the "destructive character" and the image of the "positive barbarian." Beyond the proximity of the polemic to Nietzsche's conception of the super-man, the connection between the various sketches is in the role ascribed to technology.

Benjamin's political-philosophical interpretation of the technique is found in the first comment on Paul Scheerbart from 1917-18 and extends through *One-Way Street* of 1928 and into to his sketches for the Arcades Project. To a considerable degree it must be read as an argument with Florens Christian Rang, who became close friend after his return from Switzerland until Rang's early death in 1924. The French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr district in January 1923 that was provoked by a delay in German reparation payments, was the catalyst for Rang to conceive and write a memorandum in which Benjamin participated directly. The author received his public, though critically distanced solidarity. He expressed it in a postscript to the memorandum. The memorandum, *Deutsche Bauhütte: Ein Wort an uns Deutsche über mögliche Gerechtigkeit gegen Belgien und Frankreich*, is a program indebted to the political events of the day. At the same time, however, the subtitle identifies it as a contribution to the "Philosophy of Politics." Benjamin praised Rang after the latter's death as "the deepest



critic of the Germanic since Nietzsche" (GS 3:254), and he described the *Deutsche Bauhütte* as a work in which "the necessity of private action, emancipated from the apparatus of the state, is concisely demonstrated in its ethical foundations and its possibility grounded in non-Quixotic fashion" (GB 2:384). Even before Rang began writing, Benjamin reminded him, in a letter written under the impression of the escalation of tensions in the Ruhr district, of "our political conversations concerning technology." It seemed uncertain to Benjamin whether anything could occur in the sense of these conversations. Nonetheless, he is convinced that Germany has need of more men like Rang at this hour, men "who do not permit their perspective upon the inner core of political matters to be obscured and who maintain their calm without therefore being *Realpolitiker*" (GB 2:305, emphasis in original). In the work's central section, which is entitled "The Philosophy of our Action" and culminates in a political philosophy of technology, Rang penetrates to the core of political matters.

In Rang's view, the signal of the "so-called world war" has sounded the bell for a "special hour of the world-clock." It displays the "world-hour of technology," which confronts the present in a particular way with the "secret of *Ewigung* [eternalization]."<sup>87</sup> Under the sign of technology, the things come to accommodate humans. Technology releases the "inner drive" of the things, which, in their "vertical mobilization," could emancipate man from his enslavement to the exploitation of nature and free him for an upright bearing. For as long as man "continues . . . to immobilize . . . his technological civilization," as long as the guild of technicians subjects itself to "capitalistic, all-too-earth-flat" tasks, i.e., to tasks oriented towards interests of possession and nation, nature will obey him only "unwillingly, by force."<sup>88</sup> In Rang's perspective, the technological problem opens up a "realm of *Geistleiblichkeit*" "in which manual and intellectual labor will be united just as the political oppositions of idealism and materialism, capitalism and socialism are overcome within it."<sup>89</sup> The exploitation of nature by man and the

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87. Florens Christian Rang, *Deutsche Bauhütte. Ein Wort an uns Deutsche über mögliche Gerechtigkeit gegen Belgien und Frankreich und zur Philosophie der Politik* (Sannerz, Leipzig: Gemeinschaftsverlag Eberhard Arnold, 1924) 133. On the background to the text's genesis, cf. Lorenz Jäger, *Messianische Kritik: Studien zu Leben und Werk von Florens Christian Rang* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 1998) 146-50.

88. Rang 135.

89. Rang 137 and 138.

exploitation of man by man arrive in the same measure in the technological utilization of nature's inner forces. Its luxurious wealth will make the class struggle for surplus value appear spurious: "let the technician fetch surplus value from cosmic space, let him milk the heavenly and not the human cow."<sup>90</sup>

Rang's sketch of the world-hour of technology follows the Marxian diagnosis of the contradiction between the level of technological productive forces and the capitalistic relations of production, yet it strips this contradiction of its genuinely political, i.e., its revolutionary point, by ultimately reducing the problem to a decision of the technician's conscience. In this decision, as Rang would have it, the technician tests the words of Jesus: "But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." As Rang's commentary updates the Evangelist: "The things will submit freely to those who do not cling to them."<sup>91</sup> For Rang, political practice is disclosed solely by the ethical decision of the individual: *metanoia* instead of class struggle, a revolution of conscience instead of political revolution. Under the topos of *metanoia* Rang's philosophy blurs the boundaries separating theology from politics, the earthly yearning for happiness from the religious expectation of salvation. The deed that follows the revolution of conscience is justified to the extent that it is met with recognition and imitation as "a genuine step in and to the realm of God."<sup>92</sup>

Benjamin's cautious evaluation of his words in his epilogue indicates that he does not share Rang's "hopes for the practical impact" of the *Bauhütte*.<sup>93</sup> Benjamin's reservation strikes a vital nerve of the memorandum and distances him from the text. With respect to Rang's quotation of the Evangelist, Benjamin's inversion of this quotation in his "Theses on the Concept of History," which were often cited by Rang, makes this unmistakably clear. The real test of Rang's ultimately theological philosophy of politics lies in the immediate effect, in the active fulfillment of the "deed of faith."<sup>94</sup> Whereas Rang's 'Reich der Leib-Geistlichkeit'

90. Rang 140.

91. Rang 141; Matt. 6:33 is programmatically quoted by Rang already at 52.

92. Rang 119.

93. Rang 185. The text also appears in *GB* 2:373-75.

94. Cf. my more detailed study: *Die Geburt der Kritik aus dem Geiste. Untersuchungen zum Begriff der Kritik in den frühen Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989) 244-26, and my essay: "Säkularisierung. Überlegungen zum Ursprung und zu einigen Implikationen des Begriffs im Denken Benjamins," *Walter Benjamin 1892-1940. Zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. Steiner (Bern: Peter Lang 1992) 166-70.

[realm of body-spirituality] denotes the locus of a transcendently guaranteed correspondence between the individual revolution of conscience and the technological mobilization, in Benjamin's political philosophy, the interaction between the subject of politics – conceived of as a collective – and technology takes place within the order of the profane. Though humanity prepares to transgress the boundaries set to it on earth with the help of technology, it does so only in order to attain to recognition of its yet unknown earthly vocation.

In the "Critique of Violence" Benjamin had already praised technology in the broadest sense as a non-violent means of "civil agreement" (*GS* 2.1:192). This idea would presumably have been presented in greater detail in the critique of Paul Scheerbart's 'asteroid novel' *Lesabéndio*, that was planned as the conclusion to the projected work on politics. We can reconstruct this critique with a reasonable degree of certainty from Benjamin's various remarks on Scheerbart.

The planet on which the novel is set is "the best of all worlds" (*GB* 2:54) because of the successful interaction between humans and technology. The allusion to theodicy becomes apparent in the context of the earlier notes on anthropology and the metaphysical interpretation of pain. The pain of the novel's hero, Lesabéndio, and the planet's other inhabitants becomes the measure of success and indicative of their own transformation into a different species to the degree that they reform their planet in a communal realization of Lesabéndio's construction plans. The "spiritual overcoming of the technical" for which Benjamin praises Scheerbart (*GS* 2.2:619), is demonstrated by the inhabitants that is in turn tested while redesigning their planet. It is, in other words, the conviction that technology is not for exploiting nature, but instead enables humans to emancipate themselves and the entirety of creation itself. (*GS* 2.2:631). Benjamin clearly associates this with his own speculations regarding the psycho-physical problem when he speaks of Scheerbart's "Utopie des Leibs [utopia of the body]," which culminates in a vision in which "the Earth forms a single body together with humankind" (*GS* 6:148).

Scheerbart's importance for Benjamin's political philosophy and the question of technology within it is evidenced in an interview with a Soviet newspaper during his stay in Moscow in December 1926. As a scholar of the arts, he was asked for his evaluation of the contemporary state of German literature. In his answer, Benjamin referred emphatically to the works of the recently deceased Paul Scheerbart:

His books are utopian-cosmological novels in which the problem of interplanetary relations is tracked down and humans are represented as the creators of an ideal technology. The novels are saturated with the pathos of technology, a pathos of machines that is entirely new and unaccustomed for literature, yet which is far from displaying social meaning, since Scheerbart's heroes seek the harmony of the world and since the creation of machines is of importance for them not for economic reasons, but rather as the proof of certain ideal truths. (*GS* 7.2:880)

As Benjamin notes in his *Moscow Diary*, he was reproached by his friends for mentioning Scheerbart in the politically charged atmosphere of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union and, even more, for revealing himself in a dangerous fashion with the superfluous theoretical discussion that followed (*GS* 6:313). In contrast, Benjamin's own concerns have nothing to do with the risk involved with making himself politically vulnerable through his remarks on Scheerbart's conception of technology. Benjamin does not reproach himself for having mentioned Scheerbart, but for "the insecure and imprecise manner of the mention" that has decreased the value of his statement (*GS* 6:732). Benjamin clarifies what he wanted to say later in a discussion with Bernhard Reich and Asja Lacis on the present state of Soviet Russia. Lacis gives Benjamin the decisive cue with her opinion that revolutionary labor is currently being transformed in Russia into technological labor, that the revolutionary labor of the moment is not battle, not civil war, but rather electrification, canal-building, and setting up factories. For Benjamin, Scheerbart "knew better than any other author how to give emphasis to the revolutionary character of technological labor" (*GS* 6:368).

Yet the image of the human developed in conjunction with technology by Scheerbart – who was, incidentally, a close friend of Friedlaender<sup>95</sup> – casts off all human features. Scheerbart, in Benjamin's view, was interested in "what sort of entirely new creatures, worthy of being seen and loved, our telescopes, our airplanes and rockets could make out of the former humans." Benjamin's politics are not concerned with Nietzsche's human being, an enhanced hybrid. Rather it is the decline of the traditional human being and his rebirth in an as yet

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95. In his review of Max Kommerell's book on Jean Paul from 1934, Benjamin, with a view to Jean Paul's character, the "body-giver," describes the "false incarnation" as "the experience of the humorist." With this background, he then portrays Scheerbart and "his friend Mynona" as fellow spirits close to Jean Paul. (*GS* 3:412). On Scheerbart and Friedlaender see also Exner, *Fasching als Logik* 44-48.



unknown form of humanity that concerns him. "Human beings as a species completed their development millenia ago. Yet humanity as a species stands at the very beginning of its development. Within technology, a *physis* is organizing itself for humanity, in which its contact with the cosmos will be formed in a new manner different from that of peoples and families" (GS 4.1:147).

The "Utopie des Leibes" discerned by Benjamin in Scheerbart can also be read as a counterargument to the negative utopia of the last man in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.<sup>96</sup> The happiness invented by Nietzsche's last man is radically reevaluated as a result of the function that Benjamin's political philosophy assigns to technicians. Since the jurisdiction of the political is restricted to the order of the profane, striving for happiness is not only legitimated, it actually becomes realizable through technological means. It is worth noting incidentally that Benjamin transports the concept of politics into a sphere, in which, according to Carl Schmitt's conviction, politics has lost all justification. He considered the "vulgar popular religion" of technological progress as an attempt to neutralize the genuine political differentiation of friend and foe. The belief in technology replaced the political with the "creed of activistic metaphysics," which embraces the belief in "an unbounded power and mastery of humans over nature, indeed over the human body, . . . in unbounded possibilities of alteration and happiness for the earthly, natural being of man." This vision, which one could call "fantastic and satanic," had to be confronted by politics as a fundamental challenge.<sup>97</sup>

### III

In the passage just cited from *One-Way Street*, Benjamin concentrates his reflections on politics in a memorable figure of thought. He uses motifs which had already played a significant role in his early metaphysical speculations. Numerous impulses and influences coalesce into thoughts that suggest a systematic intention without explicitly developing

96. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 18-21 (5. Vorrede).

97. Schmitt, "Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen," *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1979) 93. Schmitt himself emphasized the proximity of this speech to his own treatise on the *Begriff des Politischen*. The treatise itself appeared first in the Heidelberg *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 58 (1927); vol. 47 (1920/21) of the same journal contained Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*. On Benjamin and Schmitt see also Steiner, "Säkularisierung" 148-61.

it. To the extent that one can speak at all of Benjamin's political philosophy, it develops only through the successive explication and experimental adjustment of these motifs in their changing historical contexts.

The "turn to political thinking" (*GB* 3:60), which Benjamin experienced in Capri in 1924, did not announce an abnegation of his earlier ideas, rather it indicated a reinvigorated return to a topic he had previously treated marginally. The seriously considered question of practical political engagement on behalf of communism is of considerable relevance for Benjamin's personal development, but it is of secondary importance for his theoretical development. Benjamin thematized the interaction of both moments in a remarkable letter written to Gershom Scholem, in May 1926. Scholem had emigrated to Palestine and viewed his friend's Bolshevistic sympathies from that distance with unconcealed skepticism and growing concern. "Always to proceed radically and never consistently in the most important things" – this suggestive and obscure formula, which Benjamin professed in the letter, describes an experimental bearing which he claimed to embrace equally in practice and in theory.

Politics approaches religion precisely in the realm of practice. For Benjamin, the escape from the pure theoretical sphere was "possible for humans only in two ways: in religious or political observance." He granted neither "a distinction between these two observances in their quintessence" nor a mediation between them (*GB* 3:158). If we consider the occasion for the letter and its further remarks, it seems that Benjamin's aim was to place his own choice for communism side by side with Scholem's commitment to Judaism as equally legitimate and equally problematic. Scholem's insistence several years later that the political emancipation of the Jewish people – for which he strove as a Zionist – be strictly separated from religious emancipation reflects his own position in a manner reminiscent of Benjamin's letter.<sup>98</sup> For Benjamin, the classification of the political within the order of the profane had by no means lost its validity. Thus he saw no reason to be ashamed of his "earlier" anarchism because he considered "the anarchistic methods to be impractical, yet the communistic 'goals' to be nonsense and nonexistent" (*GB* 3:160).

While those suggestive turns of phrase in the letter are often cited, Benjamin's remark that corresponding thoughts were to be found in several

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98. Scholem, "Die drei Sünden des Brit Schalom," quoted in David Biale, "Scholem und der moderne Nationalismus," *Gershom Scholem. Zwischen den Disziplinen*, eds. Peter Schäfer & Gary Smith (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995) 265.

of his book reviews or travel notes has apparently been overlooked. Among these texts the announcement of a volume with letters of Lenin's to Maxim Gorki for the *Literarische Welt* deserves particular attention. It concerns a concept of responsibility clearly derived from Unger's *Politics and Metaphysics*, which is elucidated in further detail with recourse to Friedlaender's notion of creative indifference. This concept of responsibility presupposes the elimination of the public and private distinction that Benjamin had underlined as the motive of architecture in the Soviet Union. During his visit to Moscow he emphatically ascribed "the development of new forms of everyday life" to Soviet architecture (*GS* 7.2:880). The public exposition of the private is based on the conception of responsibility that Benjamin saw in Lenin, and was expressed politically in the dictatorship of the proletariat. Benjamin writes, the "physical, political responsibility" is brought visibly to the fore through the dictatorship of the proletariat. The individual's liability is determined in historical materialism by "the degree in which a person's 'indifference' becomes 'creative' through responsibility."<sup>99</sup> These formulations, which are otherwise cryptic and nearly undecipherable for the uninitiated reader, testify insistently to Benjamin's attempt to allocate the political practice of Bolshevism a place in his own system of political theory.

This is already visible in Benjamin's earliest attempts to decipher his own "communist signals from Capri." Here, he reformulates the question of the psycho-physical problem into one concerning the relationship between theory and practice. This question becomes the focal point of his confrontation with communism and its account of the problem, whereby "definitive insight into theory" in Benjamin's view on communism was "bound precisely to practice." Benjamin was convinced that this claim had "a firm philosophical core" in the work of Georg Lukács, (*GB* 2:483) specifically, *History and Class Consciousness*. Benjamin became acquainted with the book through Bloch's detailed review, and was immediately convinced of its extraordinary importance (*GB* 2:469). His expectation that the work would reinforce his political "nihilism" shows clearly that Benjamin confronted the text with his own fundamental belief in the limitation of the political to the order of the profane – a conviction reiterated adamantly in a letter written to Scholem two years later. With this caveat, the merit of the book seemed to him indisputable.

99. *GS* 3:53; on the concept of physical responsibility, which was touched upon briefly above, cf. Unger 46. Friedlaender refers to Benjamin frequently in reviews from the years 1928 and 1932 (cf. *GS* 3: 138, 150, 323).

Bloch had praised Lukács with a nice turn of phrase as a “practitioner of theory” and had thereby provided the motto for Benjamin’s reception.<sup>100</sup> This manner of expression focuses on the conviction that “the organization” was “the form of mediation between theory and practice,” which Bloch’s review presented in detail and discussed approvingly.<sup>101</sup> Benjamin, in his short announcement of the book from 1929, lent a specific nuance to this perspective. The novelty of Lukács’s work, Benjamin wrote, lay in the certainty “with which it captured, in the critical situation of philosophy the critical situation of class struggle, and in the overdue concrete revolution, the absolute presupposition, indeed the absolute exercise and the last word of theoretical cognition” (*GS* 3:171). For Benjamin, revolution as the exercise of theoretical cognition takes the place of organization. The fact that he was puzzled by the orthodox Marxist polemic against Lukács speaks volumes (*GB* 64, 130, 133). Benjamin’s interpretation of *History and Class Consciousness* was confirmed by the retrospective rejection of the author from the perspective of orthodox Marxism. Benjamin was not the only one captivated by the overly effusive conception of revolutionary praxis. Lukács himself later felt compelled to denounce fundamental aspects of his book as “messianic utopianism” and to discredit them by noting their intellectual proximity to the philosophy of Georges Sorel.<sup>102</sup>

The importance of Benjamin’s large essay on Surrealism, which was published in the same year, rests partly on the fact that it is a prelude to the *Arcades Project*. The “replacement of the historical view on the past by the political view,” (*GS* 2.1:300) for which Benjamin gives the Surrealists credit, anticipates the “Copernican revolution in historical intuition” (*GS* 5.1:491), with which the *Arcades Project* epistemologically places the collective at the center of the theory of history. Benjamin asserts, in this 1929 essay, that the political core of the surrealist movement is crystallized in the call “to list the forces of ecstasy in the service of revolution” (*GS* 2.1:308). His warning that the ecstatic, anarchic components of revolution should not be overestimated at the expense of its methodological and disciplinary preparation seems to suggest a change of faith. But if we look more closely, the criticism of anarchism

100. Bloch, “Aktualität und Utopie. Zu Lukács *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*,” *Gesamtausgabe* 10: 617. [*Der neue Merkur* 7 (1923/1924) 457-77].

101. Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* ([1923] Darmstadt, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1970) 457.

102. Cf. Lukács’s prologue of 1967, Lukács 6, cf. 17-19, 27 and 30-45.



that is made audible here is aimed only – to use the words of the letter of 1926 – at the practical methods of anarchism, not however at the anarchistic renunciation of political goals. It is not accidental that the slogan of an “organization of pessimism” (GS 2.1:308) attributed to the Surrealists rings anarchistic.

In this slogan, we can recognize the anthropological, metaphysical speculations that informed his earlier work. In the essay on Surrealism, pessimism contrasted the optimism propagated by the formulation of political goals in party programs. With his turn away from such goals, Benjamin defines the political sphere as a space of images, more precisely as the space “in which an action produces an image out of itself and is itself this image” (GS 2.1:309). Political action becomes self-aware only in the moment of revolutionary action: namely by creating the revolutionary collective, by literally taking on bodily shape in the revolutionary collective. In this sense, the essay speaks of the realm of political action, which is to be “*Bildraum* [imaginary space], and more concretely: *Leibraum* [bodily space]” (GS 2.1:309).

Much as he had considered the relationship between ecstasy and revolution in the essay on Surrealism, Benjamin tried to free the faculty of divination from its complicity with superstition in *One-Way Street*. Omens were to be used, not interpreted. Mastery of the future came from action, not knowledge. When Benjamin calls this state of spontaneous simultaneity of insight and action “*leibhafte Geistesgegenwart*” [bodily presence of mind] (GS 4.1:142), this concept, which is more circumscriptive than descriptive, calls to mind the psycho-physical problem as the anthropological starting-point of Benjamin’s politics. The basic concept of the body allows Benjamin to transcribe individual experiences to the collective. Thus it is not surprising that he expressly states that the “presence of mind” as a political concept in the *Arcades Project* (GS 5.1:598).

Ultimately, Benjamin conceives of revolts and revolutions as attempts to produce a collective body whose organic cohesion will be guaranteed by technology. The war had shown him that the time for this was over ripe. Benjamin saw in it and in all future imperialistic wars a “slave’s revolt of technology.” In war, the “vast discrepancy between the enormous means of technology and their miniscule moral enlightenment” was given fateful expression. War demonstrates that the attempt to create a harmonic interaction of humanity and technology has failed. It reveals “that social reality was not mature enough to make of technology an organ for itself, that technology was not strong enough to master the fundamental social forces”

(GS 3:328, GS 1.2:468). In *One-Way Street*, the true politician is the one who has an eye to the period of humankind up to the point of its potential self-annihilation. Hence the aphorism emphatically describes the task of the true politician as a technical endeavor (GS 4.1:122).

In this respect, cinema appears to Benjamin as the best training ground for politics. Ever since the late 1920s, the social phenomenon of modern masses seems to have interested him increasingly from the perspective of the theory of media. His work on the world fairs of the nineteenth century may have focused his view on the problem of popular illustration which the new media of the twentieth century pose in a particular manner. Once the masses assemble as an audience, the principle of contemplation is destroyed. Genuine representation, as Benjamin puts it on the occasion of an exhibit in the Berlin workers' district Kreuzberg, suppresses "contemplation" for the sake of "surprise." It is not the object, but rather the mode of presentation that is the focus of primary interest. To the extent that the surprising representation of things, like montage, reflects "the perceptual canon of our day," Benjamin finds in this the specific signature of experience in modernity. By catastrophically unchaining the technological means, the war has made irreversible the experience that "reality . . . [has] ceased to permit itself to be mastered" (GS 4.1:560). Just like he has described the artistic situation in the Surrealism essay, Benjamin sees the confrontation of the technique of exhibition with a world of things profoundly altered by technology leading towards politics. The *demonstratio ad hominem*, as he remarks in a diary entry discussing the matter, is a political principle: "To release the metaphor from the things means discovering its anthropological core, and this in turn is identical to representing its political meaning" (GS 6:417). A metaphor contains political meaning in an emphatic sense because it does not refer to the individual in its anthropological core, but rather to the mass that should see itself addressed, just like the child who has been presented a gift.

Benjamin develops these thoughts further and uses the example of radio to illustrate the extent to which the popular mode of representation and its genuine anthropological-political mass-orientation are affected by media technology. The technological ability of radio to simultaneously address unlimited masses demands a fundamental reconsideration of these matters. Benjamin's thoughts are not aimed at the content of the representation, but at the interaction between medium and mass. Although he himself does not use the term, one would have to

speak of a “mass medium” in the precise sense that the mass first becomes conscious of itself as a mass via the medium. Popularity entails not only communicating knowledge to the public, but also in setting “the public in motion in the direction of knowledge” (GS 4.1:672). Radio anticipates this active role of the masses in its attempt to do justice to those interests of the mass that are not articulated in front of the microphone, through the formation and performance of the material.

These merely thesis-like thoughts are pursued further and sharpened by Benjamin in an explicitly political context in the mid- 1930s in his discussion of cinema in the framework of the theses on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He assigned film the task of “training the human being in those new apperceptions and reactions conditioned by working with an apparatus that plays an almost daily increasing role in his life. To make of this monstrous technical apparatus an object of human innervation – this is the historical task in the service of which the true meaning of film lies” (GS 1.2:444-45). Here, the human being refers to the cinema audience, formed into a collective by the specific conditions of the medium.

Prior to writing the artwork essay, Benjamin had developed these basic thoughts in the context of the contemporary discussions of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*. In his 1927 response to a critic of the film, who condemned it as tendentious art and accused it of ideological bias, Benjamin insists that the concept of tendentiousness must be defined through its relation to technology. “A new region of consciousness” emerges with the film. This region of consciousness, which only the new medium can disclose, is the everyday world shaped by technology. The revolution of technology denotes the task which film must fulfill in its form and content. Both the Russian revolutionary film and the American grotesque film are tendentious in the sense of this task. But in contrast to the bourgeois film, the Russian film has discovered a fitting ideological answer to the challenges posed by technology in the shape of the collective.<sup>103</sup> The collective is the class-conscious proletariat. The extent to which it utilizes the technological experiences depends “on the degree of its solidarity,” (GS 7.2:767) in other words, on whether the revolutionary class arises from the womb of the indifferent

103. Cf. GS 2.2:752-53. On Benjamin’s judgment in the context of the contemporary discussion and on the later impact of *Battleship Potemkin*, see Werckmeister, *Linke Ikonen: Benjamin, Eisenstein, Picasso – nach dem Fall des Kommunismus* (Munich: Hanser, 1997) 80-81.

mass. The focus on this process builds the political (in a narrow sense) subtext of the theses on the artwork. It emerges with different emphases in the various versions of the text. In working through Le Bon's *Psychology of the Masses* and under the impression of the masses mobilized by Fascism, Benjamin emphasized that "the formation of classes" takes place "in the womb of masses." In certain circumstances, a cinema audience makes up such a mass. Even if they are not fixed in their class structure and not immediately capable of being politically mobilized, it is nonetheless possible "that through certain films a particular political readiness to be mobilized" might be "increased or reduced." This occurs "often with an effect more lasting than that achieved by genuine propaganda films through performances in which class consciousness, as it is present in the various groups in the audience, is surreptitiously supported or damaged" (*GS* 7.2:668). With a view to the mass as audience, Benjamin has weighed the revolutionary against the counterrevolutionary potential of the medium and accorded it a paradigmatic meaning in the political context of the 1930s.

What is merely practiced in the cinema exists for real in the revolution. From the perspective of Benjamin's politics, revolution appears as an "innervation of the technological organs of the collective" (*GS* 5.2:777), as humanity's attempt "to gain mastery over the new body" (*GS* 4.1:148).

The question raised in the earliest notes, where Benjamin sought to express his politics in the context of the psycho-physical problem, is preserved not only in the images of the texts from the mid-1930's. Technology also maintains its central role in the context discussed under the heading of anthropological materialism in the *Arcades Project* and other writings. The true politician knows that humanity possesses with technology, "not a fetish of decline, but rather a key to happiness" (*GS* 3:250). And he knows that true politics is not embodied by politicians, but takes on bodily shape in humanity's revolutionary ecstasy.

#### IV

While speaking about the importance of Paul Scheerbart's novels in his interview with the Soviet newspaper *Vecernjaja Moskva*, Benjamin feels compelled to trace the public's marginal appreciation of them back to the abstract character of their utopia. In the final analysis, his own concept of politics, which is decisively indebted to Scheerbart cannot be spared the same reproach. This abstraction is responsible for the fact that Benjamin's commitment to a particular political party always appears



relatively arbitrary, or, politically spoken, subjected to tactical aspects.

As early as his analysis of political Zionism prior to World War I, Wyneken's follower Benjamin justified his sympathies for a political party politically rather than metaphysically. Precisely because he is convinced that mind and politics exclude one another, he believes that he is most likely to find his political home "in left liberalism of the social-democratic wing" (*GB* 1:83). When a socialistic or social-democratic bearing moved Wyneken to support the war,<sup>104</sup> Benjamin saw himself compelled to break his allegiance to the former in the name of the idea (*GB* 1:264). He defends this idea, when, still in the midst of the war, he justifies his refusal to collaborate in the journal *Der Jude* in a letter to its editor, Martin Buber. The letter takes up the question concerning the relation of language to the deed, a topic that is in Benjamin's own understanding political in the broadest sense. In the context of his current work on the philosophy of language, he introduces the "magical" conception of language. Though Benjamin decisively rejects all writing which puts itself at the disposition of politics as a mediate utilization of language through the deed, he wants to accord to his own conception of an immediate, "magical" effect the predicate of "highly political" writing. It is precisely the separation of politics from the spiritual that is supposed to meet the preconditions necessary so that "the magical spark can leap between the word and the moving deed" (*GB* 1:327).

The attempt to define politics as an independent, profane sphere in its relation to the metaphysical sphere of the idea also comprises the premise of the conception of politics and of political commitment. It is a conception that is abstract in the sense that it abstains entirely from a concrete, substantial definition of political targets.<sup>105</sup> In just this sense, Benjamin expects that in the mid-1920s an entry into the KPD will result in pushing forward his "occupation with marxistic politics." Yet he views the political option itself as an "experiment" (*GB* 3:39). The structure of this experiment is informative: As the renewed consideration of the option in the *Moscow Diary* shows, Benjamin is far from placing himself at the service of the party. To the contrary, he views the

104. On Wyneken see Ulrich Herrmann, "Die Jugendbewegung. Der Kampf um die höhere Schule," *"Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit" Der Mythos Jugend*, eds. Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz, & Frank Trommler (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 239.

105. In contrast, Rabinbach describes this attitude as "a programmatic antipolitics" against the background of the Buber letter and the language essays from 1916; cf. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe* 50.

party as a "framework" for his work, as the benefit of being able to project immediately his thoughts, whose "metaphysical foundations" he explicitly professes, "as it were into a pre-established force field" (GS 6:359). This force field proves, however, not to be the political party itself. With the proletarian revolution having already transpired in the Soviet Union, Benjamin thinks, it is imminent in Germany at the onset of the 1930s. The revolution will enable him to write differently, whereas he has "not the slightest of illusions" about the fate of his work in the party, with respect to which Scholem had accused him of self-deception (GB 4:24). In other words, the concept of politics as defined by the boundary separating it from metaphysics legitimizes revolution as the embodiment of political action, yet in no way does this alter its basic indifference with respect to political targets.

