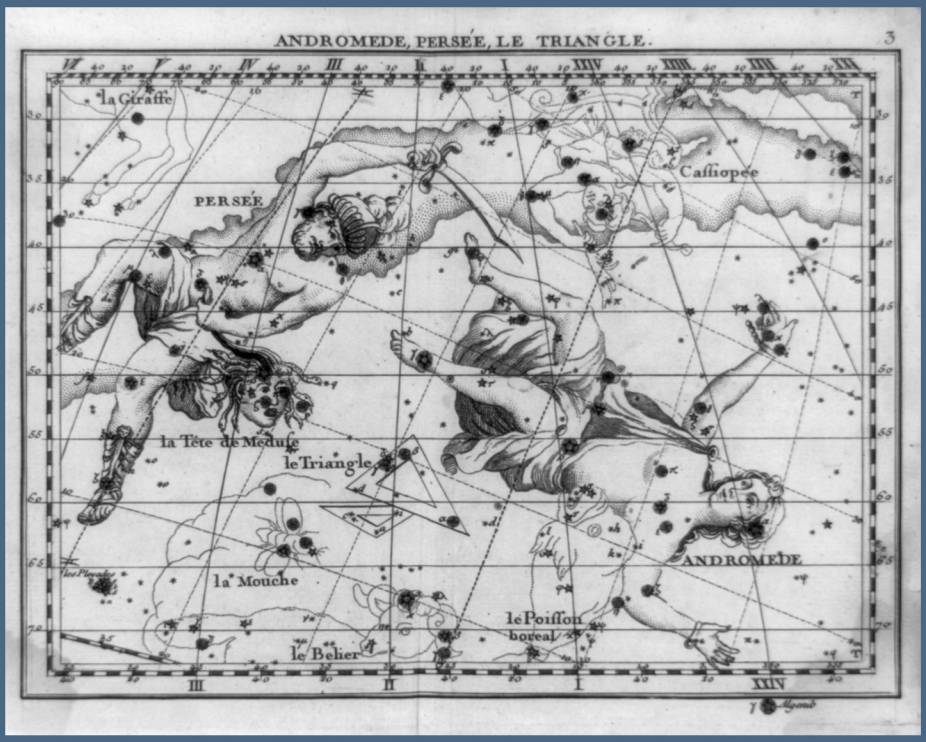
THINKING IN CONSTELLATIONS



Walter Benjamin in the Humanities

Edited by Nassima Sahraoui
and Caroline Sauter

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List of Abbreviations

Throughout this volume, all quotations from Walter Benjamin's work in German are taken from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften,* edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-1991), and will be abbreviated as GS.

Existing translations of Walter Benjamin's works into English are mostly taken from Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003), abbreviated as SW, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Modifications or re-translations are clearly indicated.

Translations from Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* into English are taken from Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), abbreviated as *Origin*, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Modifications or re-translations are clearly indicated.

Translations from Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* into English are taken from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), abbreviated as *AP*. Modifications or re-translations are clearly indicated.

For all other translations of Walter Benjamin's work into English, full references are given in the endnotes.

INTRODUCTION

THINKING IN CONSTELLATIONS: WALTER BENJAMIN IN THE HUMANITIES

NASSIMA SAHRAOUI, CAROLINE SAUTER

> *This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the subject in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in exactly this presence.*
> Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian"

> *Beunruhigung über die Zumutung an den Forschenden, die gelassene, kontemplative Haltung dem Gegenstand gegenüber aufzugeben, um der kritischen Konstellation sich bewußt zu werden, in der gerade dieses Fragment der Vergangenheit mit gerade dieser Gegenwart sich befindet.*
> Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker"

The concept of constellation is a prominent figure which is used in a variety of fields and contexts within the Humanities today. In fact, it has become seemingly fashionable to speak of a constellation of concepts, events, ideas, or any other kind of material, as manifested in the many recent publications featuring the term "constellation" in their title.[1] In its common usage, "constellation" usually defines a configuration of phenomena under specific spatial and temporal circumstances. In more concrete terms it is, of course, the formation of stars into a "star-image", or *Sternbild*, as the 20th century German-Jewish philosopher, art critic, and literary and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) would have it.

There is a notable, constant, and indeed programmatic reference to constellations, stars, and astrology throughout Benjamin's oeuvre: from the earliest to the latest writings, the repeated mentioning of stellar constellations in key texts of Benjamin's—such as, for instance, *Doctrine of the Similar* and *On the Mimetic Faculty*, his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to his *Trauerspiel* book, the so-called *Baudelaire Book*, or the *Arcades Project*—relates two essential

aspects of Benjamin's work to the notion of constellation: his poetics of reading and writing, and his philosophical method. In both instances, the constellation is an instantaneous, relational figure of epistemological, historico-political, and literary objects. Just like a constellation in astronomy, however, this figure is defined by the relation of the individual objects to each other and to the viewer; and it can be grasped only instantaneously and only from a specific viewer's standpoint. And just as the ever-changing stars of a stellar constellation never stand still, the movement of reading or writing—or, for that matter, thinking—never becomes fixated; rather, reading and writing as well as thinking are constantly in movement. Thinking in constellations therefore expresses Benjamin's method in general: it poses and answers the question of how to adequately approach epistemological, phenomenological, and literary problemata *with* and *against* its respective tradition.

"Ideas are eternal constellations," Benjamin famously writes in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to his study on the German baroque mourning-play; and he continues: "by virtue of the elements being gathered as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and saved at the same time."[2] Benjamin's attempt at "saving the phenomena" from any "contemplative attitude," and his endeavour to set them into a "critical constellation," which he later frames in his essay on the German art collector and historian Eduard Fuchs that we opened our introduction with,[3] alludes to and stands in line with a grand astronomical and philosophical search: namely, the centuries-long quest for explaining the irregular movements of the stars, and the subsequent dispute about how to "save the phenomena". How is it possible, astronomers and philosophers alike asked time and time again, that the stars—being perfect formations from the gods' or God's hands—do not circle the cosmological firmament in perfect and regular trajectories?[4] With all sorts of scientific, astronomic, and esoteric methods, the Ancients tried to attribute these irregularities to the distorted perception of man, rather than to the dynamics of nature itself. It was only with the beginning of the revolutionary renewals in modern science that the stars were not seen as divine entities anymore. Only then was it possible to relate man's perception to the things, and to develop methods and concepts that could be verified in reality. The things, therefore, were turned into objects of man's perception and man's thinking, and not least, the language of man, that Walter Benjamin so famously engages with in his 1916 essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*.

In another passage from the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, Benjamin draws an analogy between ideas and constellations, and between things

and stars: "Ideas are related to things like constellations are to stars."[5] Here, he not only inverts Plato's doctrine of forms, according to which ideas or forms are archetypes or pre-images, and thus the only everlasting and true realities, whereas things are only their mere likeness, but moreover, he goes beyond the concrete philosophical, and also beyond the common understanding of constellation. As the contributions in this volume elucidate, a constellation, for Benjamin, is not only a fixed concept, and it is not only a metaphor, or a manner of speaking, nor is it just a random motif among others. Rather, it is—perhaps quite idiosyncratically—his name for a specific movement of thought and a specific method of (non-)presentation that challenges the very assumptions and conventions of reading, writing and thinking that the Humanities are based on—most clearly, of course, the conventions of progress, progression, and linearity. Benjamin's constellations are therefore best understood as crystallised "thought-images" that defer rigorous conventions, and lead us to a critical standpoint, allowing us to transcend the borders of reading and writing, and not least of thinking, thus creating an essential and indeed programmatic openness.

This constellatory poetics of transience, of openness and non-linearity, can be discerned throughout Benjamin's entire work, and it is as much a part of his aesthetics as it is a part of his philosophy of history and of his theory of the narrative.[6] In this vein, constellations challenge the very self-conception of the text-based disciplines in the humanities: Benjamin's notorious demand for "brushing history against the grain" in the seventh of his theses on the *Concept of History*[7] indeed implies a practice of reading, writing and thinking that does not necessarily favour the established notion of linearity. Nor does it favour the notion of processuality or chronology of history as such. Rather, it promotes the deferral, disfigurement, and disruption of any linear thinking "ad infinitum," as Benjamin writes in the famous Convolute N on epistemology of the *Arcades Project*, "until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis."[8]

Therefore, Benjamin's use of constellation as a method or as an "epistemological principle"[9] is in no way meant metaphorically. Rather, constellation *is* Benjamin's method of reading, writing and philosophising. It is true that Benjamin "pioneered modes of critical reading,"[10] such as the constellation, in which past and present intersect and in which a new, critical insight emerges in a momentary instance. This critical insight, for Benjamin, means to "grasp the constellation"—an instantaneous act that has tremendous consequences for our perception of time: it leads to a "justification" and "foundation" of our concept of the present as now-time (*Jetztzeit*).[11] It is, therefore, an insight that exceeds and supplements the

concept of constellation, by working through it, to paraphrase Adorno's famous postulate in his *Negative Dialectics*.[12] In this sense, tracing constellations in and with Walter Benjamin is in itself both a historical task, and a critical endeavour.

Benjamin's insistence on not "keeping step" with the rhythm of the present and the contemporary, and his move to disfigure it, and hence to form new "critical constellations" whenever possible, becomes in this volume the point of departure for discussing a topic more than relevant to the current state of the Humanities. The following contributions trace critical and constellatory thinking, reading, and writing, in linking Benjamin's philosophical, cultural, and literary observations to the reflections of other prominent thinkers, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Sigmund Freud, or Gottfried E. Leibniz, as well as writers or poets, such as W. G. Sebald, Franz Kafka, or Carlos Martínez Rivas. Thus, they cover wide-ranging, diverse fields of knowledge—for instance, quantum physics, postcolonial studies, natural philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism, film theory, and the arts—, hence taking a decidedly interdisciplinary point of view. And all contributions—in one way or another—provide us with enlightening insights into the manifold possibilities of becoming aware of the "critical constellations" in Benjamin's work and beyond, insofar as they themselves operate according to a constellatory logic.

Finally, thinking *in* constellations with Walter Benjamin consists in "collecting and juxtaposing apparently disparate ideas and concepts for the purpose of mutual illumination."[13] Hence, thinking (in) constellations, in the last instance, might lead us towards a new, critical, understanding of the task of the Humanities today.

The Starry Skies of Philosophy: Physics and Psychoanalysis

The two contributions in the opening section both operate in-between academic disciplines in order to clarify Benjamin's use of both the concept and the *praxis* of constellation. In so doing, both papers become a sort of constellation both in themselves and with each other, revealing surprising insights into the nature of textual reading in Benjamin, and its relation to other fields of knowledge, such as philosophy, physics or psychoanalysis.

ERIC KLIGERMAN focuses on a specific constellation between literature, natural science, and philosophy of history: his paper examines how Benjamin's philosophy of history turns to the concepts of quantum thought. Benjamin finds in the quantum an epistemic model that challenges classical concepts of time, space, and causality associated with

Newtonian physics, which also influenced Kantian philosophy. By developing the undercurrents that Benjamin discerns between quantum physics and Kafka, Kligerman reveals how quantum thought provides Benjamin with the necessary elements to reconceptualise such classical concepts of time, space, and causality that have governed the writing of history, focusing on Benjamin's analysis of the Kafkan figure "Odradek."

ADAM LIPSZYC discusses Benjamin in constellation with Freudian psychoanalysis: he brings together Benjamin's ideas of constellation and name on the one hand, and Freud's ideas concerning the text of the dream and the nature of the drive on the other. He argues that if Freud's theory of the drive and of dreams is coupled with Benjamin's theory of constellation and the name, then the Benjaminian name can be understood as the locus of desire appearing as the navel of the dream decomposed into a constellation in the process of critical reading.

A Firmament of Ideas: Language and Perception

The *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to Benjamin's *Habilitation* thesis on the German baroque mourning play, the so-called *Trauerspiel* book, is the point of departure for the two papers in this section dealing with the specifically philosophical implications of Benjamin's notion of constellation in his thinking on language and perception. Both papers in this section therefore focus on Benjamin's doctrine of ideas and its relation to constellations.

In the *Prologue*, Benjamin argues that ideas are to phenomena as constellations are to stars, or that ideas represent the phenomena by determining the nexus of their relations. PAULA SCHWEBEL's contribution aims to give a decidedly philosophical interpretation of those contentions in Benjamin's figure of the constellation. She argues that Benjamin's analogy draws on a Leibnizian notion of expression, and she elucidates the connections between Benjamin's "monadic" theory of ideas and the implicit "expressionism" underlying his notion of constellations. More specifically, she understands Benjamin's ideas not as Platonic or Kantian, but rather as Leibnizian monads, and hence, she argues for a Leibnizian interpretation of the constellation as an idea's phenomenal expression, in Leibniz's sense of this term.

In the *Prologue*, Benjamin also posits that ideas are essentially linguistic in nature. TOM VANDEPUTTE's text departs from the Benjaminian contention of the linguistic nature of ideas, which he understands as a challenge to philosophers to read texts properly in order to represent their ideas, and he then traces a theory of reading in Benjamin's early writings

on language until the *Trauerspiel* book. Benjamin himself connects the element of language, such as the word, with astronomical images, such as the sun, and Vandeputte underlines in his close reading how *Deutung* and *Bedeutbarkeit* form a theory of interpretation that resembles Benjamin's constellatory notion of the idea in the *Prologue*.

Capitalism's Mourning Play and the Rags of History

For Benjamin, historical action takes place in the form of a constellation. Since historical time, for Benjamin, is not conceived of in a linear fashion, but in the constellation of things past and present, the fleeting moments of this constellation reveal, in an instant of insight, a momentary call to historical (and political) action. The two papers in the third section address the question of historical time inherent in Benjamin's notion of constellation from the point of view of his later writings, mostly the *Arcades Project*, and the so-called Baudelaire book, revealing a specific poetics prevalent in Benjamin's writings.

Departing from the (Kantian) notion of "historical signs" and the notions of legibility and signification connected with it, YANIK AVILA's paper goes back to a well-known note in the *Arcades Project* about the structure of dialectical images, where the "death of intention" coincides with real historical time, indicating a focal point within the problematic of natural history. Drawing upon Benjamin's elaboration of this problematic, Adorno in his essay *The Idea of Natural History* points out that the dialectical interlacing of the philosophical concepts of nature and history in Benjamin's thought is to be conceived of not as a "synthesis of natural and historical methods but rather as a change of perspective." Avila's paper examines the poetological consequences of this "change of perspective". Coming from a Marxian perspective, he concentrates specifically on the context of Benjamin's constellation of baroque allegory with the modern commodity structure, and insists on the connection between allegory and *praxis*, in "*making* history".

The Marxian context, and especially Marx's notion of the *Lumpenproletariat*, is equally decisive for SAEIN PARK's contribution. Departing from a critique of the prevalent notion of "collective identity" in the Humanities today, she constellates collecting-related terms in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* from the early 1920s with Benjamin's depictions of 19th century rag collectors in the *Arcades* and the Baudelaire material from the late 1930s. Her contribution therefore is a constellation in a two-fold sense: for one, she reads two work phases of Benjamin's together (and together with Marx), in order to enhance their mutual

enlightenment, and on the other hand, she is concerned with the notion of constellation as a mode of collecting and collectivity, and their surprising connection with agriculture. Her constellatory approach demonstrates how Benjamin's constellation of archival material, comments and fragments surrounding the figure of the rag collector constitute a poetics that potentially critiques political-philosophical theories of collectivity, as prevalent in contemporary discourse.

Directing Constellations: Film and Art

Thinking (in) constellations with Walter Benjamin also implies to take his analyses of mass media and the modern urban landscape of his lifetime seriously. Elements of mass culture, such as movies or panoramas, form the primal scene of constellatory practices in Benjamin's oeuvre. This is what the two contributions in the fourth section demonstrate.

BENJAMIN BREWER argues for an understanding of the constellation in Benjamin as a "distracted image:" an image in which each point of the constellation, including the one from which one is attempting to view the constellation, is scattered and dispersed. Following Benjamin's considerations in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* and related texts, Brewer traces the connection between the decline of the aura, distraction and experience in Benjamin's writings on film and other mass cultural phenomena, and concludes with an analysis of historical time and critical action: if the constellation—as demonstrated in his analysis of movies—is always a bringing-together, a standing-in a particular historical moment, then it is only on the basis of this scattering that the task of Benjamin's historical materialist—the recognition and reading of such constellations—is made urgent or even necessary.

CARLO SALZANI's paper examines a concrete example of Benjamin's readings of contemporary mass culture: namely, his preoccupation with Mickey Mouse, the controversial American cartoon mouse hero, in the 1930s. It is little known that Benjamin collected newspaper clippings about Disney and Mickey Mouse throughout the 1930s, that demonstrate his careful attention towards the mass cultural phenomena of his lifetime. Within the context of capitalist modernity, Benjamin's writings on Mickey Mouse reveal what Salzani calls a "posthuman constellation," namely a form of imagination that does not rest on experience alone, and a form of being in which clear-cut demarcations, such as the human-animal divide, are loosened.

Reading (in) Constellations

The fifth and final section of this volume focuses on the aspect of reading in Benjamin's notion of constellation, which has become apparent as the red threat running through the different academic disciplines that are concerned with Benjamin's notion of constellation. However, reading is here understood in a more Benjaminian sense: as reading images as well as texts.

JAVIER PADILLA's contribution opens up a constellation towards the post-colonial discourse on art: Padilla attempts to inscribe Benjamin's theories of modernity in the *Arcades Project* into the accelerated processes of modernisation which took place in the "Third World" during the last decades of the 20th century. By reading photographs by Susan Meiselas and Alberto Trobat, and the poetry of the Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas in constellation with Benjamin and Baudelaire, his essay works through the logic of temporal and spatial superimposition, and elaborates a poetics of exclusion as a tentative discourse on the utopian potential of the photographic image. He argues that as poets, Baudelaire and Martínez Rivas foreground this process of social and poetic superimposition, and produce lyrical traces which recycle and re-inscribe—however tenuously—the gaze of the excluded.

Along the lines of including the excluded, NIKOLAI PREUSCHOFF's paper follows one of the most important, but yet not entirely researched constellations in German post-war literature: W. G. Sebald's reading of the works of Walter Benjamin. Like Benjamin, Sebald connects past and present, documentary and fiction, and different genres and media, like photography and film, in his prose fiction. Preuschoff analyses this interrelation of those two relations as a constellation in itself. Specifically, he demonstrates how Benjamin's unorthodox, poetic form of philosophising, and his "thinking in extremes," is most significant for Sebald's prose and poetry, resulting in a writing style that Preuschoff calls "writing *with* Walter Benjamin."

*

We have chosen to combine the contributions in such a way that they themselves would function as a constellation and reveal new insights by looking at things from a different angle. Thus, we hope, the various contributions demonstrate how the critical potential of constellation can provide a way of thinking, reading, and writing in many fields and disciplines within the Humanities today.

The idea and the initial impulse for this collection of essays on Walter Benjamin goes back to a seminar at the American Comparative Literature Association's Annual Meeting at the University of Toronto in 2013 where we co-chaired a seminar called *Benjamin's Constellations*. The lively discussions and the illuminating convergences—as well as the striking differences—between each of the very divergent interdisciplinary presentations gave rise to the idea of publishing its proceedings. However, as constellations do, things changed—and therefore, some of the papers presented in this volume were actually talks at the 2013 ACLA seminar, while other contributions were added at a later point to form a new constellatory setting. We would like to thank all authors of our volume for their wonderful and thought-provoking contributions.

Nassima Sahraoui, Caroline Sauter
May 2018

Notes

[1] For examples from Walter Benjamin studies, see, for instance, Graeme Gilloch's *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), James McFarland's *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); or Angeliki Spiropoulou's *Virginia Woolf, Modernity, and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), as well as, among others, Carla Milani Dimião, "Women as Constellation in Walter Benjamin's Aesthetics," *Estetyka y Krytyka* 41:2 (2016): 119-134; Jack Wong, "Remapping the Constellation of Walter Benjamin's Allegorical Method," *American, British and Canadian Studies* 25:1 (2015): 37-59; Bettine Menke, "Ornament, Constellation, Flurries," in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, edited by Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 260-276; or Carlo Salzani, *Constellations of Reading. Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality* (Oxford/New York: Peter Lang 2008)

[2] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; cp. Benjamin, *Urspung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, GS I.1, 215.

[3] "This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the subject in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in exactly this presence." (Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," SW 3, 262) Cf. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker," GS II.2, 467-468.

[4] An overview about very old discussion about how to "save the phenomena"—a *terminus technicus* in epistemology and the histories of philosophy and sciences for the Greek σῴζειν τὰ φαινόμενα—can be found in Pierre Hadot's study *The Veil*

of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature, translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), 162-165.
[5] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; cp. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, GS I.1, 214.
[6] For the aesthetic aspect, see Dimião, "Women as Constellation," 131f.; and for the aspect of philosophy of history, see McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin*, 4f.; Spiropoulou, *Constellations with Walter Benjamin*, esp. 8f.
[7] See Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," SW 4, 392.
[8] Benjamin, *AP*, 459; cp. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS V.1 (N1a, 3).
[9] Dimião, "Women as Constellation," 120.
[10] Gilloch, *Critical Constellations*, 6.
[11] Benjamin, "Addendum to *On the Concept of History*," GS I.2, 704; SW 4, 397.
[12] Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge 1973), 13-15.
[13] Gilloch, *Critical Constellations*, 235.

I

THE STARRY SKIES OF PHILOSOPHY: PHYSICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

FROM KANT'S STARRY SKIES TO KAFKA'S ODRADEK: WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE QUANTUM OF HISTORY

ERIC KLIGERMAN

In his pithy description of the trajectory of modern physics, Niels Bohr, one of the fathers of quantum thought, employs the structure of a Talmudic parable to convey its various stages of development:

> A young rabbinical student went to hear three lectures by a famous rabbi. Afterwards he told his friends: The first talk was brilliant, clear and simple. I understood every word. The second was even better, deep and subtle. I didn't understand much, but the rabbi understood all of it. The third was by far the finest, a great and unforgettable experience. I understood nothing and the rabbi didn't understand much either.[1]

Moving in his analogy from Newtonian physics to Einstein's relativity theory, Bohr ends with the mystifying thoughts of quantum physics. Despite being an unforgettable experience, the student fails to grasp the counter-intuitive ideas behind the quantum realm. While Bohr strove to find the proper language to articulate the meaning behind its enigmas, Albert Einstein repeatedly scoffed at what he derided as an incomplete field. Comparing quantum mechanics to Talmudic thought, yet in a pejorative manner, Einstein critiqued Bohr's atomic theory, and described Bohr as a "Talmudic philosopher who doesn't give a hoot for reality."[2] Einstein wrote many terse statements repudiating the apparent success of quantum physics, most famously arguing, "God does not play dice." According to Einstein, physics "should represent a reality in time and space, free from spooky action at a distance." [3] With this three-pronged critique of the quantum—a Talmudic-like dice game with spooky results—Einstein rejects how quantum physics subverts an objective image within the quantum system through the dismissal of the fundamental laws of time, space and causality.

Similar to how both physicists use Talmudic analogies to approach quantum thought's mysterious concepts, Walter Benjamin also forms a link between the Talmud and quantum physics by expounding on how

these paths cross in Franz Kafka's literary universe. In the following study, I examine some of the fundamental concepts of quantum physics in relation to Benjamin's philosophy of history and his analyses of Kafka, which he was developing alongside one another throughout the 1930s. First, I explore how Benjamin, during the outbreak of the First World War, focuses on the limits of Newtonian physics in his critique of Kant's model of experience. The classical structures of time and space, upon which Kant develops his epistemic model, undergo radical transformations in light of the discoveries of modern physics and the war's violent shocks.

Afterwards, I show how Benjamin's "Copernican turn of remembrance" eclipses the narrative of historical progress that had been inscribed upon the Enlightenment's constellations.[4] Benjamin both includes and dismantles Kant's astral metaphor regarding "*the starry skies above and the moral law inside me.*"[5] Kant's turn to the cosmos figures prominently throughout his writings and materialises in his earliest work on cosmogony through his critiques of epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. Ultimately, these stars—signifying rationality, morality and the sublime—appear in his later writings; astral imagery adorns Kant's narrative linking reason and progress in his philosophy of history.

Benjamin, Kant and Quantum Thought

Challenging Kant as the touchstone to studies on reason, Benjamin shatters Kant's totem-like status by turning to Kafka. Abandoning the sublime heights of Kant's heliotropes, Benjamin supplants these stars with the disfigured and hybrid creatures that inhabit Kafka's literature, such as Gregor Samsa, the Hunter Gracchus, Red Peter and, central to my analysis, Odradek. In turn, Benjamin associates these figures with a quantum strangeness. Benjamin finds in Kafka's poetics an epistemology that challenges the concepts of time, space and causality associated with Newtonian physics, which had governed Kant's notions of reason and historical progress. As Benjamin rejects the pre-determined conception of how history progresses toward a rational future, he replaces 19th century paradigms of history with models based on discontinuity and catastrophe.

I propose to read Benjamin as a quantum physicist of history, who employs Kafka's parables as ready-made thought experiments that help him illumine a theory of history that responds to modernity's shocks.[6] Challenging the prevalent narratives of 19th century historiography that purport to show how Western culture's trajectory is marked by progress, Benjamin departs from Kant's moral law as the cornerstone to historical progress and declares that Kafka is the new "Categorical Imperative."[7]

Benjamin's use of the following phrases and motifs in his *Arcades Project* and Kafka study—"the past casts a light," "flashing up," "blasting out of continuity," "interference," "ultraviolet light," "atomic fission," "superposition," "incomprehension," "complementarity," and the image of a sealed box that produces a mixture of states—resonate with imagery from quantum physics. In the interplay between quantum thought and Kafka's literature, Benjamin sketches the template to his philosophy of history, which displaces not only positivistic historicism and classical determinism, but also the metaphoric implications behind Kant's stars that point to the moral law, sublimity and historical progress.

Just as the modern physicist attempts to re-think the fundamental laws of physics in relation to discoveries within the microcosmic world, Benjamin challenges his readership to re-conceptualise the task of the historian in light of the catastrophic disruptions of the early 20th century associated with the First World War, technological changes, the modern cityscape and fascism's growing terror. Like our encounter with the quantum's unfathomable world, modernity's shocks impact our ability to articulate and comprehend these moments of historical disruption. Since the classical modes of understanding and representation provide insufficient recourse to our engagement with the past's relation to the present, Benjamin gleans within the quantum sphere the necessary elements to reconceptualise the classical structures of time, space and causality that had governed the 19th century historiographic model.

In particular, Benjamin gravitates to the critiques of language and modes of representation that are central to quantum thought. The following passage from the physicist Leopold Infeld conveys how the inscrutable nature behind the quantum world is linked to the linguistic restrictions that anchored the debates surrounding quantum phenomena:

> But what is light really? Is it a wave or a shower of photons? There seems no likelihood for forming a consistent description of the phenomena of light by a choice of only one of the two languages […]. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.[8]

While we can switch back and forth between the two perspectives of whether light is a wave or particle, we cannot simultaneously occupy these two viewpoints. Nonetheless, light *is* both a wave and particle. In contradistinction to Newtonian physics, an objective description of subatomic phenomena is incompatible within the quantum realm: our depiction of reality wavers between two possible modes of representation. Such concepts as space-time location (the particle's position) and energy-

momentum (the particle's trajectory), key elements in the unified picture from classical physics, cannot be synthesised simultaneously into a clear picture in quantum mechanics.

"When it comes to atoms," Bohr writes, "the language that must be used is the language of poetry […]. Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real."[9] In order to find an adequate form of expression for the quantum, Bohr suggests that we turn to fields outside of science to see how such thinkers as Buddha and Laotse engaged with epistemic quandaries pertaining to reality. Moving away from the language of physics, Bohr's words approach mysticism as he describes how,

> [w]e must in fact turn to quite other branches of science, such as psychology, or even to that kind of epistemological problems with which already thinkers like Buddha and Laotse have been confronted […]. Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real.[10]

Bohr's references to Talmudic thought and Eastern philosophy are reminiscent of how Benjamin interprets Kafka's *Great Wall of China*, where he describes the meeting in "the field of force between Torah and Tao." Comparing the interplay between Jewish and Eastern thoughts in Kafka's literature to atomic phenomena (*Kräftefeld*), Benjamin juxtaposes *Das Talmuddorf* to Laotse.[11]

After examining his letter exchange with Gershom Scholem from June 11, 1938, where Benjamin conjoins quantum physics and Kafka's literature by invoking Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Bohr's complementarity theory, my analysis of Benjamin, Kafka and modern physics will centre on one of Kafka's most quantum-like figures, Odradek, whom Kafka describes in *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* (*Cares of a Family Man*) as a "star-like spool of thread."[12] In his notes to the 1935 exposé on the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin includes Odradek under the title of the "dialectical schemata" for his study of history.[13] If, as I suggest, Odradek both invokes quantum behaviour and is a template for Benjamin's historical method, then I will demonstrate how Benjamin's model of history bears the hallmarks of quantum physics.[14] Attempting to formulate a new methodology for the study of history that rejects both a deterministic representation of events and narratives of progress, Benjamin finds the necessary elements in the crossing of Kafka and quantum thought to rethink such classical notions as the structure of time, space, experience and causality that governed the writing of history throughout the 19th century.

Kant and The Ethical Side of History

As the First World War was decimating Europe, Benjamin rebuffed Kant's conception of history in a 1917 letter to Gershom Scholem, claiming that it failed to disclose, "the ethical side of history."[15] In *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy* (1918), Benjamin postpones his analysis of the relation between Kant and history. Instead, he centres his critique on Kant's notion of experience by probing how Kantian epistemology relied on the tenets of classical physics. Before he can dismantle Kant's conceptualisation of history, Benjamin explores the components behind the evolving concept of experience within the context of modern science.

In his re-evaluation of Kant's notions of empirical reality and experience, Benjamin focuses on Kant's reliance on Newtonian physics:

> Kant wanted to take the principles of experience from the sciences, especially mathematical physics, and yet from the very beginning, and even in the *Critique of Reason*, experience itself and unto itself was never identical with the object realm of that science [...]. The very fact that Kant was able to commence his immense work under *the constellation of the Enlightenment* indicates that his work was undertaken on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance.[16]

According to Kant, whenever an event is observed in time and space, we can intuit that it originates from a preceding event. But while the law of causality along with the notions of time and space are the cornerstones to both classical physics and Kantian metaphysics, these *a priori* concepts of supposed absolute truths collapse in relation to modern physics. By critiquing the Newtonian facets behind Kant's idea of experience, Benjamin's aim is not to dismiss categorically a scientific conception of the world. Rather, wishing to show that our perspective of modern experience is incomplete, Benjamin tries to re-configure an understanding of time and space so that he can access these new experiences within modernity. Abandoning the rigidity of Kant's spatial-temporal categories, Benjamin writes, "[i]t is a question of finding, on the basis of Kantian typology this future metaphysics, *this higher experience*."[17] Benjamin describes how Kant's idea of experience is a nadir, for it is fixed to the Enlightenment's epistemic principles, specifically Newton's categories of space and time, which preclude for Benjamin not just theological and mystical experiences, but also the shocks associated with war, the modern cityscape and technology.

Before returning to Benjamin's concluding thoughts in *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy*, I will examine the significance of

his term "constellation of the Enlightenment" in relation to Kant. In an interesting turn of phrase Benjamin inverts the heights of the constellation—a term that will play a key role throughout his oeuvre—into a *Nullpunkt* (nadir).[18] In his critiques of German Idealism, Benjamin references several times Kant's emblematic starry skies. Within the context of German philosophy, there is perhaps no passage more renowned than the one that appears at the end of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, where he writes: "Two things fill the heart with renewed and increasing awe and reverence the more often and the more steadily that they are meditated on: the starry skies above me and the moral law inside me."[19] Kant's astral metaphor projects a scene of ethical transcendence that is situated not in the heavens above, but is located within the depths of the subject. As the expanse of nature threatens to annihilate the subject, she avoids a self-eradication by turning inward to the moral law and is thus elevated by the faculty of reason. In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant will name this caesura between the senses and the expanding imagination "the sublime."[20] Although we cannot fully grasp the magnitude of the heavens through sensory apprehension, the fear of annihilation turns to pleasure as we behold the sublimity coming from within ourselves through our "supersensible vocation," that is, from the moral law.[21]

Kant re-inscribes these stars and notion of progress in his concluding studies on the philosophy of history. Again, these stars shed light on how the unfolding of history is a narrative of progress that results in the subject's moral transcendence. In *Is the Human Race Progressing?*, Kant asks if we could approach historical events as if they were constellations whose signs would augur a narrative of moral progress.[22] Kant now locates the sublime affect of awe and wonder not within our disrupted experience with the stars, but within history, specifically the French Revolution. However, Kant is not interested in the event itself, but instead investigates the effects it has on those who witness the revolution from afar. Questioning whether one can locate a moral character of humanity by examining the reactions of spectators to paradigm shifts in history, Kant intuits a moral disposition in those who view the revolution from a distance. The historical witness is overcome with awe, enthusiasm and empathy as the revolution's participants display their yearnings for freedom and desire to establish a new system of law. By studying the effects that the revolution had on its non-participants, Kant uncovers the very signs that predict a movement toward progress in his analysis of history.

Contrary to the promise inscribed in the Enlightenment's cosmos, Benjamin juxtaposes his multiple references to Kant's stars to the

disruption of experience in modernity, which has not led to an age of reason within history, but rather to catastrophic violence. At the end of *One-Way Street (*1927) and *Theories of German Fascism* (1930), Benjamin positions Kant's stars alongside the horrors of The First World War. In the final stop of *One-Way Street,* Benjamin concludes with his image of the planetarium (*Zum Planetarium*) in order to connote the supposed path of progress. Yet despite this closing image, Benjamin describes a world that has been disenchanted through scientific discoveries and political violence.

The planetarium's technological developments have not only demystified the heavens; the lost mystical encounter with the cosmos is also replaced with an extreme earthly violence that discloses the Enlightenment's illusion of progress. Benjamin warns us: "It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights."[23] In this oblique reference to Kant, modernity replaces the once mystical experience with the stars with a desire to master nature through technology. Unlike the ancient Greeks and Jews, who shared an intimate relation with the stars that he labels "a cosmic experience (*Erfahrung*)," Benjamin demarcates a schism between how the ancient and modern worlds encounter the cosmos.[24] While the relation of the ancients to the stars begins with an ecstatic union with the heavens, this experience fades in modernity. The ancient "*Lehre*" (doctrine)—Benjamin conjoins Hillel's Jewish doctrine with the Greeks—undergoes dissolution.[25] As the individual's abilities to measure and probe deeper into the mysteries of the heavens expand, the mystical and theological experiences diminish. The starry skies no longer compel the spectator to turn inward to the moral law, but instead Benjamin discerns our self-destructive drive to control the natural world through technology.

A few years later in his study on Ernst Jünger's literature, Benjamin develops his analysis of the evacuation of meaning behind Kant's stars in relation to the war. Benjamin writes:

> As far as it was possible to look beyond the edge of the trench, the surroundings had become the terrain of German Idealism itself, every shell crater a problem, every wire entanglement an antinomy, every barb a definition, each explosion an axiom, and the sky overhead during the day was the cosmic inside of the steel helmet, at night the moral law above you.[26]

As the Enlightenment's promises collapse on the battlefields, modern warfare converts the landscape into a metaphysical problem. Opening up a

new space of writing, Kant's stars are now violently carved into the landscape through technology's disastrous effects. In Benjamin's inverted reading of the interplay between heaven and earth, the battlefield becomes the new theoretical space of moral reflection; our contemplation of stars shifts to shell craters and explosions. Benjamin's Copernican turn reverses Kant's statement about the "starry skies above and the moral law within." No longer conjoined to this inward space of reason, but now observed in the skies etched with the synthetic stellar projections of artillery, the moral law is replaced by the sway that technological violence has over the human condition and earthly domain.

Keeping in mind Benjamin's references to doctrine (*Lehre*), Kantian thought and modern experience in the aftermath of the First World War, I now return to the end of *On the Programme to the Coming Philosophy*, where Benjamin concludes his analysis of a new metaphysics of experience by reflecting on the interplay between knowledge, language and doctrine. Benjamin insists that the new experience should be found,

> [B]y relating knowledge to language […] that all philosophical knowledge *has its unique expression in language* […]. The demand upon the philosophy of the future can finally be put in these words: to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, *of which the knowledge is the doctrine*.[27]

Although he does not explicitly mention the war, Benjamin's struggles with how the concepts of experience and knowledge are radically altered in light of the shocks of modern warfare, which are surely influencing his thoughts on the transformation of representing experience.[28] Just as he reconfigures Kant's stars in the above passage, Benjamin also uses Kantian concepts (antinomy, axiom and moral law) to underscore how these very terms cannot withstand the seismic shifts of catastrophic history. The diminishing of experience and knowledge within modernity must correspond to a new doctrine of knowledge, one that is itself based on a unique model of signification. In his search for a new doctrine, we recall how the ancient doctrine attached to the stars dissolved in *Zum Planetarium*, where its loss was associated with Copernicus' discoveries, Kant's philosophy, and the effects of war and technology on experience. Our epistemic relation to how we experience a transforming reality necessitates a new form of representation.