One might consider war to be the prime scene of Benjamin's concept of politics, yet this hardly applies to its philosophical foundations. Nonetheless, war appears to have opened his eyes to the meaning of technology. He seeks in the development of his concept of politics an intellectual answer to the epochal challenge of technology.<sup>106</sup> It is not only this context that makes it so difficult to locate Benjamin's political philosophy in the political-intellectual spectrum of the Weimar Republic, regardless of his political choice for the Bolshevik left, or in spite of it. The affinity of his own reflections concerning the relationship of technology and the masses to corresponding approaches stemming from the opposite end of the political spectrum is quite apparent.<sup>107</sup> From the present-day perspective, the political intentions, in their particular historical forms, have approached one

106. Rabinbach, productively following Vondung, bases his study on the importance of the war for the philosophical conception. Benjamin emphasizes the technological aspect in particular in the Jünger reviews (GS 3:238-50), the artwork theses (GS 1.2:467-69), the narrator essay (GS 2.1:438-39) and, parallel, in "Erfahrung und Armut" (GS 2.1: 213-19) as well as in the essay "Die Waffen von morgen" (GS 4.1:473-76).

107. See on this, after Bolz's groundbreaking study, *Auszug aus der entzauberten Welt* (on Jünger, Carl Schmitt and Heidegger), more recent works, e.g. on Jünger see Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte. Lebenversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994) 206-15 and (as it were *contre coeur*) Alexander Honold, "Die Kunst, unter der Taucherglocke zu hören. Ernst Jüngers soldatische Avantgarde," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik. Neue Folge* 1 (1998): 49, on Heidegger Christoph Lienkamp, "Griechisch-deutsche Sendung oder messianische Historie. Zur geschichtsphilosophischen Auseinandersetzung mit Nietzsche bei Walter Benjamin und Martin Heidegger," *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 21 (1996): 63-78, and Willem van Reijen, *Der Schwarzwald und Paris. Heidegger und Benjamin* (Munich: Fink, 1998), and finally, on Schmitt within the framework of a larger work on Benjamin, Raulot, *Le caractère destructeur esp.* 58-62 and 244-45.

another to the point of becoming indistinguishable, and have revealed the affinity of their theoretical premises. One may read the often-quoted closing passage of the artwork essay, which seeks to confront the fascistic aestheticization of politics with the communistic politicization of art, less as a document of a theoretically convincing antagonism and more as proof of an obvious proximity, which makes it necessary to avow the opposite. Adorno's critical examination of the theses implicitly broaches the subject of this precarious proximity. He unexpectedly accords to Benjamin's discussion of the "disintegration of the proletariat as a 'mass' through the revolution" a place next to Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, and then in the same breath reproaches Benjamin for relying blindly and anarchistically upon the "self-empowerment of the proletariat."<sup>108</sup> Adorno summarizes this central objection with the "title of an anthropological materialism," which he is unable to follow. Though Adorno was unaware of the genesis of Benjamin's concept of politics, his criticism of the immediacy, the "undialectical ontology of the body" in Benjamin's theoretical sketches from the 1930s, strikes its heart. In another context, he accounts for his reservations to the conception of the dreaming collective with reference to its dangerous proximity to Klages's crypto-fascistic concept of myth.<sup>109</sup>

If Benjamin's political philosophy seems obsolete in its political implications, its technological premises have long lost their utopian appeal in our time, when atomic fission, genetic technology and new media have since immeasurably altered the face of the planet. Does not Marshall MacLuhan, with his understanding of media as "extensions of man" still test the fantastic speculations on the metaphysics of the body on which Benjamin founded his concept of the politics? "Physiologically," one reads in *Understanding Media*,

man in the normal use of technology (or his variously extended body) is perpetually modified by it and in turns finds ever new ways of modifying his technology. Man becomes as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates man's love by expediting his wishes and desires, namely, in providing him with wealth.<sup>110</sup>

108. *Adorno/Benjamin: Briefwechsel* (letter of 18 Mar. 1936) 17, and 171. Adorno refers to a footnote in the second version of the artwork essay (*GS* 7.1:370-71).

109. *Adorno/Benjamin: Briefwechsel* (letter of 6 Sept. 1936) 19, and (letter of 22 Sept. 1937) 277.

110. Marshall MacLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964, Cambridge: MIT, 1997) 46.

According to MacLuhan, since his entry into the age of electricity, "man extended, or set outside himself a live model of the central nervous system itself."<sup>111</sup> In this fashion, however, the vision of a consciousness that would encompass the world and paradisiacally unite humanity becomes tenable: "If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?"<sup>112</sup>

Benjamin, however, envisioned a form of technology and media, which, compared to the current situation remains in its infancy. But it is not only his fixation upon technology that seems obsolete in the face of the new electronic media that evidences Benjamin to be "not a precursor of MacLuhan, but rather a pupil of Marx."<sup>113</sup> Benjamin presents a Janus-faced attempt to accord to technology a place within politics to the cheerful positivism of both recent and older media theories, which would leave him behind at the threshold of postmodernity. While his solutions may seem antiquated, the questions he sought to answer with them have lost none of their relevance.

*Translated by Colin Sample*

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111. MacLuhan 43.

112. MacLuhan 61.

113. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* (Munich: Raben, 1990) 92.



## *Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics*

Christopher P. Long

On October 16, 1935, Walter Benjamin wrote the following from Paris to his friend, Max Horkheimer: “. . . art's fateful hour has struck for us and I have captured its signature in a series of preliminary reflections entitled ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction.’ These reflections attempt to give the questions raised by art theory a truly contemporary form: and indeed from the inside, avoiding any *unmediated* reference to politics.”<sup>1</sup> Less than one month later, on November 13, 1935, Martin Heidegger gave a lecture to the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* in Freiburg entitled “The Origin of the Work of Art.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Gerschom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, eds., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994) 509. Benjamin's claim that 1935 marked “art's fateful hour” was more prescient than even he could have known, for during the fall of 1935, after Hitler's harsh indictment of modern art at the Nuremberg Party congress in September, Joseph Goebbels abandoned once and for all his affinity for promodernist art and adopted a more conservative and less tolerant stance toward modern art. This stance was in line with Hitler's position and served to solidify Goebbels's standing within the Nazi bureaucracy, which had been increasingly threatened by the conservative anti-modernist attitudes of Alfred Rosenberg. From the fall of 1935 on, no Nazi leader was more instrumental and energetically engaged in opposing the modern art movement than Goebbels: he banned art criticism in 1936, purged the works of Jewish artists from German museums and organized the infamous *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*. For a good discussion of Goebbels's transformation during this time, see Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill & London: North Carolina UP, 1996) 47-58.

2. Martin Heidegger, “Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” *Heidegger Studies* 5 (1989): 5. The first edition of Heidegger's essay on the work of art, the only edition never given as a lecture, is reprinted here. Although I refer to this edition, I follow for the most part, the edition published in *Holzwege*: see note 11 below.

When read together, these two essays have much to teach us about philosophy, art and politics. In what follows, Benjamin's essay will be read as a response to Heidegger's, and Heidegger's essay will be interpreted by means of Benjamin's to expose the implicit political implications of Heidegger's essay and to suggest a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's. To bring these two essays into relation with one another in this manner is not to suggest that either man was at the time aware of the other's essay on art. There is no evidence for this. Rather, it is to take advantage of a privileged hermeneutical perspective unavailable to the authors themselves in order to better understand the political implications of these two philosophical reflections on art.

The concept around which the relationship between these two essays comes most perspicuously into focus is that of the "aura" of the work of art developed by Benjamin. As will be seen, Benjamin's conception of the aura and its decay can be mapped onto Heidegger's conception of *aletheia* as the originary happening of truth in the work of art in order to elucidate the two authors' opposing impulses. In short, while Benjamin emphasizes the emancipatory dimensions of the decay of the aura and employs it against what he saw as the increasing aestheticization of politics by the forces of fascism, Heidegger attempts to reinvigorate the aura in order to secure the possibility of an authentic relation to the origin that would reestablish the spirit and power of the German people.

### ***Benjamin: The Decay of the Aura***

Traditionally, the authority of an original work of art is derived from its independent existence as a unique being. Such originals confront the viewer as something marvelous, beautiful, authoritative. Benjamin's fundamental insight in "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction" is that technical reproduction undermines this authority and frees the spectator from its mesmerizing influence. Unlike manual reproduction, which has in principle always been possible,<sup>3</sup> technical reproduction undermines the authority of the original in two ways. First,

3. Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 474. Translated by Harry Zohn as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 218. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to "The Work of Art" essay will be taken from the third German edition followed by the page number of the English translation based on this edition. They will be cited in the text as follows: (Benjamin 474/218). All translations from both Benjamin's and Heidegger's German are my own unless otherwise noted.

because technical reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction, which remains completely determined by its relation to the original, it is less constrained by the original. By means of enlargement, slow motion and other technical processes, Benjamin suggests that photography and cinematography – two important techniques at work in the age of technical reproduction – can bring out aspects of the original that escape the naked eye (Benjamin 476/220). Thus, the very process of technical reproduction calls the authority of the original into question by splitting it open and exposing to the viewer that which had remained hidden in its own, independent existence. Second, technical reproduction reduces the distance between the object and its viewer, for it can bring the copy of the original into situations inaccessible to the original itself. In short, “. . . it makes it possible for the original to come out and meet the viewer, whether it be in the form of the photograph or the phonograph record” (Benjamin 476-77/220-21). These two aspects of technical reproduction undermine the unique existence of the original and call into question its authenticity. Benjamin clarifies the meaning of “authenticity [*Echtheit*]” by showing how it is related to the authority of the object:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is capable of being handed down from its origin, ranging from its material persistence to its historical testimony. Because this latter is founded on the former, in reproduction, where the material persistence has withdrawn itself from the human, so too does the historical testimony of the thing begin to waiver. What is represented as wavering is clearly this: the authority of the thing. (Benjamin 477/221)

What takes on increasing importance in this passage is the human dimension. The authority of the object begins to waiver as its material persistence withdraws itself from the human. This wavering does not merely mark a transformation of the object, but also a change in the perception of the subject. Benjamin took it for granted that such changes in perception correspond to important social transformations. This can be seen more clearly from the manner in which he develops the concept of the “aura” itself.

### ***The Aura Defined***

By offering a definition of the aura, Benjamin situates himself on the side of those forces contributing to its decay. This is because the concept of

the aura itself has an aura about it, one that seems to defy the logic of definition. By defining it, Benjamin intends to undermine the aura of the aura:

It is advisable to illustrate the concept of the aura which was suggested above with reference to historical objects by means of the concept of the aura of natural objects. We define this last as the unique appearance of a distance [*Ferne*], however close [*nah*] it may be. To follow, while resting on a summer afternoon, a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow over the resting one, is to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch. (Benjamin 479/222-23)

It is significant that this definition does not refer to the work of art at all, but rather to the *experience* of the aura of natural objects. The emphasis on experience has an important heuristic function: although the aura at first seems to be a property of the object, it in fact only manifests itself in the *relation* between subject and object. By calling it a “unique appearance” and employing the relational terms of “distance” and “close,” Benjamin not only focuses attention on the relational dimension of the aura, but also determines the peculiar nature of this relation.

To begin with, the aura is a unique [*einmalig*] appearance. As an appearance, the aura is both subjective and objective, for the encounter between subject and object is the condition for the possibility of appearance. As unique, the aura is authoritative. Marleen Stoessel suggests that the quantitative characterization of the aura as “*einmalig*” is really a qualitative determination.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin captures this quality of unique presence with the figure of the shadow of the tree’s branch. The cast of the shadow upon the resting one renders the tree present in a new, more powerful way. In the Jewish mystic tradition, the tree is an important symbol for God’s presence in the world.<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising to find it here in Benjamin’s account of the

4. Marleen Stoessel, *Aura: Das vergessene Menschliche* (Munich: Hanser, 1983) 47.

5. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset, 1974) 112. This is not unlike what Martin Buber describes in *Ich und Du*: “It can however happen, if will and grace are joined, that while contemplating the tree I am drawn into relation with it and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has taken hold of me.” Martin Buber, “Ich und Du,” *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1962) 11. Buber has also come to mind for Stoessel in reading this passage. She is correct to suggest that the example of the tree was probably only unconsciously adopted from Buber. She cites a passage from Buber’s book *Daniel* similar to the one cited here from *Ich und Du*. In this context, it is significant to note the complete absence of any personal pronoun in Benjamin’s definition of the aura. This is perhaps a further manifestation of the withdrawal of the human element, a point that is easily lost in Zohn’s translation.



aura; for the aura points beyond the moment of immediate presence, to something other, unique, authoritative.

This authoritative dimension of the aura is further developed by Benjamin's use of the spatial vocabulary of "distance." With the qualifying clause, "however close it may be," Benjamin immediately undermines the spatial meaning of distance and suggests instead a temporal determination.<sup>6</sup> Here, the mountain range takes on increased significance, for it is not the spatial distance that gives it its aura, but rather its temporal permanence, the fact that it signifies the long and (geologically) turbulent history of the earth. Again, the mountain range, like the tree, points beyond itself.

Benjamin argues that in the age of technical reproduction the uniqueness and permanence of the object is diminished. The impulse to diminish these two characteristics is a function of a particular kind of perception. Again, the subjective condition of the aura comes to the fore:

Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked [in images accessible to the naked eye] as are fleetingness and reproducibility [in technically reproduced images]. The prying of the object from out of its shell, the ruination [*Zertrümmerung*] of its aura, is the signature of a perception in which "the sense for the equality of things in the world" is so developed that it obtains it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. (Benjamin 479-80/223)<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin is here, as he is throughout the essay, unapologetic for this "ruination of the aura." This passage indicates part of the reason for this: the equalizing effect of the decay of the aura has a liberating function. Whereas auratic perception establishes an immediate hierarchy between subject and object by investing the object with a high level of independence and *authority*, the perception at work in technical reproduction undermines the authority of the object thereby liberating the subject from the object's mesmerizing power.

### ***From Cult to Exhibition Value***

According to Benjamin, this liberating function is particularly perspicuous in aesthetics where, with the development of new artistic technologies, most notably photography and cinematography, the "cult value" of the

6. Stoessel 45.

7. By employing the word "*Zertrümmerung*," ["shattering," "smashing," "reduction to ruins"] here, Benjamin comes as close as he does anywhere in the essay to arguing that the aura is *completely* destroyed in the age of technical reproduction. See note 42 below.

work of art increasingly gives way to its “exhibition value.” All auratic art is based in ritual. It has a quasi-religious dimension. This had already been suggested in the definition of the aura by the juxtaposition of distance and closeness, for, as Benjamin writes in a footnote: “Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant thing is the Unapproachable. Unapproachability is, in fact, a major quality of the cult image” (Benjamin 480/243). This unapproachability is what gives the object its authority. However, with the invention of photography in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the ritualistic dimension of the work of art is undermined; for photography uses its various techniques – of enlargement, cropping, depth of field – to approach the unapproachable, to “pry the object from its shell.” The full significance of this development is captured in the following passage:

From the photographic negative, for example, comes a plurality of possible prints. The question as to the authentic [*echten*] print makes no sense. The moment, however, when the measure of authenticity breaks down in artistic reproduction, the entire social function of art also is revolutionized. Its foundation on ritual is replaced by its foundation on another praxis: namely, politics. (Benjamin 481-82/224)

Although it is not immediately clear why the break down of the aura leads to politics, it is true that the question of authenticity must be rethought in the face of the techniques of photography. Benjamin begins this rethinking by emphasizing the increased importance of exhibition value. It is the social function of this exhibition value that gives technically reproduced art its political significance.

What is decisive for art in the age of technical reproduction is its accessibility to and appearance before the public – its exhibition value. The cult value of the work, however, does not immediately retreat in the face of the insurgence of exhibition value. Benjamin suggests that the prominence of the portrait in early photography signifies art’s retrenchment in ritual. Portraits of ancestors dead or absent mark the last refuge of cult value in photography. “In the fleeting expression of a human face the aura beckons from early photography for the last time” (Benjamin 485/226).<sup>8</sup>

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8. There is a certain melancholy to this passage. In his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin suggests that the aura is manifest when the expectation that a person’s gaze will be returned is met (see 114 below). The aura of the work of art seems to be derived from this basic experience. So long as the human element is involved, however remotely, the aura is never fully destroyed.

The significance of Atget, whose photographs are completely emptied of any direct human content, can be understood in this context. Around 1900, Atget photographed deserted Paris streets and created pictures that were said to look like crime scenes. Benjamin suggests the significance of this development:

Where the human withdraws from photography, there for the first time the exhibition value shows its superiority over cult value. . . . With Atget, photographic pictures begin to become pieces of evidence in the process of history. This constitutes their hidden political significance. Free floating contemplation is no longer appropriate for them. They agitate [*beunruhigen*] the viewer; he feels that he must find a definite way to them. (Benjamin 485/226)

The dimension of agitation is important here, for in it lies the specifically political dimension Benjamin has been developing. Rather than being mesmerized by the authority of the work of art, the viewer of the photograph, and to an even greater extent of the modern sound film, is agitated, worried, and thus, thrown into a mode of self-reflection. This sort of heightened awareness is precisely what Benjamin sees as the positive political implication of the decay of the aura.

### ***The Shocked Collective Subject***

The modern sound film produces this sort of agitation even more than the photograph. The experience of the photograph remains similar to that of the painting and other auratic forms of art to the extent that it is fundamentally private. The paradigm of interaction between subject and object remains that of the viewer standing before and being absorbed by the work of art. This is not the case with the film, for the film is experienced collectively. Furthermore, according to Benjamin, the experience of this collective subject does not engender unthinking obedience, but rather an attitude of critique. This is the result of what Benjamin calls the “shock effect” of the film. Cinematography, with its ability to take on, change or penetrate any point of view at will, with its techniques of montage, slow-motion, close-ups and now, indeed with its access to computer generated imagery, has an almost unlimited ability to shock its viewers. This fact puts the viewer on guard, renders the collective subject more aware. Benjamin puts it this way:

The process of association of the one viewing these [moving] images is in fact immediately interrupted by their constant change. On this rests the shock effect of film which, like all shocks, should be absorbed by a heightened presence of mind. (Benjamin 503/238)<sup>9</sup>

For Benjamin, at the movies, the modern subject acquires the skills necessary to negotiate the trials of modern life. The social significance of the modern sound film lies in its ability to shock its audience and force them, collectively, to react. This reaction throws each individual subject back onto its own devices – although the experience is collective, the effect is individuating. Everyone becomes an expert and a critic, as Benjamin suggests (Benjamin 448/228). Finally, although the film fosters a heightened presence of mind, it also distracts its viewer. This is an important dimension of Benjamin's theory, for it distinguishes the mode of perception of the modern movie goer from the kind of perception endemic to the traditional museum visitor. Distraction is the opposite of concentration, which is the mode by which the traditional art work is perceived. For Benjamin, the paradigm example of art that is absorbed in the mode of distraction is architecture. "Buildings," Benjamin writes, "are received in a twofold way: through use and perception, or more strictly speaking: by touch and sight. There is no concept of such a reception if one understands it in terms of concentration as when a tourist stands before a famous building" (Benjamin 504-05/240). Rather, buildings are used without becoming present to the subject in a conscious way; they form

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9. With the advent of computers, the aura reaches an unprecedented level of decay. Films entirely generated by computer animation shock audiences in new ways and remove the aura of the actor further from the film. Furthermore, movies are now being digitally produced and will soon be distributed immediately to millions of viewers around the world via satellites feeding directly to digital projectors. Michel Marriott, "Digital Projectors Use Flashes of Light to Paint a Movie," *The New York Times on the Web* 27 May 1999. [<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/05/circuits/articles/27proj.html>]. With the internet, the aura enters a deeper level of decay and yet at the same time, the human element is not annihilated. Rather it resurfaces in chat rooms, discussion groups and perhaps most significantly for the present context with the internet's capacity to inform enormous populations about the political and social issues of the day and to provide a forum for critical response. Due to the internet's unparalleled capacity to undermine the aura of things, to dispense in-depth information to a wide population, and to allow that population to directly express itself, the potential for genuine critique has never been greater. However, it is also true that along with information, there is misinformation and a high level of commercialization on the internet. With this comes the danger of increased manipulation against which informed critique must always be vigilant. Just as the film can be used by the forces of fascism, so too can the internet. In this context, Benjamin's essay on art has much to teach us about the emerging cyber-world and the possibility of politics in it at the dawn of the twenty-first century.



part of the *habitual* existence of the modern person.

The formation of habits in a state of distraction is a function of the film as well. The authority of the collective subject is undermined in a decisive manner – the film does not permit the subject or the object to gather itself into a stable unity, it does not permit the one to have absolute power over the other. Thus, Benjamin writes: “With its shock effect, the film comes to meet this [distracted] reception halfway. The film not only drives out its cult value in that it puts the public in the position of critic, but also in that this critical position in the cinema does not require attention. The public is an examiner, but a distracted one” (Benjamin 505/240-41). Here, the full significance of the what Benjamin calls the decay [*Verfall*] of the aura comes into focus. On the one hand, it undermines the authority of the object, thus freeing the subject from its enchanting power. On the other hand, because the aura is only in decay, and is not completely destroyed,<sup>10</sup> the object still retains something of its power and thus does not allow the subject to assert its own absolute authority over it. Thus, there emerges a liberating play between the subject and object in which neither is able to dominate the other. Deauratized art not only establishes this liberating play, but also, because it habituates us to the uncertainty of this play, it assuages the very desire to dominate. The ability to exist in the midst of this sort of uncertainty and to take part in its powerful play is a great threat too all authoritarian politics.

### ***Heidegger: Reinvigorating the Aura***

Although Heidegger’s 1935 essay on art does not at first seem to be as explicitly motivated by political concerns as is Benjamin’s, it is no less political. This can be seen most perspicuously if Heidegger’s essay is re-read with Benjamin’s discussion of the decay of the aura in mind. To put the matter succinctly: whereas Benjamin develops the political significance of the decay of the aura by demystifying the art object and emancipating the subject from its authority, Heidegger enlists the work of art in a disturbing political campaign by interpreting it as the authentic site for the originary happening of the truth [*aletheia*] of the historical existence of a people. By interpreting the work of art in this manner, that is, in Benjamin’s terms, by reinvigorating the aura of the work of art, Heidegger renders aesthetics acutely political.

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10. See below 112ff.

Heidegger begins his essay by establishing the distinction between the being of the thing, the piece of equipment and the work of art.<sup>11</sup> The discussion is situated within a critique of three traditional interpretations of being that determine the western understanding of the true nature of the origin of the work of art. The most important of these interpretations in the present context is the Aristotelian analysis of the thing in terms of form and matter.<sup>12</sup> For Heidegger, the hylomorphic analysis already marks the determination of the thing in terms of equipment. He writes: "... matter and form as determinations of beings are most at home in the essential nature of equipment. This name signifies that which is produced specifically for employment and customary use. Matter and form are in no way original determinations of the thingness of the mere thing" (Heidegger 13/28).<sup>13</sup> Because the hylomorphic approach lends insight into the nature of equipment, Heidegger is able to employ it negatively in order to elucidate the similarities and differences between the being of equipment and that of the thing on the one hand, and the work of art on the other.

For Heidegger, equipment is oddly situated between the thing and the work and yet is somehow less than both – this odd situation gives the being of equipment a powerful heuristic function. Equipment, like the thing, is self-contained; it rests in itself when finished. Unlike the thing, however, equipment has not taken shape by itself; it requires the activity of the human hand to bring it into existence. This dependence upon

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11. Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Holzwege* (Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 1994) 6-12. Translated by Albert Hofstadter as "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 22-27. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to "The Origin" essay will be taken from this seventh edition of *Holzwege* followed by the page number of the English translation. They will be placed in the text as follows: (Heidegger 6-12/22-27).

12. The other two traditional interpretations of the thing are: 1) the thing as an underlying substance (*hypokeimenon*) with attributes, which is also Aristotelian in origin; 2) the thing as the unity of the manifold given by sensibility, which is, of course, the Kantian conception. Heidegger says of the first that it holds the thing too far from us, and of the second that it presses in to close (Heidegger 11/26).

13. This critique of the Aristotelian hylomorphic analysis is not limited to the work of art essay, but rather expresses one of Heidegger's basic criticisms of the history of philosophy as determined by Plato and Aristotle. It can be found in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1988) 106-17, where the understanding of being in terms of form and matter is the result of an essential attitude of "productive comportment." For a discussion of this dimension of Heidegger's reading of Aristotle, see my essay "The Hegemony of Form and the Resistance of Matter," *Graduate Faculty Journal of Philosophy* 21.2 (1999): 22ff.

the human renders the equipment more like the work. However, the work differs from equipment and is more like the thing insofar as it is self-sufficient. "Thus, the equipment is half thing," writes Heidegger, "because it is characterized by thingliness, and yet it is something more; simultaneously, it is half art work, and yet less, for it is without the self-sufficiency of the work of art" (Heidegger 14/29). The characteristic of self-sufficiency marks the affinity between the work of art and the thing: "Because of its self-sufficient presence [*selbstgenügsames Anwesen*] the work of art is more similar to the mere thing which grows from itself [*eigenwüchsigen*] and is self-contained" (Heidegger 14/29).<sup>14</sup> This characteristic of self-sufficiency corresponds to that dimension of the aura Benjamin had thematized as uniqueness and permanence.

### *The Emergence of Distance: Van Gogh's Shoes*

Heidegger further solidifies the self-sufficiency and thus the authority of the work of art by means of a sort of philosophical legerdemain. Under the auspices of establishing a common pictorial representation of some equipment, Heidegger suggests that Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes be taken as an example. Implicitly employing the distinction between *Zuhandenheit* [readiness-to-hand] and *Vorhandenheit* [objective presence] he had established in *Sein und Zeit*,<sup>15</sup> Heidegger outlines the different modes of being in which the peasant shoes appear. They are *zuhanden* when the peasant woman wears them while working in the field. The less conscious she is of the shoes, the more they blend into the context of her environment. The shoes are reliable and useable; this

14. In his essay, "Das Ding," the thing is differentiated from the represented object precisely because it is "*Das Insichstehen . . . als etwas Selbständiges* [that which stands in itself as something independent]." Heidegger "Das Ding," *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967) 38-39. "The Thing," *Poetry, Language, Thought* 167. It is significant in the present context that Heidegger begins "Das Ding" by discussing the shrinking of all distance in space and time with the modern developments of radio, television and film, where information is now immediately available and where ancient cultures are represented as if they existed at the present moment. Heidegger laments that this shrinking of distance brings no nearness. His response is clearly to re-invigorate the aura of the thing by emphasizing its independence in order to locate in the thingness of the thing the site for the gathering of the fourfold: earth, sky, divinities and mortals (Heidegger 45-46/173). By interpreting the genuine nature of the thing in this manner, Heidegger affirms its ritual value. Thus, in "Das Ding," as in the art essay, Heidegger responds to the decay of the aura in the age of technical reproduction by attempting to re-invigorate it, to re-establish its autonomous authority.

15. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 16th ed. (Niemeyer: Tübingen, 1986) 69ff. Hereafter cited in footnotes as SZ followed by the page number for this edition.

constitutes their *Zuhandenheit*. If, however, as in the painting, the shoes are recognized as just lying there unused, if the soles are seen to be worn down, the leather muddy and the laces untied, the shoes have become *vorhanden*, objectively present. As the equipment is used up and worn down it becomes unreliable, and this disintegration reveals another dimension of the being of the shoes. This phenomenon, which plays a large role throughout *Sein und Zeit* as well as in Benjamin's work, may be called the "heuristics of dysfunction" – in the breakdown of the object another dimension of its being is revealed.<sup>16</sup> Van Gogh's picture renders the shoes present in their dysfunction, thus revealing, according to Heidegger, that "... equipment in its genuine equipmental being comes from a more distant source. Matter and form and their distinction have a deeper origin" (Heidegger 20/35). The appearance of this distance happens in the painting. Heidegger writes: "This painting has spoken. In the proximity of the work we were suddenly somewhere other than where we *habitually* tend to be" (Heidegger 21/35).<sup>17</sup> The work of art "speaks;" it transports the viewer into unfamiliar territory; it reveals the distant and deeper origin of being. This completes the philosophical legerdemain mentioned above, for the painting was not, as Heidegger originally suggested, meant merely to establish a common pictorial representation of a pair of shoes. Heidegger himself finally explicitly admits to this manipulation:

16. The heuristics of dysfunction is at the core of Heidegger's attempt to develop the meaning of being in terms of time in *Sein und Zeit*. Death is precisely that dysfunction which reveals the being of *Dasein* as time (cf. sections 50-53). The heuristics of dysfunction, besides clearly being an important dimension of Benjamin's essay on art, also plays a fundamental role in Benjamin's early work, "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.1 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974). In English as, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977). In the introduction, he writes of the emergence of the truth content of the work: "This content does not, however, become visible by being exposed, rather it proves itself far more in a process which one may metaphorically described as the burning up of the cover as it enters the realm of the ideas, that is, as an incineration of the work in which its form achieves the high point of its brilliance" (Benjamin 211/31). In the same work, the heuristics of dysfunction is at the heart of Benjamin's conception of critique, which he describes as the "mortification of the work" (Benjamin 357/182).

17. Italics are mine so as to call attention to a fundamental difference between Benjamin and Heidegger. As mentioned, Benjamin affirms the habituation of a heightened presence of mind in a state of distraction as a key element of the liberating function of the decay of the aura. This was clear in his treatment of architecture. Heidegger's interest is in breaking, not establishing, habits as a way of destroying the attitude of the "average everydayness" of "*das Man*" (SZ 126ff.). Here the work of art is said to aid in the breaking of such habits, with the result that the observer is better prepared to face the important decision posed by the work itself.