Benjamin locates his linguistic mode of expression for both this higher experience and ethical side of history in Kafka's parabolic language. If, as Bertrand Russell claims, Einstein's physics requires "a change in our imaginative picture of the world," Kafka's universe is a supplement to the

paradigm shifts unfolding within modernity.[29] The spatial-temporal shifts in modern physics find a correspondence in Kafka's poetics, and Benjamin writes in his notes, "*Kafkas Aufzeichnungen stehen zur geschichtlichen Erfahrung wie die nichteuklidische Geometrie zur empirischen*."[30] ("Kafka's sketches adhere to the historical experience like non-Euclidean geometry adheres to the empirical.") As Newton's rigid model of the universe was being replaced with one that was elastic and subject to distortions of time and the curving of space, the reliance on Euclidean space begins to unravel within this new paradigm. Similar to how Einstein describes measuring rods contracting and clocks decelerating as we near light speed, Kafka dismisses Newton's picture of absolute time and space, and constructs a non-Euclidian poetics that re-configures the space-time relation. Challenging his readers to enter this new realm of signification, Kafka provides Benjamin with the very interplay between experience, language and doctrine that he sought in the conclusion of *On the Programme to the Coming Philosophy*.

Kafka's Quantum World

In 1938, as he was constructing a philosophy of history in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin was also engaged in a letter exchange with Gershom Scholem on Kafka. Juxtaposing Kafka with allusions to classical and modern physics, Benjamin describes in his 11th June letter how Kafka's literature operates like the two points of an ellipse: the mystical experience from Jewish *kabbalah* is juxtaposed to the experience of the modern city-dweller.[31] A correspondence opens up with Benjamin's visit to the planetarium in *One-Way Street*, where the loss of the mystical experience attributed to the ancients is replaced by the shocks of the modern metropolis and the battlefields of the First World War. With his clarification that "by the modern city dweller I also mean the modern physicist,"[32] Benjamin discerns a parallel between the city's shocks and the new conceptual terrain of quantum physics. Echoing the philosophy of history that he was formulating in the *Arcades*, Benjamin describes how a new world of experience opens up in the shocks of the city, in theoretical physics and in military technology.[33]

In addition to containing references to the classical laws of physics from Kepler and Newton as revealed in his use of such terms as "ellipse" and "foci," Benjamin also employs concepts from modern physics, including allusions to Einstein's relativity theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Bohr's concept of complementarity. In a fascinating part of the letter Benjamin includes a passage from the British astronomer Arthur

Eddington. Although the passage begins with images from cosmology, Eddington eventually moves into the microcosmic realm of the material world as he describes the nature of subatomic particles. Illustrating a scene filled with spatial anxiety attributed to the laws of classical physics, relativity theory and quantum mechanics, Eddington depicts how a physicist crosses a threshold into a room: "I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business."[34] He goes on to describe complex processes from classical and modern physics, including the speed of the earth's rotation around the sun and the atomic particles that comprise the floors we step across. In short, Eddington transforms the crossing of a doorway into a mystical experience.

Referring to Eddington's passage, Benjamin writes, "In all of literature I know no passage which has such a Kafka gesture."[35] In addition to employing such Kafkaesque imagery and themes as insects, law and faith, Benjamin is drawn to the space around which these elements converge: the anxiety of crossing a threshold. He hears in this fear-inducing excerpt on traversing the doorway—one that Eddington reduces to a microscopic world of flies—the key spatial trope from both Kafka's literature and Benjamin's *Arcades*.[36] We read: "The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? No, if I make the venture one of the flies hits me and gives a boost up again; I fall again and am knocked upwards by another fly; and so on."[37] As the world of atoms metamorphoses into something creaturely, Benjamin also discerns echoes with what unfolds in Kafka's parable *Before the Law*. Like the man from the country who is caught between the old world from where he travelled and the law's new *topos*, the physicist inhabits an anxiety-infused space between classical and modern laws of physics. Upon the threshold, we encounter limits to our understanding and ability to represent the new experience through ordinary discourse. Eddington turns to parabolic language to disclose the mystery behind nature's inscrutable laws.

The first implicit reference Benjamin employs from quantum physics occurs right after the conclusion of the Kafkaesque passage. Writing how he hears in each passage "this physical aporia [*physikalischen Aporie*] with sentences from Kafka's prose pieces,"[38] Benjamin describes how Eddington and Kafka's *Sätze* (meaning both formula and sentence) are the most "incomprehensible" (*unverständlichsten*). By placing in quotes "incomprehensible," Benjamin gestures to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, also known as *die Heisenbergsche Unschärferelation* and *die Unbestimmtheitsrelation*, which probes quantum thought's primary riddle: is light a wave or a shower of photons? Heisenberg describes the quantum

as "something standing in the middle between the idea of an event and the actual event, a strange kind of physical reality just in the middle between possibility and reality."[39] It is not until the observer measures the particle that it manifests some semblance of reality. Although Heisenberg does not dispute the reality of our measurements, he asserts that atoms "form a world of potentialities or possibilities, rather than one of things or facts."[40] Establishing a correspondence between the "incomprehensible" sentences of Kafka's literary universe and the aporia that permeate Eddington's description of cosmology and the atomic world, Benjamin questions how the modern subject both represents and comprehends experience in light of the new laws of physics and modernity's shocks.

Similar to how quantum discoveries violate our intuitive picture of reality, the radically disfigured and reconstituted reality behind Kafka's literature tests the limits of what we can comprehend as readers through classical modes of interpretation. Kafka's innovative writing challenges the way in which we might conventionally approach his literature. If, as Benjamin contends, Kafka's work is structured like an ellipse with two foci—the mystical and the modern—, then what hermeneutic effect does such an ellipse have on how one reads Kafka? As our textual analysis narrows in on Kafka's mystical elements, we find ourselves speeding toward the modern, thus oscillating between divergent points of exegesis.

Benjamin employs a quantum term from Bohr to describe how Kafka lives in a "*complementary* world."[41] Detecting an inherent flaw in the way we use language when discussing the quantum, Bohr develops his complementarity theory from the paradox of light's wave-particle duality, where the observation of a particle's temporal-spatial position inevitably disrupts the trajectory of the wave characteristics of light. Arguing for quantum discontinuity, Bohr rejects Newtonian physics' concept of determinism to describe a particle's behaviour. The classical representations of phenomena as stable events based on temporal-spatial continuity and the logic of causality provide us with inadequate translations to what transpires in the quantum sphere.

In the following passage from Bohr we hear a correspondence with Benjamin's closing reflections in *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy* concerning the need for a new conceptual framework to access modern experience. Bohr writes,

> There is no quantum world. There is only an abstract quantum physical description. It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature [...]. Our task is not to penetrate into the essence of things, the meaning of which we don't

> know anyway, but rather to develop concepts which allow us to talk in a productive way about phenomena in nature.[42]

Although the traditional concepts behind classical physics were themselves inadequate to represent quantum events completely, Bohr recognised that these concepts provided the only known language to convey such phenomena. Thus, Bohr re-orients the debate of the quantum phenomena around modes of representation; how we speak about and represent the atomic event becomes the fundamental issue for Bohr.

Returning to his opening image of how Kafka's literature imitates the movement of an ellipse around the poles of mysticism and modernity, Benjamin's invocation of complementarity demonstrates how the reader struggles to grasp simultaneously the text's polemic properties. Benjamin's description of Kafka's relation to the past tradition bears the hallmarks of how one engages with quantum phenomena. While Kafka may listen to the past's "indistinct sounds," they cannot be transposed into meaning or knowledge. He hears a "sickness of tradition" and what reaches him is unclear (*undeutlich*) and not certain (*bestimmt)*. Benjamin turns to the very terms Bohr uses to describe an electron's erratic movement. In his phrase "tradition in decay," Benjamin employs another term from atomic physics: *Zerfallsprodukt* (atomic decay).[43] Kafka's parables transmit neither truth nor wisdom, but only the product of wisdom's decay. Through its movement across large swaths of time and space, tradition undergoes dissolution. In effect, Kafka's parables are evocative of the thought experiments from theoretical physics. But while conventional religious parables gesture toward a truth content, both the quantum and Kafka's parables expose instead epistemic paradoxes.

Benjamin underscores the crisis of law and tradition in Kafka, whose stories unfold in an archaic time: a period when "laws and definite norms remain unwritten in the prehistoric world."[44] Describing the status of the law as a "blind spot" (*toten Punkt*) in a letter to Scholem, Benjamin stresses that Kafka's law is not indecipherable, but absent: no content will be revealed in the future.[45] Benjamin compares Kafka's texts to Hassidic parables that are built around a failure. They exhibit a "disintegration of truth" tied to the loss of tradition. With his juxtaposition of quantum thought and Jewish tradition, Benjamin uses a Talmudic reference to describe another aspect of Kafka's complementarity: the interplay between Haggadah and Halakhah. Benjamin argues, "Truth is sacrificed for its transmissibility, its haggadic element."[46] While Halakhah refers to the Talmud's scriptural law, Haggadah denotes the stories or commentary about the law. The two elements that were taken together—the laws and the anecdotes told about them—are now in a complementary relation to

one another.[47] Recognising the decay of the underlying truth of tradition, Kafka embraces instead the Haggadic tradition of interpretation, which now transmits the story about the absent law. Both Judaic law and tradition are missing in modernity, and Kafka transforms this absence into his doctrine.[48]

However, Benjamin claims in his letter that, "No doctrine can be absorbed or knowledge preserved"[49] in Kafka. How then could Kafka become, as I proposed earlier, the new doctrine that Benjamin had searched for in *On the Programme for the Coming Philosophy*? Benjamin's remark is clarified in the context of his 1934 Kafka study, where he describes how Kafka "fail[s] in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into doctrine, to turn it into parable and restore it this stability which *in the face of reason* [my emphasis, E.K.] seemed to be the only appropriate thing for it."[50] Despite the negative implications behind the description of Kafka's "failures," Benjamin places this failure in the context of the Kantian tenets of the Enlightenment, that is, in the "face of reason" that subscribes to the idea of a higher truth and grants stability to the world. Benjamin frees himself from the Enlightenment's false promises by turning to Kafka's missing doctrine, which goes against "the face of reason" by rejecting any recuperation of mythic or utopic origins in the future. Instead, Kafka's parables open up a space to reflect on how the past influences the present.

Right after praising Kafka's failure, Benjamin asserts the source of his success: Kafka upholds the *Bilderverbot*. Benjamin writes: "No other writer has obeyed the commandment 'Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image' so faithfully."[51] By destabilising modes of visual representation, Kafka opens up a new representational medium to access experience in modernity through what Benjamin describes as an *Entstellung* (distortion). Moreover, he develops this term around the quintessential Kafka figure of distortion, the star-shaped spool of thread Odradek: he is "the form which things take in oblivion. They are distorted."[52] Counter to Kant's stars that point to the faculty of reason, the moral law and progress, Benjamin's deformed star of modernity offers no such solace.

Kafka's Odradek and Schrödinger's Cat

Critical readings of *Cares of a Family Man* (1917) tend to focus on the meaning behind Odradek's essence: what is the significance of this deformed creature?[53] Similar to how a scientist tarries with the laws behind natural phenomena, the *Hausvater* relies on a hermeneutic framework of classical thought to probe Odradek. First, the father

examines the etymology behind the name of this uncanny member of the household, who exists in a multiplicity of states. Positing that the name "Odradek" might have either German or Slavic origins, the *Hausvater* concludes that there is an "uncertainty of both interpretations" and a lack of "intelligent meaning" to the word.[54]

In the father's scientific-like probing he applies logic to ascertain the meaning behind Odradek's features, including the implications behind his name, shape and teleology. But while the father may employ a classical perspective by analysing Odradek's etymology or the significance of his form to uncover his true nature, Odradek inhabits a realm that is outside of time, space and causality. Like the physicist's inability to measure completely a particle's nature, it is impossible to lock Odradek down. The very concepts of identity and location are thrown into doubt within both the quantum and Kafka's universe. Similar to how Max Planck describes the quantum as a discontinuous event in which change could happen spontaneously without any warning or instance of causation, the erratic trajectory of Odradek's movement upon spatial boundaries resembles the thresholds in both Eddington's parable and Heisenberg's description of the quantum as "[s]tanding in the middle between the idea of an event and an actual event, a strange kind of physical reality just in the middle between possibility and reality."[55] In the ambiguity of his oscillating state, Odradek's complementary nature manifests Einstein's description of quantum spookiness: he is transcendent and mundane ("A flat star-shaped spool of thread"), dead and undead ("But it is just a laugh, like one produced without lungs"), complete and incomplete ("The whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished"). True to a particle's irregular path, Odradek occupies an "indefinite residence" and "he cannot be grasped."[56]

Recalling Infeld's description of how quantum ambiguity is comprised of two languages and two contradictory pictures of reality, Odradek is the complementary phenomenon *par excellence*. If we as readers follow the father's interpretive path and focus on "Who or what is Odradek?," then our reading will remain fixed on Odradek's ontology; is he a natural object, artisan's craft, alive or dead? We try in vain to organise the empirical data that is provided about Odradek's disjunctive movement, enigmatic name and fragmentation and reach a dead end if we concede to the father's "either/or" perspective regarding Odradek's identity. Similar to such figures as Kafka's *Kreuzung*, *Mistkäfer* and *Gracchus*, nothing prohibits the name "Odradek" from occupying a hybrid state.[57]

With my invocations of hybrid creatures and counter-intuitive representations of reality, I now turn to quantum physics' most celebrated

thought experiment: Schrödinger's Cat. Eighteen years *after* Kafka introduced his quantum-like Odradek, Erwin Schrödinger constructed his iconic parable of an imaginary cat sealed inside a radioactive box. The epistemic and ontic tensions that arise in our attempts to comprehend Odradek prefigure the paradoxes behind Schrödinger's renowned thought experiment. If atomic decay transpires in the box, the cat will die. If there is no decay, then the cat will live. Schrödinger wishes to demonstrate that only when a measurement is taken or a direct observation inside the box is made can we know the ontological condition of the cat. Until then, like the radioactive material, the cat is described as a mixture of ontic states. Only when the observer takes a measurement does the superposition of states (the mixing of alive/dead and decayed/not decayed) turn into something definitive.[58] Situated between the possible and the actual, the cat, like Odradek, occupies a blending of states; both creatures are a blur of living and dead.

But Schrödinger goes beyond this ontological quandary and his closing words from the thought experiment eloquently express how quantum uncertainty leads to problems in representing reality:

> It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation. That prevents us from so naively accepting as valid a "blurred model" for representing reality. In itself, it would not embody anything unclear or contradictory. There is a difference between a shaky or out-of-focus photograph and a snapshot of clouds and fog banks.[59]

Centring the debate on the tensions between reality and its vague representation, Schrödinger argues that the Copenhagen model provides both an incomplete and blurred picture of quantum phenomena.[60] With its description of the electron's orbit as being discontinuous and comprised of quantum jumps, the uncertainty principle presents an undeveloped picture of the particle. Illustrating how the ontological and epistemic quandaries behind a quantum event have repercussions within our visual and linguistic modes of representation, Schrödinger's paradox was meant to demonstrate how reality, counter to what complementarity may theorise, is not a blur.

In opposition to Schrödinger's attempts to show how the lack of visualisation in Heisenberg's quantum model displayed an incomplete theory, Bohr dismissed the relevance of spatio-temporal pictures of events. As ordinary language loses its signifying powers, there are no longer any unambiguous definitions of quantum systems and such terms as "event,"

"phenomena," and "causality" lose their meaning in the ordinary sense of these words.[61] Arguing that we need a "radical revision of the foundation for the description and explanation of physical phenomena," Bohr suggested that Schrödinger and Heisenberg's theories were complementary to one another, yet mutually exclusive.[62]

In turn, Benjamin is drawn to these very anti-epistemic structures in Kafka. Similar to the "blind spot" of Kafka's law, Benjamin describes how the parabolic language of "Before the Law" is comprised of a "*wolkige Stelle*" (cloudy spot) that resists the reader's search for meaning.[63] He uses this expression on several occasions in his essay to delineate the marks of epistemological indeterminacy in Kafka.[64] Benjamin connects these cloudy spots to his description of Odradek as an *Entstellung* (distortion) of time and space: "He is the shape of things in oblivion and a figure of guilt."[65] Both a distorted creature and figural distortion in the text, Odradek signifies for Benjamin the absent law that must be studied. Kafka's cloudy spots and distortions, evocative of Schrödinger's description of the difference between taking a photograph of a cloud and a blurred picture, disclose language's instabilities. Yet unlike Schrödinger, Benjamin embraces the very linguistic uncertainties in Kafka's parabolic literature, and paradoxically, he uses these points as his compass throughout his engagement with Kafka.

The *Arcades Project*: Odradek as a Dialectic Schema

In the remainder of this study I will explore how Benjamin's reflections on the quantum-like nature behind Kafka's literary description of hybrid creatures, states, and spaces shed light on the philosophy of history that unfolds in the *Arcades Project* and crystallises around the figure of Odradek. If the task of the historical materialist is to explore the ruins within the spaces of urban modernity, it is no wonder that Benjamin places Odradek under the rubric of his "dialectic schemata" in his notes to the outline of the *Arcades Project*. The fragment reads, "Dialectic of the commodity / a canon for this dialectic to be drawn from Odradek / the positive in the fetish."[66] Juxtaposing Benjamin's interpretation of Odradek from his Kafka essay and his use of quantum terms in the *Arcades Project*, I will unpack the meaning behind this fragment.

Similar to how objects in the marketplace fall under the category of commodity fetishism, whereby these objects are illusions and misrepresentations of a new Golden Age, Benjamin detects something fetishistic in the way 19th century historiography foregrounds an idealised future. Wishing to escape history's commodification, Benjamin delineates

a new mode of representing time and space that bears the hallmarks of Odradek's distorted form. As he rethinks the concepts of positive and negative, Benjamin explicates their "binary divisions" in relation to representing history. Although "positive" traditionally refers to what is "fruitful," "forward looking" and "vital," the "negative" denotes the "futile, backward, defunct parts" of history.[67] Benjamin argues that we must shift our point of view and behold the positive within history's ruins. Benjamin refers to the mercantile age of commodity culture—ironically deemed the Golden Age—as hell. What had been conceived as positive—the Golden Age—is now labelled a catastrophe. In Benjamin's reversal, Odradek, despite his ruin-like appearance, signifies something "positive."

In an October 1935 letter to Werner Kraft, Benjamin compares his exploration of the 19th century Paris arcades to looking through a telescope. Through his analogy, historical traces glimmer in the Paris ruins like the remnants of dissipated starlight. While Benjamin had previously connected the Enlightenment's stars to the traumas of war, modernity's stars—or rather their absence—are now situated within the commodity culture of the modern city. Pulling back the curtain of the 19th century's "bloody mist," Benjamin wishes to reveal the inherent violence inscribed within the cityscape's ruins.[68] In the following passage from the *Arcades*, Benjamin describes modernity's effects on Kant's stars:

> [T]he big city knows no true evening twilight. In any case, the artificial lighting does away with all transition to night […]. The stars disappear from the sky over the metropolis. Whoever notices them when they come out? Kant's transcription of the sublime through 'the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me' could never have been conceived in these terms by an inhabitant of the big city.[69]

While these urban spaces—similar to modern warfare's effects—may eclipse the stars, commodity culture's windows now display the new objects of contemplation. By juxtaposing Kant's blotted-out stars to commodity culture in modernity, Benjamin formulates a philosophy of history based on the waning of experience. Despite his use of astronomic imagery, Benjamin directs his telescopic gaze toward the insignificant traces that are trapped upon urban thresholds.

In the encounter between Odradek and the *Hausvater*, Benjamin glimpses the historical materialist's relation to the past. Occupying the home's liminal spaces and the temporal hiding-holes in-between past, present, and future, Odradek is in a permanent state of being in-between time and space. But while the father can only decipher his relation to Odradek in terms of the logic of a linear progression, Benjamin is aware

that something much more complex is unfolding in this relationship. Upon the home's thresholds, Odradek embodies Benjamin's concept of a standstill. Describing how in the historical materialist view of history, "Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences," Benjamin constructs history out of its disruptions and establishes "the discontinuity of historical time" as the foundation of the materialist view of history. [70]

Although a positivist history silences the oppressed voices of the past and constructs the illusion of a narrative of progress, it is this very fantasy that Benjamin wishes to shatter. Historical materialism "carries along with it an immanent critique of the concept of progress" that liquidates the continuum of history by "blast[ing] out 'the reified' continuity of history."[71] Benjamin's depiction of discontinuity and blasting out of the continuum reflects how the observer of a quantum system accesses an electron. Akin to how the quantum physicist grasps a particle by shooting a beam of light at it, thus knocking the particle off its trajectory, in his "immanent critique of the concept of progress," the historical materialist "blasts" the trace from the past out of its temporal continuum. In turn, this moment is simultaneously "shot through" with messianic shards that need to be read.

In his description of how the historical materialist seeks out insignificant objects, Benjamin compares the task of historical materialism to the mechanics behind atomic fission. The method of his *Arcades Project* is similar to the process of "splitting an atom."[72] Benjamin wishes to liberate the "enormous energies" of history that were bound up in the illusions of its "once upon a time" narratives of historiography, whereby the historical materialist locates an immense power within the detritus of commodity culture: its profane objects strewn throughout the city are infused with messianic potential.

Benjamin's reading of Kafka, like the task of the historical materialist, involves "blasting out" a specific fragment from the text. In Benjamin's search for a vantage point to decipher Kafka's inscrutable "cloudy spots," these ambiguous points delineate where textual meaning both flashes up and is concealed, and provides us with "a never-ending series of reflections."[73] Similar to how in quantum physics we cannot uncover from a particle's position its previous or future state, the past and future events of history's trajectory—like Odradek's movements—are independent of any law of determinism.

Parallel to Benjamin's claim that progress is located in the interferences of elapsing time, Odradek's appearances in the home are marks of disruption. At first, the representation of the family's path across

three generations—father, son and grandson—may project a scene of historical continuity. Yet during the moments when Odradek flashes up as a distortion of time and space, a linear temporal unfolding is disrupted and replaced with a moment of a standstill. Benjamin writes: "No one says that the distortions which it will be the Messiah's mission to set aright [*Zurechtrücken*] someday affect only our space; surely they are distortions of our time as well."[74] While Odradek himself is not messianic, his "flashing up" announces the possibility of the messiah's arrival, which will "set aright" the world's disfigurations through a slight adjustment, or *Zurechtstellen*.[75] By suspending future time, Odradek demands that we reflect on the present. Blasting open any temporal continuity, Odradek gestures toward the juncture to history's ethical side.

Conclusion: A Quantum Justice

Benjamin's ethics of history is not simply about mourning or remembering the dead, but rather—to paraphrase Yosef Yerushalmi in his book on Jewish memory, *Zakhor*—the opposite of forgetting is not memory, but justice.[76] In his re-conceptualisation of history, Benjamin envisions how the task of the historian neither involves the retelling of past events nor an empathic relation with history's victims. Instead, the historian's goal requires her to enact justice for the dead.

Benjamin's description of injustice in Kafka serves as a template to his philosophy of history. At the onset of his Kafka study, Benjamin examines how the sons in Kafka's literature claim that they have suffered an injustice (*Unrecht*) at the hands of their fathers. This injustice stems from the paternal passing on of an *Erbsünde* (original sin)—"The old injustice committed by man"—to the son.[77] In his analysis of how the son inherits this *Erbsünde* from the father, Benjamin compares fathers (not sons) to giant parasites who suffocate their sons, asserting that those in positions of power make their living from "the forces of reason and humanity [*Vernunft und Menschlichkeit*]."[78] By using specifically the word *Menschlichkeit*, perhaps Benjamin wishes to impart a Kantian resonance in his analysis, thereby juxtaposing the *Tierheit* associated with Kafka's literature to Kant's *Menschlichkeit*: a term that refers to both humankind and humanity's moral attitude. With his use of *Recht*, *Vernunft* and *Menschlichkeit*, Benjamin references the Kantian doctrine of the categorical imperative: "So act that you use humanity [*Menschlichkeit*], whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[79]

Dismantling the positive resonances behind Kant's terms, Benjamin connects the parasitic to reason and humanity. The tools of the Enlightenment, which would seem to counter the mythic territory of original sin, are themselves instruments of oppression. By forsaking the ideals behind the Kantian notions of reason and humanity, Benjamin transforms Kant's law into a myth. Benjamin underscores this shift in a letter to Scholem, where he describes his new "Kafkaesque formulation of the categorical imperative: 'Act in such a way that angels have something to do.'"[80] That is, behave so that your actions can accelerate the catastrophe. The preceding passages capture the complex relation between the ancient and modern. Benjamin juxtaposes the ancient Jewish law with modern law, whereby the modern points to Enlightenment's myth of reason. Kafka is not part of the ancient world, but rather he transports this prehistory into our world. Benjamin writes, "Kafka's novels transpire in a swamp world. But this world is our world. We have not overcome it, but have only forgotten or repressed it."[81] Described by Benjamin as "the strangest bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt," Odradek, the incarnation of this broken law and mark of *Unrecht*, is transferred like an inherited object between generations.[82]

Toward the conclusion of his Kafka essay, Benjamin explicitly reflects on the question of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). Citing Werner Kraft's Kafka analysis, Benjamin writes, "Kafka does not use the word 'justice', yet it is justice which is the point of departure of his critique of the myth."[83] Similar to the ever-present thresholds permeating the *Arcades*, Benjamin underscores the relation between thresholds and justice in Kafka, and writes, "the law that is studied and not practiced any longer is the gate to justice. The gate to justice is learning."[84] Benjamin insists that our exploration of Kafka does not stop at justice, but rather the absence of justice functions as the springboard for our continued study of his texts.

In the extensive notes to his Kafka study, Benjamin uses such terms as "fluctuating structure" and "ambiguous relations" to describe the composition behind Kafka's "cloudy spot": the mark of Kafka's absent law.[85] Similarly, Benjamin describes how the past moment probed by the historical materialist is marked by an ambiguity in his *Arcades*. According to Benjamin, "Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectics, the law of dialectics at the standstill."[86] Just as the cloudy spot is at the centre of Kafka's poetics, ambiguity lies at the heart of Benjamin's concept of history. While Benjamin's dialectics of ambiguity converts the positive into the negative, Odradek is himself the figurative appearance of both reversal and ambiguity. In turn, Benjamin gleans in Odradek—an *Entstellung* inhabiting a threshold—the mark where a potential moment of

justice shines forth.[87]

In his fascinating analogy for the method behind historical materialism, Benjamin conveys the difficulties of assessing the weight of history. Comparing historical knowledge to the image of balanced scales, he writes:

> One tray of which is weighed with what has been and the other with knowledge of what is present. Whereas on the first the facts assembled can never be too humble or too numerous, on the second there can only be a few, heavy, massive weights.[88]

The historical materialist's relation to the past is configured as if she or he were balancing the weight of the past through a critical probing of its fragments. If knowledge of the present is contingent on a balance between the two sides, then the historical materialist must find an adequate representation to grasp the ruins of the past. Knowledge only comes about when our representations on the second tray balance out the ruins on the first tray. Although Benjamin's scale metaphor suggests the iconic allegorical figure of justice (*Justitia*), in his quantum-like depiction of history, the interrogation of the past precludes an exact measurement or comprehension of what has already transpired. The lack of equilibrium suggests that there is still a remainder or debt that the past transmits to the present. As stated earlier, Odradek embodies such a debt (or *Schuld*) for Benjamin.

I shall conclude with one last quantum evocation. Benjamin describes how Odradek "prefers the same places as the court of law [in *The Trial*] which investigates *Schuld* [both 'guilt' and 'debt,' E.K.]. Attics are the places of discarded, forgotten objects. Perhaps the necessity to appear before a court of justice gives rise to a feeling similar to that which one approaches trunks in the attic which have been locked up for years."[89] Similar to the sealed trunk's unknown contents, Odradek signifies a lapsed memory of concealed guilt. Benjamin describes how Kafka's forgotten and distorted objects are thresholds into Kafka's *Zwischenwelt*, an in-between complementary world in which Odradek inhabits the juncture between archaic and modern time.

In Kafka's quantum-like domain, Benjamin depicts how everything that is forgotten "mixes" with the forgotten pre-historical world "to form countless, uncertain, changing compounds that produce a flow of new, strange products. Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka's stories presses toward the light."[90] We again hear in this passage the striking resonances between Odradek and Schrödinger's Cat. But while Schrödinger's unopened box leads to a

mixture of states (dead/alive), the comparison of Odradek to a sealed trunk illustrates the threat of an eternal return of catastrophe. By refusing to open the box to investigate past *Schuld*, we are left with a phantasmagoric history that only masquerades as progress. Embodying the past, present and future possibilities that we "would like to put off [...] until the end of time," Odradek flashes up between historical epochs to signify a possible break from a catastrophic future and compels us to interrogate the guilt of the past in relation to the present.[91]

In Benjamin's comparison of Odradek to a locked trunk, the past is no longer conceived as a fixed point in time, but rather, for the historical materialist, the past exists in a state similar to Schrödinger's concept of superposition.[92] Beholding events through the quantum lens of uncertainty, complementarity and superposition, Benjamin rejects a teleological unfolding of time, blasts open the continuum of history by seizing a specific moment from the past, and re-animates what was supposedly dead. Benjamin perceives history as something incomplete; the dead are not actually dead but are suspended in an in-between state whose completion is contingent on the historical materialist's vigilant tarrying with the unfinished past.

Perhaps the meaning behind history's ethical side is revealed in this act of engaging with what is inside the box, whether in a physics laboratory, an attic or history's mass graves. Unlike Schrödinger's Cat, whose 'mixed' state is completed once the box is opened, the *Schuld* contained in Benjamin's trunk is perpetually deferred; its meaning only begins to take form once the box is opened. Like the threads from Odradek's spool that are entangled across three generations, the past always transfers its debt to an indefinite horizon. The messianic moment is directed not toward the future, but is contingent on how we incorporate the past in the present, where the possibility of justice demands that the box be opened and past *Schuld* be measured on history's scales in the present.

Notes

[1] Abraham Pais, *Niels Bohr's Times*: *In Physics, Philosophy and Polity* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 439.
[2] Don Howard, "Einstein on Locality and Separability," in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 16 (1985), 178.
[3] *The Born-Einstein Letters*, translated by Irene Born (New York: Walker and Company, 1971), 157.
[4] Benjamin, *AP*, 388 (K 1 ,1).
[5] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 169.

[6] My references to Benjamin's concept of the shock experience are influenced by two specific essays: "The Storyteller" (1936) and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940). These studies map out the interplay between the loss of experience in modernity and dissolution of language. Benjamin locates such shocks in the individual's relation to technology, cinema, the game of chance, crowded streets and in modern warfare.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondences of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn Jacobson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 216. I will use the abbreviation *CWB* to refer to Benjamin's *Correspondences*.

[8] Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 262-263.

[9] Steve Giles, *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1993), 28.

[10] *Niels Bohr and Contemporary Philosophy*. Edited by Jan Faye and Henry J. Folse (Boston: Springer Science, 1994), 87.

[11] Walter Benjamin, *Benjamin über Kafka*, *Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen*, edited by Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), 136 and 138. I will use the abbreviation *BuK* for this text.

[12] See Franz Kafka, *The Cares of a Family Man*, in *The Complete Stories*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1976), 427-29. I will use the abbreviation *Cares* for this text.

[13] Benjamin, *AP*, 907.

[14] Bohr and Heisenberg's theories are the foundation of what is called the Copenhagen interpretation, which was formulated in 1927 when Heisenberg posited his uncertainty principle: we cannot know simultaneously with accuracy the position and movement of a particle. Once we locate a particle's position, we disturb its momentum, and vice versa. "Complementarity" is Bohr's term for how both the wave and particle descriptions are necessary, yet exclusive features of one another. See Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 112-116.

[15] Benjamin, *CWB*, 97.

[16] Walter Benjamin, "On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy," SW 1, 101-102 (emphasis added). I will use the abbreviation *PCP* for this essay. For an incisive analysis of this essay, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (California: University of California Press, 1998).

[17] Benjamin, *PCP*, 102.

[18] For an in-depth study of Benjamin's constellations, see Stephane Moses, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 65-83.

[19] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 169.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 103-106.

[21] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 115.
[22] Immanuel Kant, *The Contest of Faculties*, in *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edition, edited by Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182-183.
[23] Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street" (1928), SW 1, 486-489; "Einbahnstraße," in GS IV.1, 132.
[24] Benjamin, *One-Way-Street*, SW 1, 486.
[25] Cf. Benjamin, *One-Way-Street*, SW 1, 486.
[26] Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, Edited by Ernst Jünger," SW 2.1, 318-19.
[27] Benjamin, *PCP*, 98-99.
[28] See footnote 6.
[29] Bertrand Russell, *ABC of Relativity* (London: Routledge Classics, 2009), 1.
[30] Benjamin, *BuK*, 155 (translation mine, E.K.).
[31] The June 12, 1938 letter is included at the end of Benjamin's essay, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death." Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 111-145. I will use the abbreviation "Kafka" for Benjamin's Kafka study in *Illuminations*.
[32] Benjamin, "Kafka," 141.
[33] Cf. Benjamin, "Kafka," 143.
[34] Benjamin, "Kafka," 142.
[35] Benjamin, "Kafka," 142
[36] For instance, the threshold plays a significant role in Kafka's *Metamorphosis, The Castle, Before the Law, The Hunter Gracchus, On Parables* and *The Judgment*.
[37] Benjamin, "Kafka," 142.
[38] Benjamin, "Kafka," 142.
[39] Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 15.
[40] Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 63-64.
[41] Benjamin, "Kafka," 143. Benjamin emphasises this complementarity in his letter and writes, "Kafka lebt in einer *komplementären* Welt." (Benjamin, *BuK*, 86.)
[42] Abraham Pais, *The Genius of Science: A Portrait Gallery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.
[43] Benjamin, "Kafka," 143-144.
[44] Benjamin, "Kafka," 114-115.
[45] Benjamin, *BuK*, 78.
[46] Benjamin, "Kafka," 143-144.
[47] Although *Halakhah* refers to the law component from the Talmud, in his analysis of Kafka Benjamin replaces the term "law" with *Lehre* (doctrine or teaching). Benjamin writes, "We may remind ourselves here of the form of the *Haggadah*, the name the Jews have given to the rabbinical stories and anecdotes that serve to explicate and confirm the *Lehre*—the *Halakhah*." See Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer," SW 2, 494-500, 496. While it is not in

the scope of this analysis to explore how Benjamin alters the meaning of *Halakhah* from law to *Lehre*, see Eli Schonfeld's engaging study "Am-ha'aretz: The Law of the Singular. Kafka's Hidden Knowledge," in *Kafka and the Universal*, edited by Arthur Cools and Vivian Liska (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Press, 2016), 107-129.

[48] Kafka and Benjamin are writing when the very tradition of Judaism that was to be transferred between fathers and sons had been severely compromised during the era of assimilation. For instance, in his *Letter to My Father*, Kafka describes his father's watered-down Judaism and compares the law of the Torah to severed dolls heads. See Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[49] Benjamin, "Kafka," 144.

[50] Cf. Benjamin, "Kafka," 129.

[51] Cf. Benjamin, "Kafka," 129.

[52] Cf. Benjamin, "Kafka," 133. I will return in my conclusion to Odradek and the concept of distortion.

[53] Kafka's parable has prompted numerous interpretations by such scholars as Werner Hamacher, Eric Santner and Slavoj Žižek. See Werner Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka," in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, translated by Peter Fenves (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Slavoj Žižek, "Odradek as a Political Category," in *Lacanian Ink* 24/25 (Winter/Spring 2005): 136-155; Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[54] Kafka, "Cares," 427.

[55] Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 15. For a detailed study of Planck's ground-breaking contributions to quantum physics, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *Black-Body Theory and the Quantum Discontinuity*, *1894-1912* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[56] Kafka, "Cares," 427-429. See also, Franz Kafka, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," in *Erzählungen*, edited by Michael Müller (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1995), 188-190.

[57]Odradek's uncertainty is evocative of Kafka's own German/Slavic in-betweenness. We might consider how "Kafka" is himself the complementary figure *par excellence*. He portrays himself as the modern Jewish subject who is stuck like a mouse in the doorway between past and future. See Kafka's 21st June 1921 letter to Max Brod. In Franz Kafka, *Briefe*, edited by Max Brod. (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1958), 337.

[58] Although it now functions as quantum physics' signature thought experiment, Schrödinger designed it as a critique of the Copenhagen interpretation by depicting the paradoxical nature behind quantum indeterminacy. Benjamin will use the term "superposition" on several occasions in his *Arcades Project* to illustrate the subject's relation to time within the modern city and to technological shocks. "The perception of space that corresponds to this perception is superposition." (Benjamin, *AP*, 854-855; M°, 15).

[59]Erwin Schrödinger, "Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik," *Naturwissenschaften* 23 (1935), 807; English translation by J. D. Trimmer, "The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics: A Translation of Schrödinger's 'Cat Paradox' Paper," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124 (1980), 323.
[60] See n. 14.
[61] For an outstanding analysis of the effects that quantum mechanics had on philosophical terminology, see Catherine Chevalley, "Philosophy and the Birth of Quantum Theory," in *Physics, Philosophy, and the Scientific Community*, edited by Kostas Gavroglu (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1995), 11-37.
[62] Niels Bohr, "On the Notions of Causality and Complementarity," in *Dialectica* 2 (1948): 313.
[63] Benjamin, "Kafka," 122.
[64] These "cloudy spots" have become the focal point of debates between Benjamin and his three closest interlocutors on Kafka: Adorno, Scholem and Brecht, each of whom underscores the hermetic quality to his Kafka study. Scholem declared that while "98% of it makes sense […], the final touch is missing" (*CWB*, 446). Adorno argues that Benjamin still needed to "illuminate" and "thoroughly articulate" the cloudy spots. Brecht asserts that the essay "increases and spreads darkness surrounding Kafka instead of dispersing it" (110). See Adorno's letter to Benjamin from December 17, 1934 in *Über Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 105-107. See also *Understanding Brecht*, translated by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 2003). For further reading on the function of the cloud in Benjamin, see Werner Hamacher, "The Word Wolke—If It Is One," *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 11:1 (1986): 133-61.
[65] Benjamin, "Kafka," 135.
[66] Benjamin, *AP*, 906-7.
[67] Benjamin, *AP*, 459 (N 1a, 3).
[68] Benjamin, CWB, 516
[69] Benjamin, *AP*, 343 (J 64, 4).
[70] Benjamin, *AP*, 474 (N 9a, 6).
[71] Benjamin, *AP*, 474 (N 9a, 6).
[72] Benjamin, *AP*, 463 (N 3, 4).
[73] Benjamin, "Kafka," 122.
[74] Benjamin, "Kafka," 135.
[75] Benjamin, "Kafka," 134.
[76] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, *Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken, 1989).
[77] Benjamin, "Kafka," 114.
[78] Benjamin, "Kafka," 114.
[79] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, edited and translated by Allen Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 46-47.
[80] Benjamin, *CWB*, 216.
[81] See Benjamin's extensive notes to his Kafka essay in GS II.3, 1250.
[82] Benjamin, "Kafka," 132.

[83] Benjamin, "Kafka," 139.
[84] Benjamin, "Kafka," 139. Benjamin's analysis of distortions and the messianic moment reappears in *On the Concept of History*, where he writes, "Every second becomes the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter." (SW 3, 397.)
[85] GS II.3, 1236 and 1240.
[86] Benjamin, *AP*, 10.
[87] We should discern in Benjamin's choice of terms (*Zurechtrücken* and *Zurechtstellen*) how the Messiah engages with the distorted (*entstellt*) threshold, a link to an act of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). *Zurecht* conveys the sense of both acting justly and setting aright what is deformed. Benjamin describes the "double function of distortion" in his Kafka notes; see GS II.3, 1200. Distortion necessitates an act of re-adjustment, whereby the messianic moment entails the transformation of *Unrecht* into *Zurecht*.
[88] Benjamin, *AP*, 468 (N 6, 5).
[89] Benjamin, "Kafka," 133.
[90] Benjamin, "Kafka," 131.
[91] Benjamin, "Kafka," 133.
[92] See n. 57 and my discussion of Schrödinger's Cat. According to the principle of superposition, as long as a measurement is withheld, we do not know the definitive state of a quantum particle. It simultaneously exists in all possible states. Only through our act of measurement (or observation) does the particle become limited to a single possibility.

THE NAME AS THE NAVEL: ON REFINDING THINGS WE NEVER HAD

ADAM LIPSZYC

Freud's *Knäuel*

For all its brilliance, ground-breaking nature and complication in details, Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* seems to offer an almost disappointingly simple hermeneutic procedure.[1] Let us briefly review the well-known: Freud distinguishes between the latent and the manifest dream-content. The latter is produced out of the former by means of the distortive dream-work necessitated by the psychic censorship. Thus, by means of the main mechanisms of dream-work—i.e. condensation, displacement, symbolisation and secondary elaboration—the latent narrative centred upon the fulfilment of an unconscious wish rooted frequently in our early childhood turns into an enchanting, enigmatic, but tolerable texture of the manifest dream. If so, then the procedure called *die Traumdeutung* seems to be just the inversion of the distortion that produces the dream. It is a process of a rather simply conceived translation, which solves the picture puzzle of the dream, restores the original text of the latent dream-content, and thus opens the royal road to the unconscious wish.[2]

For any reader of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it is rather clear that this simple structure is quite often and in many ways questioned, relativized and subverted by numerous passages and particular analyses within Freud's rich book. In particular, what seems to be the most prominent claim of the work—namely, that every dream presents an unconscious wish as fulfilled—does not seem to be compatible with Freud's own interpretation of at least some of the dreams he cites as examples—and, indeed, this part of the doctrine has been partly, even if very reluctantly, revised by Freud himself at a later stage.[3] What is more interesting, however, is a wavering in the very understanding of the hermeneutic procedure that forms the core of the book. First and foremost, it is good to remember that in a footnote added in 1925, Freud warned his

readers and disciples against a mistake that might have been caused by the apparent simplicity of the original scheme. It is wrong, he claimed, to think that the "essence" of the dream is the latent dream-content; in fact, this essence is to be found in the distortive dream-work itself.[4] Surely, this note as such does not have to question the above reading of Freud's procedure. One may claim that if one wants to understand what a letter is, one should explain all the details of the institution known as "the mail"; still, the message of the letter is what is written on a piece of paper, properly understood. Reasonably enough, Freud might have been worried that too much stress put on the content of the message, i.e. the latent dream content, makes one forget about all the mechanisms of distortion without which the dream would not be a dream. In particular, one may point out that if the dream-work is mainly triggered by our censorship, then a focus on the distortive mechanisms themselves may give us invaluable insight into the agency of internal control that Freud—or, rather, his English translators—came to call "the superego."

And yet, there might also be a rather different motive behind Freud's warning—and a rather different reading of his footnote. The reader of Freud's book may be led to think that when, in the process of interpretation, we travel back on the road taken before by the process of the dream-work, the distortion is undone, the message is recovered, and nothing is lost. However, Freud might have felt that something *does* get lost in such a simple inversion after all, as there might be something that appears in the distorted, manifest dream-content but was never there in the latent one. The above reconstruction of Freud's hermeneutic procedure implicitly assumes that the latent and unconscious text is hidden below or behind the manifest and conscious one and that it is in fact of a similar nature. But much of what Freud has to say about the unconscious implies that it is not to be conceived as an unconscious consciousness. Thus, what Freud might be trying to say in his 1925 footnote is that there is something that can appear only in distortion, and that it is this "something" which is the essence of the dream: not as the essence of the procedure that produces it, but as the truly unconscious "thing" that any *Traumdeutung* should aim at.

It seems that Freud has never made this claim explicitly—that was left for the Lacanians to do.[5] However, he did at least admit that the results of his procedure as reconstructed above have to remain fragmentary. For this seemingly universal and omnipotent procedure will always crash against the unknown. As is rather well known, the unknown is called by Freud "the navel of the dream," where the dream touches upon the mysterious. It is a spot from which a "tangle of dream-thoughts" (*ein Knäuel von*

Traumgedanken) springs that cannot be unravelled by interpretation.[6] Characteristically, and comically enough, Freud attempted to play down this powerful claim almost at the very moment he made it. Namely, he suggested that it is both obvious, for every dream must be connected to the totality of our psychic life, and harmless, for whatever might have been disentangled from this *Knäuel* would not have contributed to the dream-content anyway.[7] The defensiveness of this statement is all too clear. The mysterious spot may not and cannot contribute to the recovery of the latent dream-content, because it questions and partly ruins the very idea of this recovery. Moreover, one is rather naturally tempted to identify this navel with what we have just redefined as the essence of the dream, which is present only in its distorted, manifest content. If we do not resist the temptation, we shall also arrive at an equally natural redefinition of the procedure called *die Traumdeutung*. On such a reading, the interpretation of dreams will, of course, pay attention to all the identifiable moments of the dream-work present in the manifest text of the dream in order to disrupt the all too smooth surface produced by the secondary elaboration. This critical disruption will not, however, lead to an equally smooth text of the latent dream content allegedly lying behind or below the surface. Rather, it will inevitably produce a constellation of disrupted elements, grouped around the dark centre of the aporetic navel which resists understanding, suspends the symbolic order and marks the true place of the wish—or, better, desire—perhaps not fulfilled, but suddenly coming to the fore.

Traumdeutung and Constellation

The reader may have noticed that in suggesting this minor, perhaps embarrassingly obvious revision of Freud's hermeneutic procedure—if it is a revision at all and not just a slightly less schematic reading in the first place—, I have been partly guided by Walter Benjamin's idea of constellation. In the preface to his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin famously defines ideas—the actual subject of any philosophical treatise—as being to (critically separated elements of) phenomenal things what constellations are to stars. Just a few lines later, however, slightly shifting the image, he urges us to see the ideas as the "ideals" that appear at the centre, and as the crystallisation of the force field composed of the extreme phenomenal elements:

> Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do the ideas come to life only when extremes are

> assembled around them. Ideas—or, to use Goethe's term, ideals—are the Faustian "Mothers."[8]

Thus, an idea is the shape, the unity and the heart of the constellation of disrupted things. The later, more dramatic version of the theory may be found in the *Arcades Project*. Here, in the critical, fleeting moment of reading, the historian himself brings his own presence and his own stance into a constellation with the critically disrupted elements of past phenomena. This results in the sudden crystallisation of the dialectical image, which is Benjamin's final name for the idea—or rather for its historical form, i.e. "the origin."[9] And it is in the *Arcades Project*, let us recall in passing, that Benjamin attempted to link his vision of the critical historian to the Freudian project: "It is at this moment," he writes, "that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of the dream interpretation."[10] If not for any other reasons inherent to Freud's work itself, the latter idea might serve as a sufficient incentive to look back at Freud's own procedure, and to read the very idea of the *Traumdeutung* through the lenses of Benjaminian notion of constellation—a little experiment I have just tried to conduct.[11]

Once this has been done, however, such an experiment may be seen as provoking a profitable revision or at least an enrichment of our understanding of Benjamin's thinking itself. It will be remembered that when, in the preface to the *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin expounds his theory of thinking in constellations, he builds it on the foundation of his early theory of language as sketched for the first time in his 1916 essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*.[12] Thus, the idea—which is both the heart of the constellation and the constellation itself, the *Urphänomen* extracted critically from the play of forces between dismantled phenomena—is identified with "the name."[13] Now, a name is a monadic bit of that aspect of language which goes beyond its function of conveying meaning, the aspect of its very being-language:

> The name, in the realm of language, has its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost essence of language itself. The name is that *through* which nothing is communicated any more, but *in* which language itself communicates itself absolutely.[14]

One may point out that although in the name language seems to be at one with itself, it is also the very spot where it must stop working and go on strike: precisely in order to come to the fore as language as such. If this is so, then the name is the peak of language, but at the same time, it is the abyss where the meaningful collapses into the aporetic.[15] In his later essay

Doctrine of the Similar, Benjamin makes clear that the "magical" or "mimetic" (i.e. the nominal) aspect of language appears only on the surface of the "semiotic" (i.e. meaningful) aspect, as a "picture puzzle" (*Vexierbild*), a fleeting constellation of its elements read in the critical moment:

> But this, if you will, magical aspect of language, as well as of script, does not develop in isolation from its other, semiotic aspect. Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language.[16]

But if the name is what it is—i.e. not the moment of meaning, but the abysmal moment of the very language-ness of language—then grasping the *Urphänomen*, the critical seeing the constellation as a constellation, means seeing the puzzle in its being-a-puzzle rather than solving it. And this means seeing it as a spot where understanding is ultimately struck dumb.[17] And if this is the case, then one is tempted to bring together the name thus understood and the Freudian navel—especially as both may be seen as standing at the very heart of the constellation. The name is the navel, the strange thing that is possible only in the midst of the meaningful order of language, but only where the order collapses, the vertiginous spot which is the aim of all *Deutung*, but which in itself is absolutely *undeutbar*. And if we do not resist the temptation of establishing this equation, our attention will be drawn to another quality of the name. It will be remembered that the navel is not just a hermeneutic whirl, but it is also the true spot of the ultimate desire. Thus, if we bring Benjamin and Freud together, the name itself reveals its libidinal nature. In the moments of the critical cognition, when we manage to dismantle the all too smooth, ideological surface of the symbolic order knitted together by secondary elaboration, in the singular constellations of the phenomena, where understanding crumbles, we get a glimpse of the name-as-the-navel, and so our utmost desire comes to the fore, its object being anticipated in the constellatory contemplation, but—alas!—anticipated as never truly given.

Without referring to Freud, Benjamin himself seems to have taken into account this libidinal aspect of the name. Thus, for example, in two *Denkbilder* included in the sequence *Short Shadows (I)*, entitled *Platonic Love* and *Too Close*, the name is presented as the heart of the object of love.[18] However, another, less immediate connection seems to be even more important. In the earlier version of the preface to his *Trauerspielbuch*—in which, incidentally, the idea of the constellation does not yet appear—Benjamin (a bit more openly than in the final version) plays with the theological dimension of his theory. Even in the final

rendering, the nominal dimension of language grasped in the unique moments of constellatory cognition is identified with the language spoken by Adam in Eden.[19] In the earlier version, Benjamin explicitly defines this prelapsarian language as "revelation."[20] More importantly in our context, however, he develops a peculiar logic of uniqueness and repetition, which governs the returns of the name.[21] If the idea manifests itself in history as the "origin," then—Benjamin claims here—everything originary is an incomplete restoration of the Edenic / Adamic / nominal revelation. It is a restoration, for it brings the name to the fore; it is incomplete, for it is essentially historical. Moreover, it is only thanks to its incompleteness necessitated by its historicity and uniqueness that it can appear as a restoration, just like the nominal aspect of language can appear only on the basis of its meaningful aspect as the dark heart of the constellation composed of its disrupted elements. On the other hand, though, the very uniqueness of the historical moment is truly singularised only by the moment of restoration that reveals itself in it. This splendid dialectic brings Benjamin to the claim that the origin is both defined and torn by "the antinomy according to which in all essential phenomena the moment of uniqueness and the moment of repetition determine each other": and this, understandably enough, makes every originary spot essentially "enigmatic" (*geheimnisvoll*).[22] Now, the same antinomy of the new and the repeated haunts Benjamin's later writings on the city and on (his) childhood experience. Most importantly in our context, however, in the longer version of his piece *Agesilaus Santander*, it is identified as the very essence of a specific phenomenon:

> He wants happiness—that is to say, the conflict in which the rapture of the unique, the new, the not-yet-lived is combined with that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived.[23]

Thus, it is happiness that is to combine the novel and the once-again—and it is the desire for, and the anticipation of, the elusive and never-really-coming happiness that forms the ultimate heart of the dreams of the past generations studied by the historian of the *Arcades Project*. Thus, ultimately, the aporetic spot of the name-as-the-navel would be the spot of desire for happiness governed by the peculiar logic of the origin, the logic of uniqueness and repetition. The name is and is *not* the object of this desire: it marks the place where the object is experienced as coming, but never given, the place where language opens on the anticipated object which is both novel and oddly well-known.

Refinding Things We Never Had

In order to grasp more fully the logic of the name-as-the-navel, we need to turn again toward Freud's teachings. More precisely, it is worthwhile to take a look at the brilliant reading of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* offered by Jean Laplanche in his *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Laplanche draws his readers' attention to the crucial role that the idea of *Anlehnung*, "propping," played in the early phase of development of the Freudian theory in general and in the *Three Essays* in particular. The gist of the idea is that the sexual drive appears first as a kind of side effect, a parasitical or perhaps spectral mechanism propping on the life instinct, the instinct of survival which urges the baby to suck at his or her mother's breast. Thus defined, the spectre of sexuality is set loose at the moment when the baby's oral autoeroticism is to make up for the loss of the original object. But it is also at this point that Laplanche identifies the fundamental paradox of human sexuality. First, he quotes the crucial passage from the third of Freud's essays and then he gives his insightful comment. Here is Freud (the notes in the square brackets are by Laplanche):

> At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of the nourishment [i.e., in the propping phase], the sexual instinct has a sexual object outside the infant's own body in the shape of his mother's breast. It is only later that it loses it, just at the time, perhaps, when he is able to form a total idea of the person to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs. As a rule, the sexual drive then becomes auto-erotic [auto-eroticism is thus not the initial stage], and not until the period of latency has been passed through is the original relation restored. There are thus good reasons why a child sucking at his mother's breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it.[24]

And here is Laplanche himself:

> If such a text is to be taken seriously, it means that *on the one hand there is from the beginning an object, but that on the other hand sexuality does not have, from the beginning, a real object*. It should be understood that the real object, milk, was the object of the [nourishing—A.L.] function, which is virtually preordained to the world of satisfaction. Such is the real object which has been lost, but the object linked to the autoerotic turn, the breast—become a phantasmatic breast—is, for its part, the object of the sexual drive. Thus, the sexual object is not identical to the object of the function, but is displaced in relation to it; they are in a relation of essential *contiguity* which leads us to slide almost indifferently from one to the

> other, from milk to breast as its symbol. 'The finding of an object,' Freud concludes in a formulation that has since become famous, 'is in fact a re-finding of it.' We would elucidate this as follows: the object to be rediscovered is not the lost object, but its substitute by displacement; the lost object is the object of self-preservation, of hunger, and the object one seeks to refind in sexuality is an object displaced in relation to that first object. From this, of course, arises the impossibility of ultimately ever rediscovering the object, since the object which has been lost *is not the same* as that which is to be rediscovered. Therein lies the key to the essential 'duplicity' situated at the very beginning of the sexual quest.[25]

This splendid reading shows how the sexual drive can be seen as originating by propping on the self-preservation instinct and ending up as a *clinamen*, as a perversion of the instinct, as a twisted quest, which swerves away from the hard-wired nature into the sphere of the phantasmatic. In particular, Laplanche is able to show how the sexual pursuit is marked by bitter irony: sexuality begins with the loss of the object, but the real object that was there was the object of hunger, and so all our lives we desperately want to refind something we have never had. The lost object gets our sexuality going and defines the quest, but it is not (really) what we are after. Sexuality is a quest out and away from the order of self-preservation into the desert of the perverse, desperately trying to "rediscover" the object which in fact is a phantasmatic displacement of what we have left behind. And so, the pursuit is utterly impossible. Every object we may find in this sad, immanent world will be necessarily a "mis-object."[26]

Stated as it is, this logic is of course deeply pessimistic. It is precisely this logic, however, which I would propose to combine with the logic of uniqueness and repetition as expounded by Benjamin in his theory of the origin and in his notes on happiness. Not that the two logical patterns are isomorphic, far from that. According to the Benjaminian pattern, the moment of the name—which I have identified with the moment of desire—is the spot of the anticipated, incomplete, unfulfilled repetition of the Edenic nominal bliss actualised in, and as a unique constellation of, the immanent elements. According to the Freudian pattern, our desire is defined as the impossible quest aiming at a repetition of what never was, because the thing that really was in the beginning was just the object of that boring, biological instinct of self-preservation—even if it is the loss of this very object that released our sexuality. Now, interweaving these two modes of thinking may result both in a refreshing disenchantment of Benjamin's theological scheme and in a salutary completion of Freud's otherwise bleakly pessimistic, sarcastic logic. The two patterns are very

different, but they may be seen as forming two aspects of a broader, psychotheological logic.[27]

According to this logic, at the spot called the name-as-the-navel identified in the act of *Deutung* the immanent order of signification collapses. What comes to the fore there is something that is not, or not-yet, there, and so it presents itself as coming rather than as given. This object appears only in the unique constellation of the elements of the decomposed immanence. And this object is an incomplete repetition, a rediscovery of something that—*pace* Benjamin—we have never really had. What we had, and lost, was the unimaginative order of self-preservation, or—in biblical imagery—the mindless fleshpots of Egypt. Our desire propped on our hunger, but now it leads us out and astray into the Promised Land which we allegedly had before. This is not true, just as we were never really expelled from Eden, for in fact we have grown out and astray from the Egyptian soil of the instinct. Eden is a retroactive fantasy of how it would have been if the erotic drive had been there from the start without the mechanism of propping: it would have floated in the bliss of pure language. But then again, the *pure* language of names cannot be the language of names at all. The name-as-the-navel can appear only as the constellation of the semiotic and immanent order, at the point of its abysmal collapse, as the object of the perverse desire feeding on the retroactive fantasy of Eden, but aiming at the coming utopia of happiness, at refinding things we have never really had.

Auf Ungeseres!

As we remember, when Freud discusses "the navel of the dream," he speaks of "a tangle of the dream-thoughts" (*ein Knäuel von Traumgedanken*) as arising from this mysterious centre. Now, it is worth noting that Freud only uses the word *Knäuel* one more time in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Moreover, it appears in a remarkably similar phrase, namely *ein Knäuel von Gedanken*, or "a tangle of thoughts." The phrase is used in a passage slightly preceding the discussion of the navel of the dream, which has also drawn the attention of commentators, as it is one of the fragments of the book where Freud speaks very explicitly about his Jewishness.[28] The passage is devoted to the analysis of a dream that begins with a certain professor M. saying, "My son, Myop…," and evolves into an enigmatic narrative of persecution and salvation. The text of the dream, together with Freud's interpretation, may serve as an illustration, extension, and completion of the above argument. Thus, here is the text itself:

> Because of some events in the city of Rome it is necessary to evacuate the children—which, indeed, happens. The stage is then set before a gate, a double gate [*Doppeltor*] in ancient fashion (Porta Romana in Siena, as I realise already in the dream). I am sitting on the edge of a well and I am very sad, almost weeping. A female person—a nurse, a nun—leads two boys and hands them over to their father, whom I am not. The elder of the two is clearly my first-born, I cannot see the face of the other one; the woman that brings the boys demands from him a farewell kiss. She has a markedly red nose. The boy refrains from the kiss, but reaching out his hand he says instead: *Auf Geseres*, and to the two of us (or to one of us): *Auf Ungeseres*. I am struck by the thought that the latter means something better.[29]

Having related his dream, Freud offers its highly incomplete and problematic interpretation. First of all, he draws his readers' attention to the fact that the immediate impulse behind the dream was a spectacle he had watched shortly before and which had produced in him a true *Knäuel von Gedanken*. The play performed was Theodor Herzl's *Das neue Ghetto*, a drama on the dilemmas of, and the anti-Semitic tension around, Jews in modern society. The troubled father of psychoanalysis points out quite openly that his dream is clearly linked to his concern about the future of his children devoid of any proper homeland—and so he melancholically quotes the famous biblical passage: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1).

This, however, is just the starting point for further interpretation. Freud suggests that it was in Siena that he has recently seen a mental clinic, which he links to the fact that not long before his *Glaubensgenosse* (fellow believer) had to resign from a position at such a mental institution. The term *Glaubensgenosse* seems to suggest that the Jewish theme is being continued. However, it must be noted that according to Robert Reszke, the Polish translator of *Die Traumdeutung*, Freud—"the godless Jew"—may rather be alluding to Heinrich Heine's witty phrase *Unglaubensgenosse* (which originally referred to Baruch Spinoza), and that this "companion in faith" or "unfaith" is not only or not so much a Jew as he is a (probably Jewish) brethren in psychoanalysis. The suggestion seems very plausible, but far from incontestable.[30]

Be that as it may, after these preliminary suggestions Freud focuses on the *Geseres-Ungeseres* pair. According to him, somewhat mysterious *Schriftgelehrte* (Scripture scholars) have informed him that *Geseres* is a Hebrew word which can be translated as "ordered suffering, doom" and in the Yiddish version as "laments and complaints." The word *Ungeseres* does not exist but the German prefix clearly suggests negation. But when, Freud asks, is negation felt as an advantage? The answer is rather startling.

It is in the case of caviar, says Freud: the unsalted one is valued higher than the salted one. Without revealing all his (personal) cards, Freud claims that this is an allusion to a female member of his household whom, being younger than himself, he expects to take care of his sons in the future. And yet, Freud claims (rather unconvincingly), the passage from the *Geseres-Ungeseres* to *gesalzen-ungesalzen* demands one more link or transitory station. This link is provided by the Passover pair of *gesäuert-ungesäuert* (leavened-unleavened), in which, likewise, the negated term is better than the affirmed, for during the Passover Jews are to eat only the unleavened bread.

From that point on, a winding road of associations leads Freud further through a memory of a visit in Breslau with Wilhelm Fliess during Easter (substituting here for Passover), an image of a child asking the wrong people for directions, a rather comic sign announcing "Dr. Herod, the consulting hours," Fliess's speculation's concerning what would have been if we had only one eye "like a cyclop," and thus brings him back to the opening phrase "My son, Myop…," and to what Freud now perceives as "the main source of *Geseres*." It is to be found in a recollection concerning the son of the said professor M. who in his childhood suffered from an eye infection. The doctor tried to calm the mother by saying that as long as the inflammation is one-sided, there is no need to worry. The eye was cured, but then the infection appeared in the other one—which made the mother lament. The doctor, however, ridiculed her "*Geseres*" and assured her that everything will be all right. Now, as the school bench that belonged to that son was then given to Freud's first-born, the father of psychoanalysis finally concludes that, all in all, the dream expresses his wish concerning the harmonious, physical, and intellectual development as well as security of his son, free of any one-sidedness.

When discussing the mechanisms of secondary elaboration that, somewhat blindly and arbitrarily, compose the final narrative of the dream out of various odd, distorted fragments, Freud claims that this process can be seen as the first, amateurish interpretation of the dream, which, of course, produces more confusion than insight.[31] The interpretation proper must oppose this process. Now, sometimes it seems that the elucidations that Freud gives of his own dreams have something of that "first interpretation" which needs to be decomposed. This seems to be the case with *Geseres-Ungeseres*. In particular, it is worth noting that the "Jewish question" appears in Freud's interpretation only as the starting point (Herzl's play) or as a bridge or transitory association between different images and ideas (*Glaubensgenosse*, *gesäuert-ungesäuert*, Passover). It seems that Freud not so much hides the Jewish motifs of the dream, as he

reveals them only in order to suppress them all the more successfully, proceeding finally to both private and universal matters: the wish to find someone to take care of his sons, as well as the wish that his son would not become "one-sided." And yet the very Jewish matters may play a much more important and ambiguous role in Freud's dream.

First and foremost, there is a line to be explored which is fleetingly alluded to by Freud himself. Although the main stage of the dream is Siena, everything takes place by Porta Romana, and after most of the people involved have fled the city of Rome. Freud passes over this detail by saying only that, since he—at that point—had never been to Rome, he needed a substitute for it. Now, this will certainly not do. For in an earlier passage, Freud tells us how for some reason he cannot reach the city of Rome and presents a sequence of his dreams that express his increasing wish to be there.[32] In one of those dreams, he sees the city from afar like "a Promised Land." In another, he feels he is in the city itself, but still he does not see any urban landscape and he does admit that he is "in vain" trying to see Rome.

Incidentally, this dream seems to be equivalent to the one described by Walter Benjamin in one of the *Denkbilder* I have mentioned above, entitled *Too close*. In that dream, Benjamin feels he is in Paris, in front of Notre Dame Cathedral, but he cannot recognise the cathedral, as it is strangely distorted. He feels a terrible longing for the city, but it is a longing not for something one sees from afar, but for something one came too close to—and so it loses its image and is reduced to its name.[33] Benjamin claims that the longing is "blissful." It seems that in his dream about Rome, Freud also came too close to the object of his desire which, however, results in much more ambivalent affects, clearly including anxiety. Finally, Freud identifies what he thinks to be the deepest, infantile source of his desire to come to Rome. If in his reading of one of the dreams he transposed the biblical image of the Promised Land to Rome, implicitly identifying with Moses standing on Mount Nebo, now the pattern gets inverted. Freud claims that, troubled in his youth by the effects of antisemitism and, in particular, by a story of his father being humiliated by an anti-Semite, he came to identify himself more and more with the Semitic Hannibal struggling against Rome. Thus, far from being the Promised Land, the city would be the centre of the oppressive empire and Freud's desire to go there would be, in fact, fuelled by deeply vengeful affect.

This contradictory duality, the ambiguity of Rome as the Promised Land and Rome as the site of the vicious empire, finds its reflection in the motif of duality that permeates the *Geseres-Ungeseres* dream itself. Thus,

there are the constant meditations on the propriety of having two (healthy) eyes, there is the double gate, *Doppeltor*, which oddly sounds like double Torah in the German, and there is the ambiguity of the *Glaubensgenosse* who might be Freud's brethren in Jewishness or in the faithless (religion of) psychoanalysis.[34] Most importantly, however, there is the enigmatic slogan *Auf Ungeseres* itself which is also marked by a strange duality. For whoever the *Schriftgelehrte* were that Freud consulted concerning the meaning of the word *Geseres*—there are good reasons to believe he consulted none and he knew all that himself—my own *Schriftgelehrte* has provided me with quite fascinating data concerning the semantic field defined by the Hebrew root *gzr*.[35] It seems that the meanings belonging to this field can be grouped into two distinct and conflicting series. On the one hand, the root would refer to the meanings connected with the persecution of the Jews, beginning with the paradigmatic Egypt. On the other hand, however, it would refer to the strict injunctions of the law springing from God himself or from the religious authority, down to the specific and emblematic law of circumcision. Now, it would be most tempting to link this bundle of contradictory meanings to the later development of Freud's thinking. First, it will be remembered that Freud came to understand both blinding and circumcision as symbolic substitutes for castration.[36] Second, it will be remembered that the figure of Moses and the story of the exodus from Egypt became a virtual obsession for the father of psychoanalysis. Thus, it is rather hard to accept the fact that the Jewish thread of analysis of that particular dream should break so quickly. But instead of pursuing this thread any further, it would be best to put one's finger on the *Knäuel* in which the thread disappears when traced back to its origin.

In his dream, Freud sits on the edge of a well, in distress, almost weeping. In the Bible, wells are pretty good places to meet one's future wife or at least the future wife of one's master. It is at a well that Abraham's servant meets Rebekah, who will become the wife of Isaac (Genesis 24). And it is at a well that both Jacob and Moses meet their future wives, Rachel and Zipporah respectively (Genesis 29 and Exodus 2). But a dried well is also the place that Joseph, the interpreter of dreams, is thrown into by his jealous brothers, to be sold to slave traders who then take him to Egypt (Genesis 37). The lamenting interpreter by the well is a lamenting father uncertain of the future of his first-born: will my son be killed by Herod's assassins or perhaps in the tenth plague which is to annihilate all the first-born who are not Jewish? Is he still Jewish? Is he Egyptian? Is he Roman? What do I want him to be? And am I still his father? At the same time, he is also a thinker who is not really sure of his

interpreting craft. Together with the father we are stuck in the two-eyed ambiguities of the double Torah, the law of Egypt and the law of Moses, the ambiguities of Jewish faith and of psychoanalytic unfaith.

These ambiguities seem to reach their climax when the father is greeted by his son with this incredible, funny, and wise *Auf Ungeseres*, which is the navel and the proper name of the dream. The phrase as such is meaningless, but at the same time it suggests a whole array of contradictory meanings. As the greeting replaces the standard and expected *Auf Wiedersehen*, it means, perhaps, that the son is parting from the father for good and he is not going to see him again any more. But it means also, perhaps, that they *will* see each other after all, when all the lamenting is gone. Or: when all law is gone. But which law? The law of Moses—and circumcision—, or the law of Egypt or Edom or Rome or Austria or any other vicious empire of this world? Shall we conquer Rome, then, or shall we reach the utmost level of assimilation within the empire? Shall we come back to Judaism, to the *Glaubensgenossen*, or shall we leave it for good and pass to the utter godlessness (of psychoanalysis)?

All these possibilities are entangled aporetically in one *Knäuel* and hold each other in check. And yet the cheerful farewell of the first-born—*Auf Ungeseres!*—offers more than just aporiae. This strange exclamation at the fair well, which seems to appeal to the utopian times of no law and no lament, is a monstrous hybrid which belongs to two languages at the same time and hence, it belongs to none. The greeting is a strike against the law of language, a perverse, nonsensical gesture, which should not be there. Freud himself presents this exclamation as absurd—the whole dream is discussed as an example of "absurd dreams"—, only to announce that the absurdity was in fact apparent, for it can be dismantled. Thus, having concluded his interpretation he triumphantly proclaims that "a dream is often at its deepest and most insightful where it seems to be at its craziest."[37] True, but not because one can disentangle its *Knäuel*—this cannot be done—, but rather, because one can identify the *Knäuel* as the site of a redemptive undecidability. For it is precisely in this aporetic moment, suspending the law of language and its normal functioning, blocking all the meaningful paths and passages, that Freud's dream finds its Passover. It is at the spot marked by this nonsensical exclamation that Freud observes his first-born bidding farewell to him and finding his way back to what he never had—ultimately, to the phantasmatic state before and beyond the law—and thus, for a moment, in the place of this strangest Name-as-the-Navel which appears in the constellation of all the facts, details and associations, making his father happy.

Notes

[1] Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, edited by Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2000).
[2] See especially Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 117 and 280-281 for particularly lucid (and famous) formulations.
[3] Sigmund Freud, *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, 470-471.
[4] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 486. See also the restatement of this claim in Freud, *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 452.
[5] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 14.
[6] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 503.
[7] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 503.
[8] Benjamin, *Origin*, 35; cp. the original: Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in GS I.1, 214-215.
[9] Benjamin, *AP*, 462-463 (N 3, 1), 475 (N 10a, 2); GS V.1, 576-578, 595.
[10] Benjamin, *AP*, 464 (N 4, 1), GS V.1, 580.
[11] For the classical attempt to show the significance of Freud's work for understanding Benjamin, see Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*. *Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, translated by Georgina Paul (London: Routledge, 1996), especially 99-133.
[12] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," SW 1, 59-61; "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," in GS II.1, 140-157.
[13] Benjamin, *Origin*, 36-37; GS I.1, 216-217.
[14] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such," SW 1, 65 (translation modified); "Über Sprache überhaupt," GS II.1, 144. As for the classical analysis of the conceptual intricacies of this essay, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie des Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 9-50.
[15] This reading is inspired by the work of Werner Hamacher, especially his seminal "Afformative, Strike," translated by Dana Hollander, in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Clinamen Press, 2000), 108-137, as well as Werner Hamacher's "The Gesture in the Name," in *Premises*, translated by Peter Fenves (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 294-336.
[16] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," SW 2, 697; "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," GS II.1, 208-209.
[17] This is very clearly grasped by Adorno in his final theory of the work of art and its riddle-like nature. "The artworks," says Adorno, "are not to be conceived in aesthetics as hermeneutic objects; what should be conceived, from the contemporary point of view, is their inconceivability." A few pages later Adorno ingenuously plays on Benjamin's idea of *Vexierbild* and on Freud's idea of the dream as a picture riddle (*Bildrätsel*): "Artworks are riddles [*Rätsel*]. Potentially, they do contain a solution, but it is not objectively posited. Every artwork is a

picture puzzle [*Vexierbild*], but in such a way that it remains at the stage of mocking [*Vexieren*], of the pre-established failure of the observer." And finally, in a splendid revision of Benjamin's definition of the aura (and in an unwitting correspondence with Lacan's definition of the *objet a*): "To solve a riddle [*Rätsel*] is to give the reason for its insolvability: the gaze with which the artworks watch the observer." Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 179, 184, 185 (translation mine, A.L.). See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 105 ("The *objet a* in the field of vision is the gaze").

[18] Benjamin, "Short Shadows (I)," SW 2, 268-269; "Kurze Schatten I," GS IV, 368-370.

[19] Benjamin, *Origin*, 37; GS I.1, 217.

[20] Benjamin, *Einleitung*, GS I.3, 935-937.

[21] Benjamin, GS I.3, 935-936.

[22] Benjamin, GS I.3, 936.

[23] Benjamin, "Agesilaus Santander" (Second Version), SW 2, 715 (translation modified); "Agesilaus Santander" *(*Zweite Fassung), GS VI, 523.

[24] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1966), vol. 7, 222. Quoted in Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 19.

[25] Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 19-20.

[26] Laplanche's reading of Freud is brilliantly used by Harold Bloom in his theory of poetry. Bloom draws an analogy between the biological instinct of self-preservation and literal meaning on the one hand and between the sexual drive and the "perverse" figurative meaning of poetry on the other. See Harold Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 42-70.

[27] I borrow the term "psychotheology" from Eric Santner. See his *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[28] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 12, 69-70; Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 221-229.

[29] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 426.

[30] Reszke points out that Freud makes use of Heine's witticism in his book on jokes. See Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, 75.

[31] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 480.

[32] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 205-209.

[33] Walter Benjamin, "Short Shadows (I)," SW 2, 269; "Kurze Schatten I," GS IV, 370.

[34] It is Daniel Boyarin who identified the possible association between *Tor* and Torah in this dream (see n. 28). Moreover, following earlier commentators, Boyarin points out that in his interpretation Freud made a curious mistake: his Breslau encounter with Fliess took place during Christmas rather than during Easter (see Sigmund Freud, *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse. Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess*, Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1975, 203-206). Boyarin soberly reminds us that the story of Herod as the persecutor of children is, indeed, linked to Christmas and that it ends not with an exodus from Egypt, but with an escape to Egypt. Thus, new dualities (Judaism / Christianity, Egypt as oppression / Egypt as salvation) join the earlier ones. However, one may also argue that by making this mistake, Freud inadvertently reveals the extent to which his thinking is rooted in the Jewish imagery, even if in his story Passover figures as Easter: following the idea of the unleavened bread, while remembering Dr. Herod, he seems to be thinking rather of the tenth plague and the Exodus—and so he moves the encounter with Fliess to spring.

[35] Here I would like to thank Dr. Piotr Paziński, the Chair of the Jewish Studies Department at the Franz Kafka University of Muri.

[36] For castration and blinding see Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, 254. For castration and circumcision see Sigmund Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 9, 567.

[37] Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 429.

II

A Firmament of Ideas: Language and Perception

CONSTELLATION AND EXPRESSION IN BENJAMIN AND LEIBNIZ

PAULA SCHWEBEL

Introduction

Benjamin argues in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* that the method of philosophy involves the presentation of ideas.[1] The ideas do not appear in themselves, but are manifest in a constellation of phenomenal elements. The purpose of this paper is to give a philosophical interpretation of Benjamin's figure of the *constellation*, as it is introduced in the *Prologue*.[2] Although Benjamin's heterogeneous thought cannot be reduced to a system of philosophy, he invokes the figure of the constellation to describe the relationship between ideas and the phenomena, both of which are philosophical concepts.[3] I will argue that Benjamin draws on a Leibnizian understanding of the ideas, the phenomena, and the relationship between them.