However, above all the work did not, as it may seem at first, serve merely to better visualize what a piece of equipment is. Rather, it is much more the case that the equipmental being of the equipment first genuinely comes to appearance through the work and exclusively in the work. . . . What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the revelation [*Eröffnung*] of that which the equipment, a pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This being steps out into the unconcealedness of its being. The unconcealedness of beings, the Greeks named *aletheia*. (Heidegger 21/36)

What is at work in the work is the happening of truth as *aletheia*; it is the revelation of the distant origin of being. What is at work in the work is precisely what Benjamin called the aura: the unique appearance of a distance, however close it may be.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Ritual Value Re-vitalized: God Does Not Flee***

It is not surprising that Heidegger appeals to the ruins of a Greek temple to elucidate the manner in which *aletheia* happens in the work of art; for the temple implicitly suggests precisely what Heidegger is attempting to establish: the ritual dimension of the work of art, its historical nature and its authority.<sup>19</sup> His description of the temple is intentionally dramatic so as to emphasize its aura. The temple is, for Heidegger, the site of the battle between what he calls "earth" and "world;" the terms by which he explicates the dynamic happening of *aletheia*. The "world," in this case is not the mere collection of things,

18. What I have called "a sort of philosophical legerdemain" is actually a highly sophisticated rhetorical maneuver by Heidegger, for it shows precisely what he is trying to say: that although the origin has been covered over – by traditional metaphysics, the prevalence of equipment in the age of technology, "average everyday" existence, etc. – it remains discernable to those who can see/think/hear it, that is, to those who can heed what the painting says (commands?).

19. The Greek temple is significant for two other reasons as well. First, it links the present essay back to the Greek origin, which for Heidegger is really the genuine origin of the historical existence of the German people as well as of genuine philosophy. Recall in this context, of course, Heidegger's famous claim "For along with German the Greek language is (in regard to its possibilities for thought) at once the most powerful and most spiritual of all languages." Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 57. This sort of assertion of the spiritual affinity between the German and the Greek was quite common in the rhetoric of the revolutionary right. See for example, Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1936) 470; *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971) 423. Second, Heidegger's attitude toward the temple is precisely the opposite of Benjamin's attitude toward buildings mentioned above. Where Heidegger encourages awe and fetishizes the aura of the structure, Benjamin encourages use and undermines the authority of the aura.

nor is it the framework that gives such a collection its unity.<sup>20</sup> Rather: “Wherever the essential decisions of our history are made, are taken over by us or abandoned, remain unrecognized or are rediscovered, there the world worlds. . . . Insofar as the world opens itself, all things receive their lingering and hastening, their distance [*Ferne*] and proximity [*Nähe*], their breadth and confinement” (Heidegger 31/44–45). The world is historical. It opens up the possibility for genuine decision, which will *either* be taken over *or* ignored. However, the world is not pure openness; it has a dimension of inaccessibility as well – it is dependent upon what Heidegger calls “the protective grace of the gods” which both grants and withholds (Heidegger 31/45). This twofold dimension of revealing and concealing is played out from the other direction with the term “earth.” Here “earth” does not name the clump of matter orbiting around the sun. Rather: “The earth is that which comes out and shelters. The earth is self-dependent, effortless and untiring. Upon and in the earth historical humans ground their dwelling in the world” (Heidegger 46/32). The dimension of closedness takes precedence here, but like the world, the earth is multi-dimensional. It is self-secluding, but in this seclusion, it shelters and protects that which comes into appearance. Earth and world must be thought together:

The world is the self-opening openness of the broad bands of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people [*geschichtlichen Volkes*]. The earth is the self-dependent forthcoming of that which constantly secludes itself and in this way shelters. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet they are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth and the earth juts through the world. (Heidegger 35/49)

Heidegger does not allow this relation between earth and world to rest in an “empty unity of opposites.” Rather, the relationship is one of strife, and it is a battle of the highest importance. The work of art is the

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20. The following passage is a clear example of the aura of authority Heidegger gives the temple: “Standing there, the structure rests on rocky ground. This resting of the work draws out of the rock its cumbersome but spontaneous support. Standing there, the structure holds itself against the raging storm above it and thus makes the violence of the storm manifest for the first time. The brilliance and shine of the stones, although appearing only by the grace of the sun, yet first bring the light of day, the expanse of the sky, the gloom of the night into appearance. The temple’s sure towering makes the invisible space of the air visible. The unshakability of the work stands out against the surging of the sea and, by its repose, allows the raging of the ocean to appear” (Heidegger 28/42).

site of this battle and the temple is the clearest example of this: the temple stands out from the earth which protects it, it opens up a world; it signifies the world of the Greeks, their culture, their gods and its links to Germanic culture and society; it is, like the German economy and position in the world, in ruins, the earth has reasserted itself.<sup>21</sup> Heidegger claims that the ongoing battle between earth and world remains open in the work so long as “the god has not fled from it” (Heidegger 29/43).

From the perspective of Benjamin’s essay, Heidegger’s conception of the happening of truth in the work of art amounts to a reaffirmation the artwork’s origins in ritual. The revitalization of the ritual value of art is, however, not apolitical. To the contrary, it is the means by which the aura of the work of art is drafted for service in a very political campaign. Heidegger’s vocabulary of “battle [*Kampf*]” and “strife [*Streit*]” already indicates this; indeed, his appeal to Heraclitus’s fifty-third fragment makes it very clear: “War [*polemos*] is the father of all things, the king of all things. It proves that some are gods and others men; it makes some into slaves and others free.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout the discussion

21. See Heidegger 35/49. This caveat is common in Heidegger because he was always concerned not to have the dynamic happening of truth understood in terms of the Hegelian dialectic of *Aufhebung*. Cf. his essay on *physis* in Aristotle, Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 1976) 366-67. See also, my essay, “The Hegemony of Form and the Resistance of Matter,” 34ff. For Heidegger, the battle between earth and world is not dialectical because the immediate past is precisely *not* preserved, but rather annihilated. Further, the battle is a matter of *Geschick*, fate, which enjoins human sacrifice [*Opfer*], and which determines human action rather than being determined by it. Johannes Fritzsche has made the difference between Hegelian dialectics and Heidegger’s conception of the destruction of tradition and fate clear in his book *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) 154ff. Hereafter to be cited parenthetically in the footnotes as *JF*.

22. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* I (Zürich: Weidmann, 1996) 162. Heidegger appeals to this on page 29/43. After paraphrasing it, Heidegger only gives the reference to the passage from Heraclitus without citing the text itself. Heidegger echoes a similar sentiment in his political speech, “The University in the new Reich,” with the use of the term “*Kampf*,” which mirrors Heraclitus’s “*polemos*”: “University study must again become a risk, not a refuge for the cowardly. Whoever cannot survive the battle [*Kampf*], lays where he lies. The new courage must accustom itself to steadiness, because the battle for the institutions where leaders are educated will last for a long time. It will be fought out of the forces of the new Reich which the chancellor of the people, Hitler, will bring to actuality. A hard race without the thought of itself must fight the battle, a race that lives from constant testing and for the goal to which it has committed itself. The battle determines the character of the teachers and leaders at the University.” Guido Schneeberger, *Nachlese zu Heidegger: Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken* (Bern: Buchdruckerei AG, Suhr, 1962) 145. An English translation can be found in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT, 1993) 45.

of the battle between the earth and world, references are made to the “destiny of an historical people [*Geschick eines geschichtlichen Volkes*],”<sup>23</sup> “native ground [*heimatliche Grund*],”<sup>24</sup> to the “essential sacrifice [*wesentliche Opfer*],” and indeed, to the “founding of a political state [*staatgründende Tat*].”<sup>25</sup> What appears in one context as harmless metaphorical language is, in another, highly charged political rhetoric. It is important to keep in mind that Heidegger composed the first draft of this essay in Freiburg in 1935 and further presented, revised and developed it during the following year. At that time in Germany, the political significance of such language could not have been more perspicuous. Although couched in a philosophical context, it is the

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23. See Heidegger 35/49 (cited on 102 above). The term “*Geschick* [fate],” must be understood in relation to the verb “*schicken* [to send],” from which the words “*Schicksal* [destiny],” and “*Geschichte* [history]” are derived. The German understanding of *Geschick* during the inter-war period in Germany does not have the same connotations as it does to English speaking readers at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the 1920s and 1930s the term “*Geschick*” was a basic term of discourse of the political right and it signified that the actions of individuals as well as history itself is determined by *Geschick*. This sounds strange particularly to American ears because of the deeply ingrained American notion that individuals determine their own fate. But it is important not to read the tradition of American individualism into a text so deeply situated in the context in which it was written. For the particularities of the German notion of *Geschick* in the inter-war period, see *JF* 69-70, note 3, 268-69 and the admirably long footnote on 243-50.

24. See Heidegger 28/42.

25. These later two references, see Heidegger 49/62, comprise part of a list of ways truth establishes itself. One way is by setting itself into work, another is by means of the thinker’s questioning. By bringing the essential sacrifice, the founding of a political state, the questioning of the thinker and the happening of truth in the work of art together in one list, Heidegger clearly brings the political implications of his aesthetic theory into focus and further suggests the seamless relationship between his philosophy and his politics. The notion of sacrifice, *Opfer*, is also a highly charged polemical term of the revolutionary right. It was frequently used in reference to those heroes [*Helden*] who sacrificed their lives for the good of the people in World War I, *JF* 323-27. Heidegger himself is not afraid to use the term in his philosophical works, as here and as he does when, in 1943 in the afterward to his essay, “Was ist Metaphysik?” he writes: “Sacrifice [*Das Opfer*] is at home in the essence of the event as that by which being claims man for the truth of being.” Heidegger, *Wegmarken* 311. He employs the same notion of *Opfer* in his overtly political writings, as he does in his speech “The University in the National Socialist State,” when he writes: “We of today are in the process of fighting to bring about the new reality. We are merely a transition, a sacrifice [*Opfer*].” Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt & New York: Campus, 1988) 231. Such a sacrifice is never merely a *Handlung*, which is the name for the actions of everyday life that are always mediated by one’s concerns and the concerns of others; rather, the *Tat* is heroic, decisive, immediate. It is intimately linked to sacrifice; it is the deed performed at the moment of decision. For a discussion of the significance of the word *Tat* and how it differs from *Handlung*, see *JF* 322.



language of the revolutionary right, of Hitler and the National Socialist movement.<sup>26</sup> However, if any doubt remains that Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art is political at its core, it is removed by a consideration of the final discussion of art as poetry [*Dichtung*].

### **Art as Dichtung**

"All art," Heidegger writes, "as the letting happen of the arrival of the truth of beings is, as such, *in essence, poetry*" (Heidegger 59/72). Poetry, for Heidegger, is grounded in language, which itself is understood as more than mere communication. Language and poetry are broadly construed by Heidegger; they are understood as the ground of the specific arts, such as architecture, painting, sculpture and music. All works of art must be traced back to their origin in poetry and language (Heidegger 60/73). Heidegger develops his conception of poetry by means of the notion of "projective saying [*entwerfende Sagen*]":

Projective saying is poetry: the saying of the world and the earth, the saying of the realm of their battle and thus of the site of all nearness and distance [*Nähe und Ferne*] of the gods. Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of beings. Language at any particular time is the happening of this saying, in which a world historically arises for a people [*einem Volk*], and the earth is preserved as that which remains closed. Projective saying is that which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into the world. In such saying, the concepts of an historical people's essence, that is, of its belonging to world history, are preformed. (Heidegger 61-62/74)

Immediately, the use of "nearness" and "distance" suggests the affinity between what Heidegger thematizes as projective saying and what Benjamin defines as the aura. While Benjamin attempts to undermine the power of the aura, Heidegger here embraces and fosters it. Furthermore, this passage indicates the intimate relationship between the aura of the work of art, that is, to use Heideggerian vocabulary, its truth and the essence of an historical people. Heidegger determines this relationship by developing the notion of preservation which is only briefly

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26. The most thorough work I know on the relationship between Heidegger's philosophical vocabulary, particularly as it is developed in sections 72-77 of *Sein und Zeit* and the political rhetoric of the revolutionary right in Germany during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s is Fritzsche's *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time*. Whatever one makes of all of Fritzsche's specific arguments, after reading his book, it is no longer possible to be naïve about the particular vocabulary Heidegger chose to employ.

introduced in the above passage.

The shift from the traditional (Kantian) view in which the artist's creative genius is given pride of place to a position in which those who preserve the work of art predominate is concordant with a more general shift in Heidegger's thinking, namely, first, the "turn" away from the individual subject [*Dasein*] to the collective subject [*das Volk*], and then the twist away from the concept of subjectivity altogether.<sup>27</sup> In the essay on the work of art, Heidegger accomplishes the turn, although the twist is already intimated by his reticence to affirm the traditional dichotomy between subject and object.<sup>28</sup> The turn from individual to collective subject can be easily discerned in Heidegger's discussion of preservation.

As with Benjamin's conception of shock, Heidegger's notion of preservation is directed against the Kantian affirmation of the individual subject. Unlike Benjamin, who identifies an alienating and thus liberating function in the shock effect of technically reproduced art, Heidegger uses the notion of preserving to ground the identity of the collective subject in the authentic origin of the work of art. Heidegger does this brilliantly by mapping the ontological structure of *Dasein* as developed in *Sein und Zeit* onto the collective subjectivity of preservers.

Preserving, for Heidegger, removes the individual from its rote existence in the "everyday" and moves it into what is disclosed by the work (Heidegger 62/75). In so doing, the subject is enjoined to take an authentic position with respect to the work, that is, to preserve it. This, Heidegger calls, the "founding of truth," which has three dimensions corresponding to what was developed in *Sein und Zeit* as the three ecstasies of the temporality of *Dasein*: 1) founding as bestowing, corresponding to the historicity of *Dasein*, its thrownness; 2) founding as grounding, corresponding the ecstatic presence of *Dasein*; 3) founding

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27. Karl Löwith already recognized the turn from the individual to the collective subject in 1940, writing: "The leap in the existential analytic from death to Heidegger's Schlageter speech (*Freiburger Studentenzeitung*, 1 Jun. 1933) is merely a passage from a particular and individual *Dasein* to one that is general, no less particular by virtue of its generality – namely, one of the German *Dasein*." (Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, Elizabeth King, trans. [Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1994] 38.) The turning and twisting in Heidegger can be seen in the movement between three of Heidegger's writings respectively: from *Sein und Zeit* to *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* and then to the *Brief über den Humanismus*. If one is convinced by Fritzsche's interpretation of section 74 of *Sein und Zeit*, then what I am calling the turn, i.e., to the collective subject, is already accomplished there. It is not until after the war that the twisting begins in earnest.

28. Cf. Heidegger 65/77.

as beginning, corresponding to *Dasein*'s futurity, its projection.<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger develops the three dimensions of the founding of truth in the work of art with vocabulary borrowed from *Sein und Zeit*. In the first edition of the essay, the only edition never given as a lecture, this was understood primarily in terms of the "free gift,"<sup>30</sup> but in the later edition, emphasis is placed on the role of the preservers, *ein Volk*.

Rather, in the work, the truth is thrown toward the coming preservers, that is, to an historical group of people [*Menschentum*]. That which is thrown is never an arbitrary demand. The truly poetic projection is the opening of that into which *Dasein*, as historical, is always already thrown. This is the earth, and for an historical people [*Volk*], its earth [is] the self-closing ground on which it rests with all of that which it already is, though as yet still hidden from itself. It is, however, the world that prevails out of the relation of *Dasein* to the unconcealedness of being. For this reason, all that is given to human being in projection is drawn up out of the closed ground and expressly set up upon this ground. (Heidegger 63/75-76)

This passage already includes all three dimensions of the founding of truth, bestowing, grounding and beginning. Here earth and world are brought together to determine the being of an historical people, just as in *Sein und Zeit*, thrownness and projection are brought together to determine the temporality of the being of *Dasein*.<sup>31</sup> When focusing on the

29. This conception of the "founding of truth" is one of the oldest parts of the essay. It has remained fundamentally unchanged from the first version: Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Heidegger Studies* 5 (1989): 5-22. In the first version, however, the conception of the founding of truth is not linked as strongly to the notion of preservation, which is more developed in the edition published in *Holzwege*.

30. See Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" (1989) 19ff. The notion of the "free gift" corresponds nicely to the German understanding of *Geschick*, see note 23 above.

31. Compare the essay on the origin of the work of art with section II.5 of *Sein und Zeit*, "Temporality and Historicity." Already in this section of *Sein und Zeit*, the Greek temple appears (SZ 378/BT 430). Here Heidegger also develops the authentic temporality of *Dasein* in terms of "*vorlaufende Entschlossenheit*," running ahead resoluteness (SZ 382/BT 434). Resolute running ahead names the manner in which past and future are unified in authentic *Dasein* just as the "founding of truth" names the authentic temporality of the being of an historical *Volk*. Here again the philosophical and the political are brought together in a disturbing manner. This move should not surprise anyone who has read Löwith's recollections of his last meeting with Heidegger in 1936: "... I was of the opinion that his partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy. Heidegger agreed with me without reservation, and added that his concept of 'historicity' formed the basis of his political 'engagement.' He also left no doubt about his belief in Hitler" (Löwith 60). For an insightful interpretation of section 74 and its political significance, see *JF* chapters 1-2.

conception of founding as bestowing, Heidegger emphasizes the historical dimension of *das Volk*. Here the earth takes on increased importance, for it captures the dimension of thrownness. It is no accident that the first edition of the work of art essay ends with Heidegger emphasizing how vitally important it is for historical *Dasein* to remain in close proximity to its genuine "*Bodenständigkeit*" on the earth: "Such proximity guarantees a truly grounded historical *Dasein* as genuinely rooted in its native soil [*Bodenständigkeit*] on this earth."<sup>32</sup> So long as historical *Dasein* remains rooted in and heroically chooses to defend its native soil, the possibility that it can regain an authentic existence remains open.

The second dimension of the founding of truth is that of grounding. As the above passage suggests, the gift must be drawn up in projection and set upon this ground. This, however, is not something that just happens of itself, rather, it requires that the preservers relate themselves properly towards the happening of truth in the work. What Heidegger specifically has in mind can be gathered from the examples, mentioned earlier, of the other ways in which truth happens: in the "act that founds a political state," in "essential sacrifice," and in the "thinker's questioning."<sup>33</sup> All the various ways in which the "truth happens" enjoin the active engagement of a subject or group of subjects and this is no less the case with the happening of truth in the work of art. This is the ultimate impetus behind Heidegger's emphasis on the importance of the preservers, for it is the preservers, recognizing their destiny, who comport themselves in the proper manner towards the work of art and thus who are able to draw up the happening of truth and establish it on firm ground.<sup>34</sup>

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32. Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" (1989) 22. "*Bodenständigkeit*" was also a term used by the revolutionary right in their fight for "*Lebensraum*." It means being rooted in the soil. See *JF* 287 for a discussion of "*Bodenständigkeit*." Although the term itself does not make it into the editions of the essay Heidegger presented in public, the spirit of the word remains vitally clear at the end of the essay in the citation from Hölderlin, see 119 below.

33. See 103 above.

34. The structure of the argument is the same as the electoral appeal Heidegger published as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933 to encourage support for Hitler's decision to leave the League of Nations: "This last decision reaches the outermost limit of our people's existence. And what is this limit? It consists in the most basic demand of all *Dasein* that it preserve and save its own essence. A barrier is thereby erected between what can be reasonably expected of a people and what cannot. By virtue of this basic law of honor a people preserves [*bewahrt*] the dignity and resoluteness of its essence" (Schneeberger 145). The meaning of "to preserve" [*bewahren*] throughout this speech is precisely the same as it is in the essay on art.



This grounding, however, requires a third dimension, namely, that of beginning. For Heidegger, genuine beginning is an “*Ursprung*,” a primordial leap, which, Heidegger stresses, is not primitive because it is fundamentally directed towards the future. Thus, bringing the discussion of the founding of truth and the entire essay to a crescendo, he writes:

Art lets truth leap out [*entspringen*]. Art, as founding preserving, springs [*erspringt*] the truth of beings in the work. To spring something, to bring something into being by the founding leap [*Sprung*] out of its essential origin [*Wesensherkunft*], this is the meaning of the word origin [*Ursprung*].

The origin [*Ursprung*] of the work of art, that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of the historical *Dasein* of a people, is art. This is the case because art in its essence is an origin [*Ursprung*]: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical. (Heidegger, 65-66/77-78)

The full effect of Heidegger’s position comes quickly into focus here. Art is the site for the rejuvenation of the historical *Dasein* of the German people. The proper relation to art is no mere philosophical exercise in aesthetics, but rather a concrete, political challenge. Heidegger employs the rhetoric of a polished political speaker when he ends the essay:

Are we in our *Dasein* historically at the origin? Do we know, that is, do we respect [*achten*] the essence of the origin? Or do we, in our relation to art, only call on an informed acquaintance with the past?

For this either-or<sup>35</sup> and its decision, there is an unmistakable sign. Hölderlin, the poet, whose work stands before the Germans as a test to be withstood, named it when he said:

“With difficulty,/that which dwells near the origin, departs.” – “The Journey,” verses 18-19. (Heidegger 66/78)

These words leave little to the imagination as to what, precisely, Heidegger thought the relationship was between art and politics. The “we,” of course, is the authentic German *Volk*. Such a challenge to the

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35. Hitler’s rhetoric is rife with precisely such “either/or,” decisionistic formulations: “There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard: either – or” (Hitler, *Mein Kampf* 225; In English: *Mein Kampf* 206). See also 475/427 and “Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany” (742/654). Translations are Manheim’s.

German people, in 1935, could not have been more straightforward: Be on the right side of the either-or; defend and respect the hidden origin that fatefully gives us our position of privilege at this world-historical moment of decision. From beginning to end, Heidegger's strategy in the essay on art is to rejuvenate the aura of the work of art, that is, its mysterious relation to the forgotten authentic origin of the German people, in order to prepare the way for the self-assertion of the German *Volk* after the shame and devastation brought on by the Treaty of Versailles. It is, however, precisely this sort of response that Benjamin sought to attack in his own essay on art by undermining the authority of the aura.

### ***Heidegger and Benjamin: Art, Philosophy and Politics***

By interpreting Heidegger's essay through the lens of Benjamin's, we have not only gained insight into the political implications of Heidegger's vision of the relationship between art and politics, but we have also placed ourselves in a position to develop a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's essay.

It has already been suggested that Heidegger's essay resonates with his earlier thinking, particularly *Sein und Zeit*, insofar as it retains the basic temporal structure of *Dasein* even as it moves to map it onto the historical *Dasein* of *das Volk*. There is, however, a deeper affinity as well, one that runs through almost everything Heidegger wrote – early, middle and late – that is, what may be called “originary metaphysics.”<sup>36</sup> Originary metaphysics should be distinguished from original metaphysics, for, to follow Reiner Schürmann's interpretation of Heidegger, “original” refers to the historical happening of the history of being while “originary” refers to the ahistorical event of the happening of being itself.<sup>37</sup> Heidegger never tired of trying to develop ways to think the originary. Yet, it must be admitted, that in the work of art essay at the very least, the originary was brought into relation with the original in a very disturbing manner. In this essay Heidegger's attempt to think the originary event of

36. Of course, Heidegger himself would prefer the name “originary thinking” because it reserves the name “metaphysics” for that which is to be destroyed. However, it is precisely because, as will be clear below, this “originary thinking” is not thinking at all, but rather, as Karl Löwith put it, an “art of enchantment” that I purposefully juxtapose the two terms – “originary” and “metaphysics” (Löwith 45). Heidegger would have had opposite reactions to these terms and so, by placing them next to one another, I intend to call into question both Heidegger's notion of “origin” as well as his conception of metaphysics.

37. Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger: On Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 131.

being itself is intimately linked to the concrete historico-political situation in which it was written. Here, the dangers endemic to “originary metaphysics” are clearly manifest. Its basic assumption is that there is a deep and hidden origin that gives meaning to everything that exists. Paul Tillich has called this the “myth of origin” and has suggested: “The consciousness oriented to the myth of origin is the root of all conservative and romantic thought in politics.”<sup>38</sup> The danger endemic to such a notion lies not only in its lack of determinacy, but also in its hypnotic effect. For a good story teller – and Heidegger, like most great philosophers, was quite an expert – can lull an unguarded listener into believing the myth of the origin as it is determined by the philosophico-political beliefs of the teller. Thus, what starts out innocuously enough as a consideration of the origin of the work of art, leads, with increasing urgency, to a sort of call-to-arms in which the listeners are challenged to heed the command of the origin and preserve and defend the land of their birth. Art can work this way, slyly and hypnotically, and so can philosophy and politics, if they are not held accountable by critical thinking. Herein, however, lies the importance of Benjamin’s conception of the shock effect of the work of art in the age of technical reproduction. This shock effect offers some defense against the hypnotic power of originary metaphysics. Indeed, just as the film shocks the spectator into a heightened presence of mind, Benjamin’s essay undermines the spell of Heidegger’s aura.<sup>39</sup> By juxtaposing Heidegger’s conception of the founding of truth with Benjamin’s affirmation of the decay of the aura, the hypnotic effect of Heidegger’s writing and strangely appealing vocabulary is broken and the disturbing political implications of his thinking comes clearly into focus.

### ***The Aura’s Verfall***

There is, however, something of a reciprocal relationship here, for Heidegger’s essay, both because it provides a concrete example of the sort of aestheticization of politics to which Benjamin was opposed and

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38. Paul Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung* (Berlin: Medusa Verlag Wölk, 1980) 3f.; *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 18.

39. According to Löwith, Heidegger augmented his aura as a great and different thinker by donning the unconventional dress described “as a kind of Black Forest farmer’s jacket with broad lapels and a semi-militaristic collar, and knee-length breeches, both made from dark brown cloth . . .” Löwith also suggest that the students must have been aware of his aura because they called him “the little magician from Messkirch” (Löwith 44-45).

because it reaffirms the aura to such an extent that the possibility of a complete destruction of the aura is called into question, lends insight into an aspect of Benjamin's essay that is often misunderstood. Even before its publication, the concept of the *Verfall* of the aura was misinterpreted. In March, 1936, from London, Adorno wrote a letter to Benjamin with his reaction to "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction." In this letter, Adorno famously suggests that the essay requires "*more dialectics*."<sup>40</sup> The basic impulse underlying this suggestion is the valid concern that Benjamin's essay is naïve and romantic about the emancipatory power of deauratized art and about the immediate revolutionary response the masses would have to it. Adorno's point is that deauratized art lends itself just as well to the manipulative ends it was designed to undermine. Thus, according to Adorno, the negative moment was missing from the essay. Of course, the other aspect of Adorno's critique, as Richard Wolin points out, is that Benjamin does not recognize the *positive* moment endemic to radically autonomous art, which itself "undergoes a process of *self-rationalization* such that it divests itself of the aura and its accompanying retrograde attributes."<sup>41</sup> Taken abstractly, this critique seems valid enough. However, what Adorno failed to recognize was the concrete context against which Benjamin was writing. He was living in exile in Paris in 1935 where the autonomous art of the fascists required a concrete and indeed powerful response. Thus, while the positive dimensions of autonomous art were being undermined by fascist films and propaganda, the negative dimensions of Benjamin's position, its naïve romanticism and tenacious, one-sided emphasis on the aura's decay, can be explained, although not fully excused, by the need to emphasize the political potential of deauratized art as a response to the fascists' attempt to render politics aesthetic. Heidegger's essay helps bring this context into focus by offering a concrete example of how the aura of the work of art can be and was manipulated for authoritarian political purposes.

40. Ronald Taylor, ed. & trans., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977) 124.

41. See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 194. In this case, Adorno clearly has in mind something like what he will later write about Schönberg's twelve-tone technique in *Philosophy of Modern Music*, namely that, by confining itself so rigidly to its self-imposed rules, it frees itself. "Twelve-tone technique is truly the fate of music. It enchains music by liberating it." See Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1994) 67-68.



However, even if the concrete context in which Benjamin wrote the essay is taken into account, and even if it is granted that Benjamin was perhaps too idealistic about the response of the masses to deauratized art, the suggestion that Benjamin's position is too one sided and therefore dialectically closed remains grounded in a misconception – namely that by thematizing the “*Verfall*” of the aura, Benjamin is arguing for its complete destruction. This is where Heidegger's affirmation of the aura, and particularly its historical dimension can help us develop a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's position, for Heidegger is correct to emphasize the historical nature of art, and Benjamin's conception of the *Verfall* of the aura does nothing to deny this.

Marleen Stoessel has keenly suggested that Benjamin never speaks of the “loss [*Verlust*]” of the aura, nor does he use other expressions of absolute destruction in relation to the aura that would lead one to believe that the process under consideration is closed and static.<sup>42</sup> Rather, when speaking about the aura, Benjamin most often uses words like “*Verfall*,” “*verkümmern* [decline, wither, or dwindle],” or “*ins Wanken geraten* [begin to totter, become shaky]” (Benjamin 477/221). These words are meant to retain a certain openness, to emphasize the dynamic nature of the process undergone by the aura in the age of technical reproduction. Thus, while it is true, as Rodolphe Gasché says, that the decay of the aura is “a liberating event, an event in which mankind becomes reborn – and Benjamin celebrates it without regret,”<sup>43</sup> it is not the case, as Gasché also seems to suggest, that

42. See Stoessel 36. As mentioned above in note 7, Benjamin comes close to saying that the aura is “destroyed” when he used the word “*Zertrümmerung*” (479/223). In fact, Harry Zohn translates “*Zertrümmerung*” as “destroy,” thus giving the English reader the false impression that the aura is completely annihilated. But “*Zertrümmerung*” does not mean “destruction,” but rather “smashing,” “shattering,” or, indeed, “reduction to ruins.” For Benjamin, a “ruin” is never absolute annihilation. In *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, he writes: “Structure and detail are, in the end, always historically laden. It is the object of philosophical criticism to prove that the function of artistic form is the following: to make historical content, because it provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth. This transformation of material content into truth content makes the *Verfall* in effectiveness, whereby the attraction of earlier stimuli diminishes decade by decade, into the basis of rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands in a ruin.” See Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* 358; *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* 182.