Among scholars who read Benjamin's work philosophically, the tendency has been to emphasise Benjamin's affiliation with Kant and Neo-Kantianism.[4] Eli Friedlander, for instance, turns to Kant in order to understand what Benjamin means by 'ideas' in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*: "I take it that in his use of the term 'idea' Benjamin invokes not only Plato but also Kant, for whom 'idea,' the product of reason, indicates the encompassing of a totality."[5] Friedlander's chief reason for naming Kant in this context is that Benjamin distinguishes between ideas and the phenomena and argues, like Kant, that the ideas do not enter into possible experience.[6] In keeping with a Kantian interpretation, Friedlander conceives of the constellation as an image, or the idea's sensuous presentation.[7]

Friedlander's appeal to Kant is one way to make sense of Benjamin's claim that the ideas do not appear in themselves, but only insofar as they are phenomenally presented. However, Kant is not named in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, and Benjamin only invokes the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen in order to take distance from him.[8] Meanwhile, Benjamin explicitly models his theory of ideas on Leibniz's monadic metaphysics: in

the *Prologue*, he states that, "the idea is a monad,"[9] and in a letter to his friend, Florens Christian Rang, Benjamin characterises the monadology as the "*Summa* of a theory of ideas."[10] In light of these statements, a Kantian interpretation of Benjamin's ideas seems unwarranted.

There are salient differences between Leibniz and Kant, which bear on Benjamin's theory of ideas.[11] Leibniz argues for the primary reality of simple substances (monads), which are spontaneously active and endowed with the capacity to represent or express the universe. Kant, for his part, distinguishes between cognising *subjects* (which alone are endowed with the capacity to think and represent) and cognised *objects* (which are stripped of any representational qualities of their own). According to Kant, it is impossible to know whether the subject is also a substance in Leibniz's sense; this would involve what Kant thinks of as an illegitimate metaphysical claim.[12] Rather, Kant conceives of the subject in terms of the set of cognitive functions that make objective experience possible. In the context of his theory of ideas, Benjamin retreats from the Kantian distinction between the cognising subject and the cognised object, and he takes up Leibniz's notion of individual substances. Benjamin's ideas are not the mental representations of a conscious subject; they have independent existence as *essences*.[13] Moreover, Benjamin argues that ideas, like monads, are *self-representing* prior to being the represented objects of a conscious mind.

Once we understand Benjamin's ideas as monads, a Leibnizian interpretation of the constellation also becomes available. I will argue that the constellation is an idea's phenomenal *expression*, in Leibniz's sense of this term. According to Leibniz, "one thing expresses another […] when there is a constant and ordered relation between what can be said of one and of the other."[14] Expression thus involves a kind of analogy, or a structural isomorphism between that which expresses and that which is expressed.[15] Although this analogy is exact, it need not involve a relationship of similitude.[16] For example, a musical score expresses a symphony, and a map expresses a city, although it is clear that maps and scores do not resemble cities and symphonies.[17]

The concept of expression helps us refine Friedlander's suggestion that the constellation is an *image* of the idea. While an expression may take the form of a sensuous image, it is an image of a particular sort, since it can also be *read*, just as we speak of *reading* a map, or *reading* music. Although neither map nor musical score involves a language of words, they both provide exact information about the structure of what they represent. This makes it possible to read from a map the corresponding

properties of the city, or to read from a score the corresponding properties of the symphony.[18]

A constellation *expresses* an idea, I will argue, in that it represents the idea's intensive structure in a nexus of extensive relations between phenomenal elements. I find support for my argument in Leibniz's account of the relationship between a monad and its body. Whereas monads are simple unities that express multiplicity in the intensive order of their perceptions, bodies are composites, which reflect the unity of a central monad in the relations between their elements. To convey their expressive quality, Leibniz refers to bodies as the "well-founded phenomena." I will argue that Benjamin's notion of the constellation is prefigured in Leibniz's well-founded phenomena.

The argument that follows is divided into two parts, each of which are comprised of two subsections. The first part of this paper will give an interpretation of Benjamin's monadic theory of ideas, while the second part will argue for an interpretation of Benjamin's constellation as the idea's expression in the well-founded phenomena.

1.1 Name, Idea, Monad: The Genesis of Benjamin's Monadic Theory of Ideas

At first glance, it is hard to fathom why Benjamin would introduce his study of the baroque *Trauerspiel* with a discourse on ideas. According to one commentator, Benjamin's appeal to a realm of ideas was no more than a strategy for marking the difference between immanence and transcendence, which Benjamin soon abandoned: "Of course, we have to admit that Benjamin himself does not really adopt the doctrine of ideas, whose deployment […] is strategic. Benjamin does not return to it in his work."[19]

But a closer look shows that a theory of ideas was one of Benjamin's central preoccupations (at least in the period between 1916 and 1925), even if he did not always use the term "ideas." In his 1916 essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, Benjamin anticipates a theory of ideas by appealing to Adam's language of names. Unlike the so-called "bourgeois" language, which signifies its contents according to agreed-upon conventions, Adam's names are the univocal expressions of the *essences* of things.[20] Because Adam's names express the essences of things, knowledge of the names also endows one with knowledge of the things themselves. Thus, names can be regarded as archetypes, or as verbalised Platonic forms. In the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, Benjamin makes precisely this connection.[21]

A theory of ideas is introduced as such for the first time in Benjamin's 1919 dissertation, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*. This text is also referenced in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, which suggests that the early romantic "idea of art" is a precedent, if not a model, for Benjamin's own theory of ideas. According to Benjamin, the most recent attempt "to renew the theory of ideas" was undertaken by the "older generation of the romantics."[22]

Benjamin's dissertation distils Friedrich Schlegel's concept of art criticism, which hinges around what Schlegel held to be the immediate relationship between an individual *work* of art and the *idea* of art.[23] According to Schlegel, each work of art contains an implicit idea, which it is the critic's task to explicate or unfold.[24] Benjamin reads Schlegel's concept of art criticism as a radicalisation of Fichte's concept of reflection on a form. Like Fichte, Schlegel held reflection on a form to be transformative, in that each act of reflection on a form produces a new form (the form of the form), which becomes the object of a subsequent act of reflection.[25] Although the reflective process is infinite, Schlegel did not fear an infinite regress, but regarded the intensification of reflection in a form to be a mode of fulfilment, which would ultimately converge on the Absolute. Accordingly, reflection on an *artwork's* form would lead, through a series of reflective acts, from the "presentational form" of the empirical work to the "idea of art," or the Absolute in the medium of art. The romantic idea of art, as Benjamin understands it, is identical to the medium of interconnected forms, subsumed under a singular, absolute form.[26]

When Benjamin introduces his study of the baroque *Trauerspiel* with a theory of ideas, he is drawing on the precedent of romantic art criticism. Like the early romantics, Benjamin does not purport to judge artworks according to standards that are extrinsic to them (be they subjective notions of taste or universal principles of aesthetic merit); rather, he understands the critic's task to involve the discovery and presentation of a work's inner form, or essence. Benjamin adds in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* that it is not just individual works that have essences, but that fields of artistic endeavour—like tragedy, comedy, and (he proposes) the *Trauerspiel*—also stand on their own as essences, and should not be regarded as merely generic terms.[27]

However, one should not overstate the similarities between Benjamin's theory of ideas and Schlegel's. In the *Prologue*, Benjamin distances himself from the early romantic idea of art on two important points. First, whereas the early romantics conceive of the idea of art as a *continuum* of forms, Benjamin argues that the truth refracts into a multiplicity of

discontinuous ideas.[28] Second, whereas the early romantics hold the idea of art to be a product of the reflecting consciousness, Benjamin regards ideas as *linguistic* in character, recalling the Adamic language of names of his earlier essay.[29] These two points capture the key differences between the early romantic idea of art and Benjamin's monadic theory of ideas.

Benjamin rejects the notion of a singular idea of art, which engulfs all intermediary art forms.[30] As the engulfing form of all other art forms, Benjamin suggests that the romantic idea of art would itself be formless, vitiating what had seemed most promising in the romantic concept of art criticism—namely, that the idea would be the concrete fulfilment of an individual work's immanent form.[31] As opposed to the singular absolute, Benjamin conceives of a multiplicity of individual ideas.[32] Whereas for Schlegel, all art forms are (at least potentially) interconnected in a medium, Benjamin argues for the complete lack of mediation between each individual idea: "all essences exist in complete and immaculate independence, not only from phenomena, but, especially, from each other."[33] It follows that, "it is necessary to treat every idea as an original one."[34] We can recognise an appeal to Leibniz's monadology in this description, since reality for Leibniz is comprised of a multiplicity of monads, which do not interact with one another, but are essentially self-sufficient, or "windowless."[35]

Benjamin references Leibniz's monadology in his doctoral thesis in order to emphasise that the early romantics precisely did *not* conceive of reality as "an aggregate of monads locked up in themselves and unable to enter into any real relations with one another." On the contrary, Benjamin describes how, for the romantics, "all unities in reality, except for the absolute self, are only relative unities. They are so far from being shut up in themselves and free of relations that through the intensification of their reflection […] they can incorporate other beings, other centres of reflection, more and more into their own self-knowledge."[36] We can recognise in this statement the first glimpse of Benjamin's monadic theory of ideas, which emerges as an alternative to the engulfing form of the romantic idea of art.

Benjamin's attempt to conceive of the ideas as something other than a product of consciousness is also informed by Leibniz's philosophy. Leibniz holds expression, rather than consciousness, to be the primary attribute of mental beings.[37] Expression is also the key to what Benjamin means by the *linguistic* character of ideas.

Benjamin introduces his theory of ideas by distinguishing between an idea and the product of consciousness.[38] He supports this point by appealing to Plato—particularly, Plato's argument that ideas are innate in us prior to our being consciously aware of them.[39] In Benjamin's words:

"Whereas the concept is a spontaneous product of the intellect, ideas are simply given to be reflected on. Ideas are pre-existent."[40] Benjamin likens the manner in which ideas are given and recognised to a process of recollection, or Platonic *anamnesis*.[41] But Benjamin's appeal to Plato resonates with the underlying Leibnizianism of his theory of ideas, since Leibniz reprises Plato's theory of innate ideas, adopting his own version of *anamnesis*. According to Leibniz, there are implicit dispositions—innate ideas—in our minds, of which we are not conscious, but which we can come to *recollect* by focusing our attention.[42]

In support of his theory of innate ideas, Leibniz appeals to the vast degree to which our mental representations are not accompanied by conscious awareness.[43] Much of what a mind perceives, according to Leibniz, is too minute or indistinct to be consciously noticed.[44] For instance, Leibniz maintains that a mind *expresses* everything that occurs in its body, from the circulation of blood to the regeneration of cells.[45] While these bodily processes occur without being noticed, they are representationally distinct, and have their exact mental correlate in what Leibniz calls our *petites perceptions*. With respect to our innate ideas, or the implicit dispositions of our minds, Leibniz argues that even if we are not aware of them, they are expressed at the micrological level. The recollection of such ideas thus involves a deepening of attention to the minutiae of perception.[46]

Benjamin gives what strikes me as a Leibnizian (rather than a Platonic) account of the recollection of ideas. According to him, "truth content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter."[47] The task of representing an idea thus involves "penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world." Benjamin immediately adds that, "[i]n light of such a task of penetration it is not surprising that the philosopher of the Monadology was also the founder of the infinitesimal calculus."[48] Following Leibniz, Benjamin suggests that the ideas are discovered or recognised in the exacting way in which the minute details of perception hang together, revealing a structural whole.

Leibnizian expression accounts, moreover, for what Benjamin means by the linguistic character of ideas. Benjamin leads into this argument by comparing ideas to Adam's language of names.[49] Although Benjamin does not spell out the relationship between linguistic Adamicism and his Leibnizian theory of ideas, there is a clear conceptual connection, in that Leibniz is also a proponent of linguistic Adamicism.[50] Leibniz considers our innate ideas to express the essences of things, and on the basis of this expressive relationship, he seeks to construct a universal language of

thought, which would represent the order and structure of our ideas. Because our ideas express the essences of things, a language devised to express the ideas would (like Adam's names) endow us with knowledge of the order of creation.

The key to this argument is that Leibniz identifies the *essences* of things with the *ideas* in God's mind: "essences […] exist in a certain region of ideas, if I may so call it, namely in God himself."[51] The divine mind conceives of the ideas of all possible things, and the essence of a thing is thus both its possibility in God's mind and the idea *in* the thing itself—i.e., its internal constitution: "we conceive of nothing as possible *except through the ideas which in fact exist in the things* which God has created."[52] Accordingly, even inanimate beings have *ideas*, which are nothing other than their essences, perfectly or completely conceived.

The ideas of finite minds, such as ours, lack the perfection of divine ideas, but they nonetheless have an *expressive* relationship to the divine ideas, according to Leibniz. As Leibniz puts it, even though God's ideas are "infinitely more perfect and extensive than ours, they still have the same relationships that ours do."[53] From the structure and relations of our ideas, we can therefore read off the structure and order of divine ideas; and because the divine ideas inhere in things as their essences, our ideas endow us with knowledge of the essences of things.

Because Leibniz held our ideas to have their basis in the order of creation, he saw it as possible to *construct* a universal language of thought, which would resemble the language of Adam. Leibniz's project to construct such a universal characteristic involved assigning a character to each simple or primary idea, and then combining these characters to represent complex ideas.[54] It was in this context that Leibniz first introduced his notion of expression.[55] What he calls "the law of expression" involves an exact correlation between the composition of a complex idea and the configuration of characters in which that idea is expressed:

> An expression is the collection of characters representing the thing which is to be expressed. The law of expression is this: when the idea of the thing to be expressed is composed of certain things, the expression of the thing should be composed of the characters of those things.[56]

Although the characters themselves would be arbitrary signs (and hence could be substituted for any other set of signs), the *relationships between such characters* would mirror the intrinsic structure and order of ideas:

> For although characters are arbitrary, their use and connection have something which is not arbitrary, namely a certain analogy between characters and things, and the relations which different characters expressing the same thing have to each other. This analogy or relation is the basis of truth. For the result is that, whether we apply one set of characters or another, the results will be the same, or equivalent, or correspond analogously.[57]

Leibniz's universal language of thought is premised on the expressive relationship, or structural analogy, between an idea and the set of characters that are configured to represent it.

I have introduced Leibniz's Adamic language of thought in order to shed light on what Benjamin means when he claims that ideas are linguistic, rather than conscious in character. But the expressive nature of Leibniz's 'universal characteristic' also anticipates my interpretation of Benjamin's constellation as a form of expression. Just as Leibniz takes the structure and order of ideas to be expressed in a configuration of characters, Benjamin argues that the ideas are presented in a configuration of phenomenal elements.[58] Before turning to an interpretation of Benjamin's constellation, however, I will need to delve into the attributes of the monad that are salient for Benjamin's theory of ideas.

1.2 The Characteristics of Monadic Ideas

Benjamin names Plato, Adam, and Leibniz as the sources for his theory of ideas in the *Prologue*. This suggests an eclectic approach, which some have taken to undermine the seriousness of Benjamin's philosophical intentions.[59] Yet, as I have shown, Benjamin's allusions to Plato and Adam are encompassed in his Leibnizian theory of ideas. To bring out this coherence, I have focused on Leibniz's own (quasi-Platonic) theory of innate ideas, and the role that this theory of ideas plays in Leibniz's project to construct an Adamic language of thought. But Benjamin models his theory of ideas on Leibniz's notion of individual *substances*, or monads, rather than on Leibniz's discussion of ideas. These notions are connected, to be sure, since for Leibniz every individual substance exists as an *idea* in the divine understanding.[60] But in order to understand why Benjamin appeals to Leibniz's *monads* as the model for his theory of ideas, we need to look at what Leibniz means by an individual substance.

According to Leibniz, the fundamental building blocks of reality are simple, indivisible, mind-like substances, or monads. Leibniz argues that whatever is to count as a substance must be an essential unity, and must be

the source of its own activity. Aside from being created by God, monads do not depend on anything else for their occurring states. From the moment of creation onward, each individual substance is self-sufficient, which means that everything that ever has or ever will occur to it, and all of its relations to the rest of the universe, are *implicit* in it. In addition to being simple unities, each monad thus expresses or "perceives" the universe, and is endowed with "appetite," or an active drive for moving from one perceptual state to another. Unity, the capacity for expression, activity, and completeness, are also the key attributes of Benjamin's ideas.

In the first place, Benjamin's ideas are unities in essence (*Einheit im Sein*).[61] This distinguishes them from concepts, which are merely mental unities. In the case of a concept, a multitude of things are held together mentally, based on what they have in common. But such a unity is derivative, as Benjamin notes, since it depends on a "coherence established in the consciousness."[62] The unity of an idea, on the other hand, is "present in [it] as a direct and essential attribute."[63] Benjamin appeals to Plato to make this point, but if we look to Leibniz, we see that his very definition of an individual substance is that it is a genuine unity, or *one* being.[64] A true substance, according to Leibniz, must have its unity "from the nature of the thing" (i.e., its essence), whereas a conceptual unity is dependent on an act of mind, and is therefore only "one *per accidens*."[65]

Leibniz suggests that whatever is not a unity in essence—whatever is an aggregate or composite—is *phenomenal* in character.[66] This includes bodies, which Leibniz thinks of as aggregates that are *founded* in genuine unities, but that lack unity themselves. Benjamin never defines what he means by the phenomena, leaving some scholars, such as Friedlander, to assume that he is using the term in the Kantian sense (i.e., as coextensive with all objects of possible experience). But I take it as plausible that Benjamin follows Leibniz's manner of distinguishing between what is essential and what is phenomenal. I will elaborate on this point in the next section.

A second key feature of Benjamin's ideas is that they are *self-representing*. Benjamin introduces this point in terms of the distinction between knowledge and truth: "For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object—even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth it is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form."[67] What Benjamin means by "truth" is closely related to his theory of ideas, since he defines truth as the *harmonious relationship* between individual ideas or essences.[68] Truth "represents itself" in the multiplicity of ideas, and each idea, for its part, expresses a view of the truth.

Benjamin's account of the representational nature of truth and ideas maps onto Leibniz's argument that every individual substance expresses a view of the universe. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz argues that God views the universe from every possible position, and that created substances are those views of the universe that God sees fit to realise.[69] Thus, although each monad expresses the universe, each is intrinsically differentiated from all the others according to its point of view. Just as the different views of a city correlate with each other, even though they are dissimilar, Leibniz argues that individual substances, while unique, have a constant and proportional relationship to everything else that exists.[70] The universe is mirrored by as many views as there are individual substances. Truth in Leibniz's system therefore consists in a unity in plurality, or in the harmonious relationship between individual expressions, rather than in a systematic totality.

Monads, although entirely simple, express complexity in their representational structure. In the *Monadology*, Leibniz describes the expressivity of individual substances in terms of a monad's capacity to *perceive* the universe.[71] Leibniz does not restrict perception to substances that are minds; even "bare monads" (i.e., inanimate substances) are capable of perceiving, although they lack apperception, or the conscious awareness of what they perceive. Monadic perception involves nothing other than the representation of a *multiplicity* of things from a *single* point of view, much like an infinity of angles converges in a centre-point.[72] In representing itself, a monad expresses its relation to everything else in the universe.

A third salient feature of Benjamin's ideas is that they "appear in action, like blood coursing through the body."[73] As Benjamin puts it, "if philosophy is to remain true to the law of its own form, as the representation of truth," it must involve the "*exercise*" of this form.[74] Benjamin does not elaborate on what he means by this, but we can look to Leibniz for a clue. According to Leibniz, each monadic substance is endowed not only with perception, but also with an intrinsic source of activity, or "appetite." We can understand appetite as a monad's intrinsic drive to unfold itself, or to move from one perceptual state to the next. In Leibniz's words, appetite is that "action of the internal principle that brings about the change or passage from one perception to another."[75]

We saw that monadic perception involves the representation of a manifold within a simple unity. But something simple can only represent that which is manifold (and still remain a unity) if it involves a *succession* of states, or a temporal *unfolding*. Thus, monads express themselves (and their relationship to everything else in the universe) by continuously

passing from one perceptual state to another. This is how I understand what Benjamin means when he says that ideas appear in action. Ideas are not static representations, since they express the complexity of their subject matter in the *active unfolding* of all the implications of a singular point-of-view. For the presentation of such an idea to be adequate, it must do more than simply list the idea's properties, as though the order and interconnection between these properties were a matter of indifference. I take Benjamin to be suggesting that the presentation of an idea must discern the very manner in which the attributes of an idea unfold from one another. In other words, one must discover the mode of connection between a monad's *petites perceptions*, and this mode of connection is *enacted*.

Benjamin's ideas, finally, are characterised by their *completeness*. Each idea is the complete expression of an individual essence, which includes its genesis and its unfolding—the traces of its past and the anticipations of its future. Indeed, perfect knowledge of a monadic idea would even allow one to read off the coordinated states of the rest of the world of ideas. As Benjamin writes:

> The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings—concealed in its own form—an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others.[76]

Benjamin's reference to the *Discourse on Metaphysics* points to Leibniz's definition of an individual substance as the "complete individual concept" of a thing in §8.[77] In this section, Leibniz radicalises the traditional Aristotelian notion of a substance. According to Aristotle, a substance is that which receives predicates, but cannot itself be predicated of anything else (i.e., it is the grammatical *subject* of a proposition). For instance, the subject "king" can be predicated of many subjects; therefore, it does not stand up on its own as an individual substance. The subject "Alexander the Great," on the other hand, qualifies as a substance, since it receives predicates but cannot be predicated of anything else (it is a unique or proper name).

Leibniz thinks that Aristotle's definition of substance is insufficient, since it does not tell us anything about the *real basis* of predication, or its ground in the nature of things. If something is predicable of a subject, Leibniz holds this to mean that it is *contained* in the subject, whether explicitly or virtually:

> Now it is evident that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an identity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually.[78]

Leibniz thus defines substance in terms of the expression of an identity: everything that can be said of a subject *belongs* to its essence. If a predicate is "explicitly" contained in a subject, this yields a proposition that can be directly expressed as an identity, as is the case with definitional truths, which are logical or necessary ("Gold is metal;" "A bachelor is an unmarried man"). But contingent truths, such as the proposition that Alexander vanquished Darius and Porus, or that he died by poisoning rather than of a natural death, are what Leibniz considers to be "virtual" identities. This means that such propositions are *implicit* in the subject, even though it would be impossible *for us* to deduce them all.

Much of what is contained in the "complete individual concept" of a thing (or its "idea," in Benjamin's terminology) remains "virtual" for finite minds. But here Leibniz has recourse to the *divine idea* of a thing. In §8 of the *Discourse*, he appeals to divine intuition to ground his account of the containment of all predicates in an individual substance:

> God, seeing Alexander's individual notion or *haecceity*, sees in it at the same time the basis and reason for all the predicates which can be said truly of him, for example, that he vanquished Darius and Porus; he even knows *a priori* (and not by experience) whether he died a natural death or whether he was poisoned, something we can know only through history.[79]

All of a subject's predicates—its past and future contingent states, and every way in which it is related to the rest of the universe—are simultaneously intuited in the divine understanding. The divine idea of a thing is identical to its complete individual concept, which is how Leibniz understands the notion of individual substance in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

Leibniz takes the divine idea of an individual substance to be an epistemic ideal for us. While there are certain things that we, finite minds, can only know with the passage of time, Leibniz holds that if we had perfect knowledge, we would be able to immediately see in each thing its entire history (i.e., all of its past and future states). We could also read off the correlated states of the rest of the universe from an individual's relational predicates. The fact that we have such knowledge *virtually* means, for Leibniz, that we can recollect it if we carefully attend to the connection between things:

> Thus, when we consider carefully the connection of things, we can say that from all time in Alexander's soul there are vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him and even traces of everything that happens in the universe, even though God alone could recognise them all.[80]

Benjamin also takes the "complete individual concept" of a thing to be an epistemic ideal for us. As he argues in the *Prologue*, "[t]he representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored."[81] "Virtually," since the complete individual concept of a thing involves knowledge that is not explicit for us, even though it is implicit in the essences of things, and is potentially discoverable in the thoroughgoing connection of our minute perceptions.

Benjamin does not explicitly thematise the distinction between the perfection of divine ideas and the ideas as they are presented to *us*. However, it is a mark of our finitude that the ideas do not appear to us *in themselves*, but only insofar as they are phenomenally presented. It is germane to my argument that, for Leibniz, the manifestation of our finitude is that we conceive of ourselves and other monads as *embodied*. God, uniquely, perceives the essences of things as purely ideal. The limited nature of our understanding, and our difference from God, is manifest in our confused perception of an embodied world.[82] In the next section of my argument, I will interpret Benjamin's constellation as the embodied expression of an idea.

2.1 The idea and its phenomenal body: The constellation as a form of expression

Benjamin uses the term "constellation" to describe the nature of the relationship between an idea and the phenomena (or more precisely, the phenomena once they have been divided conceptually into their elements). I take it that, in the context of his theory of art criticism, Benjamin is referring to the critical dissection of empirical works of art, which divides them into their salient details. In Benjamin's study of the baroque *Trauerspiel*, such details (quotes, gestures, individual typologies) are de-contextualised from their empirical settings (which are only "false" unities, according to Benjamin), so that they can be re-configured in the service of presenting an *idea* (which alone is a "genuine" unity).[83] The destruction of a work's empirical unity is "redeemed" only insofar as the fragments of the material are rearranged so as to express the genuine unity of the idea.[84]

Benjamin invokes the figure of the constellation to describe the configuration of phenomenal elements, which serve to present the idea. He introduces his notion of the constellation initially by determining what the relationship between the idea and the phenomena *does not* involve. In the first place, this relationship is not conceptual, even though concepts are involved in dividing the empirical works into their elements. Concepts subsume the phenomena, whereas the ideas maintain an unbridgeable distance from the phenomena.[85] Moreover, while conceptual unities are determined by what the phenomena have in common, the ideas "do not make the similar identical, but they effect a synthesis between extremes."[86] In the second place, Benjamin states (admittedly without argument) that the ideas do not stand in a lawful or "hypothetical" relationship to the phenomena. Here, Benjamin is alluding to the Critical Idealism of Hermann Cohen, who interpreted the Platonic forms as "hypotheses."[87]

Having ruled out the conceptual and the lawful relationship between ideas and the phenomena, Benjamin suggests a third alternative: namely, that the ideas *represent* the phenomena.[88] An idea represents the phenomena, according to Benjamin, by *determining the relationship between* phenomenal elements:

> Whereas phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences, their relationship to ideas is the opposite of this inasmuch as the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena—or rather their elements—determines their relationship to each other.[89]

Without encompassing the phenomena, the idea organises the phenomena (or the elements thereof) into a configuration. The phenomenal elements are not classified conceptually, or brought together by what they have in common. Rather, the phenomenal elements become the extremities of extension in a figure, just as stars are the extremities of extension in a constellation.

What does Benjamin mean by "representation" in this context? It is unfortunate that the English translation of the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* uses the word "represent" for several different words in the German original, including *Vorstellung*, *Darstellung*, *Vergenwärtigung* and *Repräsentation*. Some scholars have suggested that *Darstellung* should be translated as "presentation," and have sought to distance Benjamin's theory of ideas from the implications of "representation" as a kind of mental picture.[90] But Benjamin uses the term *Repräsentation*, uniquely, to characterise the relationship between an idea and the phenomena. I emphasise this terminological point, because I take it that Benjamin uses the term

"representation" to mean expression. Leibniz, we should note, used the terms *repraesentare* and *exprimere* interchangeably.

A constellation *expresses* an idea, I argue, by presenting the idea's *intensive* structure in the *extensive* relations between phenomenal elements. In keeping with Leibniz's understanding of expression, the constellation thus exhibits a constant and ordered relation to the idea, reminiscent of how, for Leibniz, a configuration of characters expresses the structure of a complex idea. Whereas the monad is a simple unity that expresses complexity in the sequence and connection of its perceptions, a constellation is a complex or composite, which expresses the virtual unity of the idea in the relations between its elements. We might say that the constellation translates the idea's perceptual structure into relational terms.

I find support for my argument in Leibniz's conception of embodiment.[91] Unlike Descartes, who understands bodies to be extended *substances*, Leibniz regards bodies to be the *phenomena* of monads, albeit phenomena which are "well-founded" in reality. Leibniz's phenomenalism has often been interpreted as a kind of reductive idealism, which treats bodies as nothing other than the coordinated perceptions of mind-like monads, which we only *mistakenly* judge to have independent reality. Leibniz seems to take this position in a letter that he wrote to Nicolas Remond in 1714, in which he relates that, "monads or simple substances are the only true substances and that material things are only phenomena, though well founded and well connected."[92] However, scholars have challenged the interpretation of Leibniz as a reductive idealist, marshalling the evidence of the numerous passages throughout Leibniz's work in which he characterises bodies as *aggregates* of monads.[93] Contrary to the reductive idealist position, the conception of bodies as aggregates suggests that bodies are more than simply the coordinated perceptions of monads, but involve the relations among beings. My interpretation of Benjamin's constellation, as the idea's embodied expression or figure, draws on an understanding of Leibniz's bodies as aggregates, which express a central monad.

According to Leibniz, aggregates are phenomenal for the specific reason that they involve a *relation* between several elements. As we saw, Leibniz restricts substances to beings that are essential unities.[94] At the level of what is substantial, reality consists of nothing other than individual substances and their perceptual modifications. Relations, and entities that arise from the relation between things, are thus phenomenal rather than substantially real. As Leibniz writes in a letter to Burchard de Volder, "since only simple things are true things, what remain are only entities by aggregation; to that extent they are phenomena, and, as Democritus put it, exist by convention and not by nature."[95] Aggregates are *phenomenal* because, as composites,

they do not have their unity by nature (according to an essence), but they depend for their unity on a mental act. Their unity is thus derivative, or conventional. Insofar as we judge a composite to be *one* being, Leibniz would say that our judgment is *confused*, in the strict sense that we fuse together what is in reality distinct.

Leibniz often used the example of a rainbow to illustrate the phenomenal character of bodies. A rainbow is not one *per se*, but results from the confused perception of multiple individuals (i.e., water droplets and their light-refracting properties), which we judge to be one thing:[96]

> The unity of the idea of an aggregate is a very genuine one; but fundamentally we have to admit that this unity of collections is merely a respect or a relation, whose foundation lies in what is the case within each of the individual substances taken alone. So the only perfect unity that these "entities by aggregation" have is a mental one, and consequently their very being is also in a way mental, or phenomenal, like that of the rainbow.[97]

The passage quoted above makes two important points. First, relations are not real *per se*, but depend on an act of mind. This is what accounts for their phenomenal character. But second, Leibniz grants that the unity of collections has its *foundation* in individual substances. Thus, even though a mental act is involved in apprehending the unity of an aggregate, the perception of a bodily composite is not simply a product of the imagination. As Donald Rutherford suggests, the unity of an aggregate reflects an agreement between things that is objective, or grounded in the natural order of things: "relations are […] 'beings of reason' (*entia rationis*), whose reality is limited to their expression of the archetypal ideas and eternal truths constitutive of God's understanding."[98] The phenomena participate in reality insofar as our apprehension of the affinity between elements in a relation is grounded in the order of (divine) ideas. I take it that this is what Benjamin means when he characterises ideas as the "objective virtual arrangement" of the phenomena, or as "their objective interpretation."[99] The essences of things constitute the objective ground of our judgment that certain elements of the phenomena stand in relation with each other.

Leibniz uses the term "well-*founded* phenomena" (*phaenomena bene fundata*) to capture the sense in which bodily aggregates have their *foundation* in what is real. As Rutherford argues, the well-founded phenomena "have their foundation in certain individuals, which together determine the existence of a single complex being insofar as they are apprehended as standing in certain relations to one another."[100]

Rutherford's description raises the question of just how the individual essences (monads) *determine* the existence of a bodily composite.

One might think that a body is *composed* of a multiplicity of individual monads, which come together to form a complex entity. But this interpretation runs into the paradox of suggesting that an assemblage of *extensionless* monads could somehow add up to an *extended* mass. Leibniz clarifies that this is not what he has in mind: "Accurately speaking, matter is not *composed* of these constitutive unities but *results from them* […]. Substantial unities are not parts but *foundations* of phenomena."[101] If monads are not the phenomena's constitutive parts, then in what sense do they *found* the phenomena? Leibniz conceived of the relationship between a bodily composite and a monad in terms of *expression*, as he suggests in a letter to de Volder: "every body whatsoever expresses everything else, and […] every soul or entelechy whatsoever expresses both its body and, through it, everything else."[102] Bodily phenomena *mirror* the perceptual structure of monads in the organisation of their component parts. As Leibniz writes in the *Monadology*,

> The body of a living being or an animal is always organised; for, since every monad is a mirror of the universe in its way, and since the universe is regulated in a perfect order, there must also be an order in the representing being, that is, in the perceptions of the soul, and consequently, in the body in accordance with which the universe is represented therein.[103]

Monads do not enter into the composition of bodies, but only represent or express bodies in their intensive, perceptual structure. In my view, this sheds light on Benjamin's argument regarding the unbridgeable distance between the idea and the phenomena. Since it forms no part of the phenomena, the idea "belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends."[104]

The Leibnizian body—as a composite that expresses the individual monad, and as a nexus of relations in which the singular essence is explicated—anticipates Benjamin's figure of the constellation. The constellation depends on a mental act, which unites the phenomena, based on the recognition of an affinity between distinct elements. Were it not for this mental act, the constellation would fall into dispersion. While the constellation's lack of *inherent* unity suggests that it is merely conventional or constructed, the constellation is no *arbitrary* construction, since the configuration of its elements is determined by the intrinsic structure and order of ideas. The constellation is a form of *expression*.[105]

2.2 Expression as representation: The sovereignty of ideas and the body politic

While Leibniz uses the terms "expression" and "representation" interchangeably, Benjamin, at least in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, favours the term "representation."[106] I argue that this is because of the political valence of the term "representation," which "expression" does not connote. There is a definite order of rank between ideas and the phenomena, even though the expressive relationship is reciprocal and involves the constant and ordered relation between *both* terms. Whereas the ideas are genuine unities that represent themselves, the phenomena are *dependent* on ideas for their representation. It is only by participating in the unity of ideas that the phenomenal elements, which would otherwise be dispersed, are gathered together in a constellation. We might say that ideas represent the phenomena like a *sovereign* represents the body politic.

There are unmistakable parallels between Benjamin's discussion of the representational nature of ideas in the *Prologue*, and the representational role assigned to the sovereign in the main text of the *Trauerspiel* book. While ideas *represent* the phenomena, the sovereign is the *representative* of history.[107] While ideas are manifest in a *constellation* of empirical elements, the court is the "setting" in which the sovereign characteristically appears in the *Trauerspiel.* Indeed, Benjamin argues that the "confused court" is the stylistic principle of Baroque allegory:

> [I]n its fully developed, Baroque, form allegory brings with it its own court; the profusion of emblems is grouped around the figural centre, which is never absent from genuine allegories, as opposed to periphrases of concepts.[108]

Leibniz's notion of expression involves a tacitly political, or theological-political, structure, since it is ultimately God that is expressed in all created substances, while each of these expressions multiplies God's power. Unsurprisingly, the political implications of Leibnizian expression come through most clearly in his political writings, in which he argues for an articulated hierarchy of different organs of representation, ranging from God (who encompasses all representations while transcending each of them), to the universal church (God's representative on earth), all the way down to individuals.[109] But even in his account of physical bodies, Leibniz conceives of expression in terms of an order of rank. This is apparent in Leibniz's description of a phenomenal body as the figural expression of a "dominant" or ruling monad. In the *Monadology*, Leibniz thus describes each dominant monad as having its own configuration of dependent

essences (its own "court," as Benjamin might say), which the dominant monad represents, and which, in turn, express the dominant monad in their configuration.[110]

Benjamin picks up on this implicitly political-theological structure when he describes the relationship between the idea and the constellation in terms of the dominance of a sovereign idea, and the configuration of dependent elements that gather around it. This facet of what Benjamin means by "representation" emerges with particular clarity in an early fragment from 1920/21, entitled *Language and Logic*, which I read as a first sketch of what will become the figure of the constellation in Benjamin's *Prologue*. There are some differences between Benjamin's formulation in the fragment and in the *Prologue*; notably, in the fragment, Benjamin describes how a sovereign idea has its empirical presentation in a multiplicity of subordinate *essences*, whereas in the *Prologue* he argues that ideas are expressed in a constellation of *phenomenal* elements. But in other respects, the fragment is quite similar. In both the fragment and the *Prologue*, Benjamin is concerned to set ideas apart from concepts. Whereas concepts subsume or engulf the material that is arranged under them, Benjamin writes that ideas "rule over" subordinate essences, which remain distinct from one another:

> The relation between concepts—and this relation governs the sphere of knowledge—is one of subsumption. The lower concepts are contained in the higher ones—that is to say, in one sense or another what is known loses its autonomy for the sake of what it is known as. In the sphere of essences, the higher does not devour the lower. *Instead, it rules over it*. This explains why the regional separation between them, their disparateness, remains as irreducible as the gulf between monarch and people […]. The essential unity reigns over a multiplicity of essences in which it manifests itself, but from which it always remains distinct.[111]

The multiplicity of dependent essences that gather around the sovereign idea aid in its empirical presentation and unfolding, as Benjamin goes on to explain:

> Every essence possesses from the outset a limited—and moreover determinate—multiplicity of essences, which do not derive from the unity in a deductive sense, but are empirically assigned to it as the condition of its presentation and unfolding [*Darstellung und Entfaltung*].[112]

This anticipates Benjamin's argument in the *Prologue* that ideas are presented only when the multiplicity of phenomenal elements is assembled

around them. The expression of an idea, which is a simple unity, involves explication or unfolding in a multiplicity of elements.

Although Benjamin does not name Leibniz anywhere in this fragment, he seems to be grappling with Leibnizian ideas regarding the relationship between monads and their bodies—ideas and their empirical presentation and unfolding. We can compare Benjamin's sketch in *Language and Logic* to the following passage from Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace*:

> Each distinct simple substance or monad, which makes up the centre of a composite substance […] and is the principle of its unity, is surrounded by a mass composed of an infinity of other monads, which constitute the body belonging to this central monad, through whose properties the monad represents things outside of it, similarly to the way a centre does.[113]

Just as Leibniz's monad is surrounded by a multiplicity of essences, which constitute its body, so too, for Benjamin, is the idea the figural centre, which is surrounded by a constellation of dependent elements. We cannot know whether Benjamin was familiar with this passage in Leibniz.[114] However, given the important role of Leibnizian ideas in Benjamin's *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, I find it plausible that Leibniz's conception of embodiment informed Benjamin's thinking about the relationship between ideas and their phenomenal constellations.

Benjamin's fragment exhibits the link between an idea's embodiment and the "body politic." Sovereign representation is what makes of the disparate masses a unity. At the same time, the reality of sovereignty is made manifest only when the subjects gather around and display their allegiance to the sovereign. Benjamin sees both of these aspects at work in the idea's representation of the phenomena: the phenomena are "saved" from dispersion when they are represented by an idea;[115] and the ideas, which would otherwise remain obscure, are rendered visible only when the phenomena "declare their faith to them and gather round them."[116] The political-theological implications of Benjamin's argument come to the surface here: like a sovereign, the idea *represents* the phenomena, and for their part, the phenomena express their *fidelity* to the sovereign by mirroring it in their formation.

Conclusion

I have argued that Benjamin's figure of the constellation, as it is articulated in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, hinges around a Leibnizian notion of expression. We saw that, for Leibniz, one thing expresses another when there is a structural analogy between that which expresses

and that which is expressed. As I argued in Part One, Benjamin takes the idea to coincide with the complete expression of an individual essence. But only God is capable of intuiting the idea of a thing as a complete individual entity; we, finite minds, cannot adequately express the essence of a thing in a single term. As I argued in Part Two, Benjamin's constellation is the expression of an individual essence in the relations between elements of the phenomena. I argued that what Benjamin refers to as the phenomena is consistent with Leibniz's designation of any entity constituted by relations among things as phenomenal in character. Since the constellation derives its unity not from itself but from an idea, it is phenomenal. Yet, configured so as to express an idea, the phenomena are enabled to participate in the order of what is essentially real. Benjamin's figure of the constellation thus serves to recuperate what is sought in an Adamic language, and what has been lost to philosophy: namely, the expression of the individual itself, and the natural or non-arbitrary relationship between what *is*, and its representation in language. Like Leibniz's project to construct an Adamic language of thought by representing the relations between ideas in a configuration of characters, Benjamin's method is also constructive. It involves the deconstruction of what only *appears* to be a unity (in this case, empirical works of art), and the reconfiguration of the resulting fragments into a new whole: a constellation, which is determined in its structure by the idea.

Although my argument focused exclusively on Benjamin's early work, and on the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* in particular, it is possible to follow the thread of expression from Benjamin's early to his late work, testifying to a deep-seated Leibnizian vein in his thought. The terms change from Benjamin's early to his late work; the emphasis on ideas is dropped, and, under the influence of Marxism, Benjamin declares his method as historical materialism. Yet, filtered through the Marxist vocabulary, Benjamin carries forward a Leibnizian notion of expression. As he argues, the material infrastructure of a society, or its economic base, *expresses itself* in the superstructure, or ideology, much like the process of digestion is expressed in a dream:

> The question, in effect, is the following: if the infrastructure in a certain way (in the materials of thought and experience) determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then—entirely apart from any question about the originating cause—to be characterised? *As its expression*. The superstructure is the expression of the infrastructure. The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure—precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection

> but its expression in the contents of dreams, which, from a causal point of view, it may be said to "condition."[117]

As is suggested in this passage, the author of the *Arcades Project* considers the material to be what is real (designated here by the subconscious activities in the body), whereas the ideological superstructure is likened to a well-ordered dream. Despite the inversion of rank between the material body and the idea (now demoted to a dream), the expressive relation between what is essential and what is phenomenal remains a constant in Benjamin's thought.

Notes

[1] Benjamin, *Origin*, 29.

[2] The constellation also features in Benjamin's late work. See thesis XVII of "On the Concept of History," in Benjamin, SW 4, 396. See also the N-Convolute of *The Arcades Project*, *AP*, 462-463 (N 2a, 3; N 3, 1). Although my analysis of the constellation in Benjamin's *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* will furnish clues for understanding Benjamin's later use of this term, a discussion of the later works is beyond the scope of this essay.

[3] Alison Ross argues against using philosophy as a kind of "master discipline" for resolving the hermeneutic difficulties that confront readers of Benjamin's thought. See the introduction to her recent book, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 3-4. I find Ross's argument persuasive. However, when Benjamin uses philosophical concepts, their traditional meanings should be taken into consideration, even in order to understand the originality and idiosyncrasy of what Benjamin does with them.

[4] Eli Friedlander, whose recent book is one of the most impressive attempts to read Benjamin philosophically, puts it thus: "Thinking of Benjamin's philosophy as growing out of a philosophical *tradition* is first and foremost thinking of it in relation to Kant's legacy." Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 27. Howard Caygill also offers a Kantian interpretation of Benjamin's early thought in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

[5] Friedlander, *Philosophical Portrait*, 38.

[6] Friedlander, *Philosophical Portrait*, 35.

[7] As Friedlander understands it, the constellation is an image because the material is used to present something other than itself, namely, the idea. Friedlander, *Philosophical Portrait*, 39.

[8] Benjamin points out two differences between his theory of ideas and Cohen's Critical Idealism: First, he rejects Cohen's notion that the idea should be understood as a "hypotheses," and second, he takes the category of "origin" to be a historical rather than a purely logical genesis, as Cohen had argued. Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; 46.

[9] Benjamin, *Origin*, 47.
[10] Walter Benjamin, "Letter to Florens Christian Rang," SW 1, 389.
[11] For a relevant discussion of the differences between Kant and Leibniz, see Antonio-Maria Nunziante and Alberto Vanzo, "Representing Subjects, Mind-Dependent Objects: Kant, Leibniz and the Amphiboly," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 17.1 (2009): 133-151.
[12] Kant makes this argument in the chapter on the paralogisms of rational psychology in the first *Critique* (A 348-51/ B 407, B 410-11). See Nunziante and Vanzo, "Representing Subjects," 139.
[13] Benjamin's objection to the subjective constitution of experience includes the (Kantian) transcendental subject: "Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of—*even if in a transcendental sense*—in the consciousness." Benjamin, *Origin*, 29 (emphasis added).
[14] G.W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften* (7 vols.), edited by Carl Immanuel Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), vol. 2, 112.
[15] Leibniz scholars, with some exceptions, generally uphold the view that expression is a structural isomorphism. See Robert F. McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 23 and 42; Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 236; and Stephen Montague Puryear, "Perception and Representation in Leibniz" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2006), 12. Chris Swoyer argues against the structural isomorphism interpretation, since he sees an isomorphism as requiring an *unequivocal* relationship between expression and expressed, whereas Leibnizian expression is often equivocal. See Swoyer, "Leibnizian Expression," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1995): 65-99. Mark Kulstad argues for a *functional* interpretation of expression in his "Leibniz's Concept of Expression," *Studia Leibnitiana* 9 (1977): 55-76.
[16] In "What is an Idea?", Leibniz describes expression as an analogy: "Hence it is clearly not necessary for that which expresses to be similar to the thing expressed, if only a certain analogy is maintained between the relations." See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, edited by Leroy Loemker, 2nd edition (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), 207. Moreover, Leibniz describes expression as an "exact" analogy; as he puts it in the *New Essays*, ideas represent, or express the motions in bodies "through a rather exact relation." See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Francis Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 133.
[17] Leibniz gives numerous examples of what means by "expression." For instance, a map expresses the geographical region that it depicts; perception (whether conscious or not) is an expression of what is perceived; each monad expresses the universe; and language involves expression, in that speech expresses thought, and words express the things they signify. For a comprehensive list of Leibniz's examples, see Kulstad, "Leibniz's Concept of Expression," 57.

[18] While Friedlander recognises that the constellation is an "image that is read," he lacks a convincing account of what this involves. According to him, the linguistic element of the constellation is due to the role of concepts, which divide the phenomena into their basic elements: "Indeed, if one wants to hold to the sense that ideas are presented in *language*, then retaining conceptual articulation is crucial." Friedlander, *Philosophical Portrait*, 41. I take this to be a misunderstanding of what Benjamin means by language in this context, which I hold to be expressive, rather than discursive.

[19] David Kaufmann, "Correlations, constellations and the Truth: Adorno's Ontology of Redemption," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 26.5 (2000): 64.

[20] In the dense opening section of *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man*, Benjamin argues that all things, animate and inanimate, have a language, and that this language is the tendency of all things to *express* the contents of mind. Benjamin does not restrict what he means by the "contents of mind" and the "mental being" of things to determinations of consciousness; the mental being of a thing is the complete expression of its essence. See Benjamin, SW 1, 62-63.

[21] Benjamin, *Origin*, 36-37.

[22] Benjamin, *Origin*, 38.

[23] There are two main sources for what Benjamin considers to be the romantic theory of criticism: Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. But as Benjamin puts it at the outset of his dissertation, "Friedrich Schlegel's theory will be presented […] as *the* Romantic theory of criticism" (Benjamin, SW 1, 118). It should be understood that when I speak of Schlegel's ideas in the following, I mean these ideas as discussed by Benjamin.

[24] The romantic concept of criticism comes out most clearly in Schlegel's review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, in which he argues that the book has an "indwelling genius," and therefore need not be judged by the critic, since it "turns out to be one of those books which carries its own judgment within it, and spares the critic his labour." See Friedrich Schlegel, "On Goethe's Meister," in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, edited by J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 275-276.

[25] This is a simplification of Benjamin's argument. I have written at length about Benjamin's development of a monadic theory of ideas in response to the romantic idea of art in Paula Schwebel, *Walter Benjamin's Monadology* (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2012).

[26] Benjamin writes, "In this medium all the presentational forms hang constantly together, interpenetrate one another, and merge into the unity of the absolute art form, which is identical with the idea of art." (Benjamin, SW 1, 165)

[27] Benjamin, *Origin*, 44.

[28] Benjamin, *Origin*, 37-38.

[29] Benjamin, *Origin*, 38.

[30] According to Benjamin, the romantic interpretation of the idea of art as a singular individual gives "a false interpretation to a valuable and valid motive." The valid motive was to account for the idea of art as distinct from an abstraction or the average of empirical works. Benjamin describes the "false interpretation"

thus: although Schlegel had "wanted to define this concept as an idea in the Platonic sense […] as the real ground of all empirical works […] he committed the old error of confounding 'abstract' and 'universal' when he believed he had to make that ground into an individual. It is with this in view that Schlegel repeatedly and emphatically designates the unity of art, the continuum of forms itself, as one work." (Benjamin, SW 1, 167)

[31] Benjamin describes the "peculiar character of the infinitude of reflection vindicated by the Romantics" as involving a devolution of the form of reflection into formlessness: "Reflection expands without limit or check, and the thinking that is given form in reflection turns into formless thinking that directs itself upon the Absolute" (Benjamin, SW 1, 129).

[32] Benjamin, *Origin*, 43.

[33] Benjamin, *Origin*, 37.

[34] Benjamin, *Origin*, 43.

[35] For Leibniz's reference to the "windowless" nature of monads, see §7 of *The Monadology* in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, edited by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 214.

[36] Benjamin, SW 1, 145-146.

[37] For an excellent discussion of the representational or expressive character of Leibniz's philosophy of mind, see Alison Simmons, "Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness," *The Philosophical Review* 110 (2001): 31-75.

[38] Benjamin, *Origin*, 30.

[39] Even though Benjamin's main discussion of Plato focuses on the relationship between truth and beauty in the *Symposium*, I take it that when he distinguishes between ideas and the products of consciousness, he is referencing Plato's doctrine of "innate ideas" in the *Meno*. See Benjamin, *Origin*, 30-31.

[40] Benjamin, *Origin*, 30.

[41] Benjamin, *Origin*, 36-37.

[42] See §26 of Leibniz's "Discourse on Metaphysics," in Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, 58.

[43] For a discussion of how Leibniz's theory of innate ideas is linked to his understanding of our unconscious *petites perceptions*, see Nicholas Jolley, *Leibniz* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 103-121.

[44] Leibniz writes that "there are hundreds of indications leading us to conclude that there are in us an infinity of perceptions unaccompanied by awareness or reflection; that is, of alterations in the soul itself, of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own" (Leibniz, *New Essays*, "Preface," 53).

[45] Leibniz writes that, "I even maintain that something happens in the soul corresponding to the circulation of the blood and to every internal movement of the viscera, although one is unaware of these things" (*New Essays*, 116). For an incisive discussion of the soul's representation of bodily states, see Simmons, "Changing the Cartesian Mind," 46.

[46] According to Leibniz, conscious reflection is "nothing but attention to what is within us." As he writes, "It would indeed be wrong to think that we can easily read these eternal laws of reason in the soul, as the Praetor's edict can be read on his notice-board, without effort or inquiry; but it is enough that they can be discovered within us by dint of attention" (*New Essays*, "Preface," 50).
[47] Benjamin, *Origin*, 29.
[48] Benjamin, *Origin*, 48.
[49] Benjamin, *Origin*, 37.
[50] The pioneering studies of Leibniz's Adamicism can be found in Hans Aarsleff, "Leibniz and Locke on Language," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 165-188; and D.P. Walker, "Leibniz and Language," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972): 294-307. See also Jean-Francois Courtine, "*Leibniz et la langue Adamique*," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et theologiques* 64 (1980): 373-391; Michael Losonsky, "Leibniz's Adamic Language of Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992), 523-543; and Marcelo Dascal and Elhanan Yakira (eds.), *Leibniz and Adam* (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects Ltd., 1993).
[51] Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 488; cf. Losonsky, "Leibniz's Adamic Language of Thought," 534.
[52] Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 2, 45; cf. Losonsky, "Leibniz's Adamic Language of Thought," 534 (Losonsky's emphasis).
[53] Leibniz, *New Essays*, IV.v.2, as cited in Jolley, *Leibniz*, 112.
[54] Leibniz defined the term "character" broadly, as including: "Words, letters; chemical, astronomical, and Chinese figures; hieroglyphs; musical, cryptographic, algebraic notations; and all other symbols which in our thoughts we use for the signified things. When the signs are written, drawn, or carved, they are called characters." Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 7, 204; cf. Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, 234.
[55] Robert McRae makes this argument in his *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception and Thought*, 20.
[56] Eduard Bodemann, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften der Königlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover* (Hannover: Hahn, 1895), 80-81, as cited in McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought*, 21.
[57] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 282.
[58] Benjamin introduces the constellation in terms of a configuration of the *phenomena* rather than a configuration of *characters*. Therefore, I find a clearer anticipation of Benjamin's constellation in Leibniz's notion of a monad's body than in Leibniz's "universal characteristic." However, an underlying notion of *expression* links Leibniz's philosophy of language and his understanding of embodiment. Just as the elements of a complex character express the structure of an idea in their configuration, Leibniz argues that the "well-founded phenomena" of a body express the structure of a central monad. Leibniz's figurative language of thought is particularly relevant for understanding the "baroque" philosophy of language that Benjamin invokes in the section on allegory in the *Trauerspiel* book. If one regards the baroque allegory to be a concrete instantiation of what Benjamin

means by the constellation in his methodological *Prologue*, then Leibniz's attempts to construct an expressive language are quite relevant to an interpretation of the constellation form. I have written about Benjamin's allegory in light of Leibniz's philosophy of language in the fourth chapter of *Walter Benjamin's Monadology* (see n. 25).

[59] For instance, George Steiner writes in the "Introduction" to the English translation of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that, "Benjamin was not, in any technical sense, a philosopher. Like other lyric thinkers, he chose from philosophy those metaphors, dramas of argument and intimations of systematic totality—whether Platonic, Leibnizian or Crocean—which best served, or rather which most suggestively dignified and complicated his own purpose." (Steiner, "Introduction," in Benjamin, *Origin*, 23)

[60] Perhaps the clearest expression of the identity between the divine idea of a thing and its substance is found in a letter Leibniz wrote to Magnus Wedderkopf in 1671: "The substance of things is an idea. Idea is the union of God and creatures, as action is the union of an agent and patient […]. N.B. ideas are not in God except insofar as things are given outside him […]. The ideas of God and the substances of things are the same in fact, different in relation, as are action and passion." Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Letter to Magnus Wedderkopf," cited in Leroy Loemker, "Leibniz's Doctrine of Ideas," *The Philosophical Review* 55.3 (1946): 231.

[61] Benjamin, *Origin*, 30.

[62] Benjamin, *Origin*, 30.

[63] Benjamin, *Origin*, 30.

[64] In "The Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason," Leibniz notes that the Greek word *Monas* means "one" or "unity" (Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 207).

[65] As Leibniz writes, "That which is one *per se* is one from the nature of the thing [*a parte rei*]. That which is one *per accidens* arises when many entities are conceived in the manner of one by a single act of mind, like a pile of logs." See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2006), vol. 6.4, 401; cf. Paul Lodge, "Leibniz's Notion of an Aggregate," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 9.3 (2001): 470.

[66] For a discussion of Leibniz's argument that aggregates are phenomenal, see Paul Lodge, "Leibniz's Notion of an Aggregate."

[67] Benjamin, *Origin*, 29.

[68] Benjamin, *Origin*, 37.

[69] For this account of creation, see §14 of the "Discourse on Metaphysics" in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 46-47.

[70] As Leibniz writes in §14 of the "Discourse on Metaphysics," "although they all express the phenomena, it does not follow that their expressions are perfectly similar; it is sufficient that they are proportional" (in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 47).

[71] Leibniz, "Monadology," §13 in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 214.

[72] The fact that Leibniz intends no connection between perception and consciousness is made clear in the example that he gives of perception in the "Principles of Nature and Grace," a text that he wrote shortly before completing the *Monadology*: "For the simplicity of a substance does not prevent a multiplicity of modifications, which must be found together in this same simple substance, and which must consist in the variety of its relations to external things. Similarly, in a *centre* or point, though entirely simple, we find an infinity of angles formed by the lines that meet there." See "Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason," in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 207.
[73] Benjamin, *Origin*, 39.
[74] Benjamin, *Origin*, 28.
[75] Leibniz, "Monadology," §15 in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 215.
[76] Benjamin, *Origin*, 47.
[77]Benjamin anachronistically uses the term "monad" to refer to Leibniz's notion of an individual substance in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, even though Leibniz would not use the term "monad" for another decade. Daniel Garber writes that the first known usage of the term "monad" in Leibniz's thought was in 1695. See his *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 336. The anachronism does not undermine Benjamin's argument, however, since what interests Benjamin in the "Discourse" (i.e., the completeness of Leibniz's individual substances) is also a feature of Leibniz's monads.
[78] "Discourse on Metaphysics," §8 in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 41.
[79] "Discourse on Metaphysics," §8 in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 41.
[80] "Discourse on Metaphysics," §8 in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 41.
[81] Benjamin, *Origin*, 47.
[82] Justin E.H. Smith traces Leibniz's thinking about the body to the tradition of Christian Neo-Platonism. Within this tradition, creatures perceive themselves and other entities in the world as *embodied* due to their finitude. Embodiment is a sign of creaturely inferiority to God, and is the marker of the distinction between God and creatures. See Justin E.H. Smith, "The Metaphysics of Body in Leibniz," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12.1 (2004): 45.
[83] As Benjamin writes, "Phenomena do not, however, enter into the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth." (*Origin*, 33)
[84] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34.
[85] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34.
[86] Benjamin, *Origin*, 41.
[87] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34. For a discussion of Hermann Cohen's interpretation of Platonic ideas as hypotheses, see Andrea Poma, *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen's Thought* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2006), 21-42.
[88] The German is important here. Benjamin writes: "*Wenn sie die Phänomene weder durch Einverleibung in sich enthalten, noch sich in Funktionen, in das Gesetz der Phänomene, in die 'Hypothesis' verflüchtigen, so entsteht die Frage, in*

welcher Art und Weise sie [die Ideen] denn Phänomene erreichen. Und zu erwidern ist darauf: in deren Repräsentation." Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), 16.

[89] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34.

[90] Hans-Jost Frey is one of several scholars who makes the case for translating Benjamin's use of *Darstellung* as "presentation" rather than "representation." See his essay "On Presentation in Benjamin," in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, edited by David Ferris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 139-164.

[91] My purpose is to interpret *Benjamin's* figure of the constellation in light of Leibniz's notion of a monad as embodied. I do not think that Benjamin gives anything like a *scholarly* interpretation of Leibniz's conception of embodiment. In fact, as I have suggested, Benjamin was not sensitive to the distinctions between different historical phases of Leibniz's work (see n. 77 in this essay). Nevertheless, I find striking similarities between Benjamin's notion of the constellation and Leibniz's notion of the well-founded phenomena, and I see it as plausible that Benjamin was informed by Leibniz's conception of embodiment. Leibniz seems to have adopted several positions on the nature of bodies throughout his life. These shifts are carefully documented in Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*. In keeping with Benjamin's persistent appeal to Leibniz's monads, I will restrict my discussion of Leibniz's conception of embodiment to his mature, monadological thought.

[92] See Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*, 303.

[93] Garber refers to this position as "aggregate phenomenalism" (*Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*, 293). For a reading of Leibniz's bodies as aggregates of monads, see Donald Rutherford, "Phenomenalism and the Reality of Body in Leibniz's Later Philosophy," *Studia Leibnitiana* 22 (1990): 11-28.

[94] As Leibniz puts it in a letter to Arnauld, "nothing is truly *one* being if it is not truly one *being*. It has always been held that one and being are reciprocal things" (as cited in Nicholas Jolley, *Leibniz*, 41). As is implied by the word "reciprocal," this means not only that whatever is a being is one, but also that whatever is not one lacks being, or is phenomenal in character.

[95] Leibniz, "Letter to de Volder, 20 June 1703," in *Philosophical Essays*, 175.

[96] Leibniz's example is potentially misleading, since, strictly speaking, even a water droplet is an aggregate rather than a simple unity.

[97] Leibniz, *New Essays*, 146; cf. Paul Lodge, "Leibniz's Notion of an Aggregate," 472.

[98] Rutherford, "Phenomenalism," 19. In support of this point, Rutherford cites Leibniz, who writes: "The reality of relations is dependent on the mind, as is that of truths; but they do not depend on the human mind, as there is a supreme intelligence which determines all of them from all time" (Leibniz, *New Essays*, 265).

[99] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34.

[100] See Rutherford, "Phenomenalism," 19.

[101] Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 179, as cited in Jolley, *Leibniz*, 78 (emphasis added).
[102] Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 178.
[103] Leibniz, "Monadology," §63 in *Philosophical Essays*, 221.
[104] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34.
[105] This recalls Benjamin's discussion of allegorical form, which involves both convention and expression. The emblematic characters that the allegorist assembles are not judged to be meaningful in themselves. As profane things, they are regarded with indifference, which exhibits the conventional aspect of allegorical technique. But on the other hand, the allegorist strives to express the order of creation in the configuration of emblematic characters. It is the relationship between elements, not the elements *per se*, that is expressive. See Benjamin, *Origin*, 175.
[106] Benjamin invokes a concept of expression elsewhere in his work, using the more characteristic German term, *Ausdruck*. Although an exhaustive study of expression in Benjamin's work goes beyond the scope of this essay, it would be well worth conducting. Expression underlies Benjamin's early work on language: in *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man*, Benjamin equates language with the tendency of each thing to express (*ausdrücken*) its essence (Benjamin, SW 1, 62-63). He also invokes a concept of expression in *The Task of the Translator*, where he writes that, "All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression [*Ausdruck*] of its nature, in the representation [*Darstellung*] of its significance" (Benjamin, SW 1, 255). In Benjamin's late work, most notably in the *Arcades Project*, he makes use of an idea of expression to understand the relationship between superstructure and base, which is a Marxian variation on the argument that the phenomena express the structure of what is real. See Benjamin, *AP*, 392 (K 2, 5); 460 (N 1a, 6-7).
[107] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; 65.
[108] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; 188.
[109] For instance, in *On Natural Law*, Leibniz describes the articulated hierarchy of political representation, in a way that is fully consistent with his theory of a hierarchy of monads, each representing the dominant or ruling monad: "If everything in the world were arranged in the most perfect way, then, first of all, parents, children, and relatives would be the best of friends, and whole families would have chosen an art of living […], would abide in it and continue to perfect themselves in their art and direct their children to the same end. They would marry people of the same calling in order to be united through education from their parents. These clans would make up guilds or estates out of which cities would arise; these would enter into provinces, and all countries, finally, would stand under the Church of God." See Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters,* 706, cf. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Political Writings*, edited by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80.
[110] Leibniz writes, "Thus we see that each living body has a dominant entelechy, which in the animal is the soul; but the limbs of this living body are full of other

living beings, plants, animals, each of which also has its entelechy, or its dominant soul" ("Monadology," §69, in *Philosophical Essays,* 222).
[111] Benjamin, SW 1, 273 (emphasis added).
[112] Benjamin, SW 1, 273 (translation modified).
[113] Leibniz, "Principles of Nature and Grace," in *Philosophical Essays*, 207.
[114] Benjamin recorded a list of works which he read, but this list includes no texts by Leibniz. See Benjamin, GS VII.1, 437-76. I do not take the absence of Leibniz from this list to mean that Benjamin did not read any texts by Leibniz (indeed, in the *Prologue* he mentions the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and the *Monadology* by name). But because Benjamin did not record the titles of the Leibniz texts that he read, we cannot say with any certainty which texts he knew.
[115] Benjamin, *Origin*, 33.
[116] Benjamin, *Origin*, 35.
[117] Benjamin, *AP*, 392 (K 2, 5; emphasis added).

CONSTELLATION AND CONFIGURATION: LANGUAGE AND READING IN THE *EPISTEMO-CRITICAL PROLOGUE*

TOM VANDEPUTTE

When the concept of constellation is introduced in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to Benjamin's first published book, his study of the German mourning play, it makes its appearance among a broader set of astrological and astronomical images. The doctrine of ideas outlined in the *Prologue* draws its imagery time and again from the firmament: the ideas that together make up the *mundus intelligibilis* are described as "suns" (*Sonnen*), as "star signs" (*Sternbilder*) and, finally, as "constellations" (*Konstellationen*).[1] These images do not merely serve to illustrate Benjamin's doctrine of ideas; rather, this doctrine is articulated in and through them in the first place. As I will show, it is precisely in these images that Benjamin's *Ideenlehre* turns out to be above all a theory of philosophical interpretation: if ideas have a linguistic character, as Benjamin will argue in the *Prologue*, philosophy's task to present them is first and foremost a matter of *reading*.

"The idea is something linguistic…"

The doctrine of ideas that Benjamin formulates in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* is perhaps best understood as an elaboration and extension of his earlier theory of language. The *Prologue*, of which Benjamin probably composed the first complete drafts in 1924, does not only draw on his treatise on language of 1916, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, and several fragments that he wrote around the same time as this text; it also returns to a host of unpublished studies that Benjamin wrote several years later, when he began to work on his first planned *Habilitationsschrift* in the early 1920s.

The relation between the doctrine of ideas and the theory of language articulated in these writings is elaborated in the section of the *Prologue* that bears the title "Word as Idea." The priority that is given to the "word"

in this title anticipates the main focus of a crucial reflection on the linguistic character of ideas that is found halfway through the section. In a passage that already appears in the first drafts of the *Prologue* in virtually the same form as in the final, published version, Benjamin writes:

> The idea is something linguistic [*ein Sprachliches*], indeed, it is in each case that moment in the essence of the word in which it is symbol. In empirical languages, in which the words of the revealed language have dislocated themselves, an obvious profane meaning [*eine offenkundige profane Bedeutung*] pertains to them, besides their more and more hidden symbolic side. The concern of the philosopher is to restore once again [*wieder zu instaurieren*], through presentation, the character of the word as idea [*den Ideencharakter der Worte*] in its rightful primacy.[2]

The relation between the doctrine of ideas and the theory of language is here organised around two distinctions, which intersect with one another but may be treated separately: that between two distinct "sides" of the word that pertain to empirical languages; and that between empirical languages and a "revealed language." Both of these distinctions may be understood in light of a number of studies of the "communicating and symbolic force" (*mitteilende und symbolische Kraft*) that Benjamin undertook as part of the initial preparations for his *Habilitationsschrift*.[3]

Of special relevance in this context is a fragment of 1921 that revolves around the example of the word "tower" (*Turm*)—a word that, not by coincidence, evokes language after the Fall and, as such, the counterpart of the "revealed language" referred to in the *Prologue*. In this fragment, Benjamin draws on a concept that had already played a central role in *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*: that of "communicability" (*Mitteilbarkeit*). In the first paragraphs of his treatise, Benjamin had distinguished between what is supposedly communicated "through" language and what is communicated "in" language.[4] These two modes of communication are strictly demarcated from one another, while being at the same time closely related. Before anything can be communicated "through" language, language must have already given itself as a pure form of mediacy.[5] In other words, before it can be employed as an instrument to communicate determinate contents, language must have already communicated itself qua language—or, as Benjamin puts it in the early *Language* essay: language can be put to use as a means of communication only on the condition that it has already communicated "sheer communicability" (*Mitteilbarkeit schlechthin*).[6] This pure, prior possibility must precede and accompany all communication "through" language: each time language is put to use as a means of speaking about

things, it has already communicated the communicability of that of which it speaks. Such communicability deserves to be called "sheer" because it does not manifest itself as such; it can be communicated as a pure possibility of communication only insofar as it accompanies a singular occurrence of language.

In the *Tower* fragment of 1920, where Benjamin focuses his analysis of language on the "word," the "sheer communicability" communicated by language is said to manifest itself always as "a communicability" (*eine Mitteilbarkeit*)—the determinate communicability that is communicated by a single word, a phrase, or by what Benjamin refers to here in more general terms as a "linguistic formation" (*sprachliches Gebilde*).[7] It is in the discussion of this determinate communicability of the word that Benjamin turns to the word "tower"—a word that, by evoking the narrative of the Tower of Babel from Genesis, not only exemplifies the attempt to reduce language to a means of communication serving the ends of a fallen humanity, but also testifies to the impossibility of such communication:

> The word "tower" communicates in the first instance a communicability of itself [*eine Mitteilbarkeit seiner selbst*]. As a word, it communicates that it is communicable, and this "it" is a spiritual essence [*ein geistiges Wesen*]. It is something originary, and a word therefore communicates that a determinate, originary spiritual essence is communicable.[8]

The word communicates a determinate communicability: it communicates the communicability of that which it names. Insofar as it communicates the possibility that something can be communicated, it points towards that whereby it is communicable in the first place—its "essence." What Benjamin here calls an "essence" is nothing but the determinate communicability that is communicated by the pronounced word. The word does not communicate this essence, only the pure possibility for things to communicate themselves in language. This possibility must exceed every propositional content; or as Benjamin writes in his fragment on the word "tower," it cannot be communicated by the word qua sign. "When I designate something, I do not communicate it," Benjamin writes; "rather, I abstract in general from its communicability in order to arrange it in another context [*um es einem andern Zusammenhang einzureihen*]."[9] The sudden appearance of an "I" in this passage is no coincidence: that of which the word communicates the communicability—namely, an essence—cannot be communicated "through" language insofar as it is employed as a means of designation at the disposal of an already established speaker. The communicability communicated by language is

thus a possibility that must remain in excess of every propositional content and every subjectively limited actuality. If essence has the structure of a possibility that is also a "demand" (*Forderung*)—a term that Benjamin uses in other texts of the same period, anticipating what he will refer to as a "task" *(Aufgabe)* in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*—, it is a demand that must make an excessive claim on the speaking subject.[10]

In his essay on language of 1916, Benjamin calls the word, in which this possibility of communicability is realised, a "name."[11] In fragments written around the same time, Benjamin refers to the name understood in this sense as "pure name" (*der reine Name*), which is to be distinguished from the name as it manifests itself in empirical languages.[12] This pure name may, in the most schematic terms, be understood as a word that communicates the essence of that which it names—what every finite, empirical word only communicates as a communicability. "The pure name," Benjamin writes in one of these fragments, "relates itself to the substantia or the essence"[13]—and it does so immediately. In his *Language* essay, Benjamin famously associates this "pure name" with the paradisiacal language of names. It is in Adam's act of name-giving that the language of things enters without rest into the language of human beings.[14] As the association of this pure name with a paradisiacal language already suggests, language in its finite, historical existence—fallen language, in Benjamin's terms—cannot lay claim to such communication. The word that is employed as a sign does not communicate an essence; but neither can this word be reduced to the status of a sign. Insofar as it communicates a communicability, the word still names—even if it does not communicate that which is named by it. In the *Language* essay, Benjamin writes that human language after the fall contains an *Erbteil*, a "partial inheritance" of the paradisiacal language of names.[15] This is not to be mistaken for a Cratylic fantasy about a substantial affinity between the thing and the thing named. Much rather, it suggests that this affinity only manifests itself in fallen language in an always already fragmented, broken form. The word still names, but only as a gesture without a determinate content; it no longer communicates that which is being named. In the other unpublished fragments on language of the same years, Benjamin distinguishes the "pure" name, as the word in which the pure possibility of communicability is realised, from the "bound" (*gebundene*) name, as the manifestation of this possibility in empirical languages. If the essence communicates itself completely in the "pure name," the word only "contains the name in a bound form, it relates to the essence unclearly [*bezieht sich undeutlich auf das Wesen*]."[16]

The word is thus traversed by an incompleteness: it communicates a communicability, but it does not communicate that of which it communicates the communicability. In the notes for his *Habilitationsschrift* of the early 1920s, Benjamin attempts to construct what he calls the "symbolic side" of the word out of this incompleteness and the tension expressed in it. In the fragment on the word "tower," he argues that this tension can only be resolved by postulating that the word must "mean" (*bedeuten*) that which it does not communicate—even if this "meaning" (*Bedeutung*) is not yet given:

> A word communicates that a determinate, originary spiritual essence is communicable. But as such it means nothing yet. Indeed, it communicates something, something wholly determinate and definitive, namely a communicability; but it does not communicate that of which it communicates the communicability—this is rather what it means [*das bedeutet es*].[17]

Since it does not communicate that of which it communicates the communicability, the word must be taken to "mean" it—even if its meaning still remains indeterminate. In the same set of notes, Benjamin describes this meaning as "a postulated but unfound meaning" (*die postulierte aber ungefundene Bedeutung*).[18] The "unfound meaning" of the word must not be mistaken for the "semblance of meaning" (*Bedeutungsschein*) that every word employed as a sign comes to acquire. The meaning which is attributed to the word qua sign is, however, not meant by the word as such; what the word as such means—even if its meaning is not yet given—is that of which it communicates the communicability: "A word does not communicate the thing that it apparently designates, but that which it means in truth [*was es in Wahrheit bedeutet*]."[19] The "unfound meaning" that is meant by the word thus has nothing to do with the representation that it is supposed to designate; it means this communicability without designating it. If the word must nevertheless be taken to "mean" that of which it communicates the communicability, it does so as a word stripped of any content that is supposed to be communicated through it, any representation it is supposed to designate. It does so as the "skeleton of the word" that Benjamin describes in the same notes as "a word without representation" (*ein Wort ohne Vorstellung*).[20] It is precisely this "meaningless" skeleton of the word—the word deprived of the representations that it is meant to designate—that comes to mean that of which the word has communicated the communicability but which it cannot communicate itself.