43. Rodolphe Gasché, “Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’” *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds. (London: Routledge, 1994) 185.

the aura is entirely eliminated.<sup>44</sup> Benjamin's treatment of the decay of the aura must be understood in terms of the heuristics of dysfunction mentioned above<sup>45</sup> – in the breakdown of the aura, the political function of art reveals itself. But the condition for the possibility of this political function of art is in fact the resistance of the aura in the face of its complete annihilation. For it is the resistance of the aura along with the heightened capacity for critique that emerges as the aura seems to decay that holds the relationship between subject and object open and establishes the possibility for a politics directed against authoritarianism and domination. Thus, when Benjamin writes in his essay on Baudelaire the following: "But looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met . . . there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent,"<sup>46</sup> the experience at the heart of the concept of the aura is made clear. So too is its political and ethical significance, for the aura names the place of this autonomous response, a place where the aura and its decay are continually in play. Thus, unlike in Heidegger, where the response to the work of art is a matter of authentic preservation, in Benjamin, there is an autonomous response between subject and object that undermines the attempt of either to gain absolute authority. Whereas Heidegger affirms the authenticity and authority of the work of art, Benjamin sees in the age of technical reproduction the decay of the aura of authenticity that makes room for the autonomous response. This comes clearly into focus when Benjamin's essay is read against Heidegger's, indeed, as a response to him.

Thus, what Howard Caygill naïvely ascribes to Heidegger's conception of the double concealment at the end of his essay *Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition*, would much more justly be ascribed to Benjamin's conception of the decay of the aura, namely that "the condition of politics is not the neutral space where the past, present and future are gathered, but one in which the gathering disassembles itself,

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44. Gasché readily admits that it is difficult to argue that Benjamin could have endorsed the radical destruction of the aura, "especially when the elimination of the singular human being's aura is shown to be a function of his transformation into a mass being" (184). Nevertheless, Gasché's essay explicitly attempts to argue that "Benjamin must reject both the aura of art objects and the one attributed to the human being" (185).

45. See page 100 and note 16 above.

46. Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2: 646; *Illuminations* 188. The translation is Zohn's.

never seeking or attaining authenticity. It is one in which the opposition of authentic presence and inauthentic absence is suspended, one in which the scene itself, or 'clearing', is not 'a rigid stage' but is itself negotiable and continually in play."<sup>47</sup> Caygill is naïve about the possibilities of using Heidegger's conception of the double concealedness of being for a non-authoritarian politics because he fails to recognize how forcefully Heidegger himself puts the never-fully-opened concealedness in the service of a disturbing *Blut und Boden* political agenda. On the other hand, Caygill's critique of Benjamin is that the conception of the decay of the aura says nothing positive that would suggest the direction of a new politics after the destruction of tradition.<sup>48</sup> However, when read as a response to the kind of political position presented in Heidegger's essay, Benjamin's essay may be seen in a new light. The discussion of the decay of the aura is precisely an attempt to render the conditions of politics negotiable and continually in play and to undermine the drive to domination that is so often characteristic of politics. But further, when read as a response to the concrete political conditions with which Benjamin himself was faced, conditions which, in philosophical language, Heidegger's essay clearly epitomizes, a further dimension of a new politics is made manifest, namely, the importance of open critique. By uncovering and undermining the mysterious shroud in which fascist politics was wrapped, Benjamin was able to level a damning critique of the political forces operating in Europe in the mid-1930s. It is one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century that more people did not see through the aura of fascism in the 1930s; but this failure also stands as one of the most important lessons the century has had to teach.

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47. Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition," *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* 30.

48. Caygill 29.

# *The Work of Walter Benjamin in the Age of Information*<sup>1</sup>

Noah Isenberg

What, in this age when we are so oversupplied with information, does a given human need to remember . . . ?

— Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*

## I

“The kind of thinking that Benjamin embodies today,” remarked Siegfried Kracauer somewhat ruefully in a 1928 essay, “has fallen into oblivion.”<sup>2</sup> Reviewing Benjamin’s two book publications of that same year, *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [*The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*] and *Einbahnstrasse* [*One-Way Street*] – the only two major books published under his name in his lifetime – Kracauer perceived in Benjamin “a type of thinking that is foreign to current thought,” something that was “more akin to talmudic writings and medieval tractates.”<sup>3</sup> Little could Kracauer ever have suspected that some seven decades later, long after Benjamin’s untimely death in September 1940, his close friend would gain the recognition, even the fame, that would prevent his thinking from falling anywhere near

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1. I would like to thank Gerd Gemünden, Andreas Huyssen, Anson Rabinbach, Melanie Rehak, Paul Reitter, and Silvia Spitta for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of the essay. Wherever possible, I have attempted to incorporate their suggestions.

2. Siegfried Kracauer, “Zu den Schriften Walter Benjamins,” *Frankfurter Zeitung* 72.524 (15 Jul. 1928); rpt. as “On the Writings of Walter Benjamin,” *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 264.

3. Kracauer 259.



oblivion again. Despite what Kracauer had found to be the complex, occasionally obscure, and elusive nature of Benjamin's work – or, as some critics might argue, precisely because of these attributes – the influence that Benjamin has since exerted shows no signs of decline. In fact, in recent years there seems to have emerged a veritable “Benjamin industry.”<sup>4</sup>

Not only does there now exist an International Walter Benjamin Association and a bilingual yearbook, *Benjamin Studies/Benjamin Studien*,<sup>5</sup> but there are also several Benjamin Web pages,<sup>6</sup> a so-called “Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate,”<sup>7</sup> a comic book-style introduction to his work,<sup>8</sup> and a semi-fictional novel on his failed escape from Vichy France.<sup>9</sup> There are widely reproduced photographic portraits and postcards,<sup>10</sup> a Benjamin monument in Spain and a Berlin Jewish museum designed with purported

4. George Steiner, among others, has used this term. Cf. *Benjamin Bulletin* 3 (Oct. 1998): 1.

5. The Association, as its first newsletter, the *Benjamin Bulletin* (Jul. 1996), states, “was founded on 13 April 1995 in Amsterdam. [It] is open to anyone who applies for membership . . . [and] provides an international platform for two main activities: (1) the study of the life and works of Walter Benjamin; (2) cultural analysis and critique from the interdisciplinary and international perspective forged by Benjamin's groundbreaking initiative in the field of the humanities.” The *Bulletin*, whose editors are housed in the Institute for Comparative Literature at the University of Amsterdam, is published semiannually (email: Benjamin@let.uva.nl). The first world congress of the Association took place in Amsterdam, 24-26 July 1997. In addition to the yearbook, *Benjamin Studies/Benjamin Studien*, there is also a Dutch precursor, *Benjamin journal*, of which five annual issues were published in Groningen from 1993 through 1997.

6. See, for example, the Italian site: [www.giardini.sm/benjtxt.htm](http://www.giardini.sm/benjtxt.htm); the American site: [www.wbenjamin.org](http://www.wbenjamin.org); and the French site: [www.culture.fr/culture/pasparis/benjamin.htm](http://www.culture.fr/culture/pasparis/benjamin.htm).

7. Based in San Francisco, the auspiciously named “Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate” is for the most part a one-man show run by Scott J. Thompson, an instructor at the New College of California. His Web site ([www.wbenjamin.org](http://www.wbenjamin.org)) contains articles, translations, and works in progress. The site's claim to fame, as Thompson recently explained via e-mail (13 Jan. 1999): “It is the only place in the world, at the moment, where one can read WB's uncompleted work on ‘Hashish.’”

8. Howard Caygill, Alex Coles and Andrzej Klimowski, *Introducing Walter Benjamin* (New York: Totem, 1998). An additional volume, *Benjamin for Beginners* by Lloyd Spencer, is also scheduled for publication.

9. Jay Parini, *Benjamin's Crossing* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

10. Benjamin and photography – i.e., Benjamin in, and on, photography – appears to be a growing area of research. See, most recently, Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997); and Linda Haverty Rugg, “The Angel of History as Photographer: Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*,” *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 133-87.

Benjaminian inspiration;<sup>11</sup> there are films, paintings, music – and the inventory seems to expand each year. A 1993 annotated bibliography of Benjamin scholarship from 1983-92 alone lists over two thousand entries.<sup>12</sup>

The Benjamin boom first gained momentum in the wake of the fiftieth anniversary of the critic's death in 1990 and his one hundredth birthday celebration in 1992, when numerous anthologies, special issues of journals, and conference proceedings began to appear.<sup>13</sup> In this country, where translations were previously limited for the most part to those contained in *Illuminations* (1968) and *Reflections* (1978), as well as selections published in these pages and elsewhere, the publication of Benjamin's collected works<sup>14</sup> was finally undertaken by Harvard

11. Designed by Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan, the Benjamin monument "Passages" in Portbou, Spain was inaugurated in May 1994. On the monument, see Konrad and Ingrid Scheurmann, eds., *Dani Karavan: Homage an Walter Benjamin. Der Gedenkort "Passagen" in Portbou* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1995). See also Noah Isenberg, *Between Redemption and Doom: The Strains of German-Jewish Modernism* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999) 140-45. The architect of Berlin's new Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind has cited Benjamin's *One-Way Street* among the key influences for his design. See Daniel Libeskind, "Between the Lines," *radix-matrix* (Munich & New York: Prestel, 1997) 34-55. Cf. Bernhard Schneider, *Daniel Libeskind: Jewish Museum Berlin* (Munich & New York: Prestel, 1999).

12. Reinhard Markner and Thomas Weber, eds., *Literatur über Walter Benjamin: Kommentierte Bibliographie 1983-1992* (Hamburg: Argument, 1993).

13. A small, and by no means exhaustive, sampling includes: *Concordia* 21 (1992); *Modern Language Notes* 107 (1992); *diacritics* 22.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1992); *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993), rpt. as *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, eds. Laura Marcus and Linda Nead (New York: New York UP, 1998); and, most recently, *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999). See also the collected volumes: Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin* (Leipzig: Reklam, 1992); Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann, eds., *Für Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), rpt. in English as *For Walter Benjamin*, trans. Timothy Nevill (Bonn: InterNationes, 1993); Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); David S. Ferris, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996); Gerhard Fischer, ed., *'With the Sharpened Axe of Reason: Approaches to Walter Benjamin* (Oxford & Washington, DC: Berg, 1996); and Micheal P. Steinberg, ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996).

14. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996). "The publication," notes Winfried Menninghaus, "represents a landmark in the American reception of Walter Benjamin's works." See Menninghaus, "Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999): 199. Cf. Peter Monaghan, "Project to Translate Walter Benjamin's Works May Add to the Critic's Influence," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (18 Apr. 1997): A16-A18. In the meantime, since I first drafted this article, the second volume has appeared as has the monumental *Arcades Project*. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume II: 1927-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999); and *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999).

University Press (with the first of three volumes appearing in 1996). Throughout the 1990s there was an extraordinary onslaught of scholarly works on Benjamin, and today there are few signs of decline. As Axel Honneth has suggested, "Scarcely any other author of this century has been able to trigger so many waves of reception in so short a time: hardly any other seems to possess the same stimulating potential for generating new efforts at interpretation as Benjamin."<sup>15</sup>

During the initial stages of the English-speaking Benjamin reception, in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the criticism appeared in the form of translations.<sup>16</sup> But the trend in recent years has been to give Benjamin more of a specifically Anglo-American inflection – whether in cultural studies, New Historicism, feminism, or Jewish studies – thus moving increasingly away from the once predominant methodologies of Marxism and poststructuralism.<sup>17</sup> One of the key factors in this development has been the expansive nature of Benjamin's work from which critics in diverse disciplines (art history, sociology, women's studies, architecture,

15. Axel Honneth, "A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation Between Anthropology and Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin," trans. John Farrell, *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993): 83. In their introduction to Benjamin, Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen assert, "Walter Benjamin's lack of success during his lifetime stands in striking contrast to the fame of the history of his influence. Indeed Benjamin's life, which reads like the story of a failure . . . seems ironically mirrored in the fate of his works as they were published and received." Bolz and van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. Laimdota Mazzarins (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P, 1996) xi.

16. See, for example, the important early collection *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge: MIT, 1988). Of the 17 essays contained in that volume, only 2 (those by Charles Rosen and Irving Wohlfarth) originally appeared in English.

17. Some early Benjamin scholarship of a Marxist variety has remained relatively influential. See, for instance, Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974). Within British cultural studies, there also appears to be a continued interest in Marxist readings of Benjamin. See Angela McRobbie, "The *Passagenwerk* and the Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies: Benjamin, Cultural Studies, Marxist Theories of Art," *Cultural Studies* 6.2 (May 1992): 147-69. As for poststructuralism, or what some might call the "Hopkins School," such early collections as Rainer Nägele, ed., *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988) have been followed by special issues of *diacritics* and *Modern Language Notes* and, most recently, David Ferris, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*. By and large, however, both the Marxist and "linguistic turn" in Benjamin studies seem to be on the wane. For a useful survey of Anglo-American appropriations of Benjamin, largely of a poststructuralist and/or Marxist nature, see Jeffrey Grossman, "The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution," *The German Quarterly* 65.3-4 (Summer-Fall 1992): 414-28. On the (West) European reception, see Gerhard Wagner, *Benjamin Bilder: Aspekte der Westeuropäischen Rezeption Walter Benjamins von 1978 bis 1991* (Hamburg: Bockel, 1992).

etc.) have borrowed freely. The collector's impulse so evident in Benjamin's own eclectic writings has fed into the wide distribution of texts and angles among his critics. If, as Fredric Jameson has recently observed, Benjamin may "serve as a precursor to New Historicism,"<sup>18</sup> then it is due, at least in part, to Benjamin's proclivity for picking among the ruins of history, sifting through material of the past and present, and extracting rich cultural constellations. Michael Steinberg has put it this way: "Benjamin provides the ground for a meeting of subjectivity, materiality, human agency, cultural interpretation, and the ongoing critique of ideology and thus makes clear why his voice has become so important to the conscience of our age."<sup>19</sup>

Another closely related factor that has helped Benjamin achieve such iconic status at the end of the century is his eminent citability. Not only does much of his work appear in highly condensed format, in poignant aphorisms, vignettes, short essays and theses – making it intrinsically appealing in view of the demands for abbreviation in this age of information – but it also speaks to our fin-de-siècle sensibility. It addresses such timely issues as the lasting impact of war, destruction, and exile, the atrophy of experience, the perils of technology and the exigencies of memory. And then, of course, there is the very citability of Benjamin himself, evidenced in the vast reproduction of a series of photographs – by now perhaps even too familiar – of the brooding intellectual, observing the world as it collapses before him.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the same man who in his famous tract of 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," expressed such an acute sense of ambivalence<sup>20</sup> vis-à-vis mass-produced images has now himself been mechanically disseminated – in

18. Jameson, "The Theoretical Hesitation: Benjamin's Sociological Predecessor," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999): 258.

19. Steinberg, "Introduction: Benjamin and the Critique of Allegorical Reason," *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* 23. His subsequent contribution to the same volume, "The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods, and the Objects of History" (88-118), demonstrates how Benjamin has continued to inspire debate in the fields of art history, philosophy, and cultural studies. On the diverse nature of Benjamin's trajectory of thought, see also John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993).

20. On Benjamin's ambivalence, see Susan Buck-Morss's incisive critique, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 3-41. See also Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 179-224. For a general discussion of Benjamin's own artistic reproduction, see Walter Grasskamp, "The Author as Reproduction," *For Walter Benjamin* 189-202.



writing, mass media, film and the visual arts. As a result, he may well be preserved as one of the great icons of twentieth-century intellectual life; he may indeed live on to be considered, as Susan Sontag once called him, the "Last Intellectual."<sup>21</sup> In the following essay, I will attempt to account for some of the different modes of recent appropriation, popular and scholarly, and to make sense of the various underlying factors that have fueled the remarkably widespread Benjamin reception. Since such a significant part of the Benjamin industry has flourished in the Anglo-American world, I will limit much of my discussion to works published (translated, recorded, or produced, as the case may be) for an English-speaking audience, while also paying particular attention to newer areas of Benjamin studies.

## II

Of the many facets of Benjamin's life that have gained notable prominence in the critical discussion of his work, the unusual circumstances of his death have increasingly drawn attention.<sup>22</sup> The fact that his escape from Nazi-occupied France ended in suicide; that the suitcase he was carrying at the time, so the story goes, contained a manuscript (perhaps a copy of his *Passagen-Werk* or his theses on the philosophy of history) which he is said to have valued even more than his own life; and finally that his death reportedly made it possible for the group of refugees with whom he was traveling to cross safely into Spain – all of these anecdotal elements have produced an almost legendary aura surrounding his death.<sup>23</sup> Benjamin's suicide has thus provided writers, artists, and critics

21. Susan Sontag, "Under the Sign of Saturn," *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 133. Benjamin had expressed his own prescient concerns, regarding the prospects of emigrating to the United States, about being viewed as the "last European." See Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 18. See also Hans Sahl's poem "Die Letzten," in *For Walter Benjamin* 15.

22. See Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. Malcom R. Green and Ingrid Ligers, ed. Martina Dervis (London: Verso, 1996) 250-62; Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) 3-5, 9-10; Ingrid Scheurmann, "New Documents on Walter Benjamin's Death," *For Walter Benjamin* 265-301; and Wohlfarth, "Männer aus der Fremde": Walter Benjamin and the 'German-Jewish Parnassus,'" *New German Critique* 70 (Winter 1997): 3-85, esp. 66-85.

23. For a detailed accounts of Benjamin's flight, see Lisa Fittko, "The Story of Old Benjamin" in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 5.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1982) 1184-94. See also "Lisa Fittko on Walter Benjamin's Flight: An Interview with Richard Heinemann," *For Walter Benjamin* 139-53; and Fittko's book-length chronicle, *Escape Through the Pyrenees*, trans. David Koblick (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1991).

with an enticing occasion for conjecture on his persona, conjecture that often possesses the potential to overshadow the effect of his work. As Gerhard Fischer has recently noted, commenting on the symbolic power of Benjamin's death:

Benjamin's tragic suicide on 26 September 1940, so full of quiet, unpathetic heroism, again encapsulates the contradiction that characterizes the reception of his work. He had chosen to leave the prison that Europe had become in 1939 through the last open gate to freedom; but perhaps his decision came too late because of an instinctive fear that cutting off his cultural roots in Europe would rob him of the vital necessity of continuing his work. His passing away – all but unnoticed at the time – appears to us today as one such 'single moment' repeatedly evoked in his writing, of the 'crystal of all that has taken place,' the memory of which will remain forever etched in the consciousness of readers of his work in the *choc* of recognition he so vividly described.<sup>24</sup>

Critics face a major dilemma in dealing with Benjamin's death, even now that several important documents have been uncovered and some of the initial mysteries that shrouded the event have been solved.<sup>25</sup> "To invest Benjamin's death with too much meaning," asserts Irving Wohlfarth, "is also to risk doing too much to honor the meaningless circumstances that provoked it. 'Meaningless' is not, however, synonymous with 'unintelligible.' To suspend all attempts to understand Benjamin's death is to run the opposite risk of accepting the circumstances as so many opaque, accomplished facts and thereby of assenting to another, positivist form of myth."<sup>26</sup>

Nowhere has the mythical excess of Benjamin's death, and the events leading up to it, been so extensively – and, as some would argue, so irresponsibly – explored as in Jay Parini's semi-fictional novel *Benjamin's Crossing* (1997). Hailed as a work that "will do much to preserve Benjamin's memory,"<sup>27</sup> Parini's novel tells the florid tale of Benjamin's final months from the perspective of those who ostensibly knew him best: his dear friend and future literary executor Gershom Scholem; his wife Dora; his Latvian mistress Asja Lacis; his guide

24. Gerhard Fischer, "Introduction: Benjamin the Centenarian," *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason* 3.

25. See Ingrid Scheurmann, "New Documents."

26. Wohlfarth 67.

27. *Booklist* (15 May 1997).

across the Pyrenees, Lisa Fittko. Although much of the story is based on factual accounts, including that of Fittko herself,<sup>28</sup> Parini embellishes his story with the sensationalism, sexual escapades, intrigue and melodrama of a Harlequin romance. Which is not to say that all accounts of Benjamin must dutifully keep to the hard facts, nor that they should adhere to the crass historicism that Benjamin himself so adamantly rejected. Rather, in this particular case the facts are distorted in such a way that if indeed this story is expected “to preserve Benjamin’s precious legacy,” we might wish to ask ourselves what exactly this legacy represents.

The opening narrative voice, which resurfaces several times before it finally closes the novel, is that of Gershom Scholem. Scholem, who together with Adorno was largely responsible – at least during the first few decades after the war – for bringing Benjamin’s work to the public’s attention, figures in Parini’s novel as a man who passionately and unrelentingly adored Benjamin. He admits in a fictional letter to Dora in September of 1940: “I loved him, Dora, as did you. But he could not love either of us fully – not in the way we loved him . . . I felt plumbed by him, interrogated and discovered.”<sup>29</sup> For Scholem, in Parini’s rendering, Benjamin is not only an untenable love interest, but also a figure whose fate symbolizes something far larger, more mythical, than merely that of the individual. Scholem’s letter to Dora thus continues:

But I fear for him now. He has stayed too long in Paris, Dora. The Nazis are winning this war. They may well consume Europe and destroy whatever we meant by the term *civilization*. I swear, if they damage one hair on Walter’s head, I will curse them forever. He represents, in a curious way, everything they oppose. He is so open to everything: the contrarities, the absurdities. He will face death, I know, with a rueful wince, then a dark chuckle that will boom through heaven. (24)

Scholem’s love for Benjamin drives his passion for preserving his memory. From his deeply mournful perspective, conveyed by Parini in

28. Parini admits that he borrows heavily from Lisa Fittko’s account (cf. *Escape Through the Pyrenees*). And yet in his “Author’s Note,” he also explains that Fittko made him promise to state explicitly that “the ‘Lisa Fittko’ who appears in my novel, while based on a real person, is a fictional character, the product of my imagination” (*Benjamin’s Crossing* 308). To be sure, much the same could be said for each of the figures – Scholem, Dora, Lacis, et al. – who appears in Parini’s very imaginative portrayal.

29. Parini 24. All subsequent references to Parini’s novel shall be made parenthetically within the text.

amplified tones, we observe a particular fantasy of Benjamin, one that seems to circumscribe a common understanding of Benjamin's death: "The death of Benjamin was, for me, the death of the European mind, the end of a way of life" (18).<sup>30</sup> Life after Benjamin – at least for Parini's Scholem – is inextricably bound up with Benjamin's afterlife. Indeed, Benjamin's afterlife, as we shall see, is just as much the subject of the novel as is the life and death of its protagonist.

As fashioned in the novel, the intimate bond between Scholem and Benjamin appears replete with homoerotic undercurrents. "I thought about my friend every day," confesses Parini's Scholem in his account of their summer in Bern in 1918, "It was as if an inexplicable force drew me toward him, and I kept wanting to drop everything and cross the border [to Switzerland]. I wanted his attention and advice, but especially his conversation" (89). While in Bern, an alleged love triangle develops between Scholem, Benjamin, and Dora, which Parini renders with great extravagance. Consider, for instance, an episode in which Parini has the drunken threesome indulge their sexual intrigues. In lurid detail, he depicts a lecherous Benjamin, lying naked in bed, who calls out for Dora to satisfy him. Dora in turn, after physically arousing the onlooking Scholem, invites their friend to participate. "'What, you don't want to join us?' She gave me a teasing look, then flicked her own glass against the stucco wall so that it shattered on the tile floor" (92). After fleeing on his own from the disquieting scene, Scholem registers his frustration: "I don't think either would have minded if I'd sat at the edge of the bed to watch them fornicate!" (93).<sup>31</sup>

30. Scholem's remarks, given by Parini, are echoed with striking similarity later in the novel in the voice of Lisa Fittko: "For me, Benjamin was the European Mind, writ large. Indeed, as I later realized, Old Benjamin was everything the Nazi monsters wanted to obliterate: that aura of tolerance and perspective that comes from having seen many things from many angles. Even that rueful laugh of his was part of the aura. Here before use was the last laughing man, I thought. The last man to laugh the laugh of the ages. From now on, history would be tears, and the work of intellectuals would be the work of grieving" (177). Despite the trite characterization of Benjamin as "the last laughing man," and the crude reduction of his so-called "aura," the novel's commentary does manage to pick up on a notable strain of Benjamin scholarship – the work of mourning, or *Trauerarbeit*, that one finds today. See, for example, Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999): 201-34.

31. A subsequent replay of the scene, narrated from the perspective of Benjamin, tells of Scholem entering unannounced into their bedroom, at which point he begins "to chatter away about the deficiency of Kantian epistemology." In this instance, however, Dora's response has an absurd vulgarity to it that is nothing but gratuitous: "Let us fuck in peace, dear Gerhard. We can discuss Kant *after* I've had a good orgasm" (182).



In Parini's rendition, the German-Jewish critic and philosopher appears to be something of a Casanova: "Benjamin had in fact loved many women," he writes almost admiringly, "and each he had loved singly, finding some instance of the Divine in every one of them"(191). For Parini, Benjamin's life reveals a litany of erotic conquests, conquests which are portrayed vividly and with seeming delight. We are made privy to the imagined perspectives of his lovers, and also to that of Benjamin. Take one of many brazen examples of encounters between the critic and his lovers, here narrated from Asja Lacis's perspective: "I could feel his hand moving my hand toward him, toward the hardness that pressed against my stomach. He had by now unbuttoned his trousers, which had fallen about his knees. I liked the hot flesh in my hand, its curling hardness; he came, it seemed, within seconds, and he said, 'I love you, Asja. I love you.' It was disconcerting"(153). Such episodes are indeed "disconcerting," owing in large measure to the fact that they often read as if taken from *The Story of O*. and not from the life of Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, as invented by Parini, is a mythical hero whose heroic and mythical traits extend into the dubious domain of love and romance.

Benjamin met her [Jula Cohn] secretly many times in obscure cafés, and they would talk into the morning hours, sometimes holding hands beneath a small table. Once, in an isolated section of the park near the river, they kissed deeply; it was a smoky dusk, with a mist floating above the water, swirling around them like a stage set from Wagner. Geese paddled by, snorting, honking, sometimes whirling in rings overhead. Passively, Jula opened her lips for him, letting him dig into her mouth with his tongue, his watery affection drooling into her throat. Another time, nearby, in a grove of copper beeches (he could still see their trunks rising, the bark smooth as steel), she had touched him where no woman had dared to touch him before, unbuttoning his trousers with delicate, moist fingers. (188)

With the misplaced Wagnerian backdrop – and glaring phallic symbolism – bestowed upon an unlikely hero, Parini's portrayal of Benjamin's sordid love affair is riddled with trite clichés and stereotypes.

Yet the clichés are not limited to the love affairs alone. Much of the dialogue and speech throughout the novel evokes a caricatured quality. For instance, Benjamin as outspoken leftist exhorts, "We are all intellectuals. Our obligation is therefore only to the world of ideas. The money be damned!" (91). He recites parts of his theses on the philosophy of history ("This is how one might visualize the angel of history")

to an enraptured lover, only to receive her banal response: "That is very sad, Walter, but quite beautiful" (41). He readily engages in a so-called "postcoital conversation" with his wife: "You want me to build you up, is that it? To make you feel masculine?" "I cannot respond when you talk like this." "You're a shit, Walter." "I know." "You are poison for women." "Do you think so?" (225). And, in an imagined exchange with Henny Gurland, Benjamin sheepishly remarks, "There is no such thing as a famous critic" [ . . . ] "I am a critic, yes. Rather, I *was* a critic. Now I am, well – a Jew in flight" (211).

Of course, this text is a fictional novel, not a biography, and should be judged according to different standards. However, because Parini borrows so much from Benjamin's actual biography – from various personal accounts, letters, scholarly literature – it is instructive to discern how Benjamin is characterized in this series of fictional episodes. Taken as fantasy, with all its requisite distortion and projection, Parini's novel has quite a bit to say about how we imagine Benjamin and how we imagine others to imagine him.<sup>32</sup> For here we glean, in addition to the tawdry and tiresome scenes from Benjamin's invented sex life, something perhaps more revealing. It is the conjecture about the afterlife of Walter Benjamin, to be sure, that makes this novel of any interest at all. On this level, we witness Benjamin as a devout Jew: "One could easily imagine him as an old man drowsing over the Talmud, in some remote yeshiva" (8). Or later we learn of the exile's – or, rather, Parini's – ideas about the possibilities of being a professor in America: "They were apparently thirsting for scholars with German doctorates, and the salaries were stupendous [ . . . ] With almost no preparation, he could lecture on Goethe, Proust, Kafka, Baudelaire, and a dozen other authors. He could teach philosophy, German history, cultural politics. Surely some university would want such a man?" (250-51). And, finally, we are asked to address the question of the enduring fame of this imagined figure: "His arcades book would appear after the war, too, transforming the way history is written. People would say, 'Are you *the* Walter Benjamin?' and he would look askance at them for putting forward such an embarrassing question, bored by their inquiry and (slightly) irritated by their blunt intrusion. 'Walter Benjamin?' he would say, raising a thick, dark eyebrow. 'Who is Walter

32. For a poignant example of the stock misconceptions of Benjamin, see Robert Grudin's review of Parini's novel, "Everywhere an Exile," *The New York Times Book Review* 29 Jun. 1997: 12. See also the subsequent exchange between Grudin and Martin Jay, 17 Aug. 1997 and 24 Aug. 1997.

Benjamin?"(227). Alas, this final question, raised in a seemingly self-reflexive vein, is one that Parini's novel simply cannot answer.