What Benjamin calls the "symbolic side of the word" is nothing but this *Bedeuten* that does not yet have a *Bedeutung*: "Linguistic formations, also the word, communicate a communicability and symbolise a non-communicability [*symbolisieren eine Nicht-Mitteilbarkeit*]."[21] This formula, which already appeared at the end of the *Language* essay of 1916 (without, however, being elaborated), summarises the theory of the word that Benjamin had attempted to formulate in his studies of the early 1920s, and that would become the basis for the "Word as Idea" section of the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*. When Benjamin writes there that the idea is "something linguistic" (*ein Sprachliches*), this must be understood in line with the distinction that he set out to investigate in his previous notes and fragments: that between logic and language, between concept and word.[22] That the idea is *ein Sprachliches* means, first of all, that it is not to be mistaken for a specific kind of concept, as Kant conceived of the ideas in the first *Critique*.[23] Instead of being deduced from the transcendental structure of reason and understanding, the "descriptive outline of the world of ideas" that Benjamin undertakes in the *Prologue* would have to begin from a study of the *a priori* structure of language—and of the word in particular.[24]

Such a study would have to take into account both sides of what Benjamin calls "the communicating and symbolic force" of the word.[25] It is only insofar as it communicates a communicability, the determinate communicability of the thing it names, that the word refers a thing to an essence. This essence is, as we have seen, nothing but the *a priori* demand of the things to communicate themselves in the words that name them; but since the word does not communicate the essence of which it communicates the communicability, it must be taken to symbolise this essence, albeit *undeutlich*, obscurely. Just as the "communicative force" of the word lies in its communication of the pure possibility of communication, its "symbolic force" would seem to lie in the meaning of a pure possibility of meaning—a possibility that Benjamin refers to in these studies as a "meanability" (*Bedeutbarkeit*), a concept that we will have to return to in more detail.[26] If the essence derives from the *Mitteilbarkeit* communicated by each word, the idea would have to be derived from its *Bedeutbarkeit*. This is, at least, what is suggested by Benjamin's claim in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*: that the idea, as a linguistic entity, corresponds to that "moment" in the word "in which it is symbol."[27] Ideas would be nothing but a word in which this possibility of *Bedeutbarkeit* is realised: words that come to mean that of which they can now only communicate the communicability. Ideas are not a special kind of concept; they are more accurately characterised with a formula that appears in Benjamin's studies

for his first planned *Habilitationsschrift* and returns in the *Prologue*—as "deified words."[28]

"Every idea is a sun…"

The "descriptive outline of the world of ideas" that Benjamin undertakes in the *Prologue* may be understood as an attempt to think through the implications and consequences of the claim that the idea is "something linguistic." The significance of the astronomical and astrological images that occur at decisive places in the text can only be grasped if they are read in light of this attempt. It is certainly no coincidence that one of these images appears precisely in the "Word as Idea" section, which offers an exposition of the linguistic character of the idea. Towards the end of this section, Benjamin writes:

> All essences exist in complete independence and untouchedness [*vollendeter Selbständigkeit und Unberührtheit*], not only in relation to phenomena, but especially in relation to one another. Just as the harmony of the spheres [*Sphärenharmonie*] is based on the orbits of stars that do not touch one another, so the existence [*Bestand*] of the *mundus intelligibilis* is based on the unsublatable distance between pure essences. Every idea is a sun and relates itself to other ideas just as suns relate to one another. The sounding relationship [*das tönende Verhältnis*] between such essences is what constitutes truth. Their named multiplicity is countable [*zählbar*].[29]

That Benjamin attributed a special importance to this image is suggested by the fact that it already appears in the initial preparations for his *Habilitationsschrift* in the early 1920s, where it is included in one of the fragments on language and logic. In contrast to the other astronomical and astrological images, the comparison of the ideas to suns also surfaces in the early drafts of the *Prologue*, where it is not located at the end of the first theoretical section, but rather at its beginning. Here the image is introduced precisely at the point where Benjamin, after an initial reflection on the problem of philosophical "presentation" (*Darstellung*), turns to the "object" (*Gegenstand*) of such presentation.[30] "The object of philosophy are the ideas," Benjamin writes in this draft; "and the idea in the sense in which it is thought here [*die Idee im gedachten Sinne*] is identical to the essence that allows itself to be contemplated in the image of a sun [*den Wesen, die sich im Bild einer Sonne betrachten läßt*]."[31] The image of the suns here takes the place of a conceptual clarification: instead of defining what constitutes the ideas that are to be presented in philosophy,

Benjamin's first attempt at a "descriptive outline of the world of ideas" unfolds in figural language.

The relation between this image and Benjamin's thesis concerning the linguistic character of ideas may not be apparent at first. But the cited passage from the *Prologue* alludes to this relation at least at one point: namely, in the sentence at the end of the passage, where Benjamin refers to the multiplicity of essences that is evoked in the image of the suns as a "named multiplicity" (*benannte Vielheit*).[32] In the earlier draft of the text, this relation to "naming" is emphasised even more. Benjamin writes: "The ideas are indeed given to contemplation as this multiplicity which is, as it were, counted, but actually named [*diese—gleichsam gezählte, eigentlich aber benannte—Vielheit*]."[33] The image of the suns is here unmistakably tied to the theory of essences that Benjamin had developed in the earlier reflections on language. As we have seen, "essence" had been conceived there as a demand that arises out of the word insofar as it names the thing and communicates its communicability; and it is on this basis that Benjamin conceives of the "ideas" as the fulfilment of this demand in "deified words"—words in which things come to communicate themselves in their essence.

That the image of the sun exemplifies this conception of the idea as a "deified word" is suggested by Benjamin's claim that the idea has to be thought as "identical" (*identisch*) to the essence that is captured in this image. The reference to identity is significant, since "identity" is a term that Benjamin had introduced only at specific places in the earlier essay on language, namely in those passages concerned with a "divine language."[34] In contrast to human language, which even in its prelapsarian state can only approximate the language of things, the divine language is a language of identity. "The absolute relation of the name to knowledge exists only in God," Benjamin writes in the *Language* essay, "only there is the name the pure medium of knowledge."[35] That the terms "essence" and "idea" seem to be used almost interchangeably throughout the passage on the suns, may be taken to enact this identity: ideas, as deified words, are words that coincide completely with the essences they communicate.

This language of identity is captured in Benjamin's description of the *mundus intelligiblis* as a "harmony of the spheres" (*Sphärenharmonie*)—the ancient notion that the celestial bodies produce tones that together make up a harmony. The comparison of ideas to suns can only be understood in light of this *Sphärenharmonie*, which is referred to in each of the extant drafts of the image. When Benjamin compares the ideas to suns, this is first and foremost an attempt at characterising them as "sounding" (*tönende*) essences. The importance of this *Tönen* to the image

of the suns is even more pronounced in the first draft of the image in the early fragments on language and logic. Here we read: "Everything essential is a sun and relates itself to other essences just as suns relate to one another. This also holds in the domain of philosophy, the only domain where truth appears [*zur Erscheinung kommt*], namely as a resounding that has an affinity with music [*einem der Musik verwandten Tönen*]."[36] If the ideas are "deified words," then they are such words, in which things communicate themselves without the intervention of meaning—they belong to a language that is closer to music than to a fallen language where sounds are employed as signs.

But the description of the ideas as suns that partake in a *Sphärenharmony* does not only serve to capture the complete coincidence of essence and word; it also points to the structure of the *mundus intelligibilis* made up of ideas conceived as such "deified words." The basic characteristics that Benjamin attributes to the world of ideas can be shown to derive directly from his analysis of its linguistic character. This is most apparent in the description of the "named multiplicity" of essences as "countable" (*zählbar*)—a term that is specified later in the section when Benjamin speaks of the "discontinuous finitude" (*diskontinuierlichen Endlichkeit*) of the world of ideas.[37] The multiplicity of essences is finite insofar as each essence is given *in* and *as* a word, one of the necessary limited number of elements in a linguistic system. The countable multiplicity of ideas is grounded in the countable multiplicity of words that make up a language, each of which is never merely a means of designation, but also a symbol, a "name of the second order" that points to an essence.[38] The finitude of the *mundus intelligibilis* is nothing but a reflection of the structure of the empirical languages in which they are given.

In the earlier draft of the *Prologue*, Benjamin does not present the image of the suns as an example of the "discontinuous finitude" of the world of ideas but rather of its "irreducible multiplicity" (*unreduzierbare Vielheit*).[39] In the published version of the image of the suns, this irreducibility is captured in the claim that the ideas—like suns—are separated by an "unsublatable distance" (*unaufhebbaren Distanz*).[40] Also this characteristic can be derived from Benjamin's conception of essences as linguistic entities. As linguistic entities, the ideas are, however, grounded precisely in the "symbolic side" of the word—that is to say, the side that cannot be assimilated to its status as a sign and, thus, a carrier of the concept. The ideas are symbolised precisely by the "skeleton of the word"—in other words, this side of the word that does not partake in the movement of the concept, and resists being sublated into a higher unity. Also, the "independence" (*Selbständigkeit*) and "untouchedness" (*Unberührtheit*) of the

ideas may be understood to be grounded in the structure of the "symbolic side" of words. If the word qua sign is characterised precisely by its embeddedness in a linguistic system, the same cannot be said for the word qua symbol. Even though this symbolic side can only manifest itself as the reverse of the semiotic side of the word, it does not rely on relations between words: each word immediately points to an essence.

The characteristics of the *mundus intelligiblis* captured in the image of the suns are thus not simply asserted: despite the apodictic tone in which it is written, the image may be understood as an attempt to expand the reflections on the relation between word, essence and idea into a description of the basic structure of the world of ideas. There is an unmistakable affinity with Kant's deduction of the ideas of theoretical reason in the first *Critique*. But while the Kantian deduction of these ideas begins from the nature of pure reason and derives the ideas, as the three *a priori* concepts of reason, from the three forms of judgment,[41] Benjamin attempts to derive the structure of the world of ideas from an analysis of the *a priori* structure of language.[42] Likewise, the two other images in the *Prologue* that Benjamin draws from the "starry skies" to describe the ideas and their relation to phenomena—namely, those of the star sign and the constellation—may be understood to follow from this attempt.

Deutung and *Bedeutbarkeit*

Not only the "Word as Idea" section, but also the section "Idea as Configuration," that is presented as the former's counterpart in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, is closely related to Benjamin's reflections on language of the preceding years. Just as the "Word as Idea" section elaborates the significance of his earlier studies of the "word" for the doctrine of ideas, so the subject matter of the earlier reflections on which this section draws is marked by the concept which appears in its title: that of "configuration."[43] This concept plays an important role in a group of important studies on reading that Benjamin wrote around 1916/17, shortly after *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*.[44] That these fragments stand in a special relation to the *Prologue* is suggested by the fact that the concept of configuration will hardly ever resurface in Benjamin's work after his first published book—and never in a context where it plays a comparable role.

The fragments on reading—and Benjamin's turn to the subject of reading, which does not appear in his earlier writings on language—may be understood in light of his distinction between the "communicative" and the "symbolic" side of the word. While the treatise of 1916 had offered a

detailed study of the former, it had only touched in passing on the latter. At the end of the *Language* essay, Benjamin points to the need for a study of the word as symbol: "the word […] does not only have a communicating function, but probably also a closely connected symbolic function, which has emphatically not been referred to here."[45] In his study of the word "tower," Benjamin had specified what is at stake in the analysis of the symbolic side of the word:

> The word […] does not communicate that of which it communicates the communicability—this is rather what it means [*das bedeutet es*]. And in order to determine the object of its meaning, there would need to be another *virtus* in the word than the communicating one [*einer andern virtus im Wort als der mitteilenden*].[46]

Another *virtus*: the term here takes the place of the other term that Benjamin had used in the same studies in order to evoke a certain dynamic of language, *Kraft*—a term that we have already encountered in the reference to the "communicative and symbolic force of language."[47] If Benjamin uses the Latin *virtus*, it is in order to emphasise its proximity to what is *virtuell*—another important term in the fragments on language that also returns in the *Prologue*. If the essay on language had engaged in a study of one such *virtus*—namely, "communicability"—, the fragments on reading are best understood as an initial attempt to think its counterpart, the "meanability" (*Bedeutbarkeit*) that the *Tower* fragment also touches upon in passing.[48]

The fragments on reading begin their analysis of this other *virtus* of language from the concept of configuration. Despite its important role, Benjamin does not specify what is meant by configuration; in contrast to other key terms in the fragments—for instance, *Bedeutung* and *Bezeichnung*, *Zeichen* and *Name*—, the term is not subjected to laborious conceptual clarification. In its most general sense, it is used throughout the fragments to indicate the object (*Gegenstand*) of reading: the configuration, understood in this way, is simply that which is read. But the concept also has a more precise meaning, which is perhaps not made explicit because it is already pointed towards by the word "configuration" itself. What Benjamin calls a configuration in these fragments may be understood as a *con-figuratio* in the most literal sense of the word: as an arrangement of elements into a figure. The configuration is, in other words, that arrangement of elements by which these elements, as a *figura*, first come to point towards something other than themselves. Understood in this sense, the configuration—or configuration as such, as an act or occurrence—has an inherent relation to reading.[49] Not only would it be the

name for any surface that is legible in the sense that is already constituted as an object of reading; it also has a more precise meaning insofar as it brings to mind what might be referred to as an originary reading, a reading in which a surface is first interpreted as legible—that is to say, a reading in which the object of reading is first constituted. "Readable is only that which appears in the plane," Benjamin writes in one of his notes; "[a] plane that is [a] configuration."[50]

The theory of reading which Benjamin constructs around the concept of configuration builds on his early reflections on the word. At the start of the most extensive of these fragments, Benjamin distinguishes between two configurations, for which he reserves the names of "sign" and "symbol," respectively. Benjamin uses the adjective "absolute" here to describe these two configurations, which may be taken to indicate that they never appear as such in finite experience.[51] Rather than being absolved of all relations, these two configurations are always bound to one another in a third configuration that is located between the two. The fragment begins by discussing the configuration that Benjamin calls "sign":

> The sign is a configuration […] to which, in principle, infinitely many things could be attributed as that which is meant by it [*als durch sie Bedeutetes*], and to which, however, at each occurrence [*bei ihrem jedesmaligen Vorkommen*], only *one* out of the infinitely many possible things meant [*Bedeuteten*] is attributed, necessarily, in accordance with the context in which it occurs [*nach Maßgabe des Zusammenhanges in welchem sie vorkommt*].[52]

This passage is perhaps best understood as an attempt to characterise a configuration—an arrangement of elements that has come to "mean" something other than itself—, in which the referential relation between *Bedeutendes* and *Bedeutetes*, here conceived as a sign and signified, is completely secured. The relation between that which means and that which is meant is arbitrary; in principle, it is possible to attribute to each *Bedeutetes* an infinite amount of possible *Bedeutende*. But the decisive characteristic of the configuration described here is precisely that its context, in its absolute coherence, guarantees that every *Bedeutendes* is *eindeutig*—unambiguous. In the absolute configuration that Benjamin associates with the sign, the coherence of the set of relations in which the sign occurs guarantees that everything that means necessarily corresponds to only one thing that is meant. But in finite experience there is no *Zusammenhang*, no context coherent enough to completely guarantee the *Eindeutigkeit* of the configuration:

> Thus, it follows that […] it is no longer possible to speak of an 'occurrence' [*Vorkommen*] in the above sense, and since the criterion for the unambiguity [*Eindeutigkeit*] of that which is respectively to be assigned now disappears, it is also no longer possible to speak of meaning that presupposes this unambiguity [*Bedeutung welche diese Eindeutigkeit zur Voraussetzung hat*].[53]

If it is still possible to speak of *Bedeutung* in the absence of a context that can secure the referential status of that which is read, this would have to be a meaning that is constituted only in and as a *Deutung*, an interpretation. Benjamin will elaborate his concept of interpretation in a tortuous passage that must be unpacked step by step:

> That which is interpreted is not transparent to interpretation [*Deutung*]. Interpretation is related to what is interpret*ed*, which is present [*das* G*edeutete, welches vorliegt*]; meaning [*die Bedeutung*] relates to that which is meant, which is not present [*das* Be*deutete, welches nicht vorliegt*]. Interpretation is determinate in its relation to meaning, its schema, the canon which makes it possible that something that means can mean something [*das ein Bedeutendes etwas bedeuten kann*]. This schema (the canon of meaning) is the meaning of a meanability [*die Bedeutung einer Bedeutbarkeit*].[54]

Without the guarantee of a secure referential relation, reading and its *Gegenstand* cannot remain the same. That which is read loses its transparency: it can no longer be understood as a diaphanous medium through which meaning can pass uninterrupted. Once it has been exposed to ambiguity, the object of reading becomes opaque: what is read no longer provides a direct access to what is meant but comes into view itself as an object with an uncertain referential status. If that which is read is to mean anything at all, it must be subjected to interpretation. Since interpretation has no access to that which is meant, it can only relate itself to that which is interpreted—that is to say, an object of reading that is as yet without meaning. Benjamin's rigorous separation between *Deutung* and *das Gedeutete* on the one hand and *Bedeutung* and *das Bedeutete* on the other is important to note, for it points to a fundamental disjunction that traverses reading, once it is exposed to referential ambiguity. Not only has it become impossible for reading to decide whether it is to attribute this or that determinate meaning to that which is read; moreover, no longer are there any grounds to assume that what is read means anything at all. What Benjamin calls *Deutung* is a reading that cannot exclude the possibility that the configuration of elements that it reads is without a distinct meaning, a mere effect of chance.[55] While Benjamin had used the

term *Vorkommen* when describing the first configuration, evoking not only the "occurrence" of the unambiguous sign but also the "coming-forth" of meaning that presents itself through it, he now speaks of *Vorliegen*: that which is interpreted presents itself to interpretation as something that "lies before" it, devoid of referential intention.

This intentionless character of the object of reading is of crucial importance for the concept of interpretation that Benjamin elaborates in the second part of the cited passage. Benjamin begins here by stating again that *Bedeutung*, in the absence of a criterion that would guarantee the *Eindeutigkeit* of that which is read, requires a *Deutung*: interpretation is "the canon which makes it possible that something that means can mean anything [*etwas bedeuten kann*]."[56] But such *Deutung* does not just involve the decision between this or that determinate meaning to that which is interpreted; it does not merely attribute one of various possible meanings to something that is already taken to be meaningful. Since interpretation cannot assume that what it interprets means anything at all, every interpretation has always already postulated the pure possibility of meaning—or rather, what Benjamin here refers to as a "meanability" (*Bedeutbarkeit*). Before interpretation has attributed a determinate meaning to what is interpreted, it has already attributed the "meaning of a meanability" (*die Bedeutung einer Bedeutbarkeit*). This conception of interpretation is summarised in the next part of the fragment:

> When we attribute the meaning of its meanability to a configuration in the plane, we interpret it [*so deuten wir sie*]. To interpret something is to attribute something to it, as something that means [*als einem Bedeutenden*], meanability as something meaningful [*Bedeutbarkeit als Bedeutendes*].[57]

The argument that Benjamin sketches out for the *a priori* necessity of this "meanability" is thus constructed along the same lines as the argument for the "communication of a communicability" in the *Language* essay of 1916. Just as language must communicate a communicability before it can communicate any determinate content, so the (pure) possibility of meanability must have been given before any determinate meaning can be meant. In his aforementioned study of the word "tower," Benjamin recapitulates the argument that he attempts to provide here:

> Are there objects [*Gegenstände*] […] that can only be signified, not meant? Probably not, because the possibility to designate an object may well rest on its meanability [*weil die Möglichkeit der Bezeichnung eines Gegenstandes auf seiner Bedeutbarkeit beruhen dürfte*].[58]

Even though Benjamin's attempts to show how the possibility for a word to be put to use as a sign "rests" on the attribution of its meanability remain provisional in character, the central significance of the concept for his doctrine of ideas is clear. If "the word does not communicate that of which it communicates the communicability, but rather means it," as Benjamin writes in the same fragment,[59] then the word does not mean that of which it communicates the communicability in a determinate and definitive manner. What it means is rather a "meanability"—the pure possibility for a word to mean that of which it communicates the communicability. Like *Mitteilbarkeit*, this *Bedeutbarkeit* is a *virtus* that is at work in the word: a force by which the word points beyond every empirical interpretation, towards a state in which the possibility that it bespeaks would be realised.

"The ideas are eternal constellations…"

The *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* does not only elaborate the epistemological consequences of this theory of reading; it also draws out its latent historical dimension. This is especially clear in the "Idea as Configuration" section, which, just like the "Word as Idea" section, is concerned with the "givenness" of ideas in the phenomenal world.[60] To characterise this *Gegebenheit*—which is now emphatically described in terms of an *Aufgabe*, the giving of a task—Benjamin once again takes recourse to an image that is drawn from the "starry skies:"

> The idea belongs to a domain that is fundamentally other than that which is apprehended by it. Whether it comprehends that which is apprehended, as the genus comprehends the species, is not a criterion of its existence. This is not the task of the idea [*das ist die Aufgabe der Idee nicht*]. Its meaning [*Bedeutung*] may be presented as a comparison [*Vergleich*]. The ideas relate to things like the star signs to the stars [*wie Sternbilder zu Sternen*]. This is to say, primarily, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not serve the knowledge of phenomena, which can in no way be criteria for the stock of ideas [*den Bestand der Ideen*].[61]

The comparison of the ideas to *Sternbilder* thus appears in the context of an attempt to further distinguish the ideas from concepts. An idea—like that of the "mourning play"—is not a *Gattungsbegriff*, a generic concept that gathers phenomena on the basis of their distinguishing marks. In contrast to concepts, ideas belong to a fundamentally other domain than these phenomena. Like Kant, Benjamin plays on the distinction between what is "given" (*gegeben*) and what is "given up" (*aufgegeben*): a play of

words that indicates not only that the ideas are only given in the world of phenomena as *Aufgabe*, a task that is yet to be realised, but also implies its inherent abandonment and incompletion.[62] Kant had famously used the same play of words in his deduction of the ideas in the first *Critique* when pointing out that the ideas of reason are concepts that "cannot be given [*gegeben*] through any possible experience," but must be *aufgegeben*, "given as a task," to determine the ultimate elements in the chain of conditions.[63] But just as Benjamin, unlike Kant, does not conceive of the idea as a special kind of concept—a concept to which no empirically given object can be adequate—, he also does not conceive of the givenness of ideas as the ideal endpoint of reason's striving to determine the unconditioned concepts under which every given conditioned is subsumed. As the "comparison" (*Vergleich*) introduced by Benjamin at the key point of the cited passage suggests, the relation between ideas and phenomena is not to be thought of as a relation of subsumption and systematisation. If the phenomena relate to ideas just as the stars appearing on the firmament relate to *Sternbilder*, or star signs, then the world of ideas is not given in the phenomenal world as the task of its complete comprehension; what Benjamin calls the *Aufgabe der Idee* would instead have to be understood as a task which involves *interpretation*.

That Benjamin characterises this interpretation by evoking the relation between stars and star signs suggests that it is to be understood as an interpretation of a specific kind. The *Sterndeutung* that is conjured up here is not a reading of the stars according to an already established set of conventions. By introducing the relation between *Sterne* and *Sternbilder*, Benjamin rather evokes a more fundamental reading: a reading in which the stars appearing on the firmament are first interpreted as star signs, that is to say, as configurations of elements that point to something other than themselves. If Benjamin's "comparison" captures a relation of interpretation, it is that interpretation by which a group of stars first comes to stand for Hercules or weighing scales, a string of stars for the tail of a scorpion, or a single star for the head of a great bear. The meaning of the individual stars does not precede their arrangement; it is only in their interpretation—their *con-figuratio* in the sense of an arrangement into figures—that each star comes to point to something other than themselves. The *con-stellatio* evoked in the "Idea as Configuration" section, the arrangement of *Sterne* into *Sternbilder*, thus recalls the earlier fragments on reading insofar as it evokes an inaugural interpretation—an interpretation by which reading first begins. As such, it also anticipates the role that Benjamin reserves for *Sterndeutung* in his writings of the early 1930s, *Doctrine of the Similar* and *On the Mimetic Faculty*, where the emergence of configurations on the

firmament will be treated as the most ancient reading—one that precedes even the written word.[64]

The ancient reading of the stars, as the *Deutung* by which the firmament first becomes legible, thus exemplifies the central proposition of the fragments on reading: that interpreting something is first of all to attribute the possibility of meaning to it—the "meaning of its meanability."[65] The interpretation of the phenomenal world that is exemplified in this passage—the attribution of the possibility of meaning to the "starry skies," the surface most devoid of human intentionality—is not to be dismissed as an act of superstition. This is emphasised elsewhere in the same section, when Benjamin refers to the ideas as the "objective interpretation" (*objektive Interpretation*) of phenomena.[66] How precisely the ancient reading of the stars can be said to exemplify this "objective" interpretation is only understood, if such a reading is grasped as the expression of a demand for interpretation that inheres *a priori* in all possible experience. In the *Language* essay, Benjamin had already argued that experience has an inherently linguistic character. In an argument that parallels Kant's deduction of space as a pure form of intuition, he claims here that it is impossible "to represent to ourselves a total absence of language in anything."[67] Everything we represent to ourselves must be taken to communicate itself to us, it must have communicated its communicability—and thus "we cannot represent anything to ourselves that does not impart its spiritual essence in expression."[68] The subsequent steps in Benjamin's reflections on the word can also be applied here: if the phenomenon communicates its essence, it does so only as the sheer possibility of communicability that must remain entirely indeterminate; it cannot communicate this essence, but only point towards it as a symbol that demands interpretation. The claim that Benjamin advances in the early essay on language—namely, that we cannot represent anything to ourselves in which language is absent—has its counterpart in another structural impossibility: that we cannot represent anything to ourselves that does not symbolise its essence, "mean" its essence in a yet to be determined way. If the *Aufgabe der Idee* is exemplified by the reading of the firmament, this task extends well beyond the scope of the word and the domain of human intentionality: it would call for an interpretation by which every phenomenon comes to mean what it cannot communicate. The "starry skies above," the image that Kant famously employs to describe the *mundus intelligibilis*, thus returns once more in the context of Benjamin's own doctrine of ideas—but this time as a surface that demands to be read.[69]

Notes

[1] Benjamin, GS I.1, 214-18; cf. *Origin*, 34-38. All translations from works by Walter Benjamin are mine (T.V.).
[2] Benjamin, GS I.3, 937.
[3] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[4] Benjamin, GS II.1, 142.
[5] On the "immediacy of mediacy" of language, see Samuel Weber's essay "Impart-ability: Language as a Medium," in *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 31-52; and Werner Hamacher, "Intensive Languages," translated by Ira Allen and Steven Tester, in *MLN* 127 (2012): 485-541.
[6] Benjamin, GS II.1, 146.
[7] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[8] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[9] Benjamin, GS VI, 15-16.
[10] For a detailed account of Benjamin's concept of essence and its relation to his theory of language, see Hamacher, "Intensive Languages," 490-91.
[11] A discussion of the complexities of Benjamin's theory of the name and the unrest that already traverses this paradisiacal language is found in Peter Fenves' essay "The Paradisal *Epochē*: On Benjamin's First Philosophy', in *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 174-225.
[12] Benjamin, GS VI, 12.
[13] Benjamin, GS VI, 12.
[14] Benjamin, GS II.1, 152.
[15] Benjamin, GS II.1, 144.
[16] Benjamin, GS VI, 12.
[17] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[18] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[19] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[20] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[21] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[22] See the editor's notes to the fragments of the early 1920s in Benjamin, GS VI, 640.
[23] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): A 334 / B 391.
[24] Benjamin, GS I.1, 212; cf. *Origin*, 32.
[25] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[26] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[27] Benjamin, GS I.3, 937.
[28] Benjamin, GS VI, 25.
[29] Benjamin, GS I.1, 218; cf. *Origin*, 37.
[30] Benjamin, GS I.3, 938.
[31] Benjamin, GS I.3, 928.

[32] Benjamin, GS I.3, 928.
[33] Benjamin, GS I.3, 928.
[34] On divine language as a "language of identity," see the sections on the "name" in Caroline Sauter, *Die virtuelle Interlinearversion: Walter Benjamins Übersetzungstheorie und -praxis* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 59-78.
[35] Benjamin, GS II.1, 148.
[36] Benjamin, GS VI, 23.
[37] Benjamin, GS I.1, 218; cf. *Origin*, 37.
[38] Benjamin, GS VI, 12.
[39] Benjamin, GS VI, 12.
[40] Benjamin, GS I.1, 218; cf. *Origin*, 37.
[41] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 333-36 / B 390-93. For a discussion of the "metaphysical deduction" of the ideas in the first *Critique*, see Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, translated by Brady Bowman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 31-34.
[42] On Benjamin's use of the adjective "pure" and its relation to Kant, see Ilit Ferber, "Lament and Pure Language: Scholem, Benjamin and Kant," in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21.1 (2014): 42-54.
[43] Benjamin, GS I.1, 214; cf. *Origin*, 34.
[44] Benjamin, GS VI, 32-33.
[45] Benjamin, GS II.1, 156.
[46] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[47] Benjamin, GS VI, 15.
[48] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[49] If it is construed in this way, the concept of configuration would mark the point where Benjamin's theory of reading approaches Paul de Man's analysis of the "allegorical" structure of reading. Cf. the essays on Proust and Rousseau in Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
[50] Benjamin, GS VI, 32. A more detailed analysis of the concept of configuration, particularly Benjamin's references to the "configuration in the plane" (*Configuration in der Fläche*), would also have to take into account its use as a technical term in mathematics, especially in the works of Cantor.
[51] That Benjamin tends to refer to "an" absolute rather than "the" absolute, privileging the indefinite over the definite article and thus evoking an absolute that must remain inaccessible to knowledge while being the condition of its possibility, is highlighted by Samuel Weber in *Benjamin's -abilities*, 310-313.
[52] Benjamin, GS VI, 32.
[53] Benjamin, GS VI, 32-33.
[54] Benjamin, GS VI, 33.
[55] See Werner Hamacher, *Premises*: *Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, translated by Peter Fenves (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 184-187.
[56] Benjamin, GS VI, 33.
[57] Benjamin, GS VI, 33.

[58] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[59] Benjamin, GS VI, 16.
[60] Benjamin, GS I.1, 215; cf. *Origin*, 35.
[61] Benjamin, GS I.1, 214; cf. *Origin*, 34.
[62] De Man emphasises this aspect of the *Aufgabe* in his reading of Benjamin's essay on translation; see Paul de Man, "'Conclusions': Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 73-105.
[63] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 508 / B 536.
[64] Benjamin, GS II.1, 204-213.
[65] Benjamin, GS VI, 33.
[66] Benjamin, GS II.1, 214; cf. *Origin*, 34.
[67] Benjamin, GS II.1, 141. For a detailed discussion of this passage and its relation to Kant's argument for the non-conceptual character of space, see Fenves, "The Paradisal *Epochē*," 200-205.
[68] Benjamin, GS II.1, 141.
[69] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129.

III

CAPITALISM'S MOURNING PLAY AND THE RAGS OF HISTORY

THE HISTORY OF PRODUCTION AND THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORY: WALTER BENJAMIN ON NATURAL HISTORY AND DIALECTICAL IMAGES

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From its inception, modern historical-philosophical thinking is closely related to the problem of signs. It is Kant who figures prominently in this discourse when he formulates a theory of the "historical sign."[1] The idea of collective *praxis*, and thus of history, implies that humanity, in its present state, has the power to cause its own future development. According to Kant, such an assumption suggests the possibility of a "prophetic history of the human race,"[2] that is, the possibility, in principle, of predicting the future as it is virtually inscribed in the present, and hence the possibility of history as the continual progression of humanity towards its perfection. To merely assert the possibility that a present state may cause its future does not, however, imply the actual existence of a "tendency"[3] towards progress. Rather, this conclusion requires the observation of an event from the past that "would not in itself be regarded as the cause of progress […], but […] as rough indication or *historical sign* […]."[4]

In many respects, Benjamin's notion of constellation seems to reverse the Kantian premises. Not only does he not share Kant's interest in a prophetic history, but the notion of *constellations* implies a theory of historical *signification* rather than one of the historical sign, that is a theory of the very processes that relate every sign to an outside, to an opaque region that it cannot contain but on which, as a sign, it nonetheless depends. In focusing on this region of signification, Benjamin's notion of history is genuinely materialistic, accounting for the pre-eminence of the object, or perhaps more precisely, the irreconcilable split between subject and object in modernity.

The "historical index of images" stands at the centre of a frequently quoted passage in Convolute N of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The formulations in note N 3, 1 make a strict distinction between

"images," as the medium for a presentation of history that is further specified as "dialectical," and the "essences" of phenomenology. Benjamin writes:

> [T]he historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time.[5]

Benjamin here articulates a notion of knowledge as the cognition of historical time, hence of a genuinely historical knowledge that roots its truth not in a timeless realm, but rather in the singular situation of the origination of this knowledge. The idea of a *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*, which is the "now of a *particular* recognisability,"[6] refuses to embed its subject matter in a causally determined continuum of events, in "its own time." Instead, it provides a way of viewing the "now" itself—and Benjamin explicitly refers to "each now"[7]—as that which defines a historical subject matter as the conflictual field of a setting apart (*Auseinandersetzung*) between its pre- and its post-history:

> It is not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.[8]

What seems peculiar in this account of the structure of dialectical images is, first, the connection of "indexicality" (the gesture of pointing at something) with "reading." Rather than receiving an explanation in terms of visual immediacy, one is referred to the semantics of construction, interpretation, and deciphering. Secondly, the term "historical index" seems to offer two possible interpretations, and thus tends to a certain ambiguity: is it to be understood as a type of index that points out, isolates, or marks an element of a given object by which it is recognisable as belonging to the realm of history? This would correspond to the structure of the Kantian historical sign. Or is it rather the index itself which is historical in nature? Is there a dimension of the object that is part of this realm precisely by failing to fulfil its function, i.e. to properly "indicate" or "intend" a historical context?

The Death of Intention

Both of these peculiarities lead us back to Benjamin's discussion of the Baroque allegory in his 1925 study *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*). The emphasis on the *legibility* of

images highlights the characteristics of Baroque allegorical tradition, for which the separation of "visual being from meaning"[9] (*Abgrund zwischen bildlichem Sein und Bedeuten*) is constitutive, presenting its subject matter precisely as the antagonism, or as the irreducible incompatibility, of imagination and signification. Meanwhile, the ambiguity implied in the expression "historical index" refers to the problem of natural history as well as of a dialectics conceived in the light of the polarity of nature and history. Indeed, if the object of historical cognition bears an element that links it to a particular time, a historical index, then it is because—perhaps paradoxically—this element has become, as it were, untimely. The index acquires its indexicality by failing to indicate by its own efforts. It is therefore most historical where it presents itself as opaque, bereft of intention—i.e., where it appears as nature. It appears as nature where its meaningfulness, its intention, ceases to appear.

Such a reading would suggest that a materialist rendering of history operates not by itself, but as an undermining of all accounts that assume a temporal continuum as the foundation of historical relations. It does so by detecting the moment of their "breaking apart" or "exploding," as Benjamin puts it in the passage quoted above:

> Each "now" is the now of a particular recognisability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting [*Zerspringen*] with time. (This point of explosion [*Zerspringen*], nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of the truth.)[10]

By equating the instant of the "birth" of authentic historical time with that of the "death of the *intention*," Benjamin implicitly ascribes to intention the role of an obstacle to cognition. Against the backdrop of a subjectivist philosophy for which a certain "intentional" structure is the very condition of cognition, this gesture thus highlights the contrast between, on the one hand, time conceived as a continuum within which the subject relates to stable and self-contained objects, and, on the other hand, historical time proper.

The formulation "the death of the *intentio*" in this new context is easily recognisable as a self-quotation from the "Epistemico-Critical Prologue" of Benjamin's above-mentioned book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*). The epistemico-*critical* thought that this *Prologue* outlines, is concerned more with the obstacle for cognition than with the object-relation; or rather, it views the object-relation itself as the obstacle that needs to be overcome:

> Truth is the death of intention. This, indeed, is just what could be meant by the story of the veiled image of Sais, the unveiling of which was fatal for whomsoever thought thereby to learn the truth.[11]

Here, the veiled image at once describes the structure of a truth that is obstructed, and ultimately destroyed by the very subject that seeks to approach it. As an image, it is defined by its distance, by its essential separation from the subject; in turn, what figures as knowledge and thus as subjectivity can only be accounted for in terms of a separation from truth. By thus staging the relation of mediation and immediacy as a paradoxical yet indissoluble one, Benjamin bases his critique of knowledge or cognition (*Erkenntniskritik*) on a model of signification.

If the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct perception founds the category of truth on a visual paradigm, i.e. on the self-contained nature of a perceived image, this very subject-object separation must be its premise. Viewed as object-relation, cognition can only perpetuate this separation. One of the basic traits of Cartesian epistemology is its reductionism. The idea of immediacy plays a key role here. The immediate evidence of clear and distinct perceptions is the starting point for the gradual construction of a gapless system of knowledge. The homogeneity of thought that ensues from this systematic character suggests an equally gapless, homogenous structure of being. However, rather than bridging the separation between thinking and being, between subject and object, this assumption solidifies it, because it fails to relate to precisely that dimension of objects that resists such reduction. The assumption of such a homology between thinking and being not only makes for an exclusion of the subject from being, it also fails to grasp what the very idea of thinking and cognition entails: the *relation* to their other, to something that in itself is not fully determined by thought.

On the other hand, the rejection of imaginary immediacy as providing access to truth seems to be a lesson that Benjamin draws from the Baroque understanding of allegorical presentation. This rejection is part of a dialectical stance in that it seeks to overcome the subject-object separation by focusing on the translation of one image into another. Rather than doing away with this separation, thinking can only gain an idea of the object's reality by recognising its irreducible otherness. Immediacy as promised by the image (i.e. the clear and distinct evidence of a thing in its wholeness), can only qualify as an object-relation insofar as the object is fully determined by the subject, by thought. Such a relation is one of the subject to *its* object, and is therefore ultimately a purely intra-subjective relation. It cannot be a relation of the subject to something other than itself. For the subject of perception, perceiving a thing *as a whole* is

therefore, strictly speaking, at odds with the very possibility of grasping the *reality* of said thing. As a whole, self-contained entity, the thing is always already detached from material reality; it enters a dimension of unreality.[12] If critical cognition implies the affirmation of the subject's separation from truth, then it is by focusing on the cracks and fissures that the very incompleteness of images is revealed. The allegorical function of this incompleteness is what, for Benjamin, provides a criterion of true historical time, i.e. of the recognition of a historical constellation. Benjamin's reprisal of the expression "the death of intention," with respect to what he calls an "original history" or "primal history" (*Urgeschichte*) of the 19th century, thus implies an additional thesis. This thesis is one that concerns a "genealogy of modernity,"[13] as Samuel Weber puts it, a genealogy that links the physiognomies of the 17th and the 19th century, and that entails the possibility of a critical cognition of their respective conceptions of time and history in relation to the very conditions of their intelligibility.