### III

After perusing the contents of *Introducing Walter Benjamin*, a book that is predicated upon the assumption that "Benjamin eludes classification,"<sup>33</sup> one comes away with a surprisingly clear, if also somewhat truncated, idea of who this renowned critic really was. Comprised of comic book illustrations and snippets of text from Benjamin's oeuvre, the primer is symptomatic of the current large-scale demand for information on Benjamin. The fact that the work appears in comic book format is indeed significant, not only for the bearing it has on Benjamin's understanding of artistic reproduction and mass culture, but also as part of a recent trend in expressing some of the most vexing ontological concerns in comics.<sup>34</sup> By employing the comic book medium, the project makes Benjamin available to the masses without stripping his writings of their specificity. (Because of its diffuse, heterogeneous, and fragmentary nature, often quite illustrative in and of itself, much of Benjamin's writing seems particularly well suited to this format.) Spanning less than 200 pages, each adorned with a frequently insightful, occasionally humorous graphic illustration, *Introducing Benjamin* provides a basic outline of the critic's life, his key works, fundamental concepts, and chief influences. Given its potential for reaching such an unusually large readership, presumably made up of students and the general reader seeking a brief introduction, this work merits consideration within the scope of Benjamin studies today.

Needless to say, *Introducing Benjamin* is not intended to serve as a resource for Benjamin scholars, and such readers will doubtless discover

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33. Howard Caygill et al., *Introducing Walter Benjamin* 3. All subsequent references shall be made parenthetically within the text. To this statement, the co-authors add: "He seemed content with the name 'critic'. But an exceptional critic of such passion, erudition and virtuosity who transforms the nature of what usually passes for criticism. His gaze is multiple: philosophy, language, art, architecture, photography, history, Jewish mysticism, Marxism. He does not merely glance at these but digs at their foundations" (3).

34. See, for instance, Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) and *Maus II: And Here My Trouble Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1992). Another illuminating example, especially with regard to the question of urbanism and the modern city dweller, is the work of Ben Katchor. See his *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1996); and his most recent book, *The Jew of New York* (New York: Pantheon, 1999).

various shortcomings in the explication of their respective research areas. Yet viewed as a general introduction to Benjamin, one that might best be augmented by Benjamin's primary texts and recent critical biographies,<sup>35</sup> this small book offers more than one might expect. Making use of the latest translations, it is especially effective in dealing with Benjamin's lesser known and more abstract texts. The volume's co-authors, Howard Caygill and Alex Coles, present brief glosses on Benjamin's writings on art criticism, architecture, language, baroque tragedy, and aesthetics. They offer an equally imaginative and instructive commentary (albeit necessarily reductionist, due to the format) of Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, a seminal text that only recently, thanks to the Harvard edition, has been made available in English translation.<sup>36</sup> Here the co-authors present a synopsis of Goethe's narrative, followed by a biographical reading of Benjamin's essay, showing several levels of possible affinities – discursive, philosophical, stylistic, etc. In this vein, their work serves an important function in the continued dissemination of Benjamin's thought.

In spite of the premise that Benjamin's work eschews shorthand definition, Caygill and Coles go on to annotate in schematic fashion much of his critical terminology. They provide condensed explanations – almost more akin to riffs – of his notion of “experience” as it came to be understood with regard to language (38-39) and art and modern technology (76), and of his much-debated idea of “aura” (135-38). They introduce his concepts of “sovereign” and “divine violence” from “Critique of Violence” (98-99), and also his use of the term “porosity” in explaining the urban landscape of Naples (85). Some of the annotations bear out the complexity of Benjamin's ideas. For example, on symbol, allegory, and ruination in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, we read: “Benjamin opens his study with a daunting ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ in which he tackles the problem of *origin*. Origin is described as ‘an eddy in the stream of becoming’, in other words, something that is both *in* and *out* of time. This peculiarity of origin – outside time but open to its

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35. The two most reliable biographies available in English translation are Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin* and Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. James Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991).

36. See Benjamin, “Goethe's *Elective Affinities*,” trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings* 295-360. Such readings, when paired with the primary texts, may indeed prove helpful to students and may be a provocative way of inaugurating a critical discussion that involves both the comic book gloss and a more complex, sustained textual analysis.



effects – permits him to identify *allegory* as the key feature of Baroque culture” (110). Caygill and Coles’s gloss is then enhanced by an illustration, by Andrzej Klimowski, of a classical female statue’s torso, to which two dialogue balloons are attached: first, “Classical tragedy hinges on the symbol which presents timeless truth in the beautiful appearance, even if imperfectly”; and second, “Allegory instead presents the temporariness of truth in the ruination of appearance” (110). According to the co-authors, “The mourning play was conceived of at the outset as a *ruin*. Now it becomes clear that Benjamin’s analysis of allegory in Baroque drama revealed to him the origin of modernity. The fragmented nature of modern experience – the way it is experienced discontinuously as shock – was ‘originally’ manifested through Baroque allegories of ruination and *transience*” (111). The interpretations are presented in miniature, and as such they are meant to suggest further paths of exploration on the part of the reader. (Conversely, if read only on their own, without consultation of the primary texts, the glosses would undoubtedly have a far more limited effect.)

Among the freshest concerns addressed in *Introducing Walter Benjamin*, owing to Caygill’s independent research,<sup>37</sup> is the discussion of color and experience. In this case, what otherwise serves as more of a descriptive introduction now offers a critical revision. “The fragments from 1916 on the philosophy of language,” write Caygill and Coles, “are justly celebrated but should not be allowed to overcast another series of contemporary fragments on the philosophy of colour. In 1915, Benjamin wrote ‘Dialogue on the Rainbow’ in which he had already developed a philosophy of experience based on the experience of colour” (42). By shedding light onto Benjamin’s less-known writings on color – the co-authors additionally draw from Benjamin’s fragment of 1914-15, “A Child’s View of Color,” and from his two short pieces of 1917, “Painting and the Graphic Arts” and “Painting, or Signs and Marks”<sup>38</sup> – Caygill and Coles open up new areas for debate. One of the great accomplishments of their work is that it avoids presenting a single overdetermined version of Benjamin, instead foregrounding an

37. Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998).

38. Benjamin, “Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 19-26. See also “A Child’s View of Color,” “Painting and the Graphic Arts,” and “Painting, or Signs and Marks,” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 50-51, 82, 83-86. For further discussion, see Caygill, *Walter Benjamin* 10-13, 82-89.

entire gamut of interpretive entries into his writings. From the start, Caygill and Coles call the reader's attention to "the complexity of Benjamin's writings which transgress disciplinary borders and rules of genre" (4) – perhaps paramount among the chief factors that accounts for Benjamin's wide appropriation and increasing popularity today – while in their later discussion, under the apt heading "Which Benjamin?" they duly note the need to shun dogmatic readings. "So, which is the 'real' Benjamin – the Marxist? or the Jewish mystic? We should not see Benjamin's plural areas of work in contradiction or opposition to each other, but rather in continuous dialogue with each other. Intellectual, spiritual and political commitments need not be forced into a straightjacket, as Benjamin himself stated" (145).<sup>39</sup>

Admittedly, *Introducing Benjamin* is not devoid of clichés. One illustration, under the heading "Teddy and Bert" has Adorno playing the piano, Brecht on sax, and Scholem looming, almost incognito, in the background. In their respective dialogue balloons, the three figures express their caricatured views: Adorno insists, "Brecht is a vulgar materialist, a petit-bourgeois *poseur*, and an apologist for Stalinism!"; Brecht then responds, "And what good is your bourgeois lifestyle and over-subtle intellectual Marxism"; and Scholem finally remarks, "We're building a new Jerusalem. Why don't you come over here?" (120). Unlike in Parini's novel, however, the clichés appear less egregious, more inherent to the medium, often invoked in a playful and ironic vein. Still, in this case, the speculation on Benjamin's afterlife and the significance of his death remains no less an irresistible temptation. Hence, Caygill and Coles suggest, "We are left to wonder if Benjamin ever meant to leave Europe. He would remain 'in transit'. . . . Something irreplaceable in European culture died with Walter Benjamin. Not the brilliance of the mind only, but a unique spirit, the passionate rescuer of a history in danger of extinction" (172). Even the comic book strikes a mournful tone in the end.

But maybe this should not come as a surprise. After all, presented as a book of images of and commentaries on Benjamin, this work partakes to a certain degree of the larger project of memorializing the critic – constructing an aesthetic jeremiad against allowing Benjamin to be forgotten. From the front cover, bedecked with a distinguished photo

39. Cf. Esther Leslie, "The Multiple Identities of Walter Benjamin," *New Left Review* 226 (Nov. 1997): 128-35.

representation and an overlay of kabbalistic iconography, to the numerous illustrations and retouched author portraits, the work adds to the proliferation of images we now possess of the renowned figure. In fact, the nature of the project takes reproduction a step – or, in the parlance of reproduction technology, a “generation” – further, insofar as many of the illustrations consist of comic-book renditions of extant photographs (some of near photo-quality appear more as montage or collage than comic). There are new renderings of the heavily reproduced family portrait, the childhood photo in mountaineering *Tracht*, the almost trademark melancholic disposition conveyed in the later images: Germaine Krull’s celebrated downward-gazing cosmopolitan with cigarette in hand and Gisèle Freund’s equally eminent portrait of the exile at work in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. It would appear that Benjamin is one of the most photographed (and, in this case, illustrated) intellectuals of the century. As Janet Wolff has recently noted, “More than any other author I can think of, it has seemed almost obligatory to include at least one image on the cover, the frontispiece, or the body of the text . . . . Despite all we know about the mediation of the image (thanks, partly, to Benjamin’s own work), we are constantly implicated in some fantasy of immediate knowledge of the author, compounded by the way in which most interpretations do situate the text in relation to the biography.”<sup>40</sup> Wolff points out that at least since Susan Sontag’s essay of the late 1970s,<sup>41</sup> Benjamin critics have felt inclined, if not obligated, to refer back to the images of the author. There is an apparent need to give the icon privileged status, to distill information from the well of these images, and to rethink Benjamin’s ideas concerning the visual.

#### IV

If ours is an age of information, and an age of visual culture, then it should make perfect sense that such a notable branch of Benjamin studies would focus on the turn in Benjamin toward the interpretation

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40. Janet Wolff, “M memoir and Micrologies: Walter Benjamin, Feminism, and Cultural Analysis,” *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993): 116. A German reprint of Benjamin’s “City Portraits” and selections from his *Berlin Childhood around 1900* has gone so far as to commission a well-known photographer to document the images conveyed in Benjamin’s texts. See Benjamin, *Städtebilder fotografiert von Anna Blau* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992). See also Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith, *Benjaminiana* (Giessen: Anabas, 1991), a work in which the photographic (and the graphic, in general) is given prominent expression.

41. Sontag 109-10.

of photography, film, and the visual arts. Benjamin's own concepts – e.g., “dialectical image,” “monad,” “constellation,” etc., – have lent themselves to contemporary theoretical discussions, and within the areas of cultural criticism and media studies the affinities have proven especially ripe.<sup>42</sup> Just as discussions of modernism and postmodernism have addressed the recurrent issue of citation, photographic and otherwise, so too have Benjamin's ideas made their way toward the heart of this discussion. In her recent interpretation of Benjamin writings on photography, Rosalind Krauss accounts for the historical development as follows:

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 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.<sup>43</sup>

What Benjamin first perceived in 1936 to be a “plurality of copies” brought about by mechanical reproduction has become a central component of a protracted debate.<sup>44</sup> In today's world of infinite quotations, virtual reality and few, if any, residual claims to originality, Benjamin's ideas

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42. Wolff suggests the influence of Benjamin's concepts on cultural studies and poststructuralism, from Barthes and Bakhtin through Derrida. Cf. Wolff 120. For a discussion of Benjamin's broad impact on film studies, see Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience,” as well as her more recent discussion in “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999): 306–43. See also Venessa Schwartz and Leo Charnay, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996); and Andrew Dudley, ed., *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1997).

43. Rosalind E. Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999) 290.

44. See, for instance, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York & London: Penguin, 1972) and Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1977). For a useful survey of the ties between Benjamin's writings on photography and contemporary debate, see Jeannene M. Przyblyski, “History is Photography: The Afterimage of Walter Benjamin,” *Afterimage* 26.2 (Sept./Oct. 1998): 8–11. I should like to express my indebtedness to Przyblyski for having introduced me to several of the works discussed in her essay.



have maintained a certain resonance.<sup>45</sup> To invoke the technological impact on the visual arts and mass media is to recall Benjamin's critical intervention.

Let us consider a recent analysis of Benjamin's writings on photography and their bearing on the practice of history. In his study, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Eduardo Cadava raises the discourse of citation to a different level. "Citation," he argues, "is perhaps another name for photography. When Benjamin claims that 'to write history therefore means to quote history' [in Konvolut N 11,3 of his *Passagen-Werk*] he suggests that historiography follows the principle of photography."<sup>46</sup> The snapshots, or flashes of history, that Benjamin invokes can be interpreted, as Cadava would have it, via the language of photography. Accordingly, the discursive ties that Benjamin attributes to photography and history represent fundamental issues that "belong to the entire trajectory of his writing – the historical and political consequences of technology; the relations between reproduction and mimesis, images and history, remembering and forgetting, allegory and mourning, visual and linguistic representation, and film and photography" (xix).

Presented as an assemblage of twenty-eight theses, juxtaposed with a series of visually striking black-and-white photographs (some them stock prototypes found in current Benjamin scholarship, others altogether different), Cadava attempts "to replicate formally – as Benjamin so often did – the caesura of the historical event, the separation and discontinuity from which history emerges" (xx). What he produces are elegantly crafted vignettes, *Denkbilder*,<sup>47</sup> or "snapshots" that circulate within the larger dis-

45. Some have begun to wonder how long Benjamin's "actuality" in media studies will prevail. Miriam Hansen has suggested that, "As video and digital technologies are replacing the medium and photographic film (with its indexical dimensions of temporality contingency) and as the cinema, as institution of public, collective reception, has ceased to be the primary venue in which films are consumed, Benjamin's reflections on film and media may have lost their actuality and may stand, as [Norbert] Bolz has recently proclaimed, as nothing more than 'beautiful ruins in a philosophical landscape'" (Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema" 343).

46. Cadava, *Words of Light* xvii. All subsequent references to Cadava shall be made parenthetically within the text.

47. On the notion of the "snapshot" in Benjamin, see Elissa Marder, "Flat Death: Snapshots of History," *diacritics* 22.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1992): 128-44. Thomas Levin has pointed to the conceptual tradition of the "snapshot" that leads from Georg Simmel to Kracauer, and from Benjamin through Roland Barthes (cf. Levin, "Introduction" in *The Mass Ornament* 6). In his final work, published posthumously, Kracauer investigated further the intimate proximity between "camera reality" and "historical reality" and what he saw as the deep affinities between the photographer and the historian. See his *History: Last Things Before the Last* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) and also Dagmar Barnouw, *Critical Realism: History, Photography, and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994).

cursive fields of history and photography. Interspersed among Cadava's theses, themselves citations of sorts, are illuminating passages (textual, in this case) and critique. He draws not only from Benjamin's oeuvre, but also from a wide array of writings by Kracauer, Bloch, Bergson, Heidegger, Freud, and others, which he in turn integrates into a broad theoretical discussion. For instance, from Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, he appropriates his commentary on the "snapshot" and its relation to photographic perception, memory, and representation: "We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and as these are characteristic of this reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself. Perception, intellection, and language proceed in this way" (90). Cadava builds on the complex philosophical lineage of photography, fleshing out the links to historical practice. He does so as a means of foregrounding the confluence of photographic and historical thought in Benjamin, which according to Cadava can be analyzed under a variety of rubrics – from "history" to "ghosts," "mimesis" to "caesura," "language" to "epitaphs."

We may recall from Benjamin's renowned essay on Kafka, published on the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death in the *Jüdische Rundschau*, how at a critical point Benjamin draws our attention to a childhood photograph of Kafka. It is a photo not so very different from that of the young Benjamin in his mountaineering outfit – in fact, the two are frequently juxtaposed – in which Benjamin locates traces of Kafka's past, citations of his story, or more generally, of history.

There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a rarely touching portrayal of the 'poor, brief childhood.' It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and throne room. At the age of approximately six the boy is presented in a sort of greenhouse setting, wearing a tight, heavily lace-trimmed, almost embarrassing child's suit. Palm branches loom in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and sticky, the model holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyedominate the landscape prearranged for them, and the auricle of a big ear seems to be listening for its sounds.<sup>48</sup>

48. Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," *Illuminations* 118-19. See Liliane Weissberg, "Circulating Images: Notes on the Photographic Exchange," *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997) 109-31, esp. 110-12.

This citation, which also appears verbatim in Benjamin's "Small History of Photography" (1931), captures an important element of Benjamin's understanding of photography and of technology in general. Indeed, there is at once a redemptive and destructive bent to his observations, a touch of grace and sorrow. Benjamin's tone, his profound sense of the lamentable occasion, conjures a eulogy – a memorial to the dead writer and perhaps also to the dead image. Anticipating in part his subsequent discussion in his artwork essay, Benjamin focuses on the evocative power of early portrait photography. As he would later write, "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expressions of the human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty."<sup>49</sup>

For Benjamin, as for Cadava, there is an aesthetics of loss and of mourning that loss. And photography, by its very nature, has to do with both. As Cadava writes, under the rubric "Ghosts," "Photography is a mode of bereavement. It speaks to us of mortification. Even though it still remains to be thought, the essential relation between death and language flashes up before us in the photographic image" (11). Pairing the discourse of photography with Benjamin's terms invoked in his theses on history, Cadava reconstructs what he considers to be the intimate ties between the two realms. "History," so Cadava claims, "happens with photography. *After life*" (128). As he elaborates further:

We could even say that the lesson of the photograph for history – what it says about the spectralization of light, about the electrical flashes of remote spirits – is that every attempt to bring the other to the light *defy*, to keep the other alive, silently presumes that it is mortal, that it is always already touched (or retouched) by death. The survival of the photographed is therefore never only the survival of its life, but also of its death . . . This is why it is precisely in death that the power of the photograph is revealed and revealed to the very extent that it continues to evoke what can no longer be there. Since this possibility is exposed at death, we can assume it exists before death. In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him – it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at. The photograph is a farewell. It belongs to the afterlife of the photographed. It is permanently inflamed by the instantaneous flash of death. (11-13)

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49. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* 226.

Benjamin reflected passionately and extensively on such concerns, and Cadava follows suit, self-consciously fashioning his project as “a work of memorialization,” in which he not only takes up the very same concerns, but also attempts “to preserve the memory of Benjamin’s own thetic method of writing” (xxi).

Writing on Benjamin from the standpoint of photography and history, at least as Cadava envisages it, is ultimately a deathly enterprise. Its preoccupation, while surely related to Benjamin’s afterlife, is first and foremost his death. Gone is the subject who once lived on the other side of the camera’s lens. And in its place are the images – the great profusion of images – reproduced in their “dead” state, as well as the vast expanse of writing (Cadava goes so far as to claim that “Benjamin’s voice speaks through the tomb of his writing” [129]). In Cadava’s view, the drama of death prevails:

Benjamin’s ‘paper graveyard’ – what I have wanted to call a photograph – tells us, if it tells us anything, that we must *regard* death. And it is there, in death, that Benjamin experienced what he had already experienced in life – death. The shock of death – breaking in upon his own history and giving it, in this way, an end and a future – corresponds to the terrifying lucidity of his corpus. Death, corpse, decay, ruin, history, mourning, memory, photography – these are the words Benjamin has left us to read. These are the words that prevent his other words from being organized into a system, that prevent his writings and readings from being crystallized and frozen into a merely negative method. Words of light, they correspond to the cremation of his work, a cremation in which the form of the work – its suicidal character – reaches its most brilliant illumination, immolated in the flame of his own criticism. (130)

Cadava’s reading of Benjamin’s death, at times quite vividly overdramatized, is yet another important indicator of how significant this event has become in Benjamin studies. It has served both as a point of departure and a point to which all studies – or at least the bulk of studies produced in recent years – must return.<sup>50</sup> Although we should be cautious, as

50. In her exploration of Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit*, Haverly Rugg writes, “I would like to begin with a discussion of loss – our loss of Benjamin and the way that loss is inscribed in his own work (particularly in his autobiography) and in Benjamin scholarship. To understand the tone the latter often takes, it is necessary to return to the well-known story of Benjamin’s final days. If it were a photograph, the story of Walter Benjamin’s life [and of his death] would be in the sepia tones of nineteenth-century images, imbued with the color we have come to associate with nostalgia and regret” (*Picturing Ourselves* 162). See also my discussion in *Between Redemption and Doom* 105–45.



Wohlfarth and others have reminded us, not to overemphasize the significance of Benjamin's death, the recurrent attention it has received in contemporary criticism is certainly something remarkable. It may in fact appear, when taken together, that such works form a type of textual monument to Benjamin, i.e., that they emerge, at least in part, as an effort to inscribe the memory of Benjamin into the very core of his reception.

## V

"In a century in which memory has been more than ever before under threat," note Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead, "Benjamin offers us a body of work in which the demands of modernity are investigated alongside the ethical demands of memory. To speak, write and think in memory of Walter Benjamin, to commemorate his centenary, is to be in memory of a writer for whom the requirements of memory were pressing and ineluctable – it is to be in memory of the fragile value of memory itself."<sup>51</sup> With our fin-de-siècle focus on memory – a focus that in recent years has become almost a worldwide cultural obsession – Benjamin's voice lends credence and solace to our explorations. He is a figure whose writing and whose fate invoke the ineluctable presence of memory. As George Steiner has recently commented, "Principally, Benjamin is a remembrancer. No modern sensibility has ached more vividly towards the scandal of the unjustly forgotten . . . None has striven harder to recuperate the stricken past in order to embody it in the justifying motions of the future."<sup>52</sup> Already in 1917, writing on Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Benjamin seems to have been aware of the pressing needs of memory and the dangers of forgetting: "It is the life that is not to be forgotten, even though it has no monument or memorial, or perhaps even any testimony. It simply cannot be forgotten."<sup>53</sup> Benjamin's life came to an end on September 25, 1940, when he committed suicide outside of the Spanish bordertown of Portbou, but it has certainly not been forgotten. Intended to commemorate both the fiftieth anniversary of his death and the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth, a monument was built at Portbou by the Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan and was finally inaugurated in May 1994.

51. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead, "Editorial," *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993): vi

52. Steiner, "The Remembrancer," *Times Literary Supplement* 4723 (8 Oct. 1993): 38.

53. Benjamin, "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*," *Selected Writings* 80. I am grateful to Felman's essay "Benjamin's Silence" for having drawn my attention to this passage.

Etched into a sheet of glass, located at the end of Karavan's stark steel construction, are the words from one of Benjamin's own monumental texts: "It is more difficult to honor the memory of the nameless than that of the famous. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless."<sup>54</sup> This glass wall and the words written upon it separate the crashing waters of the Mediterranean Sea from the cliffs above the Bay of Portbou; it is a transparent yet final wall blocking the elongated steel shaft that leads – by way of some eighty-five steps – from land to the water. With its Benjaminian title, "Passages," Karavan's monument, "a grandiloquent riposte to an unmarked grave,"<sup>55</sup> attempts to incorporate the concept of memory into a work of art, a work that is to honor the memory not only of the author (who has arguably achieved his share of posthumous fame) but also that of the nameless, the countless who similarly perished in their respective attempts to flee the fascist storm that engulfed Europe under Hitler. Karavan's main objective, as he explained it in an interview, was to offer "a memory of Walter Benjamin's story" and to create "a place of meditation and of commemoration of all the people whose fate Benjamin symbolizes."<sup>56</sup>

This truly site-specific monument is located in a liminal border position, accentuated as it is on a variety of levels: on the local geographic level, it stands between the town cemetery of Portbou and the railroad station; politically, socially, and culturally, it stands between France and Spain, between the then Nazi-occupied region and what was perceived to be the gateway to freedom; and, on a more mystical plane, it stands between the jagged cliffs, the heavens and skies above and the depths of the sea (which, according to Karavan, "tells the entire tragedy of this man"<sup>57</sup>) below. The monument's formal composition is fittingly "passage-oriented" (see figures 1 and 2).

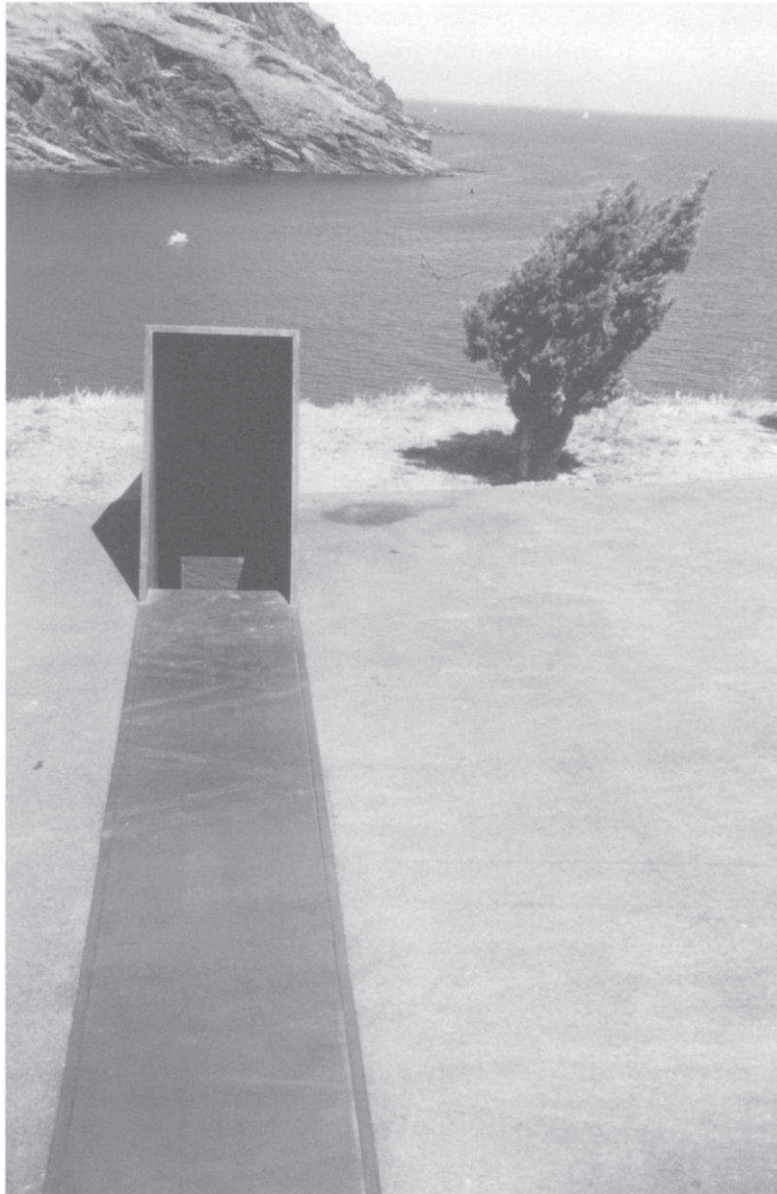
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54. Notes on Benjamin's theses on the philosophy of history. Cf. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.3: 1241.

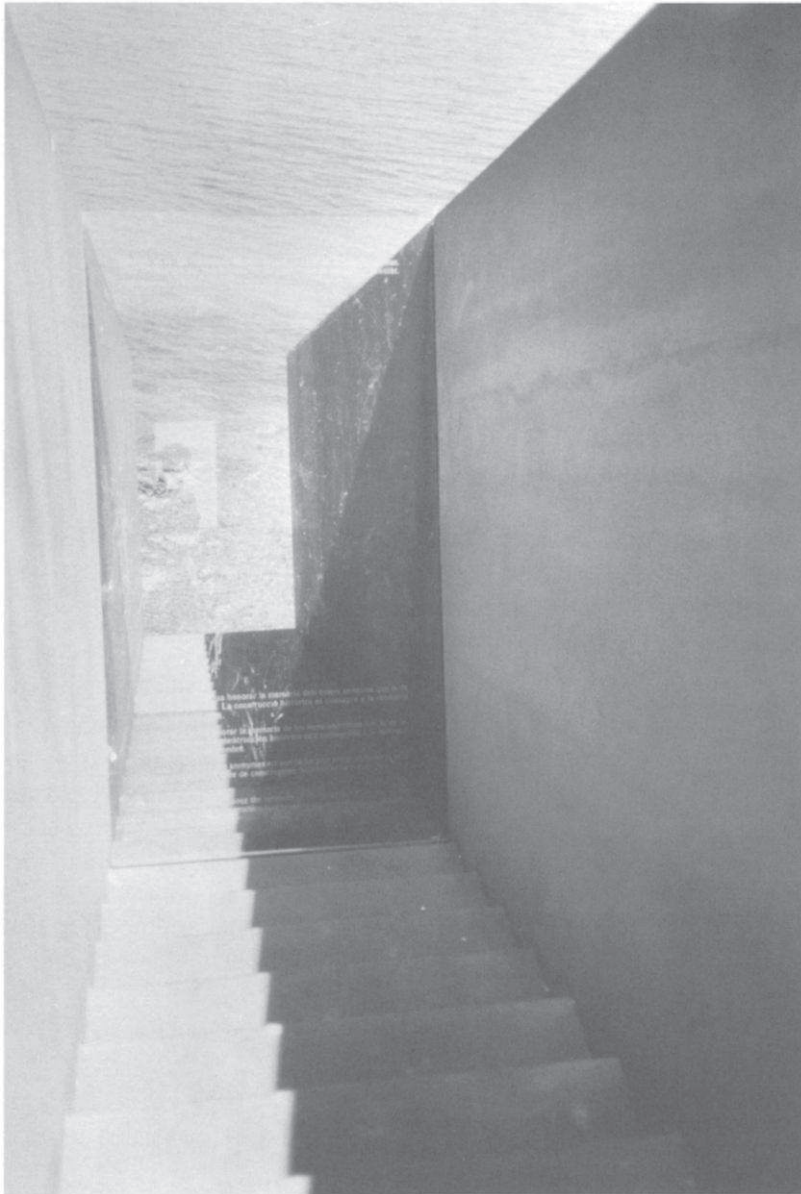
55. Leslie 135.

56. Dani Karavan, "Dani Karavan on the 'Passages' Memorial to Walter Benjamin: An Interview with Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann," *For Walter Benjamin* 255, 263. See also Konrad Scheurmann, "Borders, Thresholds, Passages: On Dani Karavan's Concept for a Memorial to Walter Benjamin," *For Walter Benjamin* 237-53; and Konrad and Ingrid Scheurmann, eds., *Dani Karavan*.

57. Karavan 255. "I discovered at the time," he suggests, commenting on his first impressions of the site at Portbou, "that we can tell the story of Walter Benjamin, the whole of his tragedy, by way of nature, of the existing elements" (255).



*Fig. 1* Dani Karavan, "Passages" (view from afar). Black-and-White Photograph



*Fig. 2* Dani Karavan, “Passages” (view from within).  
Black-and-White Photograph



The obdurate steel walls form a concealed shaft that opens up to the sky only once one reaches the uncovered final section that extends to the sheet of glass with its inscription. Similarly, the sea is obscured until one starts down the flight of steps. A clear link may be made between the steel and glass composition of the monument and that of the Parisian arcades whose architectural and cultural composition occupied much of Benjamin's thought in his *Passagen-Werk*.<sup>58</sup> And yet there is also a striking void – the empty space that makes up the body of the monument's interior – that may, if we are to take the lead of other contemporary architects such as Libeskind, have to do with the absence of those who constitute the imagined community of the nameless.<sup>59</sup>

Benjamin, who in his historical theses written shortly before his suicide in 1940, almost uncannily noted that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins,”<sup>60</sup> was never accorded a proper burial. “We have nothing but one more death without burial among so many others,” remarks the French scholar Pierre Missac, “no name on a common grave, even for someone who, while alive, provided a name for the nameless.”<sup>61</sup> While Karavan's monument has been likened to Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it is certainly not the “national healing shrine” that the Vietnam memorial has come to represent; and here, of course, we are not only dealing with the named (as is the case with the Vietnam memorial), but with the nameless.<sup>62</sup> In 1979, in the immediate wake of the Franco era, the city of Portbou mounted a plaque on the town cemetery wall as “an initial token of remembrance.” Karavan's monument then came as a continuation of the commitment expressed by the city of Portbou to preserving the memory of Walter Benjamin. However, it is not a monument designed to mourn Benjamin; in fact, the monument's construction defies traditional Jewish mourning, as it does not offer a level space like a tombstone on which to place stones of

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58. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT, 1989).

59. See Andreas Huyssen, “Monuments and Holocaust Memory in a Media Age,” *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 249–60; and Michael Geyer and Miriam Hansen, “German-Jewish Memory and National Consciousness,” *Holocaust Remembrance*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 175–90.

60. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations* 255. Emphasis in original.

61. Missac 10.

62. Michèle C. Cone draws the connection to Maya Lin in “Memorial to Walter Benjamin,” *Sculpture* (March–April 1995): 17.

remembrance. It is in this regard an anti-monument or a counter-monument in the sense that the memory of Benjamin is not glorified as in the traditional monuments to fallen heroes.<sup>63</sup> Benjamin himself was critical of the “culture of commemoration” that dominated late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe. In his *Moscow Diary* of 1926/27, for example, he noted: “There is [ . . . ] hardly a square in Europe whose secret structure was not profaned and impaired [ . . . ] by the introduction of a monument.”<sup>64</sup> Karavan’s monument is not placed in the center of the town – as a traditional European monument – nor is it, for that matter, in any place of obvious prominence. Instead, it is on the borders, subtly situated in the indeterminate site of Benjamin’s death.

The “borderline” status of Benjamin has long attracted painters, sculptors, filmmakers and other visual artists.<sup>65</sup> For some, it is Benjamin’s theoretical writings that are suggestive for their visual aspirations. For others, it is Benjamin’s life story, or as the Spanish filmmaker Manuel Cussó-Ferrer, director of the Benjamin chronicle *La última frontera* (1991), has noted,<sup>66</sup> it is “the ‘aura’ of Walter Benjamin’s person and thought, an ‘aura’ that from beyond the grave exerts a renewed influence

63. On function and critical use of monuments, in particular Holocaust monuments, see James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993). See also John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994); and Patricia C. Phillips, “Making Memories,” *Sculpture* 16.3 (Mar. 1997): 22-27.

64. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 65.

65. The painter R.B. Kitaj once remarked, commenting on his work “The Autumn of Central Paris (after Walter Benjamin)” (1972-73): “Dear Benjamin is now a truly chewed-over cultural spectre, not least in art writing. I started to chew on him myself in the late sixties after having fallen upon him, before the deluge, in a publication of the Leo Baeck Institute. His wonderful and difficult montage, pressing together quickening tableaux from texts and from a disjunct world, were called citations by a disciple of his who also conceded that the picture-puzzle distinguished everything he wrote. His personality began to speak to the painter in me--the adventure of his addiction to fragment-life, the allusive and incomplete nature of his work (Gestapo at his heels) had slowly formed into one of those heterodox legacies upon which I like to stake my own dubious art claims....Benjamin thrills me in no small measure because he does not cohere, and beautifully. He was one of those lonely few who lived out Flaubert’s instruction: ‘Not to resemble one’s neighbor; that is everything.’ A lot of artists would wish for that, think, but it eludes us more than we imagine it does.” Richard Morphet, ed., *R.B. Kitaj* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994) 94. On Kitaj’s representations of Benjamin, see Grasskamp, “The Author as Reproduction.”

66. Manuel Cussó-Ferrer, “Walter Benjamin’s Last Frontier. Sequences of an Approach,” *For Walter Benjamin* 160. See also the 1992 Australian Benjamin documentary by John Hughes, *One-Way Street*.

in our lives and will mysteriously continue to exist in times to come.” Daniel Libeskind’s new Jewish Museum of Berlin – a visually striking shiny zinc building marked by a series of zigzagging triangles, a compressed Star of David, and a succession of voids<sup>67</sup> – has attempted to draw inspiration from both realms. In what Libeskind calls “Between the Lines,” his design for the Jewish Museum “cites” Benjamin’s work, *One-Way Street* in particular, as well as the historical rift that Benjamin’s life evokes. According to Libeskind, “This aspect [i.e., the inspiration of Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*] is incorporated into the continuous sequence of sixty sections along the zigzag, each of which represents on the ‘Stations of the Star’ described in the text of Benjamin’s apocalypse of Berlin.”<sup>68</sup> In a quasi-mystical and portentous reading of Benjamin, Libeskind considers the German-Jewish critic among the many “deported archangels” who figure prominently in his architectural conception of the new Berlin as “an exemplary spiritual capital of the 21st century” and a site for “re-membering the future.”<sup>69</sup> To be sure, a prescient element of Benjamin’s Berlin runs through *One-Way Street*: “Like ultraviolet rays, memory shows to each man in the book of life a script that invisibly and prophetically glosses the text.”<sup>70</sup> Libeskind’s appropriation thus maintains a state of in-betweenness: of incomplete translation, of past and future, memory and prophecy. As a work that reflects the ruptured history Germans and Jews, the Jewish Museum makes Benjamin an analog of the larger story. As Jacques Derrida has remarked, responding to Libeskind’s design, “I wonder what he [Benjamin] would have thought about your project, remembering that he died during the

67. Cf. Libeskind, “Between the Lines,” *radix-matrix* 34. See also Huyssen, “The Voids of Berlin,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Autumn 1997): 57-81, esp. 72-81; and my “Reading ‘Between the Lines’: Daniel Libeskind’s New Jewish Museum of Berlin and the Shattered Symbiosis,” *Unlikely History: The Changing German/Jewish Symbiosis, 1945-2000*, eds. Leslie Morris & Jack Zipes (New York: Palgrave/St. Martins, 2002) 155-179.

68. Libeskind, “Between the Lines,” *radix-matrix* 34.

69. Libeskind, “Out of Line, Berlin,” *radix-matrix* 26. “Angelic” readings of Benjamin’s biography and his conception of history are not uncommon. See, for example, Lutz Niethammer, “The Blown-Away Angel: On the Posthistory of a Historical Epistemology of Danger,” *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Partick Camiller (London & New York: Verso, 1992) 101-34; Haverly Rugg, “The Angel of History as Photographer”; and, most recently, Raymond Barglow, “The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin’s Vision of Hope and Despair,” *Tikkun* 14.1 (Jan. 1999): 50-55. See also Laurie Anderson’s musical spin on the Angel of History, “The Dream Before (For Walter Benjamin),” on her album *Strange Angels* (Warner Brothers Records Inc., 1989). Anderson was among the early avant-garde artists to attempt to draw on Benjamin’s work in a new medium.

70. Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings* 483.

war, on a border, committing suicide in a very strange situation.”<sup>71</sup> Once more, Benjamin’s life, and in particular his death, becomes an essential stand-in for an entire historical epoch – giving voice to the “nameless” in the case of Karavan’s monument and setting the tone of a cultural museum in the case of Libeskind. Benjamin’s status as “representative” outsider (and victim of National Socialism) is arguably among the most critical, if also inadvertent, sources of attraction and appears to be a fundamental part of the revival of interest in his work.<sup>72</sup>

## VI

*Flüchtling, flâneur*  
 rattling your suitcase of quotations  
 at a strait gate  
 you would always never enter  
 emblem *involuntaire*, nailed  
 to a *nunc stans*, the dialectical  
 Jew at a standstill, declaring  
 the small hoarse sound  
 of the Torah  
 in the customs shed

— Terry Eagleton<sup>73</sup>

The allure of Benjamin, as we have seen, frequently elicits a sentimental and palpably nostalgic response. Those who have immersed themselves in Benjamin’s writings – as well as those who have read only selectively – often sense a connection to his prose that moves beyond the largely intellectual domain into the emotional. As Missac once candidly

71. Jacques Derrida, “Response to Daniel Libeskind,” *radix-matrix* 112. It is perhaps worth noting that Benjamin’s life and work have themselves served as subject of at least one museum exhibition (28 Dec. 1990 to 28 April 1991 at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin). See the exhibition catalogue *Bucklicht Männlein und Engel der Geschichte: Walter Benjamin, Theoretiker der Moderne*, ed. Werkbund-Archiv (Giessen: Annabas, 1990).

72. Janet Wolff has persuasively argued that the tragedy of Benjamin’s life and his “outsider” status – often evoked in the melancholic photographs – contribute toward a widespread trend of “romanticization” in contemporary theory (she cites post-colonial studies) in general and in Benjamin studies in particular. See Wolff, “Memoirs and Micrologies” 116–17. In Benjamin studies, I believe this trend can be seen taking shape already in the first wave of reception, beginning in the wake of the student movement, when Benjamin was read in light of revolutionary and antiauthoritarian discourse. The fact that he died at the hands of fascism was of course tantamount to such readings.

73. Terry Eagleton, “Homage to Walter Benjamin,” *Walter Benjamin; or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London & New York: Verso, 1981) 183.



remarked, in his opening dedication to *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, his sustained engagement with the work of Benjamin appeared at times (in the view of his wife) like a *ménage à trois*. Elaborating on Missac's summation of the predicament of the Benjamin critic, Shierry Weber NicholSEN adds, "either the critic takes up a standpoint too close to the work, and the criticism becomes mere imitation, tautology; or the standpoint is too distant, and Benjamin is seen through the lens of an ideology, or his work is assimilated to an existing discipline."<sup>74</sup> Where, then, does Benjamin criticism stand at the end of the century?

To be sure, the reasons for the emergence of a flourishing Benjamin industry are numerous: the diffuse nature of Benjamin's work, its vast citability, and its seeming capacity to transcend disciplinary boundaries on the one hand; the dramatic biography of its author, his marginal position, and his telegenic demeanor on the other. By the same token, the modes of reception have tended to evolve in equally diverse forms. There is the "popular" Benjamin and the "scholarly" Benjamin – even if the gap between the two is not always as wide as one might expect – just as there is the "individual" Benjamin and the "collective," i.e., the Benjamin who has been made to serve as a stand-in for others. In many cases, Benjamin the author has been replaced, to follow Krauss's example, with Benjamin the *pasticheur*, whose pool of citations has in turn been molded and reshaped to meet the disparate needs and expectations of his critics and readers. The theoretical surplus value of his work thus makes it possible to employ his ideas in the service of feminism and gender studies in one instance,<sup>75</sup> and to explore the import of Jewish messianism in another.<sup>76</sup>

74. Shierry Weber NicholSEN, "Translator's Introduction," *Walter Benjamin's Passages* xi. Missac elaborates upon the difficulties that Benjamin critics face in his chapter "Writing about Benjamin" (15–40). In an unusual dissent, the critic P.N. Furbank has suggested quite generally that "Benjamin tends to get overpraised – praised for things he is not really very good at." See his "Re-Illuminations," *The Threepenny Review* 70 (Summer 1997): 5.

75. See Eva Geulen, "Toward a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin," *The German Quarterly* 69.2 (Spring 1996): 161–80. Cf. Sigrid Weigel's chapter "From Images to Dialectical Images: The Significance of Gender Difference in Benjamin's Writings," *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996) 81–94.

76. See Michael Löwy, "Jewish Messianism and Libertarian Utopia in Central Europe (1900–1933)," trans. Renée B. Larrier, *New German Critique* 20 (Spring/Summer 1980): 105–15, as well as his book-length study *Redemption & Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe. A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992). See also Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 78–124.

Still further, in what may perhaps be viewed a counter-development to the near cult status that Benjamin attained, there is a growing interest in critically reassessing the conservative and reactionary strains of Benjamin's thought. As Richard Wolin noted several years ago, "The proximity in which Benjamin's destructive-regenerative critique stands to analogous tendencies on the German right bears further examination."<sup>77</sup> In the meantime, critics have looked into the unlikely affinities between Benjamin and such conservative thinkers as Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger.<sup>78</sup> It is not a matter of casting Benjamin as a reactionary, but rather of investigating the contradictory elements of his work.

With the completion of the three-volume Harvard edition well underway and the reprint of Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* now available once more, it is fair to speculate that the wave of Benjamin studies will likely continue to gain further momentum.<sup>79</sup> New research in the areas of experience, urbanism, and World War I<sup>80</sup> has shown that there may still be angles of interpretation – and perhaps new

77. Richard Wolin, "Introduction to the Revised Edition," *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, rev. ed. (1982; Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) xxix. See, more recently, Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999).

78. On Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, see Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *diacritics* 22.3 (fall/winter 1992): 5-18; and Horst Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes," trans. Melissa Thorson Hause and Jackson Bond, *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999): 247-66. On Benjamin and Jünger, see Marcus Bullock, "Walter Benjamin and Ernst Jünger: Destructive Affinities," *German Studies Review* 21.3 (Oct. 1998): 563-81. The theoretical affinities of Heidegger and Benjamin have also recently elicited a wide range of responses among critics. See, for example, Michael P. Steinberg, "The Collector as Allegorist" 96-104; David S. Ferris, "Introduction: Aura, Resistance, and the Event of History," *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* 1-26; and in the same volume, Samuel Weber, "Mass Mediauras; or, Art, Aura, and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin" 27-49. See also Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) esp. 13-22; and Helmut Lethen, "Unheimliche Nähe: Carl Schmitt liest Walter Benjamin," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 16 Sept. 1999 56.

79. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London & New York: Verso, 1998). For an insightful new reading of Benjamin's opaque and ill-fated *Habilitationsschrift*, see Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, esp. 36-81. See also Max Pensky's trenchant analysis in *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993).

80. See Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*; Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Oxford: Polity, 1996); and Martin Jay, "Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn," in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 221-39.

information – yet to discover. Given the deluge of scholarship in recent years, this may come as a surprise, not only for critics today but also in light of criticism from the period when Benjamin was still generally unknown. Discussing photography in an acclaimed essay from the late 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer declared, “Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense.”<sup>81</sup> In the current age of information, however, the intense proliferation of data, images, sound bytes and so forth has raised the level of self-inquiry far beyond anything Kracauer could have ever imagined. When he penned these seemingly portentous words, lest we forget, Benjamin did not yet have his own Web page.

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81. Kracauer, “Photography,” *The Mass Ornament* 57.

*Beyond Use, Within Reason:  
Adorno, Benjamin and the  
Question of Theology*

David Kaufmann

The theological mode of examination gains its full meaning in a turn against art that is all the more destructive for being hidden. The fundamental motif of these examinations is that the theological illumination of the works provides an authentic model with which to interpret their political aspects as much as their fashionable ones, their economic determinations as well as their metaphysical ones. One can see that this is an attitude that sets itself against that of the historical materialists with a radicalism that turns them into their opposite.

— Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

It is well known that in the early 1930's Gershom Scholem warned Walter Benjamin against the baleful influence of Brecht. Scholem argued that his friend was misrepresenting himself as a materialist when in fact his great talents lay in metaphysics, and more specifically, in a theologically inflected metaphysics of language.<sup>2</sup> Scholem did not

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1. From a 1931 review of a book by Willy Haas: Walter Benjamin, "Theologische Kritik," *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980) 277; Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 430.

2. Benjamin, *Briefe* 2, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966) 525-29; and Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994) 373-81.



directly dispute the validity of the insights of dialectical materialism, although his own version of political and religious anarchism – that sadly forgotten tradition<sup>3</sup> – obviously played a strong part in his objections. Rather, he was making a claim about the true bias of Benjamin's intellect. It is therefore not surprising that Scholem should have been equally suspicious of Adorno. For a long time, he misrecognized Adorno's aberrant Marxist tendencies as anti-theological. In an amusing letter, Adorno reported that Scholem saw him as the "dangerous arch seducer" and he recorded that in Scholem's company he "had the odd sensation of finding [himself] identified with Brecht."<sup>4</sup>

Had Benjamin not been so pathologically circumspect about his complicated and often conflicting friendships, Scholem would have known that Adorno had expressed similar reservations about the Brechtian savor of Benjamin's materialist turn. In a letter from June 1934, Adorno concedes that his misgivings about Brecht have been the cause of his own protracted silence:

I hope I am not making myself guilty of unfair interference when I admit that the whole difficult complex of problems is connected to the figure of Brecht and to the credit that you grant him, and that it therefore also touches the principle questions of the materialist dialectic, such as the concept of use value, to which today I can grant as little importance as ever.<sup>5</sup>

Like Scholem, Adorno wants to recall Benjamin to what he considers to be the kernel of Benjamin's thought, the true seed from which the *Pas-sagenwerk* should grow:

For it seems to me that, where it concerns what is most decisive and most important, for once and for all it has to be said out loud and the full categorical depth has to be reached *without* bypassing theology;

3. For a preliminary exception to this, see Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992).

4. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994) 323. See also the remarkably inaccurate English version of this and the other letters I cite in this article in Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-40*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) 248. (The inaccuracies are sometimes a question of proofreading, as with this letter, which is dated incorrectly.) Adorno quoted a part of this letter (leaving out a rather nasty crack about Hannah Tillich) in his "Gruss an Gershom G. Scholem Zum 70. Geburtstag," *Gesammelte Schriften* 20, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986) 480-81.

5. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 73, *Complete Correspondence* 53.

for I also believe that we, on this decisive level of Marxist theory, help all the more, the less obviously we appropriate it submissively. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Adorno thus pits theology against the temptations of Brecht's "coarse thinking" and wants to save what is most important and decisive in Marxism with the aid of the kind of thought that Marx, like Feuerbach before him, had done so much to demystify.

As it is precisely this theological side of Adorno's writings that tends to get lost in most Marxist readings of his work (just as his Marxism gets lost when it is straitened into the pieties of "post"-liberal readings), it is of more than passing interest to try to figure out just what Benjamin, Scholem and Adorno actually meant by "theology," if indeed they all meant the same thing. In fact, as I will show, they did not; at least not exactly. Although they all make use of the categories of Jewish theology, they are not all Jewish theologians (or even necessarily Jewish).

A note about Jewish theology might be in order here. It is a commonplace (untrue, as it turns out) that Judaism has no theology. Hence Gillian Rose claims in an essay on Benjamin that "there is no Judaic theology — no *logos* of God."<sup>7</sup> But, as David Novak has remarked, the predominant modes of Jewish thought in the middle ages — rationalist accounts of the relation between God and Nature and Kabbalah — were very precisely attempts to come up with the *logos* of God. The rise of modern science and the modern stress on human history have rendered these earlier attempts implausible, and so since Kant, Jewish theology has had to take other tacks.<sup>8</sup> And these tacks have not always been recognizable, for, as Kaufmann Kohler argued, Jewish theology differs from its Christian counterpart. As Judaism lacks dogmatics, its theology is not the systematic exposition and defense of a creed.<sup>9</sup> What is more, as Jews reject the Incarnation, post-Talmudic (and non-Kabbalistic) Judaism tends not to speculate on God's being, but concentrates on His relation to the world and on the world itself. Scholem put the point succinctly in a speech at the memorial for Franz Rosenzweig held at the Hebrew University in 1930:

6. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 74, *Complete Correspondence* 53-54.

7. Gillian Rose, "Walter Benjamin — Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism," *Judaism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 175-82.

8. David Novak, "Contemporary Jewish Theology," *Problems in Contemporary Jewish Theology*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbock (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1991) 191-92.

9. Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1918) 1-6.

As for theology, the discipline . . . that deals with man's innermost and darkest needs, that seeks to bare the riddle of his concrete existence and show him the deed he must do in order to uncover the path leading from creature to Creator theology is not a science of the essence of the divinity beyond creation but consists rather of the eternal questions of love and will, wisdom and ability, judgment and mercy, justice and death, creation and redemption. Theology has concrete questions.<sup>10</sup>

Jewish theology, on this reading, will tend to stress the human when it discusses first and last things. And so Adorno and Benjamin can remain fiercely theological without discussing God directly.<sup>11</sup>

With that in mind, I will begin by looking at Benjamin's seminal 1934 article on Kafka and at the sustained discussion of theology that accompanied it. This will show the points of contact and the distance between the secular theology of Adorno and Benjamin and the more properly Jewish theology of Scholem. This will also allow me to argue that Adorno uses the figure of theology to break the immanence of what he calls Idealism (which includes the thought of both Heidegger and Brecht!) in order to redirect philosophy. In short, in the place of Heidegger's "fundamental ontology," Adorno wants to establish a redemptive ontology.<sup>12</sup>

## I

In this first section, I will discuss the way Benjamin divorces theology from revelation, while maintaining in the tantalizingly receding distance, the critical notion of redemption. I am thus following the late Gillian Rose who has characterized Benjamin's work as an account of the historical predicament of an abjected modernity. For Rose's Benjamin, ours is a time whose stress on an impoverished interiority (the result of puritanism à la Weber, Roman law à la Hegel, and capitalism a

10. Gershom Scholem, "Rosenzweig and *The Star of Redemption*," *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover: UP of New England, 1988) 26.

11. See also Adorno's letter to Scholem on 4 Mar. 1951 in "Um Benjamins Werk. Briefe an Gershom Scholem 1939-1955," *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* V, ed. Tiedemann (Frankfurt: edition text + kritik, 1998) 165.

12. Elsewhere I have argued that the interest in the Jewish prohibition on speaking God's name (which plays a similar role in Adorno's thought to the equally Jewish *Bilder-verbatim*) in Adorno's work of the 1950s and 1960s is part of his attempt to find appropriate figures for his critique of Idealist ontology. See my articles "Adorno and the Name of God," *Flashpoint* 1.1 (1996): 65-70; and "Redeeming Mimesis," *Why Literature Matters*, eds. Rüdiger Ahrens & Laurenz Volkmann (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1996) 265-80. See also my "Correlations, Constellations and the Truth: Adorno's Ontology of Redemption," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26.5 (2000): 62-80.

la Marx) is the correlative of both the disgrace into which revelation has fallen and the loss of the horizon of meaning that redemption once provided.<sup>13</sup> This reading allows us to see why for Benjamin, Kafka's work depicts the supposedly demystified modern world not as *enlightened*, but as *prehistoric*; that is, as pre-animistic. Modernity has not been cleansed of mythology, as its defenders might claim. On the contrary, it has not even achieved the state of myth. In fact, its defenders misunderstand the spans of time in which history should be measured. Unlike those who measure time in decades or centuries, Kafka thinks in terms of geological ages, of vast epochs: "The period [*Zeitalter*] in which Kafka lives does not signal to him any progress over the primordial beginnings."<sup>14</sup> Kafka's characters live in a primeval epoch of undifferentiated swamp life, in what the odd nineteenth-century philosopher Bachofen called the "hetaeric" (28/130).

Kafka's modernity can therefore only be understood in analogy with the most primitive existence, before myth, before law (12/114). In this essay and in all his earlier works, such as "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" and the "Critique of Violence," Benjamin is fully antinomian in that he equates the law with myth. In the 1916 discussion of language, judgment is a mark of the fall into human speech; justice and the discriminations that attend on judgment do not partake of the divine which is more often than not figured by Benjamin as a form of redemptive violence. Given this reduction of law to the sheer superstitious alienation of myth, does our period, which is an apparently prehistoric age, mark a regression to a previous stage or a stasis that we have never recognized? Did we ever leave the hetaeric in the first place? Benjamin implies that Kafka's writing does not point to stasis, but to a kind of regression, for it still contains the hope of positive historical change. Benjamin's Kafka knows that myth and something beyond myth are somehow possible, the distant promises of future epochs. While Kafka's stories teem with figures who are locked in the

13. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity* 175-210. In this essay Rose stresses the parallel to Weber's project. For the similarity to Hegel, see her *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981) 149-220.

14. Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: Zum zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages," *Benjamin über Kafka: Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981) 28; "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 130. All future references to this essay will be included parenthetically in the text, with the page number of the German version cited first.



“womb of the depths,” (29/131) and the “spell of the family,” they also contain ciphers of hope – the half-formed creatures Benjamin calls “assistants” or “Helpers” (14/116): “For them and their kind, for the unfinished and the maladroitness there is hope” (15/117).

In Benjamin’s discussion of Kafka, it is not so much that every age dreams the next one (a point he makes in his abstract for the *Passagenwerk*), but that every epoch redeems the previous one. This redemption manifests itself in an odd way, for it seems to entail a complete, apocalyptically destructive break. In the past, myth and law once redeemed the pre-animistic, hetaeric “*Vorwelt*” by smashing it to pieces. But this hope in the past does not lead Kafka to yearn for a new mythic world, a new law. He looks to something beyond that. His Odysseus is not the Odysseus of myth, but of fairy tale, of a myth whose mystified and mystifying powers have been vanquished (15/117). In Benjamin’s account, Kafka’s half-formed Helpers’ incompleteness indicates the possibility of a true future. Their fluidity partakes of a world not redeemed by the law, but signals an epoch on the other side of law. This epoch is as unformed as the Helpers themselves and is not fully visible to the benighted present. To the misbegotten vision of modernity, the future can only be (mis)represented as destruction, as a judgment on the guilt of the perpetually prehistoric.

The future, a real future that promises something that is truly new, can only be troped by the as-yet-unformed Helpers or the promise of judgment and the sense of guilt. I have suggested that Benjamin’s Kafka establishes a constellation between the archaic and the modern and looks at the prehistoric within the modern from the vantage point of a philosophy of history in which positive change is possible, if not directly representable. Hence he can posit a condition that seems contradictory, as Scholem was the first to point out. How can there be a pre-legal, hetaeric world that has already lost the law? How can an epoch be pre-animistic and post-mythical at the same time? Beyond the fairly obvious observation that Benjamin is using Kafka to explain (to Scholem) his own inability to embrace the *practice* of Judaism, we can easily see the tactical logic of Benjamin’s argument. Modernity, after the demystification of the world (and the attendant evacuation of value and hence of meaning)<sup>15</sup> is as bereft as the

15. In this way, Benjamin, who studied with Rickert, is close to Weber, Rickert’s friend. For an all-too-brief account of Rickert and his place in Neo-Kantianism, see Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1978) especially 143–51. For Benjamin and Rickert, see Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. Malcolm R. Green and Indira Ligers (New York: Verso, 1996) 38, 52.

swampy *Vorwelt*. They stand in a relation of tense analogy, not identity.

If we accept Benjamin's contention that revelation has deserted the modern world and with it has fled the horizon of redemption, Kafka's work can easily and fruitfully be read as a codex of ambiguous gestures, of gestures that are too big, too pregnant with possibility for the debilitated environment which confines them (18/120). In a similar way, Kafka's *Sinngeschichten*, his stories about meaning and interpretation, seem to explode the confines of their meager circumstances and grow in an attempt to reach the enormous spaces they indicate but cannot attain. This reading allows Benjamin to suspect that *The Trial* is nothing more than the "unfolding" of the interpretive possibilities of its most famous parable:

Kafka's parables [*Parabeln*] unfold . . . the way a bud becomes a blossom. Thus their effect resembles poetry. It does not matter that his pieces do not exactly fit the prose forms of the West and stand towards doctrine like Aggadah to Halachah. They are not analogies [*Gleichnisse*] but do not want to be taken at face value . . . But do we possess the doctrine that leads from Kafka's analogies and that will explain K's gestures and the behavior of his animals? It is not there; at most we can say that this or that alludes to it. (20/122)

Kafka's tales stand in relation to the values that give them meaning in the same way that the *aggadah* (the narrative, explanatory and exemplary aspect of the Talmud) stands towards the *halachah* (the doctrine of the actual law itself). Benjamin takes Bialik's famous argument that *aggadah* without *halachah* is ultimately meaningless and radicalizes its point by reversing it. What Kafka presents is precisely this *aggadah* that has lost the doctrine that used to ground it. In fact, according to Benjamin, Kafka would probably claim that his stories are the relics of this mourned-for doctrine. But Benjamin argues, on the contrary, that Kafka's stories are the heralds of a new one (20/122).