Nature and History

Benjamin's expression "the death of intention," in the above-quoted passage, highlights his critical stance against phenomenology. It points to a distinctive feature of dialectical images vis-à-vis the notion of essence in phenomenology. This dissociation is all the more necessary, since the guiding motive of phenomenology converges with Benjamin's own concern. It was Theodor W. Adorno who spelled out the problem that phenomenology articulates, but he also underscored the necessity of a critical refutation of phenomenology's proposed solution. In a lecture entitled *The Idea of Natural-History*,[14] given in 1932 at a meeting of the Frankfurt branch of the Kant Society, Adorno takes his cue from Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, when he sets out to problematize some of the fundamental features of what he calls the "neo-ontological"[15] approaches in philosophy. Such approaches are, in short, concerned with objectivity. They seek to overcome the "subjectivist standpoint"[16] of idealism. This subjectivism is one that, as Adorno writes,

> aims at the dissolution of all categories of being into categories of thought, and that believes itself able to ground all objectivity in certain fundamental structures of subjectivity […].[17]

In contrast, what Adorno summarises under the label of "post-Husserlian phenomenology" aspires to access "another kind of being, a

region of being that is different in principle, a transsubjective, an ontic region of being."[18]

From the outset, phenomenological approaches are motivated by the problem of the contingency of historical facts. The facticity of a historical phenomenon represents the residue that resists thought. While categories of thought, general concepts, may serve to describe the structure of a phenomenon abstractly, they cannot, by definition, grasp it in its utter particularity. General concepts can give an account of the internal structure of an event. They cannot, however, relate to the fact *that it occurred* because this fact, in its particularity, defies the very nature of conceptualisation. Adorno refers to this residue as the "pure thereness"[19] (*pure Daheit*) of a historical phenomenon. While subjective categories constitute a historical phenomenon as a meaningful unity, there remains an element of muteness to it, to which thought cannot relate. Perhaps not accidentally, Adorno here names as an example the event that had constituted an instance of a historical sign for Kant: the French Revolution.[20] For Adorno,

> it is […] impossible to relate the facticity of the French Revolution in its most extreme being to such categories [i.e. the constituents of a general structural category of life]. On the contrary, in the full breadth of the material one will find a sphere of "facticity" that cannot be explained.[21]

The "pure thereness" of historical phenomena at once motivates the previously stated "neo-ontological" aspirations and exposes their ultimate shortcoming. The problem of history, as Adorno outlines it, is structurally linked to the desideratum of a dialectics facing precisely the challenge of thinking that which is, by definition, outside of thinking. Yet the various attempts at dealing with this problem, and among them most prominently Heidegger's conception of the "historicity" of being, or of "*Dasein*" thought of as irreducibly historical, evade the actual difficulty by means of an equivocation. Adorno suggests that Heidegger underhandedly redefines the word "historical" in order to make it mean the exact opposite:

> precisely where an element fails to dissolve into determinations of thought and cannot be made transparent but rather retains its pure thereness, precisely at this point the resistance of the phenomenon is transformed into a universal concept and its resistance as such is endowed with ontological value.[22]

The two meanings that are confused in this equivocation are the ephemeral singularity of the particular phenomenon on the one hand, and the timeless generality or universality that every conceptualisation entails on the other. As such, these two meanings indicate two ideas that Adorno

terms "nature" and "history," respectively. Rather than providing a definition, he circumscribes the concepts "nature" and "history" at the beginning of his essay. Adorno understands nature as synonymous to the concept of "myth," [23] for it denotes the realm of "what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history."[24] Nature is that which by definition has no history, the unchangeable structure that, even within the course of human history, surfaces in the form of inescapable repetitions. What is meant by history, Adorno continues, stands in contrast to this stratum of immutable being. History is the realm of the "qualitatively new," and not a mythical time of the mere repetition of what has always been. Instead, it emerges as a sphere "in which the new occurs, it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new."[25] Accordingly, history can be regarded as the realm of spontaneity and thus of subjectivity qua *praxis*, a realm that is defined by its directedness towards the future. Considered in this light, intentionality is the medium through which the historical trajectory unfolds. Nature, by contrast, names a sphere that is, as yet, unaffected by *praxis*. However, defined as isolated concepts, the terms "nature" and "history" remain empty and abstract. In putting them to the test with regard to concrete phenomena, they reveal their dependence on each other. It is the notion of *appearance* that proves that both concepts cannot be grasped without their respective other. By stating that nature appears in history, Adorno suggests that nature depends on history in order to come into its own, while the emphasis on the appearance of newness suggests that the historical realm—like that of subjectivity, purposes, and intentionality, that is, in short, of *praxis*—proves to have an eminently natural dimension once this appearance of newness fades. Appearance would thus be the name for the movement that sets history apart from nature. Moreover, regarding a given phenomenon, it implies that it depends on a movement by which the subject of historical perception changes its perspective: whether the emergence of the new in history presents itself as nature, or whether, on the contrary, nature presents itself as susceptible to historical change.

In his attempt to resituate the neo-ontological problem between both poles, Adorno refers to Lukács' elaboration of the Hegelian concept of "second nature" in the *Theory of the Novel*. For Lukács, the concept of "second nature" denotes the sum of the historically, i.e. the intentionally, produced: man's self-made environment (*selbstgeschaffene Umwelt*).[26] Lukács furthermore describes "second nature" as a realm of conventions, as being in a state in which they can no longer be grasped or even recognised as such. Lukács' characterisation of "second nature" as a

"charnelhouse [*Schädelstätte*] of rotten interiorities," that Adorno quotes, indicates precisely that the products of interiorities have been stripped of their expressive power and therefore appear as pure exteriorities, as nature. Adorno quotes Lukács as follows:

> Where no aims are immediately given, the structure that the spirit in the process of becoming human finds amongst men as the scene and substrate of its activity lose their evident enrootedness in supra-personal ideal necessities […].[27]

This "world of conventions" is characterised by its lack of expressiveness, which Lukács will later theorise under the label of "reification."[28]

According to Adorno, Lukács' Hegelianism points towards the possibility to overcome this lack of expressiveness through a "theological resurrection."[29] Benjamin's concept of allegory, in contrast, aims not at overcoming the separation from immediate meaning, but at *reading* it, at deciphering it as the expression of a different kind. For Benjamin, Lukács' "second nature," as the world of conventions, has a reverse side: one that does not simply consist in the lack of expression and interiority of produced things. Rather, in Baroque allegory, this very lack of expression itself produces a mode of signification that constitutes a particular concept of history. According to Benjamin, "[t]he allegory of the seventeenth century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention […]."[30] The connection between allegory and expression lies in its separation from meaning. The paradoxical structure of allegorical expression lies in the gesture of exposing every expression of meaning as ultimately arbitrary and utterly baseless. More specifically, allegory materialises this very lack of meaning: it stages it precisely by withholding immediate expression. This withholding exposes a historical difference in which meaning is determined by conventions that are external to the signifier and that, once gone out of use, leave behind an opaque sign. In such a way, the opacity of allegorical tokens that suggest a lost meaning, expresses the very structure of convention as exteriority.

While Lukács' metaphor of the "charnelhouse" (*Schädelstätte*) seems to evoke an allegorical figure in and of itself, for Benjamin this particular mode of signification is inseparably linked to the German Baroque. However, it is not a notion of the Baroque as a historical epoch that would lend itself to historicist essentialism. As Adorno explains, "[w]hat is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but a historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history."[31] Adorno's emphasis on the relationality of the structure of allegory, the relation of signification

and image, which is ultimately a historical relation, brings us back to the theme of the dialectical image.

Commodities and Half-Finished Products

It is a movement away from meaning that shifts the focus to the processes of signification. As an image that demands to be read, the dialectical image implies a relation between a phenomenon that presents itself as historical in that it requires deciphering and resists immediate understanding, and a reading subject that experiences the instability and the essentially ungrounded nature of every meaning. This is why the instant of the dialectical images' coming to legibility determines what Benjamin calls their "historical index." The inability to properly formulate the problem of historical contingency that Adorno exposes in Heidegger, points to the "change of perspective"[32] required by the idea of natural history. This change of perspective aims at the "*concrete* unity" of history and nature, which is "a unity developed from the elements of real being itself."[33] However, being allegorical, this unity is a signifying one. It is not so much that signification—and thus reading—is a mere means to access an independent sphere of being; rather, signification is the very mode in which historical being unfolds, engaging the subject of reading by dint of an utter lack of immediate expressiveness.[34] "Signification," according to Adorno,

> means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history; and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature.[35]

One particular fragment in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* can be read as the outline for the construction of a dialectical image. This note demonstrates the very structure of the "legibility of dialectical images" in a rather literal sense. At the same time, it underscores that Benjamin's notion of the "death of intention" implies an affinity of the idea of history, as implemented in the Baroque allegory, with the subject matter of an "original history of the nineteenth century." In convolute J of the *Arcades Project*, which centres on Benjamin's study of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin cites Marx's *Capital* and comments on it as follows:

> During the Baroque, a formerly incidental component of allegory, the emblem, undergoes extravagant development. If, for the materialist

> historian, the medieval origin of allegory still needs elucidation, Marx himself furnishes a clue [*Fingerzeig*] for understanding its Baroque form.[36]

What is at stake here is nothing less than the question of a materialist historiography. The metaphor of the *Fingerzeig*—which is translated as "clue" here—literally means a pointer, a pointing of either a finger or an index. As such, it implies that Marx does not provide an immediate access to an understanding of the Baroque emblem, but rather an indirect one. The passage that Benjamin quotes from Marx's *Capital* reads as follows:

> The collective machine […] becomes more and more perfect, the more the process as a whole becomes a continuous one, i.e., the less the raw material is interrupted in its passage from its first phase to its last; in other words, the more its passage from one phase to another is effected, not by the hand of man, but by the machinery itself. In Manufacture, the isolation of each detail process is a condition imposed by the nature of division of labour, but in the fully developed factory the continuity of those processes is, on the contrary, imperative.[37]

Manufacture and "the fully developed factory" are the two paradigms that are contrasted in this observation. But while Marx seeks to make a point about a historical development that can be described as the progressing automatization of production, Benjamin seems to suggest an account that sees this development as the formation of a specific closure. By doing so, he not only establishes a relation between modern and pre- or proto-modern forms of production, but also between their respective notions of history, as a dialectics of continuity and discontinuity. He thus comments on this quote from Marx:

> Here may be found the key to the Baroque procedure whereby meanings are conferred on the set of fragments, on the pieces into which not so much the whole as the process of its production has disintegrated. Baroque emblems may be conceived as half-finished products [*Halbfabrikate*] which, from the phases of a production process, have been converted into monuments to the process of destruction. During the Thirty Years' War, which now at one point and now at another immobilised production, the "interruption" that, according to Marx, characterises each particular stage of this labour process could be protracted almost indefinitely.[38]

Marx proposes a narrative that depicts a historical relation as a causal relation. In construing a connection between periods of economic history defined by their respective organisation of the means of production, Marx seems to underscore a historical tendency towards the realisation of a process of production that is increasingly free of interruption. The word

"development," or *Entwicklung*, is suggestive of his intention. The idea of the fully developed factory, as Marx articulates it, is one in which the contingencies of human interaction as well as the deficiencies of the human organism no longer have any influence on the continuity of the production of exchange value. It is important to emphasise the specific connotations of the German word *Halbfabrikat*—undoubtedly the key word in this passage. The term is a technical one, used in the domain of industrial technology to describe the state of a given material in which it is no longer a raw material (since it has partly undergone processing), but has not yet reached its final stage as a product or commodity either. In that respect, it can be regarded as not yet fully determined as a commodity. Hence, Benjamin's rendering of Marx's analysis exposes the notion of history encapsulated in the commodity form itself. The form of the commodity is the *telos* of a process in time that strives towards its completion, and its completion is the effacement of the signs of its pre-history. What determines the structure of the commodity equally applies to the notion of history, qualified as modern, that emerged in the 19th century. By envisaging an aspect of Baroque production—the pre-history of modern production in manufacture—, Benjamin thus also hints at the phantasmagorical character of progress. The requirements of capital, its production of exchange value as manifested in commodities, simultaneously produces a commodification of the concept of history. Accordingly, the imaginary dimension of the subjects for whom the commodity possesses exchange value, is determined, with regard to history, by the inactivity that pertains to the subject that is excluded from the production process. Such a concept of history is characterised by an inability to comprehend its own genesis, i.e. the relation to its conceptual pre-history, in terms of a discontinuity. Accounts based on such a concept—even Marx's one of a gradual integration[39]—seem to commit the basic confusion of ideology by essentially mistaking a result for a conditioning factor. Such accounts presuppose the structure of totality, as modelled by exchange value, as the metaphysical substratum of that process that necessarily leads up to the production of commodities.

By their very structure, commodities are, one could say, situated in a realm of nature or myth. This is because, as objects, commodities not only disavow their status as products, but also their mutability through time, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel has shown.[40] Commodities' *finishedness*—i.e. the completion of things as exchange values on a market—implies a disavowal of contingency. When this disavowal becomes a feature of categories of thought, it equally affects any historical-philosophical accounts of time and history: the historical process henceforth appears as

an automatism within a pre-determined yet invisible framework. In this respect, the notion of history as a process and, furthermore, as the progress of society as a whole, is nothing more than the idea of history abstracted from the problem of contingency.[41]

In Marx's description of the function of the factory, this problematic remains implicit. But when Benjamin takes up Marx's thread, he is interested in the *expressive* dimension of the forms of production. To focus on "the expression of the economy in its culture,"[42] rather than on a merely causal connection between the two, amounts to transforming the "second nature" of convention in such a way that it becomes palpable in its contingency. Allegory, as Benjamin puts it in the above-quoted passage, can be characterised as "convention of expression."[43] Therefore, though focused on Baroque allegory, and explicitly concerned with a proper understanding of the emblem, his account is nevertheless geared to the requirements of a "primal history of the nineteenth century."[44] It frames an understanding of the commodity form as allegory by interrupting the historical trajectory in which the manufacture is viewed as a mere phenomenon of transition. Accordingly, the contingent fact of the factory, its emergence as the end and goal of a development, is at work as the appearance of necessity. It is the temporal model ensuing from the arrangement of the factory that is presupposed in every account of historical development. As Samuel Weber notes, refusing this premise of the "genetic-teleological thinking of 'historicism,' which effaces the distinctive essence of its object by reducing it to a link in a developmental process,"[45] was a key outcome of Benjamin's study on the German *Trauerspiel*.

But how, then, does this expression become readable? The shift in Benjamin's description of the "Baroque procedure" tied to emblems may indicate a related shift of the historiographical vantage point, a shift, as it were, from object to method.[46] The objects of the perpetual attribution of meaning in Baroque emblems are "fragments" (*Stückwerk*) and "pieces" (*Teile*). They are not presented as fragments of an already constituted whole; rather, it is "not so much the whole as the process of its production"[47] of which they constitute the remnants, dispersed "stuff" that never reached the realm of completion. The process that, for Benjamin, the emblematic fragments present as *parted in half*, is an anachronism; by enacting this anachronism, Benjamin's staging of the Baroque emblem enacts the allegorist's gesture, this time directed at the image of a historical epoch and its corresponding concept of history. If wholeness always implies the imaginary dimension of appearance,[48] then fragmentation becomes readable as the lack of imaginary closure:

signification in allegory proceeds via a resistance to imagination. Such signification implies a metaleptic operation by which the Baroque allegory is transposed into a field of semantic references determined by the 19th century and its specific state of the means of production. In another remark, Benjamin opposes the allegorist and the collector. The allegorist, he writes,

> has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning.[49]

The gesture by which Benjamin here seeks to render Baroque allegory intelligible is thus one of decontextualisation. As such, it is in itself an allegorical operation. It is an allegorical operation precisely because it situates allegorical presentation, and along with it, the Baroque epoch, outside of the historical continuum that, in modernity, provides singular events with their proper meaning.

Allegory and *praxis*

The retro-projection of a category of the post-history of the developed factory, namely the category of completeness, onto its pre-history exposes the expressive content of this category. Fabrication, which Hannah Arendt defines as a process that has a "definite beginning and a predictable end,"[50] is thus not only the template by which bourgeois thinking in the 19th century came to understand history; the intensification and materialisation of its logic of accumulation—capital's necessity to effect ever-growing indebtedness—brings forth its counter-image: a thwarted historical narrative, where, as it were, the back side of the historical phantasmagoria of the 19th century is exposed as a landscape of enigmatically dispersed "fragments" and "pieces." Accordingly, the anthropological consequence that Benjamin draws is not so much a contrast between Baroque and modernity, but rather two varieties of reification. Where the factory seeks to exclude human labour from production, the emblematic "integrates man himself" into the fate of the manufacture turned into a metaphysical idea:

> But the real triumph of the Baroque emblematic, the chief exhibit of which becomes the death's head, is the integration of man himself into the operation. The death's head of Baroque allegory is a half-finished product [*Halbfabrikat*] of the history of salvation, that process interrupted—so far as this is given him to realise—by Satan.[51]

Man's exemption from life is seen here as the "chief exhibit" of the Baroque emblematic. The death's head, which is reminiscent of Lukács' "charnelhouse of rotten interiorities" (*Schädelstätte vermoderter Innerlichkeit*) as the allegory of a "second nature," indicates that man's status as a half-finished product divorces him from subjectivity *qua* will, spontaneity, and autonomy, and assimilates him to the things produced in the manufacturing process. This account of Baroque "consciousness" has little to do with—to use Hegel's term—consciousness's "being for itself." Its articulation can only happen in an exteriority for which distance, or discontinuity, is central. Benjamin's metaphor of the "death of intention," as that which will come to coincide with the birth of historical time, articulates this separation from subjective interiority as the hallmark of materialist cognition, for which he finds a model in Baroque allegory. But on a methodological level, it at once reads as a description of Benjamin's presentation of the Baroque emblematic of the 19th century, as an image of the 19th century appearing in the 20th century, namely as a profoundly Baroque epoch.

This staging is one that, for Adorno, must have been problematic. The idea developed here bears strong resemblance with a thought that incited a major disagreement between Benjamin and Adorno in 1938. The controversy revolves around the first version of Benjamin's study on Baudelaire, *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. One gesture in particular is what incited a dispute over Benjamin's philological method: namely, Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's poem *L'âme du vin* with reference to a contemporary urban wine tax that forced destitute rag pickers to frequent places outside the city limit in order to drink wine. Giorgio Agamben revisited this controversy rather extensively, showing how Adorno insists on the shortcomings of a method that juxtaposes phenomena of cultural *superstructure* to facts pertaining to the material, socio-economic basis. What this method lacks, according to Adorno, is the mediation of those phenomena through the "total social process."[52] Agamben defends Benjamin's approach against such "Marxist orthodoxy" by suggesting that the latter—to a greater extent than it likes to admit—entertains a complicity with what it pretends to criticise. For Benjamin, Agamben writes, structure and superstructure are identical in the dimension of *praxis*. Taking up Benjamin's own methodological clarifications, Agamben draws on the terms "subject matter" (*Sachgehalt*) and "truth content" (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) that Benjamin had previously developed in his study on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, to elucidate what such a notion of *praxis* entails:

> And just as subject matter and truth content are originally unified in the work, and appear separate only within temporal duration, so structure and superstructure, unified in praxis, are separate in the work that survives through time.[53]

However, it is here that Agamben, too, seems to evade the crucial point, even though he does not fail to mention it: the dimension of an utter separation of fabricated objects turned historical. Such a constitutive separation endows the term "work" (i.e. the notion of the literary work in Benjamin's study on Goethe) with a fundamentally historical dimension. *Praxis* proper, thus, is always at odds with the "work." Wherever *praxis* is "before us"—before the historian, from whom Agamben seeks to set apart the historical materialist, but who nonetheless seems to haunt the latter—it inevitably appears as a mere *image* of praxis, praxis congealed into an image, displaced into utter passivity: praxis *as* signification, history *as* nature:

> What looks upon us from the monuments and the rubble of the past and seems in them to refer, almost allegorically, to a hidden meaning, is not, then, a relic of the ideological superstructure, which, in order to be understood, has to be traced back […] to the historical structure which determines it; quite the contrary—what we now have before us is praxis itself as origin and monadic historical structure.[54]

Perhaps Adorno's distinct take on the idea of the "death of intention" that ultimately founds a "logic of disintegration," namely of the disintegration of appearance, as the measure of philosophical critique, can be found in his evaluation of the significance of Husserl's epistemology. According to Adorno, Husserl failed. But, as Susan Buck-Morss notes, "his failure was precisely his success, for it brought the dilemmas and inner antagonisms of idealist philosophy to their fullest articulation."[55] It is the very failure of the ambition of Husserl's concepts that represents an unconscious historiography; bringing the material to self-consciousness is, for Adorno, what it means to rescue it.

In light of this demand—to bring the historical material to self-consciousness—, Benjamin's note on the half-finished product (*Halbfabrikat*) must indeed appear as a half-finished product itself, and so, too, does the *Arcades Project* as a whole. But perhaps by refusing to allow for a position of self-consciousness, or for an adequate interpretation, it more thoroughly answers to the chief materialist demand, the demand not to grant thought the primacy over being. In this sense, Benjamin's intuition about the half-finished product can be read as a token of what

Adorno, in 1958—and with an eye toward Benjamin—asserts for the "essay as form," when he writes that

> the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience [*Schauplatz geistiger Erfahrung*], without simplifying it. While even traditional thought draws its impulses from such experience, such thought by its form eliminates the remembrance of these impulses. The essay, on the other hand, takes them as its model, without simply imitating them as reflected form; it mediates them through its own conceptual organisation […].[56]

In Benjamin's account of the German *Trauerspiel*, a key feature in the presentation of history on the Baroque stage—a staging of history in the medium of allegory—is the "display of the craftsmanship"[57] (*Ostentation der Faktur*), most prominently manifested in the ruin. Adorno here describes the thinker in precisely the theatrical terms that are proper to that medium: not as the subject of an intentional praxis, but as an "arena of intellectual experience." This experience consists of gratuitous juxtapositions and textual ruptures, and the arrangement of historical material by means of citation. Time and time again, these gestures induce the experience of signification, which is the essential experience of the allegorist. The praxis of such organisation and reorganisation of the historical material exposes the arbitrariness of every allegedly meaningful and self-contained sign, and along with it the transience and the lack of metaphysical substance of every subject of intentional praxis, of a subject that intends, as it were, to *make* history by producing a future as the continuation of the present.

Notes

[1] Cp. Immanuel Kant, „The Contest of Faculties," in *Kant's Political Writings*, edited by Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 181.
[2] Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," 181.
[3] Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," 181.
[4] Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," 181.
[5] Benjamin, *AP*, 462 (N 3, 1).
[6] Benjamin, *AP*, 463 (N 3, 1; emphasis added).
[7] Cf. Benjamin, *AP*, 463 (N 3, 1).
[8] Benjamin, *AP*, 463 (N 3, 1).
[9] Cp. Benjamin, *Origin*, 165.
[10] Benjamin, *AP*, 463 (N 3, 1).
[11] Benjamin, *Origin*, 36.

[12] It is Maurice Blanchot who reminds us that "[u]nreality begins with the whole. The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but as entire, manifold, the world as a whole." Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 316.
[13] Cp. Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of German Mourning Play*," in *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 131-163.
[14] Cp. Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction to T. W. Adorno's 'The Idea of Natural-History'," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 234.
[15] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 257.
[16] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.
[17] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.
[18] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 254.
[19] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 257.
[20] Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," 182.
[21] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 257.
[22] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 257.
[23] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.
[24] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.
[25] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.
[26] Cp. Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans* (Berlin: Paul Cassirer Verlag, 1920), 55.
[27] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 261.
[28] Cp. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1923), 94-228.
[29] Cp. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 262.
[30] Benjamin, *Origin*, 175.
[31] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 263.
[32] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 261.
[33] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 259.
[34] For this reason, signification and subjectivity are inextricably linked, as Hullot-Kentor points out when referring to the further development of this topic within Adorno's work: "What Adorno terms 'original history of signification' in the early essay will become the 'original history of subjectivity' traced in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction to T. W. Adorno's 'The Idea of Natural-History'," 245.
[35] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 264.
[36] Benjamin, *AP*, 365-366 (J 78, 4).
[37] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 1887), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/. (last accessed November 2016)
[38] Benjamin, *AP*, 366 (J 78, 4).

[39] Marx's use of the term "developed factory" proves, at least, that his focus is limited to the causal dimension of a movement within the structure of the means of production.

[40] Alfred Sohn-Rethel links the idea of an objective fiction that he terms "real abstraction"—as opposed to "abstraction by thought"—to the structure of commodity and exchange value. This fiction is characterised by the elimination of time, which, as it were, defines the imaginary space of the "market:" "There, in the market-place and in shop windows, things stand still. They are under the spell of one activity only; to change owners. They stand there waiting to be sold. While they are there for exchange they are there not for use. A commodity marked out at a definite price, for instance, is looked upon as being frozen to absolute immutability throughout the time during which its price remains unaltered. And the spell does not only bind the doings of man. Even nature herself is supposed to abstain from any ravages in the body of this commodity and to hold her breath, as it were, for the sake of this social business of man." Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (London: The McMillan Press Ltd., 1978), 25. Hannah Arendt also hints at such a conclusion when she suggests that in modernity, "fabrication" has become the predominant paradigm for the understanding of history as a process. She defines "fabrication"—the Greek *poiesis*—in opposition to action, *praxis*: "Fabrication is distinguished from action in that it has a definite beginning and a predictable end: it comes to an end with its end product, which not only outlast the activity of fabrication but from then on has a kind of 'life' of its own." Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 59.

[41] According to Arendt, this specifically modern confusion—or at least its reflection within philosophy—could be seen as initiated by Giambatista Vicos "new science" of history, where his contention is that man can understand history, as opposed to nature, because one can only understand what one has oneself brought into being. It is this confusion that, according to Arendt, ultimately allowed for the emergence of the idea, in modernity, that history could be "made." Cp. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 77.

[42] Benjamin, *AP*, 460 (N 1a, 6).

[43] Benjamin, *Origin*, 175.

[44] Cp. Benjamin, *AP*, 463 (N 3a, 2).

[45] Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, 141.

[46] In other words: from a historicist notion of the object of historiography towards a "Copernican revolution of historical intuition." Cp. Benjamin, *AP*, 388-389 (K1,2).

[47] Benjamin, *AP*, 366 (J 78, 4).

[48] Cp. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*. 316.

[49] Benjamin, *AP*, 211 (H4a,1).

[50] Cp. Arendt, *The Concept of History*, 59.

[51] Benjamin, *AP*, 366 (J 78, 4).

[52] Cp. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), 116.

[53] Cp. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 122.
[54] Cp. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 122-123.
[55] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 71.
[56] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 161.
[57] Benjamin, *Origin*, 179.

THE POETICS OF THE RAG COLLECTOR: ON BENJAMIN'S MOTIFS OF COLLECTING AND THE COLLECTIVE OF RAGS

SAEIN PARK

Walter Benjamin's reflections on the dreaming collective have drawn much attention in various scholarly discourses from urbanity and film studies to political theories of collectivity. This essay aims to reconsider Benjamin's ideas and images of the dreaming collective by examining his interconnected motifs of collecting, the collector, and the rag collector. I will first reconstitute a less-frequently discussed lineage of thought, by investigating collecting-related terms in the preface to his *Trauerspielbuch*, and by setting them in dialogue with his depictions of 19th century collectors and rag collectors drawn from his writings during the late 1930s. I will then demonstrate how Benjamin's constellation of the citations and comments surrounding the figure of the rag collector constitutes a poetics that potentially critiques political-philosophical theories of collectivity and its presupposed delimitations and demarcations.

It seems that the neologism "collective identity" has currently become a conventional term in many disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and in our everyday discourses. Nevertheless, behind the convention lies a multitude of meanings. For instance, the meanings of the word "collective" include "being gathered in mass and aggregate," relevant to which are both the particular meaning of the adjective "collective" as "aggregate, collected" and the obsolete meaning of the noun "collective" as "a collection of extracts, precepts, etc., compiled and arranged"; another meaning consists of "being compiled as textual fragments."[1] These meanings may run counter to conventional associations between the terms "collective" and "identity," unsettling the supposed delimitations and demarcations between the inside and outside of an identity. I find that these latent meanings become recharged in Benjamin's writings. As I will show in this essay, the collecting-related motifs disseminated throughout Benjamin's writings suggest a textual mode of gathering remainders in multiple senses—the remainders that have been excluded from philosophical

systems, modern trajectories of history, as well as capitalist economy and its cycle of commodities. In this regard, Benjamin's deployment of the collecting-related motifs resembles what the 19th century Parisian rag collectors did: picking up outmoded, discarded clothes and papers, against the backdrop of the surge of waste disposal during the period of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and the growth of commodity economy and consumerism. At the same time, the rag collectors themselves comprised one type of the heterogeneous mass of people conspicuous in the 19th century Parisian streets, whose only shared feature was the mode of dressing in rags and tatters—the indecorous outcasts observed from the eyes of the modestly-dressed bourgeois. Considering political philosophies at that historical moment, such outcasts were neither re-collected as the constituents of present and past bourgeois society nor gathered together as those of a future society. In what follows, I will demonstrate the ways in which Benjamin's textual constellations configure discarded things and such outcasts at the margins of commodity economy and the historical, provoking new and different correlations. By looking into these aspects, I will also examine how such a constellatory configuration only happens in an instantaneous temporal and spatial modality, which remains virtual to the actual spaces of 19th century modernity, to reconsider its poetic-political implications.

Constellation and the Concept's Collecting

In his 1935 exposé for the *Arcades* project, Benjamin defines the collector as the figure who saves things from "the drudgery of being useful."[2] The collector's world—called the "interior," "the universe," or "a box in the theatre of the world"[3]—consists of the things that are no longer in the cycle of capitalist economy's commodities.

> To [the collector] falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he bestows on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one—one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.[4]

Although the collector takes the things away from the world of commodities by "taking possession of them," this way of possessing is different from the way in which the bourgeois owner acquires and rightly owns her property in correspondence with private property rights, or the

way in which the consumer buys, makes some use of, and throws away her commodities. It is implied in the passage that the collector's collecting, the "Sisyphean task," is only repetitive and will probably not lead to its ultimate fulfilment. However, in the collector's dream, an entrance into a "bygone and distant" and yet "better" world also becomes glimpsed. In the dream-world, things are no longer related to human beings through a certain conception of use—the conception of use that is necessary to speculate the rights of ownership as the first relationship between human beings and things. The collector's world that disconnects the supposed relationship between use and the rights of ownership turns into the passage into the no-more and the not-yet—the non-historical temporalities located before and after the mythical founding of the rights of ownership. Put differently, while the potential dream-world arises from the actual world of capitalist economy and its commodity cycle, it simultaneously exceeds and thus undermines the actual world—which happens at any moment with the collector's gesture of taking off a commodity from its cycle.

The modality of this "better" world, or the collector's exceptional time-space that interferes with the norms of capitalist commodity economy, is certainly difficult to grasp. Theodor Adorno, in his famous letter dated 5th December 1934, considers Benjamin's theory of dreaming collective as risking to fall into archaic temporality.[5] In a later letter dated 10th November 1938, Adorno criticises the modality of immediate spontaneity pertaining to Benjamin's motif of wine: Adorno argues that it is necessary for Benjamin to be aware of how such a motif is always already "only mediated through the entire process," and that the deployment of the motif should go beyond an analysis of what immediately surges from the experience of the fetishist commodity form. From Adorno's point of view, what is missing in Benjamin is a theory of mediation that would dialectically overcome positivism and avoid the danger of falling into what he considers as magical, archaic temporality.[6] If adopting his point of view, one can claim that the collector's dream above merely reflects fetishist charms of capitalist commodities, a dream which ultimately complements the phantasmagoria of 19th century Parisian culture. Nevertheless, the collector's dream-world, which should be nothing but the useless double of the actual world of usefulness, also constitutes the image of an alternative world, in which the longstanding interrelationship between human need, use, and things becomes reconfigured into a non-historical counter-image. How can we, first, understand the modality of such an image and, furthermore, reconsider its critical potentials?

A further approach to this modality can be suggested by looking at Benjamin's collecting-related terms found in his *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*.

This examination reveals, as I will argue, different phenomenological insights that Benjamin later more or less applied to his analysis of capitalist commodity economy. Specifically, his deployment of collecting-related terms in the *Prologue*, or preface—such as *sammeln, einsammeln*, and *versammeln*—provides important suggestions for his motifs of collecting, as well as their relationship to his later thoughts on collectivity. In the *Prologue*, these collecting-related terms recur in his account of the idea as constellation, with particular respect to the role of the concept. Benjamin's account of the concept's role, however, is different from the common understanding of the concept's labour in idealist philosophies, which—to generalise in a certain way—enables the subject's further grasp of her objects and, by doing so, expands the system of knowledge. In the *Prologue*, Benjamin critiques the possessive character of such a conceptualising process, when he writes, for example: "Knowledge is possession [*ein Haben*]. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of—even if in a transcendental sense—in the consciousness."[7] In contrast, Benjamin's theory of the concept comes close to the instantaneous dispossessing of the subject's ever-expanding possession of objects. The moment of dispossessing closely resembles the above-mentioned description of the 19th century collector's universe: it arises from collecting the elements located at the margins of subject-object cognition; and, as we will see, this collecting does not aim to fill up the accumulated barns of knowledge.

Central to Benjamin's accounts of the idea, the concept, and phenomena that include moments of collecting is the thought-image of the constellation. I would first like to suggest picturing the thought-image of the constellation in regard to the biblical imagination of the universe. The image of the universe as a dome locates stellar constellations on its very outer surface, as though they were projected on a dome-shaped screen. I suggest this interpretation because Benjamin's thought-image of the constellation, in my opinion, has a distinct liminal character in terms of its temporality and spatiality, for which the visual image of the constellations on the surface may be adequate. To be sure, his thought-image of the constellation does not present the sum of several planets. Instead, Benjamin describes a constellation as a configuration of the "points,"[8] whose correlation, then, consists of the invisible lines crossing the dark universe. The description of the constellation as a configuration of points locates the liminally visible and by no means quantifiable object of seeing at the centre of his epistemo-critical reflections. In this way, the phenomenality of constellations subtly unsettles the dichotomy of the

subject and the object of seeing that is commonly presupposed in the everyday act of looking at a constellation.

As articulated through the thought-image of the constellation, Benjamin's theory of the presentation of the idea centres on "collecting" certain elements of phenomena and finding their correlations. Looking once again at the concept's role, Benjamin asserts that "the collecting [*Einsammlung*] of phenomena is the matter of the concept."[9] Although Benjamin makes a passing remark on the concept's "mediating role"[10] (*Vermittlerrolle*), this role presents a distinct mode of the conceptual mediation between the ideal and the empirical: in his terms, the concept concerns the "release"[11] (*Auslösung*) of certain elements from phenomena, for the elements to come into a distinct configuration. Furthermore, Benjamin writes:

> The idea is best explained as the figuration of the relation [*Gestaltung des Zusammenhanges*] within which the unique-extreme stands alongside its counterparts [*in dem das Einmalig-Extreme mit seinesgleichen steht*].[12]

A comparison might be helpful. To make a general remark, the phenomenological status of the extreme in the dialectics of the Hegelian tradition is the semblance of appearance: although the extreme consists of a constitutive moment within the movement of self-consciousness, the extreme, in truth-reality, has always already been sublated. In contrast, Benjamin's description of the configuration of the "unique-extreme" (*das Einmalig-Extreme*) attempts to arrest the very moment of such a liminal appearance or appearance-in-disappearing. The "unique-extreme" then stands "with its counterparts" (*mit seinesgleichen*), but such standing happens, if not in the absence of time and space, only in their infinitesimal quanta.[13]

If the concept's collecting of phenomena concerns the elements at the very phenomenological limits—the appearing-and-disappearing elements—, it by no means merely complements the system of knowledge, contributing to the delimitations and demarcations of known and knowable objects. What the concept collects is located at the limits of the intentional subject's grasping of objects, while shaping correlations in the phenomenologically minimal, infinitesimal status. Benjamin writes that such extremes "are assembled" (*versammeln*)[14] for the presentation of the idea: here, the deployment of the collecting-related term epitomises such phenomenological thoughts. Like constellations with their correlations between points and invisible lines, Benjamin presents a theory of the correlations among appearing-disappearing phenomena, by redefining the concept's role as collecting such phenomena. As we will see, this distinct model anticipates his later interests in the things at the verge of

disappearing in the capitalist commodity economy and its value system, as well as in the outcasts in rags and tatters drifted away from the norms and normative morphologies of 19th century bourgeois culture.

Agriculture, Collecting and Cultural History

In his 1937 essay *Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian*, Benjamin's critique of social democracy is presented through two contrasting metaphors: agriculture and collecting seeds. First, Benjamin situates social democracy's view toward the past in analogy with agricultural labour:

> [Social democrats] saw the past as having been gathered up and stored forever in the granaries [*Scheuern*] of the present. Although the future held the prospect of work, it also held the certainty of a rich harvest.[15]

What is critiqued here is a certain presupposition within social democratic thoughts concerning the linear, causal, and accumulative relationship between the past, the present, and the future. In particular, it is implied that this relationship is extrapolated from a certain concept of work, here in analogy with fruitful agricultural labour: according to the image, past labour has filled up the barns of the present, and present labour promises a blessed harvest in the future.

The term "work" in this passage connects the consideration of the theory and practice of social democracy with a critique of the conception of the work of history. The representative conception of the work of history in social democracy may be found in what we now would call the historical-deterministic interpretation: the belief in the progressive development of productive forces, which would inevitably lead to the progress in the history of class struggle. In a way, Benjamin tries to show affinities between this interpretation and social democracy's alternative at the moment of time, when he draws attention to the slogan, "the work of civil education" (*Bildungsarbeit*)[16]: that is, social democracy's political project of educating the working class. Benjamin critically examines this political project—assessing how well social democracy sticks to its tenet that the appropriation of knowledge, which made the bourgeois class emerge as the new dominating class, will bring about the liberation of the working class.[17] He then comments on how such a concept of work is based on a particular model of organic growth: when he cites the following phrase of an article from *Die neue Zeit*—"the trunk of the Social Democratic Party was producing ring after ring of organic growth"[18]—the image of the tree presents the organism that only grows, which also offers a model for what he calls the "new dogma,"[19] the belief in development.