Benjamin quotes Kafka's late statement that he felt he was a failure because he could not transform poetry into doctrine, *aggadah* into *halachah* (27/129).<sup>16</sup> Kafka's case should be exemplary, for we can assume that everyone who inhabits the archaic modern will be caught in the same predicament, will find him or herself lodged in the hiatus between the fading of the old doctrine and the dawning of a new one. For Benjamin, this liminal period is marked by the horrific distortions

16. It is interesting to note that Benjamin misquotes Kafka here. Kafka wanted to create a new Kabbalah, not *halachah*.

produced by forgetfulness, by both the forgetting of guilt and by the guilt of forgetfulness, that is, by forgetfulness and by forgetting that one has forgotten (30-2/131-34). “The most peculiar bastard in Kafka that the Prehistoric has conceived with Guilt,” Benjamin tells us, is Odradek, the animated spool in Kafka’s wonderful “Cares of a Family Man.” Odradek is “the form that things take in forgetfulness. They are distorted” (31/133). Forgetfulness seems to make us forget what things actually are, presents us with grotesques. Come the Messiah, such distortions will disappear (32/134).

The reference to the Messiah is not a bit of Jewish window dressing, but a necessary turn, for Benjamin’s new doctrine or *halachah* cannot be a revision of the law. His antinomianism will not allow that, for to institute the law would be a fall back into myth. In order to leapfrog over myth, this Messiah’s relation to the law has to be construed in Pauline (or, given the subterranean conversation with Scholem, Sabbatian) terms. This Savior comes to *abolish* the law.

In our era of waiting, in the breathing space between the hetaeric and the messianic, how do Kafka’s fables clear the way for that redemption, for that new doctrine? Benjamin finds a space in Kafka’s works between Guilt (figured by the alienated distortion of Odradek, by the swampy, undifferentiated promiscuity of Kafka’s women) and Hope (bodied forth by the as-yet-unformed Helpers). In the pre-messianic postponement described by Kafka’s narratives, we find in a holy attentiveness the counter to the forgetting that so marks Guilt. Kafka himself exemplified this:

If Kafka did not pray – which we do not know – still, what Malebranche calls “the natural prayer of the soul,” attentiveness, was most particularly his. And in his attentiveness he included, as do the saints in their prayers, all creation [*alle Kreatur*]. (32/134)

Study, the ever wakeful attention of Kafka’s students, marks the struggle against forgetfulness, the oblivion of sleep (33-34/136-37). But attentiveness and study seem to entail more than just keeping a watchful eye on creation, for study – which will not forget – also concentrates on the now-defunct law. In a draft review of Kafka’s posthumous *The Great Wall of China*, Benjamin argued that Kafka’s world is lawless and fearful. This fear, less an emotion than an organ, is an affective marker of its historical position between the ancient past and the

absolutely new, between primeval guilt and future expiation. In this state bereft of the law, the greatest form of distortion inheres in the fact that, for the fallen, the emancipatory by nature disguises itself as atonement – freedom appears under the sign of law, autonomy under the aegis of heteronomy. This condition obtains as long as what has been has not been made transparent, known and then dismissed (44-45). Given this line of thought, part of the job of attentiveness is to study the old law, make it transparent and thus stand in a position to dismiss it.

For this reason, the “new advocate” in Kafka’s story of the same name is exemplary. Once he was Alexander’s horse, but has now gone beyond both the violence of empire and the violence of the law. Bucephalus does not use the law [*Recht*] to enact justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] because justice and law, in spite of their etymological similarity in German, belong to different orders. As we have seen, Law cannot serve as the redemption of myth because it *is* myth in the first place. Furthermore, Bucephalus cannot help but remain true to his origins in empire, myth and law. But in this time of waiting, he enacts something that is truly new. He studies the law, but does not practice it: “The law [*Recht*] that is no longer practiced and is only studied, that is the gate of justice [*Gerechtigkeit*]” (37/139). Is Bucephalus’s study of the law an attempt to render the law transparent and thus dismissible? If so, Benjamin’s reworking of Kafka’s parable sounds like a barely coded apology for that strand of the scientific study of Judaism, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, that was represented by Moritz Steinschneider, who once said “We have only one task left: to give the remains of Judaism a decent burial.”<sup>17</sup>

While there is more than a whiff of the funereal in Benjamin’s essay, he does go on to try to imagine what that apparent oxymoron, a redeemed antinomian law would look like. For Benjamin, myth and law are of the same substance because they are both “gnostic” in that they split existence between good and bad divinities. Study, which seeks to turn existence into Scripture, life into doctrine, moves in the opposite direction, beyond the fetishes of good and evil – beyond even good and bad (37/139). Benjamin’s dream of a redeemed law would entail a code that takes the distinctions out of judgment and the judgment out of law. Benjamin claims to find such a law (*Gesetz* in this case, not *Recht* and therefore apparently of a different order) in Kafka’s lovely parable

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17. Scholem, “The Science of Judaism – Then and Now,” *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 307.



“Sancho Pansa.” In this brief commentary, Sancho, with the help of romances and stories of thieves, is able to divert his personal demon from its appointed object, and by turning it from himself thus renders it harmless. This demon – once it is defanged – is of course the famous Don Quixote who provides useful conversation and great amusement until his death (38/139). Good and evil disappear along with harm. The evil demon becomes the erring knight. Evil itself is replaced by redeemed or redemptive foolishness.

It should be clear here that Benjamin’s great essay on Kafka establishes its positions by using theological coordinates that go even beyond its dutiful quotations of (Chasidic) legend and Talmudic lore. It orients itself squarely between (lost) revelation and future redemption, though to be honest, it describes its terrain in terms of a vision of world history that is more geological than salvational. Its theology (with its stress on collective redemption and the messianic transformation of the world) derives from Judaism. This is the case even for Benjamin’s more heretical claims (such as the equation of law and myth).

While Benjamin’s theological physiognomy might be Jewish, it is not normatively Jewish. As my parenthetical comments about Benjamin’s relation to Judaism indicate, Benjamin’s account of the status of revelation, his complete rejection of the viability of even a metaphorically understood *halachah*, could not help but bring him into conflict with Scholem. Both Scholem and Benjamin were typical of their generation’s rejection of what they castigated as Liberal Judaism’s anemic, apologetic reduction of religion to a Kantian system of ethics. Nevertheless, even Benjamin at his most antinomian could not imagine a religion based on justice without *some* notion of law. So the law is summoned only to be dismissed. The oddity of the position of “Sancho Pansa” in Benjamin’s essay bears witness to his difficulty of trying to imagine Scripture without commandment, revelation without the law.

For Christianity, the notion of a revelation without the law is central. The advent of Christ in the Pauline tradition means precisely a revelation that abrogates the law, a revelation that frees one from the strictures of the law. For Judaism, such an abrogation must wait for the messianic age. “The New Advocate,” then, is a picture of that age, where war will no longer be practiced and the old law will be studied but no longer practiced. The *theological* danger in Benjamin’s reading of Kafka is that it foreshortens the period of exile, of *galut*, and makes it

seem as if the *halachah* were a curse, and not the road to redemption. It seems to mark history as a painful mistake. In his response to Benjamin, Scholem emphasizes that the ongoing openness of judgment and revelation are the very conditions of possibility for human history and that the apparent distance of the law is a sign of its life, not its death.<sup>18</sup>

In a letter from August 1931, Scholem suggested to Benjamin that he must stress the importance of the doctrine of law and justice in Kafka. He claims that Kafka's work looks like "the moral reflection of a halachist who attempts a *linguistic* paraphrase of a judgment of God's." Scholem continues: "Here for once the world is brought to a language in which redemption cannot be anticipated" (64-65). Two points should be already apparent from this. God's judgment does not take place in language – hence the need for paraphrase into language. Notice that Scholem does not call this act a translation. Moreover, this language of paraphrase is one which does not serve as an index of necessary redemption. Judgment is the Lord's and it is not a foregone conclusion. I assume that Scholem here is jealous to preserve God's freedom and the true justice of His judgments. We can thus see a very important difference between him and Benjamin and (ultimately) Adorno. For Scholem, redemption is a *historical* possibility and God's judgment is a moment of true choice, a sign that the future is open and that the moral universe is not mechanistically bound by law. For Benjamin and Adorno, as we shall see, redemption is a question of *logic*, an *apriori* derived from the Kantian and neo-Kantian *apriori* of God Himself. For them, redemption is a necessary postulate for a form of reason that seeks to calculate the level of distortion of the fallen world. For them, Odradek is the form that things take under the historical condition of forgetting – redemption is the logical condition that will show things in their true form. If Scholem wants to keep the horizon of redemption open, this is in part because he argues for the continuous openness of revelation. This becomes clearest in his "Open Letter to the Author of *Jewish Belief in Our Time*," a 1932 article in response to Schoeps's rather controversial, Protestantizing polemic for a "Biblical" Judaism. Benjamin was quite taken with Scholem's piece (he mentions it in several letters at this time) and Scholem thought well enough of it to

18. Noteworthy here as well is Rosenzweig's 1923 response to Buber: "The way to the teaching leads through what is 'knowable' . . . But the teaching itself is not knowable. It is always something that is in the future . . ." Franz Rosenzweig, "The Builders," *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1955) 76.

incorporate parts of it an essay almost thirty years later.<sup>19</sup>

Scholem rejects Schoeps's attempt to bypass the tradition (best exemplified by the Talmud and the Kabbalah). He argues that to go back immediately to the Bible is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Jewish revelation:

Revelation, and this old deep truth is given short shrift in your writing . . . Revelation with all its uniqueness is still a *medium*. It is the meaningful as an absolute, as meaning-giving but meaningless in itself, that articulates itself in relationship to time, in Tradition. The word of God in its absolute symbolic fullness would be destructive if it could also be meaningful in an immediate (undialectical) way. Nothing . . . requires concretization when applied to historical time more than . . . the word of revelation. Indeed, [the word of revelation] whose absoluteness causes its endless reflections in the contingencies of fulfillment cannot be fulfilled. The voice that we perceive, is the medium in which we live, and where it is absent, it is hollow . . .<sup>20</sup>

Scholem's recovery of the aura of revelation here depends on the notion that God's word was never immediately present, especially not at Sinai. Rather, the absoluteness of God – a central tenet of a rabbinic Judaism that sought to differentiate itself from the immanence of paganism and the unity of substance implicit in pantheism – is rendered forth in the absoluteness of the Word. This, in turn, can only be articulated through paraphrase and approximate (at best asymptotic) mediations. What is absolute can be approached but never achieved, except in panlogist fantasies. Put differently: the Word is not fully lost because it was never fully there. No, its self-enclosure requires commentary, discussion, questioning. The Word requires concretization in human language but that concretization is an ongoing process that does not allow for completion. In Scholem's conception, the abstraction inherent in the absoluteness of revelation is the condition of possibility of meaning, of action and interpretation, and, ultimately, of Jewish history itself.

This understanding of Revelation takes the pathos out of Benjamin's vision of an abjected modernity because it shows that vision to be based on an undialectical notion of revelation. Scholem makes this clear in a letter from July 1934:

19. See his "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* 282-303.

20. Scholem, "Offener Brief an den Verfasser der Schrift *Jüdischer Glaube in dieser Zeit*," *Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung* 8.16 (1932): 243.

Kafka's world is the world of revelation, but of revelation seen of course from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness . . . The *nonfulfillability* of what has been revealed is the point where a *correctly* understood theology . . . coincides most perfectly with that which offers the key to Kafka's work. Its problem is not, dear Walter, its *absence* in a preanimistic world, but the fact that it cannot be *fulfilled* . . . Those pupils of whom you speak at the end are not so much those that have lost the Scripture . . . but rather those students who cannot decipher it.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, what Benjamin takes to be the historical disgrace of revelation is nothing of the sort, but the very source of revelation's continuous relevance, its endless productivity. The crux here is that God and His Word appear in the Kabbalistic guise of the Nothing. Benjamin sees this Nothing as nothing, as an absence. But Scholem, perhaps a closer reader of Rosenzweig, does not:

You ask what I understand by "the nothingness of revelation." I understand by it a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has *validity*, but no *meaning*. In which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is appearing, as if reduced to a zero point of its own content, still does not disappear (for revelation is something that is appearing) – that is where its nothingness comes forward.<sup>22</sup>

For Scholem, Kafka's work is exemplary in that it shows revelation as it is, reduced to perhaps its purest form as form, as the ground on which meaning is constructed but which does not have meaning itself. In this letter, Scholem claims that Benjamin's inability to understand this notion of revelation is the greatest error of his approach to Kafka.

In Scholem's account of Kafka, then, it is not that revelation has lost its aura, but that this sense of loss, the undeniable impossibility of fulfillment, is precisely what constitutes revelation's aura in the first place. In many ways, Scholem's critique is similar to the critique that Adorno will level at Benjamin's exposé of the *Passagenwerk*, when he argues that Benjamin has made a fundamental error in ascribing reification to bourgeois consciousness, when in fact the Lukácsian point is

21. Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith & Andre Lefevere (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 126-27.

22. Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940* 142. Translation modified. See *Benjamin über Kafka* 82.



that consciousness is actually *produced* by reification.<sup>23</sup> In both cases, his correspondents argue that Benjamin has argued undialectically and mistaken cause for effect.

In the case of the Kafka essay, however, Adorno does not agree with Scholem. He subscribes wholeheartedly to Benjamin's vision of historical abjection, to the full force of the secularization hypothesis that Scholem rejected. In later years, Adorno went as far as to claim that Scholem's own work assumed secularization while denying it:

It appears the profoundest irony that the conception of mysticism that he urges presents itself in historical-philosophical terms as precisely that immigration into the profane that he had held to be so pernicious in us.<sup>24</sup>

But, as I shall show, for Adorno the flight into the profane promised more hope than Benjamin's Kafka essay indicates. Whereas Benjamin expresses a loosely dialectical philosophy of history, where hope resides in the destructive interstices *between* epochs, Adorno claims a dialectical possibility of redemption in *all* figures *within* an epoch. Adorno's chief criticism of Benjamin is always that he does not read dialectically enough. In an odd way, he sees Benjamin as too pessimistic, as misreading the ciphers of Kafka's work. Adorno's response to Benjamin's essay in the letter of December 17, 1934 is wonderfully rich because it lays out in a very specific context his sense of theology, of dialectical materialism and of the sheer scope of redemption.

Adorno starts by seconding Benjamin's approach and insights:

Do not take it as immodest if I begin by saying that our agreement on the philosophical central points has never yet come so perfectly to mind as here . . . It also touches at the same time in a very principle sense the place of "Theology."<sup>25</sup>

He goes on to call it "inverse theology." He is careful to distinguish it from Schoeps's "dialectical theology." Rather, he sees it lying close to the notion of Scripture that he finds in Benjamin's essay. Adorno concurs with Benjamin that Kafka could be best understood, not as a relic of a lost revelation but as a prolegomenon to a future Scripture, a future metaphysics. But Adorno adds a little twist here. He slips in the notion

23. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 139; *Complete Correspondence* 105

24. Adorno, "Gruss an Gershom G. Scholem" 481.

25. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 90; *Complete Correspondence* 66.

that Kafka would be best interpreted socially – that is, I take it, sociologically – and it is here that he claims to see the *Chiffernwesen*, the coded nature of their theology.<sup>26</sup> Adorno is writing quickly and passionately here, but also cannily, because he is looking towards the *Passagenwerk* and presumably working against Brecht. He wants to insist that the theology be read sociologically – and that the profane should be read sacredly.

What is at stake becomes clear when Adorno launches into his most telling criticism of the Kafka essay. He notices that Benjamin interprets all the anecdotes, images and stories that he interpolates in his discussion except for one: the childhood picture of Kafka that stands as an epigraph to the second section of the essay:

It is not by chance that of the interpreted anecdotes one – namely Kafka's childhood photograph – remains without an interpretation. Such an interpretation would however be equivalent to the neutralization of the epoch in a lightning flash. That means all possible disharmonies *in concreto* – symptoms of archaic self-consciousness, of the incompleteness of the mythic dialectic even here.<sup>27</sup>

If Benjamin actually interpreted the photograph he would be forced to step beyond the postponement, the hiatus between historical ages that traps Odradek in its distorted and alienated existence. To put it another way, the Helpers are not the only ones who partake of redemption. Odradek also deserves a place in the new dispensation:

For it is archaic to let him spring forth from "Prehistory and Guilt" and not to reread him as just that prolegomenon that you see through so penetratingly in the problem of Scripture. If he has his place with the family man, is he not that man's care and danger, isn't the sublation of creaturely relations of guilt prefigured in him? Isn't care – truly Heidegger put back on his feet – the cipher, indeed the most certain promise of hope . . . Certainly Odradek, the obverse side of the object world, is the mark of distortion – but as such also a motif of transcendence, namely the elimination of boundaries and the reconciliation of the organic and the inorganic, or the sublation of death: Odradek does "survive." To put it differently, escape from the relations of nature is promised even to that life which is trafficked as if it were a thing.<sup>28</sup>

26. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 90-91; *Complete Correspondence* 66-67.

27. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 93.; *Complete Correspondence* 68. Walker's translation speaks of "Kafka's photographs of children" where the German clearly refers to that part of Benjamin's article that describes the shot of Kafka as a child.

28. Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 92-93; *Complete Correspondence* 68-69.

Adorno accuses Benjamin of falling short of the attentiveness of Kafka himself, of a kind of archaic cruelty. Benjamin, whose seminal essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* ends with the claim that hope is only given for the most hopeless, is unwilling to grant hope even to Odradek.

It is important to note that Adorno implies – and not that subtly, either – that Benjamin has fallen precisely into the philosophy of history that he himself would come to criticize in his last work, the “Theses on the Concept of History.” In this view, redemption comes only to those lucky enough to be born at the right time, at the end of history. To counter this verdict, Adorno wants to read the disgrace of revelation sociologically and historically. The distortion of the object world has a very precise historical determination. It is called reification, and describes the tendency to abstract human life-processes into a series of unconnected objects. It is, in the classic Lukácsian version of the theory, to mistake living process for dead thing, and human history for an alien fate. It refers to a misrecognition imposed by history, a reversal that can be reversed within history.

Benjamin reminds us that the care of the family man which gives the title to the story is famously unspecified. The only thing that seems to bother the father of the house (although *Hausvater* can also be rendered as warden) is that the Odradek has no purpose. Having no purpose to wear it out, Odradek can live forever. It can survive. Does the *Hausvater* envy Odradek's immortality? Does he resent its lack of usefulness, its odd capacity to move and to speak while remaining what appears to be a worthless spool? Adorno's crack about Heidegger will help us to see in what way Odradek figures forth both creaturely relations of guilt and their overcoming. Let us understand Heideggerian care as determined by one's recognition that s/he is already in a world, is already involved with the projection into the future of his/her “ownmost potentialities-of-being,” and is concerned with/alongside the world.<sup>29</sup> If care signals the authentic recognition of one's finitude and one's embeddedness while marking the world in terms of one's project, then there is a sense in which the father of the house exhibits care as pure *ressentiment*: Odradek is useless and serves only as an unpleasant reminder of mortality. Is it not also possible that even Heideggerian authenticity, with its constant reference to Dasein's own situation, is

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29. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY P, 1996) 178-80.

subtly narcissistic, and ultimately distorting? To put it slightly differently, if “Reality is referred back to the phenomenon of care,” then reality, understood ontologically (not as mere existence but as Being understood) is referred back to Dasein’s self-awareness; it is in this awareness that Being can first be understood and that the essence of objects can be disclosed.<sup>30</sup> Understanding is thus always understanding in relation to Dasein. Care grants meaning, not existence.

But what if care did not refer meaning back to the father of the house but branched outwards towards Odradek? On the risk of making Adorno cleave too closely to Levinas, let me push this line of thinking to make a point. What if care did not stem from the project of the finite existence but began with the (apparent) infinity of the other? It is not clear what exactly Adorno’s dream of the “elimination of the boundaries and the reconciliation between the organic and inorganic” actually entails and how it could lead to the sublation of death. But if we remember that Adorno has the problem of reification in mind, we can say that the boundaries between the organic and inorganic are conceptual, are distortions born of commodity exchange in a modern market. To put differently, we can say that these conceptual categories are not derived from an immutable natural necessity, but rather have come to appear to be natural, have over time congealed into the dead “second nature” of social convention. We should therefore not assume that Adorno means that reconciliation entails an oddly mythic suspension of mortality, but rather that the “meaning” of the categories of the organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, living and dead can change, once they have taken their bearings from somewhere other than the reified and reifying bourgeois subject.

If my interpretation is accurate, it will go a long way towards explaining a footnote that Adorno himself appended to a passage that I have already quoted:

To put it differently, escape from the relations of nature is promised even to that life which is trafficked as if it were a thing.

The footnote reads:

here is the deepest reason as well for my opposition to the immediate connection to “use value” in other circumstances!

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30. Heidegger 195-96.



Reified life is promised liberation from “natural relations.” Now, to reified life, being trafficked as a thing seems natural, just as it seems “natural” that we are the proud possessors of our own labor and can exchange it as we please. It is precisely this misrecognition of abstract convention as a law of nature that Marx attempted to demystify in *Capital*. In fact, in the great chapter on commodity fetishism, Marx reveals what he takes to be the fatal metalepsis of bourgeois economics: the mistaking of the commodity for a natural entity that determines the laws of the market. But the commodity form, Marx argues, is derivative – it is itself an effect, not a cause. In order to achieve his dialectical demystification of the worship of the false idol of the commodity, he sets up an opposition between the specious naturalness of exchange value and use value. Adorno’s defense of Odradek thus poses the question about how natural “use value” actually is. Is the concept of use value itself not a product of reification, in that it first posits things, then their value in terms of human need? To this line of reasoning, Marxian use value and Heideggerian care become equally suspect because they both subordinate the object world to human mastery, consumption or the imposition of meaning. And under the sign of reification, the human world is misconstrued as an object world, and so is liable to the same forms of domination. The distortion that besets Odradek besets us all.

But for Adorno, there is hope even in that. Odradek, Kafka’s narrator tells us, has no purpose, has neither *telos* nor use. What does this mean other than that Odradek has no value, that it has been freed from distorted and distorting models of value? In Adorno’s reading, worthlessness in a world governed by exchange is a promise of the possibility of another world, one better than even the ideal Kant dreamed of – a kingdom (or is it empire?) of ends, in which dignity is extended, as in the prayers of the saints, not only to people, but to all creation.

## II

To recap then: Adorno invokes theology, meant here as a constant reference to redemption (and not necessarily as a relation to revelation) to maintain an emancipatory promise as well as an access to the world of objects without falling into the temptation of reducing all people and all things to a calculus based on use or consumption. This “inverse theology” does not take the human as the source of meaning, nor does it take the divine as its end. The flight of the sacred into the profane

seems to involve a hovering between “natural” and “supernatural” interpretations, between the twin perils of uncritical piety and materialist reduction. Adorno’s criticism is aimed at all thought based on scarcity (economics) or finitude (Heideggerian phenomenology). And there is a sense that his writing, both early and late, gets its charge from a deep impatience and a clear disappointment. But there is a danger here of dismissing Adorno’s work as immature and hopelessly utopian, and thus missing its real target. Why would Adorno want to maintain that Marx and Heidegger suffer from the same philosophical limitations? How could they possibly be construed in this way?

In the first pages of his early lecture “The Idea of Natural History,” Adorno carefully undoes post-Husserlian philosophy. He argues that while the initial intention of phenomenology is the “overcoming of the subjective standpoint” and the arrival at a “principally different region of Being, . . . a transsubjective, an *ontic* region of Being,”<sup>31</sup> it is basically flawed:

It is now the fundamental paradox of all ontological questioning in contemporary philosophy, that the means with which it tries to win its way to transsubjective Being is none other than the same subjective ratio that the structure of Idealism had brought into being.<sup>32</sup>

If Adorno is correct in his claim that phenomenology, like Idealism, starts with the positing subject, it should come as no surprise that it falls into tautology. One can see this especially in Adorno’s account of Heidegger’s discussion of historicity:

. . . a Being, that is historical, is brought under a subjective category, historicity. This historical Being which is understood under the category of historicity is supposed to be identical with History itself. It [historical Being] is supposed to fall into line with the determinations that are impressed on it by Historicity. The tautology seems to me to be less a self-discovery of the mythical depths of language than new camouflage for the old classical thesis of the identity of subject and object.<sup>33</sup>

History and historicity can be conflated only because the subjective principle holds sway: historicity (subjective) and History (supposedly non-subjective) become identical because in this reworking, they both start from the same place. Adorno argues that the category of history within

31. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 1:346–47.

32. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” 347.

33. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” 353.

phenomenology will only gain its dignity when it stops searching out the possibilities of Being (and the potentialities of Dasein) and instead looks to “the essent as such in its concrete determination within history.”<sup>34</sup>

Adorno puts the matter more succinctly in the critique of Kierkegaard in his first published book. The names of the accused are different but the charge is essentially the same:

[Kierkegaard’s philosophy] contests the identity of thought and being, but without searching for being in any other realm than that of thought.<sup>35</sup>

Kierkegaard wants to grapple his way back to the object world, but he cannot escape from the limits of Idealist interiority. In a similar way, he tries to redeem contingency, freedom, and the particular from Kantian abstraction and the great chuffing engine of Hegelian panlogism, but ends up erecting a system that gives up “philosophy’s central claim to truth – the interpretation of reality.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Adorno’s Kierkegaard falls prey to the very tendencies he tried to combat and loses the object world he had wanted to gain. Kierkegaard’s failure is perhaps more instructive than Heidegger’s if only because he struggles harder to overcome the “enchantment of hopeless immanence”<sup>37</sup> of a world whose intelligibility is ultimately posited by the subject. According to this line of argument, Heidegger’s definition of “world” gives up the world too quickly.

Given all this, it is perhaps not surprising to find Adorno criticizing Marx, in an aside in the book on Kierkegaard, for *his* fall into Idealism through a reductive commitment to what we would now call “totalization.” Adorno’s complaint is that Marx’s system can no more contain the phenomena it seeks to explain than Hegel’s, and for the same reason. It tries to reduce the world to a single substance, and thus sacrifices the negation, the alterity that drives the dialectic from the get-go. In short, it would seem that Adorno is using the dialectic to fight that most seductive of Jewish heresies, Spinozism.

In “The Idea of Natural History,” Adorno describes the mythic conception of nature as “what human history bears as fatefully obedient, foreordained Being, what appears in history, what acts as substance in

34. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” 354.

35. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 86.

36. Adorno, *Kierkegaard* 74, 93-97.

37. Adorno, *Kierkegaard* 83.

history.” What stands opposed to such a conception is “the appearance of the qualitatively New . . . that does not play itself out in pure Identity, pure reproduction of what was always and already there, but happens in the New.”<sup>38</sup> Whether one reduces the substance of the world to Subject or Value, the result is still mythic: the misrecognition of the historical as inevitable and the reduction of all otherness – here seen temporally as freedom – to mere fate.

How things have developed in the world of men and women is not necessarily how they are or have to be. Adorno follows Kierkegaard’s attack on Hegel’s preemptive totalities. Kierkegaard suggests that people who fall into this confusion are led to a view of history that borrows from and does not advance upon necromancy:

To want to predict the future (prophecy) and to want to understand the necessity of the past are altogether identical, and only the prevailing fashion makes the one seem more plausible than the other to a prevailing generation.<sup>39</sup>

Kierkegaard’s attack on the mythic belief in historical law is not very different from the attack on commodity fetishism or “second nature” as dead convention. In each case, the post-Hegelian thought is trying to awaken freedom – both as contingency and as alterity – from the spell that immanence casts over thought.<sup>40</sup> Each one wants to demystify *amor fati* as a form of idolatry.

“Theology” as Adorno construes it – the dialectical overcoming of a mythic sense of subjection to alien (and in truth merely alienated) powers – takes the place that reason was supposed to fill in the thought of enlightenment writers. It reveals the falseness of superstition and helps deliver fate into freedom. But it goes further than subject-centered reason because it does not merely emancipate humans. By maintaining a horizon of redemption for all creation, by a studious attentiveness to *Kreatur*, “theology” breaks with the immanence of the positing subject. It releases the object world from its dependency on the human for meaning. Thus, a redemptive ontology is the only possible form ontology can take in modernity. It is also the only path to a real emancipation.

38. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” 346.

39. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 77.

40. Steven Schwarzschild, “Adorno and Schoenberg as Jews,” *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 35 (1990): 460.



## III

In a letter of 1951, Adorno disagreed with Scholem's claim that Benjamin's theology was "existential or substantial." He wrote that Benjamin's thought here, as elsewhere, maintained a "critical intention:"

In the tension between its ambiguous-mythical natural being [*Naturwesen*] and the mythical Self – what he earlier would have called the NAME – everything that one calls "ego," "person," "subject," "individual" radically dissolves in this philosophy, and here actually is the negative moment in the work of the concept in Benjamin.<sup>41</sup>

According to this view, theology in Benjamin breaks the hold of subject-centered reason and the horrors of human history by suspending the world between two myths – between the natural and the supernatural. To read Benjamin this way is to read him in terms of the study of the *Trauerspiel* or in terms of the great essay on Kafka that we have discussed above. It is to understand that Benjamin's writings fall under the shadow of an apocalypse and a subsequent redemption. This redemption cannot be figured (but should be – hence Adorno's brief on behalf of Odradek) apart from the destruction that precedes it. Or perhaps it can. In his last work, the theses on the philosophy of history, Benjamin posits the weak messianism of a generation – any generation – that suspends the horrific train of "progress" by redeeming (and therefore fulfilling) the hopes of the past. Thus, the hopes and desires of the downtrodden serve as incomplete figures of redemption. Adorno too pursues a similar "inverse theology."<sup>42</sup> For him, theology means breaking through the limitations of a naturalism or a materialism based on scarcity or hunger or the sheer will to survive. As such, his vision of redemption is more radical even than Benjamin's and hence more rigorously beyond figuration, but in a different way. As the last aphorism in *Minima Moralia* shows even more clearly than the last section of the *Negative Dialectics*, redemption for Adorno is not (necessarily) to be hoped for, but it is (necessarily) to be thought through. That is to say, for Adorno, it is a regulative concept. It is the unacknowledged legislator for any (correct) account of the world.

41. Adorno, "Um Benjamins Werk. Briefe an Gershom Scholem 1939-1955," *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* 5:165.

42. Adorno only accepted the description of "negative theology" in an esoteric sense, that is, in that he objected having his terms translated directly into theological categories. See his letter to Scholem of April 13, 1952. Adorno, "Um Benjamins Werk" 167.

Adorno's agnosticism about the actuality of redemption shows him, like Benjamin, to be the inheritor of the logic of nineteenth-century liberal Judaism, even though Adorno was baptized and raised a Christian. Steven Schwarzschild has argued that the Liberal Jews of the nineteenth century substituted the more acceptable dream of a messianic age – the product of progress in science and ethics – for the unacceptably nationalistic and miraculous notion of a personal messiah. According to Schwarzschild, they thereby rendered the principles of messianism and redemption untenable.<sup>43</sup> In this light, the self-confessed weakness of Benjamin's "weak messianism" marks an attempt, though ambiguous – to overcome the frailty of the Liberal position by trying to locate in the distance a messianic agent. And in this light, Adorno's reduction of redemption to a logical category is a rigorous working-through of the Liberal position, even though it is a tough one to hold.

In the end, we should read Adorno and Benjamin in terms of this "theology." Such terms might mitigate their Marxism (although not their critiques of capitalism) as well as their putative postmodernism. Those familiar attempts to map them onto more comfortable terrain, though, are apologetic and might miss the scandal of Benjamin and Adorno's relevance to us. For their radicalism can be called a kind of Marxism in the *galut*, or, in more secular terms, of anti-capitalist hope in exile.

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43. Schwarzschild, "The Personal Messiah – Toward a Reconstruction of a Discarded Concept," *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, ed. Menachem Kellner (Albany: SUNY P, 1990) 15-28.

## *Messianism in the Early Work of Gershom Scholem*

Michael Löwy

Gershom Scholem is a shining example of the modern Jewish intellectual. He is neither a Talmudist nor a Rabbi, much less a prophet. More modestly: he is a historian, a man of science, of the university – gifted, however, with what spiritual energy! A – critical – son of the Haskala and a thinker who, to be sure, gave up traditional orthodox belief with its rituals and taboos, and yet, in his own way, remained religious. He is therefore also a modern Jewish intellectual because he is assimilated – stamped by German culture, despite his revolt against assimilation and his struggle for *dissimilation* (to use the term coined by Franz Rosenzweig) and despite his Zionism, which in 1923 led him to emigrate to Jerusalem.

Still Scholem also belongs to that category of the modern intellectual – Jewish or non-Jewish – who painfully experiences *the disenchantment of the world*, that, according to Max Weber, is characteristic of modernity. For this reason he is strongly attracted to the *Romantic critique of modernity*, to the Romantic protest – practiced in the name of cultural or religious values of the past – against (Weberian) *instrumental rationality* and against the quantification and reification that stem from bourgeois-industrial modernity. He participates in this broad current of a modern critique of modernity that is inspired by German Romanticism and that sees, in myth, in history, or in religion, a way to combat this loss of meaning.

Like other Romantics, Scholem is also too modern to simply fall back

on the past: he can no longer believe in the Kabbala — or in the imminent return of the Messiah — in the way his ancestors did. His strategy for the reenchantment of the world is world-immanent: he becomes the historian of the Kabbala and of Messianism, and through this mediation allows the fascinating spiritual magic of the Jewish mysticism of bygone centuries to rise again.

Gershom Scholem's work is not only a singular monument of the modernist writing of history, it also opens a new perspective on the Jewish religious tradition, since it restores to it the messianic and apocalyptic dimension that was ignored by the rationalist-liberal view of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and German sociology. Max Weber and Werner Sombart saw the spirit of Judaism merely as calculating rationality: Scholem pointed to the subterranean, mystical, heretical, messianic, and utopian currents in the history of Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Background and Influences***

Born into a petit-bourgeois, assimilated Berlin family, Scholem at first soaked up German culture; in his youth he favored the Romantic and neo-Romantic writers: Jean Paul, Novalis, Mörike, Stefan George, Paul Scheerbart.<sup>2</sup> It is highly indicative that the first book about the Kabbala that he studied and that would have a considerable influence on him is the work of the Christian Theosoph and German Romantic Franz Joseph Molitor: *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (published between 1827 and 1853). In various autobiographical texts he refers to the “deep insights” of this author and to the “fascinating effect” that Molitor's book had on him. Although he rejected the christological speculations of this “follower of the Romantic philosophers Schelling and Baader,” he nonetheless pronounced that Molitor had “understood

1. It would be incorrect to use the concept of “millennialism” here, since it corresponds to a Christian terminology — chiasmus or the “millennium” of which the new testament speaks.

2. In his dissertation *The Demonic in History*, David Biale argues that Buber and Scholem found in a specific sort of Romanticism a unique *Weltanschauung* that influenced their whole way of thinking. In his opinion Scholem's sympathy for a particular tendency inside German Romanticism played a decisive role in his intellectual development, both in the field of philosophy and of historiography. David Biale, *The Demonic in History. Gershom Scholem and the Revision of Jewish Historiography*, Doctoral Dissertation. (Los Angeles: U of California, 1977) 17.

In a conversation with me Scholem confirmed his interest in Romanticism in his early years, but explicitly forbade any interpretation of his work that would put the accent on German instead of the Jewish-Hebrew sources.



the Kabbala better than the highest religious Jewish authorities [*Gedolei Hochmat Israel*] of his time.”<sup>3</sup>

Soon the young Scholem would rebel against the assimilation-friendly ideology of his family – his father threw him out of their house because of his “antipatriotic” stance during the war! – in that he turned to the sources of Judaism, “in search of the tradition lost to my social circle, that attracted me with its great magic.”<sup>4</sup> This search led him, on the one hand – first under the influence of Martin Buber – to a study of Jewish mysticism, and on the other, to Zionism. His not-orthodox religious attitude brings him close to Buber, yet his Zionism is more radical: he passionately repudiates the Jewish-German cultural symbiosis, and this refusal would ultimately distance him as much from Martin Buber as from Franz Rosenzweig.

### *Time of Bildung*

Scholem’s diaries from 1913-1917 (published in 1995) allow us to reconstruct the development of his ideas and the extraordinary intellectual vitality that characterizes this phase of *Bildung* [education].

This document transplants us right in the middle of a *Bildung*-laboratory, in which religion and revolution, Zionist dream and anarchist utopia, German Romanticism and Jewish mysticism, Kierkegaard and Martin Buber, mix and react with each other. These diaries contain not only the raw material from his two well-known autobiographical works, *Walter Benjamin. Geschichte einer Freundschaft* and *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, but also an astonishing chronicle of encounters and readings, enriched with philosophical, political, and religious trains of thought.

In these pages one witnesses the formation of a *rebellious Jewish consciousness*, that revolts against the world war, against a solidly middle-class Jewish-German society, and even against the ruling Zionist conformism. Despite his precocious and enthusiastic turn towards Zionism, which he comprehends as a revolutionary movement, Scholem does not

3. The first citation stems from a 1937 letter to Salman Schocken, cited by David Biale in *Gershom Scholem: Kabbala and Counter-History*. Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbala and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979) 216. (This book is a revised and improved version of his dissertation, *The Demonic in History*.) The second quote comes from the Hebrew version of Scholem’s autobiography, *Mi-Berlin Le-Yerushalayim* — which is more complete than the various European translations. Gershom Scholem, *Mi-Berlin Le-Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982) 127.

4. Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 68.

conceal his hostile stance towards its founding father:

We reject Herzl. He is *to blame* for the Zionism of today [ . . . ] which is an organization of grocers, who grovel before everyone powerful! [ . . . ] His only thought was the Jewish State. And this we reject. Because we preach anarchy. That is: we do not want a state, but rather a free society (with which Herzl's *Altneuland* has nothing to do!). We as Jews know enough about the horrendous idol-state, as that to which we are supposed to submit in order to worship it and bring it our offspring as welcome sacrifice to its greed and lust for power.<sup>5</sup>

It is remarkable how very similar this critique of Herzl is to that of another "libertarian Zionist" Bernard Lazare, whom Scholem undoubtedly did not know at this time.

All of these pages are stamped by the reading of the Bible and of the German Romantics<sup>6</sup> – as well as by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. After a reading of an Eichendorff novel Scholem exclaims:

This shows how deeply we belong to Romanticism: that we can take in all the oscillations and movements of Romanticism so fully and completely, with all their variety and the great halo of joy that is over it.<sup>7</sup>

As a strict opponent of the war, Scholem shares, along with his brother Werner (who would later become a communist representative) and with Walter Benjamin (whom he meets in 1915), tremendous sympathy for the antimilitaristic standpoint of Karl Liebknecht. We must, he writes despairingly in his journal, run against the wall until it collapses. . .

Very early on, the young rebel becomes interested in mysticism, but not yet in the Kabbala: In a note from 1916 he evokes a history of mysticism from Lao-Tse, Plotinus, and Meister Eckhart to the German Romantics, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Martin Buber (the only Jewish author in this list!). During the years of 1914 and 1915 he primarily understands himself as a student of Buber, whose rediscovery of Hassidism and Jewish Mysticism he praises. "In Judaism – up to that point the classical religion of rationalism, of rational calculation – he discovered the irrational, emotion, and longing, which is the mother

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5. Scholem, entry from 20 Jan. 1915, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. I. Halbband 1913-1917*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner, with Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink (Frankfurt / Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995) 81f.

6. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 157.

7. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 215.

of renewal.”<sup>8</sup> Still, under the influence of Walter Benjamin, he continued to distance himself from this first master, whom he reproaches for his unclear stance towards World War I<sup>9</sup> and, striking more deeply, his hazy ideology of “experience” [*Erlebnis*].<sup>10</sup>

Around 1917 he begins to discover the Kabbala. One of the last entries in this diary already hints at what is to come: “The theory of language of the Kabbala has to this day found no worthy interpreter. Oh Gerhard Scholem, what all would you have to do?”

### *Attraction of the Kabbala*

Scholem’s great originality as a historian consisted in discovering, or rather, rediscovering, a nearly completely forgotten area of the religious tradition of Judaism – the mystical teachings from the Kabbala up to the heretical Messianism of the Sabbatai Zwi. In his first article on the Kabbala from 1921 he praises the magical, “unbourgeois, explosive” character of the Jewish tradition.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to Buber, he takes a decidedly *historicist* approach: in history he finds an adequate cultural answer to the cold and abstract rationalism of the bourgeois world. It is indicative of his stance that he defines history in the etymological sense of *Bindung* (to the past, “*Bindung nach rückwärts*”) as *religio*.<sup>12</sup>

What attracts him above all to the old mystical texts is the escatalogical vision that runs through them. In his 1921 essay on the Kabbala he is interested in the prophetic concepts according to which, “messianic humanity will speak in hymns.”<sup>13</sup> (a theme that is reencountered in Benjamin’s writings on the theory of language). And he implicitly contrasts messianic and historical time, in that he emphasizes that “not world history but the Last Judgement” will be responsible for the positive or negative valuation of tradition;<sup>14</sup> – a formulation aimed directly against Hegelian historicism, which “telescopes” both into each other.

8. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 112.

9. See Scholem, entry from Aug. 1916, *Tagebücher* 1: 361f.

10. Scholem, entry from Aug. 1916, *Tagebücher* 1: 386.

11. Scholem, “Lyrik der Kabbala?” *Der Jude* VI (1921–22), *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 2. Halbband 1917–1923*, ed. Karlfried Gründer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink and Friedrich Niewöhner with assistance from Karl. E. Grözinger (Frankfurt/Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000) 657.

12. Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* 210.

13. Scholem, “Lyrik der Kabbala?” 668.

14. Scholem, “Lyrik der Kabbala?” 684.

### ***Unknown Writings from his Youth***

During the time of his education, as he began to edit his first historical essays, Scholem followed, in a standing dialogue with Walter Benjamin, a secret thought that is recorded in a series of private volumes. The totality of these only partially published papers from 1917-1933 can be found in the library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They show us an author very different from the historian whom one knows: a historian who is certainly creative, but still subjugated to the objectivity of historiography. What one discovers in these messianically inspired writings on Judaism, Zionism, justice or revolution, is a young Scholem, a philosopher, theologian, metaphysicist, who gives his speculative imagination free rein. These unbelievably rich, recently published papers (up to 1923) show a spirit very close to that of Walter Benjamin in *Denkstil* and difficulty: their affinity and mutual influence are impressive.

A new author appears here, a Jewish-German philosopher – because of the language but also of the Romantically-colored religious temper – who is as interesting in this field as the later Scholem is in the field of the history of mysticism. To be sure, one also finds aspects of Scholem's own philosophy of Judaism in his autobiographical writings, in his exchange of letters with Benjamin, and in conversations from his later years; but these unknown papers from his youth, despite their fragmentary character, allow Scholem to appear as one of the great "heretical" Jewish central European thinkers before 1933.

Most of this material appears in the Suhrkamp Jewish Verlag in the second volume of the diaries with the title, Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 2. Halbband 1917-23.*, The most important files in the Jerusalem archive, probably classified by Scholem himself, are the following:

"Esoterica Metaphysica. Über Judentum und die esoterische Seite des Zionismus 1917-193. Inklus. einige Briefe, die zur Sache gehören." unnumbered, approx. 191pp.

"Über Metaphysik, Logik und einige nicht dazugehörende Gebiete phänomenologischer Besinnung. Mir gewidmet. 5. Oktober 1917-30. Dezember 1917," 61pp.

"Kleine Anmerkungen über Judentum. Jena, Winter 1917/18," 89pp.



“Tagebuchaufzeichnungen. 1. August 1918–1. August 1919. Adelsboden – Bern,” 89 pp.<sup>15</sup>

I should add that these titles are to a certain extent deceptive: the diaries contain many philosophical fragments as well as personal notes, and the file on metaphysics also concerns itself with Judaism – and vice-versa.

Alongside these large manuscripts there are various papers, untyped and not included in these four collections, including a highly significant text, “Theses on the Concept of Justice” (the title obviously inspired Benjamin), that spans six handwritten pages. This document, bearing the date “1919 and 1925”, was not incorporated into the published diaries, probably because the editor considered it to be from 1925. (In the Diaries 1917-1923 a similar yet quite different essay, “Twelve Theses on the Organization of Justice,” appears)

An interpretation of these early writings is not easy, even for a reader familiar with the (published) thought of Scholem and Benjamin. The concept *Esoterica*, which serves as the title for the first collection, applies to the greater part of the material. In the framework of this essay, I will restrict myself to calling attention to just a few aspects of these writings.

### 1. Jewish-German Thought

The writings contain a deeply *Jewish-German* thought, even if Scholem completely disliked the thesis of German-Jewish cultural symbiosis (his arguments are not to be dismissed out of hand) and insisted that his work had exclusively Hebraic origins. Jewish-German for one because of the language: it is astonishing that all of these texts – even those that originated in Palestine, when Scholem had already mastered the Hebrew language – were written in German. Jewish-German, however, above all because of the content of these writings, which stem completely from the world of Central European Jews and their culture – through everything that differentiates them from the Jewish culture of the East (Poland, Russia) as well as the Jewish culture of Western Europe (France, England). They stem, more precisely, from the *Romantic* currents of this culture.

The connection between Judaism and Romanticism is a question that surfaces in several of the texts, from an admiring as well as a critical perspective. For example, two of the “95 Theses on Judaism

15. The texts in the volumes are chronologically ordered in the two volumes of the Diaries: the metaphysics are only reproduced up to 1923; see “Editorische Vorbemerkung,” *Tagebücher* 1:9f.

and Zionism”<sup>16</sup> from 1918 claim rather elliptically:

41 Jewish Romanticism signifies an unauthorized border crossing.

42 Romanticism is the only spiritual historical movement, that has limited Judaism. That it is unaware of this makes it demonic.<sup>17</sup>

Hölderlin merits unlimited admiration – yet another passion that he shares with Benjamin – and Scholem does not balk at comparing him with the Bible itself in diary entries from August 1918-August 1919:

Of the German people, Friedrich Hölderlin lived *the* Zionist life. Hölderlin’s existence [*Dasein*] is the canon of any kind of historical life. Hölderlin’s absolute authority is based on this . . . his rank alongside the Bible. The Bible is the canon of *writing*, Hölderlin, the canon that is *existence*. Hölderlin and the Bible are the only two things in the world that can never contradict themselves. The canonical can be defined as pure interpretability.<sup>18</sup>

It is possible that this excerpt refers to Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*, whose exuberant, lyrical description of Greek national revival could have inspired Scholem to make this surprising parallel to Zionism.

A few pages further down the following claim appears, a claim formulated in the same way in similar words by Benjamin in his dissertation on art criticism in Romanticism: “Romanticism is a deductable constellation of the Messianic.”

### ***Romantic Critique of the Idea of Progress***

Despite his distance from “Jewish Romanticism,” Scholem shares – like Benjamin – the Romantic critique of the idea of *progress*. This critique finds its expression in the diaries in the form of wild attacks on the liberalism of the Jewish bourgeoisie and on their intellectual organ, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: “The ‘Wissenschaft des Judentums’ and Jewish capitalism are essentially connected.”<sup>19</sup> With implicit reference to the positivism of Comte, Scholem continues with this astonishing vituperation spiced with sarcastic images:

16. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 300-06

17. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 303.

18. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 347.

19. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 330.

It began a metaphysical revolution and competition in order to complete the needed identification: order/progress. Since then Judaism has been reinterpreted into a stronghold of liberalism, a reinterpretation performed on the doctrine by Jewish science and theology through hideous acts of incest: the Messianic became never-ending progress in time.<sup>20</sup>

The doctrines of progress are, for Scholem, a miserable falsification of the Jewish Messianic tradition, for which the philosophy of the Enlightenment is responsible. He attacks the neo-Kantian Marburg school, whose primary representative was Hermann Cohen, with a particular vehemence:

The messianic realm and mechanical time have planted the dastardly bastard idea of 'progress' in the heads of the Enlighteners. Because once one is an Enlightener [. . .] the perspective of messianic time must be distorted into progress. [. . .] These are the fundamental mistakes of the Marburg school: the lawful, deductible reduction of all things into the neverending task in the spirit of progress. This is the most pitiful interpretation that Prophetism has had to put up with.<sup>21</sup>

One can wonder if Benjamin did not have this text in front of him when he was writing his "Theses" in 1940 — unless Scholem himself was inspired by discussions with his friend in 1916 to 1919.

### ***The Significance of Messianism***

*Messianism* is central to the thinking of the young Scholem — as one can see with the passages cited below — not as an object of research, but rather as a philosophy of history, as the key to an interpretation of reality, as prophetic vision.

Strangely, although he considers himself in Jewish things to be the teacher of his friend, with respect to the theme of "Messianism," Scholem often refers to Benjamin as an — almost canonical — source:

The largest image of history was found in the concept of the messianic realm, an image on which it builds its infinitely deep connection to religion and ethics. Walter [Benjamin] once said: the messianic realm is always there. This insight has the *greatest* truth — but primarily in a sphere that, as far as I know, no one has reached since the prophets.<sup>22</sup>

20. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 330f.

21. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 339.

22. Scholem, Sammelmappe "Über Metaphysik, Logik . . ." (1917), *Tagebücher* 2: 70.

Even when Benjamin is not mentioned, their mutual affinity is obvious. It is not always easy to relate these thoughts to each other, since they function so much as “communicating vessels.” That holds above all for the astonishing manuscript with the title, “Theses on the Concept of Justice.” It must be stressed here that these writings on Messianism – despite the numerous references to Maimonides and other *halachic* sources – go far beyond the frame of a religious exegesis in the spirit of the orthodox tradition, and stress the *ethical, social, and historical* aspect of the messianic prophecy. One could even speak of a “politicization” of Messianism if Scholem, true to his libertarian apoliticism – did not categorically reject the concept of politics.<sup>23</sup> Hence his predilection for the relationship between *justice* and the messianic realm:

Messianic time as the eternal present and justics as *Daseiendes*, the substantial correspond to each other. Were justice not to exist, the messianic realm would not only not exist, but would be completely impossible. Justice, like all Jewish concepts, is not a limiting concept, [. . .] not [. . .] a ‘regulative idea.’<sup>24</sup>

Scholem contrasts justice, which experiences its fulfillment in the messianic realm, simultaneously with *myth* and the quite mythic category of *fate*:

Almost all areas of human action are subordinate to mythic categories, first of all fate, which bestows meaning. Justice is the elimination of fate from actions . . . The injustice of our lives manifests itself in the fullness of life’s singular and fateful actions.

The apocalyptic extinguishing of the messianic realm has the value and the “truth” of revolutionary propaganda – it seeks to rip out the last conflict of violence, into which myth submerges. The catastrophic, because redeeming, power of fateless life is represented in the person of the messiah . . .<sup>25</sup>

The curious dating of this essay (“Theses on the Concept of Justice”) – “1919 and 1925” – makes it impossible to know if it was written before

23. For a more thorough investigation of the connection between Jewish Messianism and the libertarian utopia in Scholem, Benjamin and other Jewish thinkers, see my book, *Redemption and Utopia. Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990).

24. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 529.

25. Scholem, unpublished “Theses on the Concept of Justice.”



or after Benjamin's essay, "Towards a Critique of Violence," with which it shows obvious affinities (but undoubtedly differences as well).

Scholem seems to waver between two concepts of Messianism, the one primarily historical, the other primarily "esoteric." In the diary entries from 1919 he attempts to define them through the following concepts:

Two currents of Messianism can be differentiated theoretically as well as historically: a revolutionary current and a transformative current. The first one represents itself thus: the Messiah at the end of days, tremendous wars of Edom against Moab, Last Judgment = End of the World, return of souls in that world, equation of 'atid la-vo' [the future that is coming, messianic time] and 'olam ha-ba' [the future world, new creation]. Basis: a literal understanding of the future as empirical time.

The second says: cleansing of souls, completely internal transformation of nature, Last Judgment neutralized, in any case no end of the world, differentiation of 'atid la-vo' and 'olam ha-ba.'

Resultant: the end of days – today. That world is this world. Messianic future is not empirical future.<sup>26</sup>

This all-too analytical and somewhat stiff differentiation does not completely satisfy Scholem, and he quickly adds: "These notions are layered into infinitely many degrees."<sup>27</sup>

### ***Revolutionary Events and Messianism***

Scholem assesses the *revolutionary events* of his time, in particular *Bolshevism*, in close connection with Messianism.

Although he is by no means a follower of soviet communism, Scholem remains fascinated by the religious meaning of the events in Russia. In the 1918 essay "Bolshevism" (included in the collection "Esoterica-Metaphysica") he uses the concept (perhaps borrowed from Tolstoy?) of the "dictatorship of the poor":

Bolshevism has a central idea that confers on its movement a revolutionary magic. This is: the messianic realm can only be unfolded through the dictatorship of poverty. [...] This says: the judgement of the poor alone has revolutionary power.<sup>28</sup>

26. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 380.

27. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 38.

28. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 556.

Even when he endeavors to demarcate the messianic dimension of revolution (a sort of hubris) from that of Judaism, he still contrasts both of them with liberal and 'progressive' pseudorevolutions:

Revolution is there, where the messianic realm should be erected without doctrine. Ultimately there *can* be *no* revolution for the Jews. The Jewish revolution is solely a reconnection to doctrine. A revolution, that in any case points towards the messianic realm, like the Bolshevik or French revolution, must as a matter of principle be separated from the weak pseudorevolutions like that in Germany in 1848, that is centered by 'progress.'<sup>29</sup>

For Scholem, Bolshevism is a messianic reaction to the war. Although he also contrasts it with Zionism (that is, his own view of Zionism), which does not react to the war but rather turns away from it, he gives to understand that everyone who behaves *in* the world differently than the Zionist can only become a follower of Bolshevism.

In a section of the the diaries from 1918/1919 there is a definition that seems to bring communism and Jewish Messianism closer together rather than farther apart:

. . . Communism, which has a religious horizon, does not at all depend on the economy, but rather solely defines itself in its way from the relationship of the age to the messianic realm. And the messianic realm can in fact be erected today *hajom im be-kolo tischma'u* [today, if you hear his voice/obey my voice; Psalms 95.7, Sanhedrin 98 a].<sup>30</sup>

Strangely, Benjamin does not follow Scholem into this area. He only succumbs to a fascination with Bolshevism several years later, in 1923, thanks to the beautiful eyes of Asja Lacis . . .

### ***Scholem's Later Publications***

What concerned Scholem at the time found partial expression in the historical research that the scientist Scholem began publishing in 1923 since moving to Jerusalem. The majority of his work on the Kabbala in the 1920s and 1930s turned on the messianic-apocalyptic dimension of phenomena. These themes again also determined his first major work, which he dedicated to Walter Benjamin: *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (1941, dt. 1957). For the Kabbala, specifically in its

29. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 556.

30. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 374.

reinterpretation by Isaac Luria, the great teacher of the Safed school (Zfad, 16th century), the *tikkun*, the way to the end of all things, is simultaneously the way that leads back to the beginning. It brings with it a “restitution of the ideal condition” that is called the “Restoration of the original totality.”<sup>31</sup> The arrival of the messiah is the consummation of the *tikkun*, the “redemption” as “return of all things to their original contact with God.”<sup>32</sup> The *olam ha-tikkun* is thus the world of messianic restoration, the wiping away of dirt, the disappearance of evil.

Beginning in the 1950s Scholem is intensely interested in “heretical” messianic movements, in particular those brought into being by the “mystical messiah” of the seventeenth century, Sabbatai Zwi. In his monumental study from 1957 (written first in Hebrew) dedicated to Sabbatianism, the new “messiah” plays less of a central role than his central prophet and theologian, Nathan of Gaza, who was named *buzina kaddisha* by his adherents – the “holy lamp.” Scholem is fascinated by this strange figure and his divergent and surprising innovations: the idea of universal redemption of all sinners – due to the Sabbatai Messiah – without exception (even Jesus of Nazareth, who is finally given back to his people); or the pronouncement that with the messianic age comes the dominion of a new Tora, the Tora of the Tree of Life, which revokes all commandments and bans.<sup>33</sup> This doctrine is the source of that which Scholem calls the Sabbatonic *Antinomism* and its call for “religious anarchism.”

Somewhat later he studies the development of Sabbatianism in the eighteenth century under the leadership of the new Messiah Jakob Frank with the same regard. This is a movement fraught with a “nihilistic” view of redemption, which repudiates rules and laws of all sorts and strives for a sort of “anarchistic, earthly utopia.”<sup>34</sup>

Around this time – end of the 1950s – Scholem systematizes his theory of Jewish Messianism as *restorative-utopian doctrine* in his famous essay, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism”

31. Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihrem Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Alfred Metzner, 1957) – (Frankfurt/Main, 1980: seitenidentische TB-Edition) 294.

32. Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihrem Hauptströmungen* 301.

33. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah. 1626–1676* (Bollingen Series XCIII) (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973). In German as *Sabbatai Zwi. Der mystische Messias* (Frankfurt/Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1992) p207, 284–87.

34. Scholem, “Die Metamorphose des häretischen Messianismus der Sabbatianer im religiösen Nihilismus im 18. Jahrhundert” (1963), *Judaica* 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) 207, 217.

(1959). According to this essay, messianism in the Jewish tradition contains two closely connected and simultaneously contradictory tendencies: a *restorative* current, that tends towards the restoration of a past ideal condition, a lost golden age, a broken paradisaical harmony, and a *utopian* current that hopes for a completely new age, a future that has never been. The weight distribution between the two currents can fluctuate, but the messianic idea assumes shape only on the basis of a combination of both. They are inseparable by virtue of a dialectical relationship that Scholem admirably presented:

[ . . . ] even the restorative force has a utopian factor, and in utopianism restorative factors are at work.<sup>35</sup>

The completely new order has elements of the completely old, but even this old order does not consist of the actual past; rather it is a past transformed and transfigured in a dream brightened by the rays of utopianism.<sup>36</sup>

Scholem also accounts for the catastrophic and revolutionary essence of the messianic view of history:

Jewish messianism is, in its origins and by its nature – this cannot be sufficiently emphasized – a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future.<sup>37</sup>

Between present and future, the current decline and salvation, yawns an abyss; in many talmudic texts the idea emerges that the messiah will come only in an era of complete corruption and guilt. This rift cannot be overcome by ‘progress’ or ‘evolution’ – only revolutionary catastrophe, together with complete uprooting and total destruction of the existing order makes messianic redemption possible. The secularized messianism of 19th century liberal Jewish thought, – for which the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen is a good example – with its idea of unbroken progress and incremental perfection of humanity, has nothing to do with the tradition of prophets and Aggadists, for whom the coming of the

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35. Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 4.

36. Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism” 4.

37. Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism” 7.



messiah signifies an all-encompassing shock, a revolutionary storm:

The bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to the redemption. [. . .] It [redemption] is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion, in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source.<sup>38</sup>

One must realize that themes and interests in the thought of Scholem on Messianism are astonishingly continuous from his early years to his last writings: they run through his work like a leitmotif. Yet his stance is not merely that of an erudite historian of Jewish Messianism: one need only read his work carefully in order to recognize the *sympathy* – in the etymological sense of the greek word – of the researcher with his object.

*Translated by Michael Richardson*

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38. Scholem, "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism" 7. Scholem's critique of the elimination of the catastrophic dimension of Jewish Messianism and of its reduction to the notion of "eternal progress" of mankind is aimed explicitly at Hermann Cohen, but it seems to me that it is also polemically aimed at Joseph Klausner, his colleague at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and nationalist historian of Messianism, for whom "the quintessence of Jewish Messianism" represents "the ideal of unending progress, of continual spiritual development." See Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel from its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishna* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956).

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