Benjamin presents a different image of the seed that serves as a counter-image to social democracy's concept of agriculture-analogous work:

> The historical material, turned by the plow of Marxist dialectics, would have become a soil capable of giving life to the seed which the present planted in it. But that did not occur. [*Der historische Stoff wäre, umgepflügt von der marxistischen Dialektik, ein Boden geworden, in dem der Same, den die Gegenwart in ihn warf, hätte aufgehen können. Das geschah nicht.*][20]

This passage presents a kind of seed that "would have sprouted" (*hätte aufgehen können*), but has not. Besides the unreal subjective mode, the non-sprouting of the seed here stands as a metaphor for the non-realisation of potentiality—it can be recalled how acorn and oak tree serve as the metaphors of potentiality and actuality in Aristotle and in the tradition of Western intellectual history thereafter. In the simulated mode, the seed might have sprouted if it were "turned by the plow of Marxist dialectics," but it has not. Then, this Marxist dialectic also is a dialectic that has not yet come to pass. Each seed, which this yet-to-come dialectics collects, announces a new potential beginning: the new beginning of the past that has never been, but might have been. In this regard, the task of this dialectics consists of finding, collecting, or re-collecting such a seed of the past, for its virtual enactment.

This "seed" (*Same*) is distinguished from another kind of seed or, more exactly, a component of seeds that Benjamin accounts for in the fourteenth footnote: the "germs" (*Keime*)[21] of barbarism. Citing Alfred Weber's *The Sociological Concept of Culture*, Benjamin claims that the "germs" of barbarism have already sprouted in a certain concept of culture. He writes: "Culture comes into existence only […] when life has risen above the level of utility of bare necessity to form a structure," and then, culture becomes something "which is superfluous for the continued existence of life, but is felt to be precisely […] that from which life derives its purpose."[22] This concept of culture contains the seeds of barbarism, which have, in the meantime, germinated: through the ways in which culture is considered as the source of life's purpose and usurps the vitality of life as its own. In this way, culture inflicts damage on life, while the damage is difficult to be felt. According to Benjamin, culture exists after the fashion of an artwork, "which perhaps confounds entire modes of life and principles of living with its potentially shattering, destructive effect, but whose existence we feel to be higher than everything healthy and vital which it destroys."[23] After accounting for how "[t]he products of art and science owe their

existence […] to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries," Benjamin claims: "No cultural history has yet done justice to this fundamental state of affairs, and it can hardly hope to do so."[24] Cultural history "may augment the weight of the treasure accumulating on the back of humanity, but it does not provide the strength to shake off this burden so as to take control of it."[25]

Benjamin argues that social democrats' theory and practice are in conformity with this accumulative augmentation of cultural history, especially as it concerns their efforts to succeed the "inheritance" (*Erbe*)[26] of culture.[27] Relatedly, he describes the ways in which the Social Democratic Party failed to respond to the new masses. Here in particular, Benjamin deploys the subjunctive mode—for example, "If the class had been sighted" (*Wäre die Klasse visiert worden*)[28]—, in order to situate "class" as something that is not yet constituted. While the "masses of workers […] streamed [*strömten*]],"[29] the party considered them as an already-formed "public" to educate rather than a "class" in formation.[30] The consideration of the class as being in formation is connected to an alternative approach to culture and cultural history that Benjamin tries to show through his description of a 19th century collector.

Benjamin first situates the collector Eduard Fuchs as someone who responded to the demands of the new "mass readership" (*Lesermassen*).[31] He gives lengthy accounts of Fuchs's publications, describing their large print runs and high sales volumes.[32] The glimpse of an alternative concept of cultural history comes from his description of the place of Fuchs's work:

> The humanities were content "to stimulate," "to offer diversion," and "to be interesting." History was loosed up to yield "cultural history." Here Fuchs's work has its place. Its greatness lies in its reaction to this state of affairs; its problems lie in the fact that it contributes to this state.[33]

Stimulating, diverting, and being interesting—all these aspects of cultural history deviate from the mandates of utility and historical necessity. Benjamin locates Fuchs's place within such an ambivalence in cultural history. Benjamin's subsequent exposition of Fuchs's writings presents an interpretation that amplifies the ambivalence of cultural history, while even going beyond Fuchs's intention. For instance, Benjamin emphasises a few specific ways in which Fuchs defines caricature: among others, the definition of caricature as the "original" form of art.[34] Disregarding the tradition of writing on caricature,[35] Benjamin bring to the foreground the following remark by Fuchs: "caricature is the form, from which all objective art arises."[36] Yet, Benjamin's way of

considering caricature as the "original" form of art goes beyond what Fuchs intended, and is rather connected to the search for a new, different potential beginning disseminated in the past, especially when he describes the form of art as the emergence of the "immediate" and the "eruptive."[37] In a similar vein, when Benjamin accounts for Fuchs's description of an artwork from the Tang dynasty, he cites the passage as though the mythic appearance with flaming wings and horns itself produced an effect that is "absolutely logical and necessary."[38] In the original context, Fuchs, for his part, evaluates the logic and necessity of various artworks because he is grounded in the theory of the causality of the base and superstructure and performs, for instance, an analysis of the flourishing of commerce in different historical periods. However, by citing Fuchs's sentences against the grain, Benjamin presents the artwork as though an eruptive form of life itself were "logical," "necessary," and "organic," subtly disrupting the causal, agriculture-analogical mode of recording cultural history. In short, in Benjamin's interpretation, Fuchs's work consists of the collection of past impulses, erotic desires, and stimulations, as well as their virtual enactments as a mode of the re-collection of the past. Its component, "seed" (*Same*), may define the word "collector" (*Sammler*), in regard to the critique of cultural history that begins by replacing the model of agriculture with the counter-model of collecting seeds. The epistemological thought of collecting phenomena at the limits of phenomenality, in this way, finds its variation in the critical reflections of cultural history, as well as in the theory of the re-collection of past potentials.

The Dreams of the Rag Collective

Marx's infamous description of the *Lumpenproletariat* stands at the background of Benjamin's 1938 essay *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. In this essay, Benjamin only includes a partial citation of Marx's description of the *Lumpenproletariat*, "the whole indeterminate, disintegrated, fluctuating mass which the French call *la bohème*,"[39] bringing to the foreground the name of *la bohème* instead of the *Lumpenproletariat*. However, Benjamin must have reflected deeply on Marx's detailed description of the *Lumpenproletariat*, given the ways in which the essay elaborates on a number of the concrete figures that are either included in or closely related to the enumerated list of the *Lumpenproletariat*.[40] Reconstituting these reflections, I situate Benjamin as one of the initial respondents to the problematic of the *Lumpenproletariat* in Marx in regard to the multifaceted connotations of *Lumpen*,[41] a problematic that has historically provoked controversies surrounding the redefinition of

the proletariat in Marxian and Marxist scholarship up to the present moment of time. As I will argue, one of Benjamin's ways of critically responding to this problematic can be found in his textual constellation of the citations and comments surrounding 19th century Parisian rag collectors.

Let me first draw attention to how Benjamin reflects on the motif of rags as well as on the mode of being in rags and tatters. As Irving Wohlfarth has pointed out,[42] Benjamin's view on raggedness seems to be in line with Hermann Lotze's, whose passage on the concept of raggedness (*Verlumptheit*) Benjamin includes in convolute J of the *Arcades Project*:

> Poverty takes on the peculiar character of raggedness [*Verlumptheit*] when it occurs in the middle of a society [*in der Mitte einer Gesellschaft*] whose existence is founded on an intricate and richly articulated system for the satisfaction of needs. Insofar as poverty borrows fragments without interrelationship [*einzelne Bruchstücke ohne Zusammenhang*] from this system, it becomes subject to needs from which it can find no […] lasting and decent deliverance.[43]

Lotze's view on raggedness here is largely predicated upon the quasi-Hegelian theory of civil society as the system of needs: it is presupposed that the satisfaction of needs grounds the necessity of the "intricate and richly articulated system" of civil society. It can be recalled that the need for clothing is essentially human in Hegel's speculations, not shared by animals or insects, and its fulfilment should come before the multiplication of other needs.[44] Admittedly, in Hegel, the pre-stage of family conceptually explains this presupposition that the needs have always already been fulfilled. Yet, it also is true that, if one considers the stage of civil society alone, the fulfilment appears as merely presupposed. This explains why Lotze conceives of raggedness as a "peculiar" type of poverty, and how he considers the apparition of the ragged poor without proper clothing "in the middle of a society" as fundamentally disrupting the wholeness of civil society: this is also why Lotze, in the cited passages, describes the ragged poor as the "fragments without interrelationship" (*einzelne Bruchstücke ohne Zusammenhang*). The citizens are—or rather, should be—always properly dressed: what matters in civil society consists of their particularised needs in terms of how they dress. Although the liberation from those needs is the precondition for civil society, the needs do not appear to be fully satisfied in regard to the ragged poor. Subsequently, the ragged poor appear as though they have fallen back into the state prior to the constitution of civil society: the state of the aggregate mass,[45] running counter to the idea of the social wholeness of citizens.

I find that the strange disjunctive time of the ragged poor, arising from certain presuppositions surrounding civil society and the need for clothing, illuminates one of the origins of Benjamin's interests in the motif of rags. As has been seen, the peculiar poor's appearance in rags and tatters displays their outmodedness in the middle of civil society—in affinity with the temporality of the masses—, as though the un-collectable, un-recollectable past of civil society tears apart the present time of the citizens' social whole. Benjamin simulates this temporal mode of the ragged poor in his subsequent constellations of the citations and comments surrounding the Parisian rag collectors, in the way that time itself becomes doubled up: there is not only the actual time of the 19th century rag collectors, but also certain dreams in which the time of the ragged becomes re-collected. To take a look at Benjamin's description of the rag collectors:

> When the new industrial processes gave refuse a certain value, rag collectors appeared in the cities in larger numbers. They worked for middlemen and constituted a sort of cottage industry [*Heimindustrie*] located in the streets. The rag collector fascinated his epoch.[46]

The byproduct of industrial production, refuse, here enters into a configuration of ambivalence. Benjamin presents the rag collectors' "cottage industry" (*Heimindustrie*) as a kind of parallel mirror industry. This cottage industry suggests another order of things, as the "refuse" receives "a certain value." In a manner, what the rag collectors did was to bring discarded things back to the system of commodity value. Nevertheless, Benjamin's eyes are not on how they eventually remove the outmoded time of rags by returning them to the cycle of commodities, but on how they open—or, more exactly, would have potentially opened—alternative spaces in the streets. Not to be overlooked here is Benjamin's remark about the number of the rag collectors. Benjamin highlights both the solitude and the great number of the rag collectors throughout this essay: they are either one or too many, which highlights their uncountability in contrast to the sum of individual citizens.

One of Benjamin's footnotes includes a citation of the monthly budget of a 19th century rag collector, which takes into consideration the actual condition of severe poverty from which rag collectors had to suffer.[47] In other words, Benjamin presents actual rag collectors' poverty in the language of budget; this mode of presentation distinguishes itself from the political-philosophical representations of rag collectors. In this footnote, the citation of the monthly budget is then followed by a citation of Eugène Buret: "Since humanness, even plain decency, forbids one to let human

beings die like animals, one cannot deny them the charity of a coffin."[48] These reflections on the human condition fallen into non-humanness may have led Benjamin to make the following remark in the essay: "The eyes of the first investigators of pauperism were fixed on [the rag collector] with the mute question: Where does the limit of human misery lie?"[49] The muteness of this question, however, shapes a point from which Benjamin reconsiders previous discourses of rag collectors, turning to the poetic images drawn from Baudelaire's works.

Central to Benjamin's reflections on the rag collectors is Baudelaire's figure of the *chiffonnier*. Looking briefly into the figure of the *chiffonnier* in Baudelaire's prose and poetry should be helpful to further illuminate what is at stake in Benjamin's interest in and reworking of the figure of the rag collector. One text in the background is Baudelaire's 1851 prose text *Du vin et du haschisch*. The text includes a description of the *chiffonnier* who becomes, in a nightmare-like vision, an imperialistic figure. In an allusion to Napoleon, the rag collector turns into the victorious emperor coming back from his battlefield and announcing a new rule:

> Forward march! Division, vanguard, army! Exactly like Bonaparte dying on St Helena! It seems that number seven has changed into a sceptre of iron, and the wicker shawl into an imperial mantle. Now he is complimenting his army. The battle is won, but it was a heated exchange. He passes on horseback beneath the triumphal arches. His heart swells with happiness. He listens with delight to the acclamations of an enthusiastic public. Any moment now he will be dictating a law code superior to all codes known hitherto. He swears solemnly that he will make his people happy.[50]

Instead of immediately drawing upon this prose, Benjamin in this essay first cites Baudelaire's 1857 reworking of the *chiffonnier* in his poem *Le vin des chiffonniers*. Benjamin cites the following two stanzas:

> *On voit un chiffonnier qui vient, hochant la tête,*
> *Butant, et se cognant aux murs comme un poète,*
> *Et, sans prendre souci des mouchards, ses sujets,*
> *Epanche tout son cœur en glorieux projets.*
>
> *Il prête des serments, dicte des lois sublimes,*
> *Terrasse les méchants, relève les victimes,*
> *Et sous le firmament comme un dais suspendu*
> *S'enivre des splendeurs de sa propre vertu.*

> [One sees a ragpicker coming—shaking his head, Stumbling, and colliding against walls like a poet; / And, heedless of police informers, his humble subjects, / He pours out his heart in glorious devisings.
>
> He swears solemn oaths, dispenses laws sublime, / Lays low the wicked, raises up the victims, / And under a sky suspended like a canopy / Becomes intoxicated on the splendours of his own virtue.][51]

In reading this poem in the context of Benjamin's essay, Jeffrey Mehlman highlights how the informants here are the only listeners to the rag collector, and how the failure of the rebellious plan is, thus, anticipated.[52] Adding up to his interpretation, I find that Benjamin goes on to unsettle the emperor-like images of Baudelaire's *chiffonnier*, in consideration of the detailed descriptions of the victorious emperor in his prose text and the ways in which this figure, in these cited stanzas, is described as swearing oaths and dispensing sublime laws. Running counter to the way in which the *chiffonnier* becomes a sovereign and sublime figure in Baudelaire's poem, Benjamin presents, in his subsequent remarks, the rag collector as an aged, powerless king, who does nothing but listen to his informants.

> His moustache drooped like an old flag. On his rounds, he encountered the *mouchards*, the police informers whom he dominated in his dreams [*über die ihm seine Träume die Herrschaft geben*].[53]

The flag, which could have been the proud symbol of Baudelaire's *chiffonnier*'s glorious victories, here becomes merely a metaphor for his drooping moustache. Furthermore, what one finds is a very strange reign, namely, the reign over informants, over the very disloyal ones. In the dream of the rag collector's domination, no "domination" (*Herrschaft*) really exists. This dream does not offer images of new victories or the announcement of new divine, sublime, or sovereign orders; it only provides an aged, exhausted parallel figure who resigns to establish a new rule.

Benjamin also presents another dream of the rag collector, in which one can glimpse a peculiar modality of the collective of rags. In this essay, the first chapter's title, *Bohème*, and Benjamin's partial citation of Marx's description of the *Lumpenproletariat* situate the heterogeneous types in rags roaming in the 19th century Parisian streets within the peculiar mode of being in the aggregate mass. The *bohème* as a name does not offer any structure of adding together, unifying, and totalising the sum of their members. Similar to the way that the plural rag collectors were too many

to be counted, a singular rag collector in the following passage cannot be counted as well:

> A rag collector cannot, of course, be considered a member of the *bohème* [*kann natürlich nicht zur Bohème zählen*]. But from the *littérateur* to the professional conspirator, everyone who belonged to the *bohème* could re-find a piece of himself [*ein Stück von sich wiederfinden*] in the rag collector. Each person was in a more or less blunted state of revolt against society and faced a more or less precarious tomorrow [*prekären Morgen*]. In his hour [*zu seiner Stunde*], he was able to sympathise with those who were shaking the foundations of this society.[54]

The *bohème*'s belonging-to-each-other is here described as the peculiar commonality of "re-find[ing] a piece of himself [*ein Stück von sich*] in the rag collector." This description may invoke how Lotze found the ragged poor as the fragments that cannot come into interrelation. Nevertheless, the ability to sympathise with "those who were shaking the foundations of this society," in this way, is located in the rag collector's time: "In his hour." In this regard, the phrase "precarious tomorrow" (*prekär*[*es*] *Morgen*) can be read not only as their actual condition, but also as the moment that actualises the disruptive time of the ragged.

Immediately following these reflections, Benjamin writes: "The rag collector was not alone in his dream. He was accompanied by comrades; they, too, reeked of wine casks, and they, too had turned gray in battles."[55] While the rag collector shaped, in the previous passage, a focal point for the correlations of the broken fragments running counter to the wholeness of civil society—the time of the apparitions in rags as the not-yet and no-more of the history of properly-dressed bourgeois—, this dream of a rag collector, furthermore, presents a moment of camaraderie. The description of the camaraderie suggests a particular mode of collectivity. The comrades are not only intoxicated, having "reeked of wine casks," but also aged and outmoded, having "turned gray." Instead of offering an image of camaraderie that would replace the old models of collectivity with a new one, Benjamin here only presents a peculiar scene of collectivity-in-dream in which the accomplishment of the aim of camaraderie to fight and win battles cannot be anticipated: the camaraderie rather rejects to have any aim to fight for. Instead, this dream presents a virtual collective that tries to include the ones who have not been collected in previous thoughts and writings of collectivity. The usefulness of the poetics of the collective of rags for establishing a new political programme may well be questioned. Nevertheless, the poetics presents a distinct critique of the previous

thoughts and writings of collectivity, regarding how they leave behind the moments that cannot be remembered and the ones who cannot be included.

Notes

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, s. v. "collective."
[2] Benjamin, *AP*, 9; GS V.1, 53. The English translations of Benjamin's works have been slightly modified, mostly to match the paralleled German original phrases in parentheses.
[3] Benjamin, *AP*, 9; GS V.1, 53.
[4] Benjamin, *AP*, 9; GS V.1, 53.
[5] In this letter, Adorno argues that the "individualistic but dialectical critique of Freud" should break apart the archaism of Carl Gustav Jung, Ludwig Klages, and Wilhelm Reich, and implies that the archaic character that he finds in Benjamin's dreaming collective should also be overcome in a similar manner. See Benjamin, GS V.2,1108.
[6] This critique surrounds Benjamin's motif of wine, about which Adorno claims that it is necessary to notice not only how this motif is motivated by wine taxes and the wines at the barriers, but also how it is mediated through the entire process (*Gesamtprozeß*); Adorno here implies his critique of Benjamin's theory of phantasmagoria deriving from an analysis of commodity fetishism. From Adorno's point of view, this "immediate," "anthropological" materialism hides "a deeply Romantic element." See Benjamin, GS V.2,1096.
[7] Benjamin, *Origin*, 29; GS I.1,209.
[8] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; GS I.1, 215.
[9] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; GS I.1, 215.
[10] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; GS I.1, 214.
[11] Benjamin, *Origin*, 35; GS, I.1, 215.
[12] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34-35; GS I.1, 215.
[13] In his book *Benjamin's -abilities,* Samuel Weber expands on the distinct temporal and spatial standing of constellations found in this passage: while centering on the phrase "*mit seinesgleichen*," he finds in this passage a conception of singularity which is relationally plural, and is open and vulnerable to differentiations, alterations, and variations. In doing so, he also suggests several different translations; my slight modification of this passage's translation including the term "unique" is drawn from his translation. See Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7-8.
[14] Benjamin, *Origin*, 35; GS I.1, 215.
[15] Benjamin, SW 3, 267; GS II.2, 475.
[16] Benjamin, SW 3, 268; GS II.2, 471.
[17] Benjamin, SW 3, 265; GS II.2, 471f.
[18] Benjamin, SW 3, 264; GS, II.2, 470.
[19] Benjamin, SW 3, 266; GS II.2, 467.
[20] Benjamin, SW 3, 265f.; GS II.2, 476.
[21] Benjamin, SW 3, 291; GS II.2, 476.

[22] Benjamin, SW 3, 291; GS II.2, 476.
[23] Benjamin, SW 3, 291; GS II.2, 476.
[24] Benjamin, SW 3, 267; GS II.2, 476.
[25] Benjamin, SW 3, 268; GS II.2, 478.
[26] Benjamin, SW 3, 265; GS II.2, 473.
[27] For example, Benjamin cites Korn's article in the *Neue Zeit* entitled *Proletariat and Classic*, in which it is claimed that the proletariat must educate itself and succeed the "inheritance [*Erbe*]" of culture. Benjamin, SW 3, 265.
[28] Benjamin, SW 3, 264; GS II.2, 472.
[29] Benjamin, SW 3, 264; GS II.2, 472.
[30] Benjamin, SW 3, 264; GS II.2, 472.
[31] Benjamin, SW 3, 265; GS II.2, 473.
[32] Benjamin, SW 3, 264; GS II.2, 472.
[33] Benjamin, SW 3, 265; GS II.2, 473.
[34] Benjamin, SW 3, 273; GS II.2, 483.
[35] Furthermore, the way that Benjamin presents Fuchs's study of caricature falls out of step with the common way of presenting the history of modern caricature as a politicised form of art. The first book on French caricature, Boyer-Brun's *Histoire des caricatures de la révolte des Français* (1792), collected caricatures on the revolution, and the representative volume *Musée de la caricature* (1838) records the major political events in France from the fourteenth century onwards. Disregarding this tradition of writing on caricature, Benjamin foregrounds the "original" character of caricature. See Michèle Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature: From the Comic to an Art of Modernity* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1992).
[36] Eduard Fuchs, *Die Karikatur der europäischen Völker: Vom Altertum bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin: A. Hofmann, 1904), 8.
[37] Benjamin, SW 3, 272; GS II.2, 483.
[38] Benjamin, SW 3, 273; GS II.2, 483.
[39] Benjamin, SW 4, 3; GS I.2, 513f.
[40] Marx's accounts of the *Lumpenproletariat* have been the object of controversy up to today's post-Marxist debates. One of the most commonly cited passages in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* unfolds as following: "Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, rag collectors, knife grinders, tinkerers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *Marx Engels Collected Works,* vol. 11 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977 [1849]).
[41] Benjamin's responses to this problematic, however, need a degree of reconstitution, as he answers the questions surrounding the *Lumpenproletariat* through the textual constellation of closely related passages. For instance, this

essay's first chapter (*Bohème*), instead of drawing upon Marx's impressive passage on the *Lumpenproletariat,* begins by citing lesser-known book reviews by Marx and Engels (on Adolphe Chenu's *Les Conspirateurs* and Lucien de la Hodde's *La Naissance de la République en février 1848*), in which the Parisian conspirators come to the foreground. While citing the reviews' passages in which Marx and Engels depict the Parisian conspirators in a way very similar to the *Lumpenproletariat*, Benjamin, however, unsettles the presupposed conceptions surrounding the description of this 19th century type, especially the conceptions regarding their idle, mobile, and rebellious characters. See Benjamin, SW 4, 3-6; GS, I-2:513-5.

[42] Irving Wohlfarth, "Et Cetera? The Historian as *Chiffonnier*," *New German Critique* 39 (Autumn, 1986), 148.

[43] Benjamin, *AP*, 373; GS V.1, 472 (J 83a, 1).

[44] Relatedly, Hegel accounts for how citizens are not the masses but have become, in the modality of the always-already, the individuals of estate society, through the social relations of the system of needs, means and works, their fulfilment, as well as cultural education (§201); also, it is here that Hegel defines the need for clothing as one of the essential human needs, in contrast to animals and insects (§190). See G.F.W. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004)*,* 347f.; 354f.

[45] This argument is also based on how Hegel finds the masses have fallen into the state prior to the constitution of civil society. See Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts,* 354-5.

[46] Benjamin, SW 4, 8; GS I.2, 521.

[47] See Benjamin, SW 4, 69-70; GS I.2, 521.

[48] See Benjamin, SW 4, 70; GS I.2, 521.

[49] See Benjamin, SW 4, 8; GS I.2, 521.

[50] Charles Baudelaire, "On Wine and Hashish," in *On Wine and Hashish*, edited by Margaret Drabble, translated by Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Press, 2002), 8.

[51] See Benjamin, SW 4, 8.

[52] This interpretation by Mehlman is predicated upon the thesis that the *Lumpen* side of Baudelaire combines both the law and its transgression, in view of a certain esoteric Jewish theological idea of the law's being perpetuated through its transgressions. In that sense, he argues that the rag collector with his snitches is both "working for" and "working against" authority. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Adventures in the French Trade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 139-40.

[53] See Benjamin, SW 4, 9; GS I.2, 522.

[54] Benjamin, SW 4, 8; GS I.2, 522.

[55] See Benjamin, SW 4, 8; GS I.2, 522.

IV

DIRECTING CONSTELLATIONS: FILM AND ART

DISTRACTED IMAGES: *ABLENKUNG, ZERSTREUUNG, KONSTELLATION*

BENJAMIN BREWER

In a letter to Werner Kraft from late 1935, Walter Benjamin claims that he has "hardly succumbed to the compulsion to make some kind of sense of the current state of the world."[1] Benjamin's resistance to sense-making is not, however, mere apathy. "As for me," he explains to Kraft,

> I am busy pointing my telescope through the bloody mist at a mirage of the nineteenth century that I am attempting to reproduce based on the characteristics it will manifest in a future state of the world, liberated from magic. I must naturally first build this telescope myself and, in making this effort, I am the first to have discovered some fundamental principles of materialistic art theory.[2]

Referring most likely to two of his most famous writings—*The Arcades Project* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction*—Benjamin's image of a telescope aimed at a mirage underlines the methodological difficulties inherent in his thinking of history, specifically the difficulties of determining which objects, periods, and events should receive the investigator's *focus*.

On one reading, Benjamin cannot be distracted from his work by the increasingly catastrophic state of the present, which, in any case, he insists is nothing new: "There have already been many cultures on this planet that have perished in blood and horror."[3] On another reading, however, perhaps the construction of such a complicated telescope in order to perform a task as strange as the viewing and reconstructing of a mirage *is* a distraction from the bloody catastrophe of Benjamin's own historical moment. In either case, the telescope-image poses the question of attention and distraction in relation to historical investigation—on what should one concentrate their technologically and mechanically supplemented gaze? Which investigations are mere distractions? Which merit attention?

I am, of course, not the first to note that distraction and attention are important themes in Benjamin's work.[4] Indeed, the problem of distraction is undoubtedly one of the most striking features of his theory of art.

Against Adorno's apprehensions,[5] Benjamin saw the rise of distraction as a mode of reception as thoroughly ambivalent, neither essentially aleatory nor essentially destructive. To complicate things even further, the English "distraction" translates two German words: *Zerstreuung* and *Ablenkung*. Neither opposed nor coextensive, these two words each delineate important features of Benjamin's thinking.

In order to trace the ways in which they interact and intensify one another, I will begin by outlining Benjamin's thinking of *Zerstreuung* as dispersal, diffusion, or scattering in relation to film, following Paul North's reading in *The Problem of Distraction.* I then turn to *Ablenkung*, tracing its distinction from *Zerstreuung. Ablenkung*, as we will see, has the connotation of deflection or diversion rather than the scattered inability to concentrate which defines *Zerstreuung*. Finally, I turn to the famous motif of the constellation in Benjamin's work. There I will argue both that the two words *Ablenkung* and *Zerstreuung* hang together in a *constellation* of distractions, and that the motif of constellation is itself one of distraction. Thus, reading not only distraction by way of constellation, but also constellation itself as a kind of "distracted" image, I conclude with some considerations about the function of constellations in nautical navigation.

The Historicity of Perception and the *Hypocrite Lecteur*

I want to begin, however, neither with Benjamin's *Work of Art* essay nor the *Arcades Project*, but with another essay from the same period, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*. Referring to "Au lecteur," the poem which prefaces Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, Benjamin notes: "Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. The introductory poem of *Les Fleurs du mal* is addressed to these readers."[6] Famously ending with the lines, "*—hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, —mon frère*" ("—hypocrite reader, —my double, —my brother"), Baudelaire's poem "Au lecteur" presents the uncanny image of the hypocrite reader, who is unable to read and whose natural faculties are transformed by an unnatural alchemy.[7] Elaborating on these difficulties, Benjamin observes that the readers addressed in the preface are "unsuited" to the reading of the text, because "willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the 'spleen' which kills interest and receptiveness." They are, in short, "the least rewarding type of audience."[8] For Benjamin, however, this mismatch of reader and text is not the detriment of Baudelaire's text, but rather its greatest strength:

> This turned out to have been a far-sighted judgment. He would eventually find the reader his work was intended for […]. If conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favourable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances does lyric poetry accord with the experience of its readers. *This may be due to a change in the structure of experience*.[9]

In other words, Baudelaire's text registers, however obliquely, a change that was already underway, but not yet legible when Baudelaire wrote it, namely, *a change in the very structure of experience*. This change leaves readers unable to sustain the kind of contemplative and concentrated attention demanded by lyric poetry, making them unable in turn to read or receive it. Having become receptive to every sensual pleasure, they are no longer receptive to the concentrated intellectual pleasure of traditional verse.

Early in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, Benjamin foregrounds this problem: "The way in which human perception organises itself [*sich organisiert*]—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but also history."[10] That is to say, human perception is not an "extra-historical," "necessary," or "natural" structure of receptivity, invulnerable to contingent and historical events or transformations. History and nature, rather, intertwine, interact, and interpenetrate one another in strange ways with regard to human perception. Taking distraction and boredom as particularly rich phenomena in this respect, Benjamin emphasises their relation to mediality and media, especially the increased (and increasing) velocity of sensual stimulation in the dawning of mass media.

One of the most famous and enigmatic phrases Benjamin uses to describe this transformed self-organisation of human perception in light of the experience of photography and film is "reception in distraction:"

> *Reception in distraction* [*die Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*]*—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground* [...]. It proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics.[11]

The very concept of reception in distraction, Paul North points out, "cannot easily be received; at best it is a paradox, at worst nonsense."[12] Indeed, it recalls the problem of Baudelaire's "Au lecteur," that Benjamin observed at the beginning of his *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*: the audience is not just weak-willed and unable to concentrate, but has been exposed to the "spleen which kills interest and receptiveness."[13] The

challenge is therefore to think this transformed reception now that perception is no longer structured in such a way to facilitate careful contemplation and absorption. This would thus mark not merely an addition or a modification to the otherwise "natural" structure of perception and experience, but, as we saw Benjamin say above, a change in their very *structure*.

Zerstreuung

In order clarify just what is at stake in this thinking of distraction, it is important to tease out two different senses of the German word *Zerstreuung*. It has the same psychological connotations of the English "distraction," insofar as it refers to the actual *experience* of distraction, of *being* distracted, both in the sense of being unable to concentrate and in the sense of seeking entertainment. These senses of *Zerstreuung* are especially evident in Benjamin's citation of Duhamel in the 1939 version of the *Work of Art* essay:

> Duhamel, who detests the cinema and knows nothing of its significance, though he does know something about its significance, describes the situation as follows: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images." Indeed, the train of associations in the person contemplating these images is immediately interrupted by new images.[14]

This psychological sense of "distraction" is tied to the sensory richness of film and, more importantly, to the increased *velocity* of images. As will be familiar to anyone who has tried to take notes during a film, the speed at which images and shots flash up on the screen only to give way to others makes detailed observation of visual arrangements and motifs quite difficult. The experience of watching a film, Benjamin argues, is characterised by an inability to concentrate on the movie in the same way one concentrates on a painting or a poem. To translate this observation into the discussion of Baudelaire we saw above, *Les fleurs du mal* is thus, paradoxically and anachronistically, a book of lyric poetry written for moviegoers, which is to say, a poetry whose legibility does not correspond to the historical moment of its publication; it is poetry written for people whose altered structure of perception will only find its 'proper' art object in the cinema.

For Benjamin, however, dissipation, scattering, and dispersal are not only related to the *experience* of film, but also to the conditions of film's composition and reception. Setting up a contrast with the "concentrated"

dimension of a painting, Benjamin says, "the painter's image is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law."[15] The painting, which here becomes a metonym for forms of art and reception that do not foreground the effects of technological reproducibility, represents, directly and mimetically, an organically unified nature or narrative in an artistically unified composition. With film, however, the situation is strikingly different:

> The finished film is the exact antithesis of a work created at a single stroke. It is assembled from a very large number of images and image sequences that offer an array of choices to the editor; these images, moreover, can be improved in any desired way in the process leading from the initial take to the final cut.[16]

In other words, film is an *assembled* artwork, and as such, it does not represent any state of affairs in the world, but assembles a new one by breaking apart reality into images, sounds, and sequences, and reassembling them according to the "new law" of entertainment—namely, distraction. In this way, the very compositional structure of film is originally based on a *Zerstreuung*, a scattering and dispersion of reality that then needs to be gathered back into a constructive rather than mimetic work of art.

Further still, *Zerstreuung* as both scattering and distraction extends to the material conditions of reception, namely a crowded theatre:

> A painting has always exerted a claim to be viewed primarily by a single person or by a few. The simultaneous viewing of paintings by a large audience, as happens in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis in painting.[17]

This "early symptom," like Baudelaire's distracted readers, is an expatriate of its own time, finding itself more at home in the age of film than the age of its own emergence. In film, the "large audience" or "mass" comes into its own:

> The masses are a matrix from which all customary behaviour toward works of art is today emerging newborn. Quantity has been transformed [*umgeschlagen*] into quality: *the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation.*[18]

In coming together in a mass to consume film, the multiplication of number becomes a transformation of kind. This different form of participation is itself *zerstreut,* distracted and scattered, not just because

the individual participants are distracted by the onslaught of images in film, or because the compositional structure of the film itself is a scattered form of representation, but also because this participation is scattered across the crowd.[19] Opinions, reactions, judgments, and affects in relation to this "reception in distraction" become detached from individuals and become *massive*, no longer either countable by individual reactions nor localisable to particular units.

That is to say, the mass is decidedly not an *aggregate*, and this massive dis-aggregation changes the way in which the artwork relates to its observers:

> A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work […]. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide.[20]

To adopt for a moment the increasingly uneasy language of subject and object, we can now see how film both distracts the *concentration* of the subject and scatters the *unity* of the object. The mediality of film pulls the viewer into the event of its own scattering and cannot be thought as a neutral medium for the transmission of sense-data or aesthetic pleasures. The scattering of film's composition and reception cannot be separated from the distraction of its viewers, who, in Benjamin's era, were always massive audiences.[21]

We should not, however, be so hasty as to think this mediality as purely visual. Through a brief detour to architecture, Benjamin attempts to bring out the way in which filmic distraction is not only optical but tactile: "architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in distraction," because "buildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception."[22] It is our tactile and habitual interactions with architecture—the direction from which we approach them, the way in which we walk through them, the floor we live on—that determines what parts of and how we see the building. In this way, architecture—being primarily received in this tactile, habitual mode—provides a clue for thinking how film's compositional and material features condition its perception.

Benjamin thus asserts that the "distracting element in film is primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator."[23] The *Zerstreuung* of film's composition and the mass-reception in which it is encountered structure the perceptual inability of the viewer to concentrate, its scattered and scattering "reception in distraction."

Ablenkung

Perhaps, however, we were distracted by the exciting effects and possibilities of *Zerstreuung*. The German word that Benjamin originally links to the *tactile* quality of film's distracting element is not *zerstreuen* but *ablenken*: "[Dadaism] thereby fostered the demand for film, since the distracting element [*ablenkendes Element*] in film is also primarily tactile."[24] It is only in this section that any variations of the verb *ablenken* appear, but just before the previous citation, Benjamin uses the word twice:

> Before a painting by Arp or a poem by August Stramm, it is impossible to take time for concentration and evaluation, as one can before a painting by Derain or a poem by Rilke. Contemplative immersion—which, as the bourgeoisie degenerated, became a breeding ground for asocial behaviour—is here opposed by distraction [*Ablenkung*] as a variant of social behaviour. Dadaist manifestations actually guaranteed a quite vehement distraction [*Ablenkung*] by making artworks the centre of scandal.[25]

Here *Ablenkung* seems to have the quality of an object or experience that *distracts* from or *conceals* the object or experience with which one *should* be preoccupied, especially insofar as the distraction effected in the bourgeoisie by Dadaism is related to scandal and morality. The scandalous quality of Dadaism distracted its public from the technological changes that made such a new relation to art possible. In this way, *Ablenkung* does not seem to have the same "scattered" quality of bombardment we saw in *Zerstreuung*, but rather invokes having one's attention *redirected* or *misdirected*. *Ab-lenken*, would literally be to steer or direct away.

In this context, however, it is telling that the use of *Ablenkung* appears in relation to Dadaism. Dadaism, as we can see in the passages above, has a particularly strange status in relation to Benjamin's thinking of film. According to Benjamin's reading in the *Work of Art* essay, Dada represents an early but ultimately misguided attempt to deal with the structural and material changes that experience and art had undergone in industrialisation and rephonologisation. This is, of course, Benjamin's famous treatment of the question of *aura* in the *Work of Art* essay, as that which "withers in the age of the technological reproducibility."[26] It is within neither the thematic nor the material scope of this essay to treat the question of aura in any depth, and we will thus only be able to sketch the outlines of the problem.

Aura is a kind of atmospheric or ambient mode of perception that, according to Benjamin, defined encounters with art in the age(s) before its technological reproducibility. The exact structure of this relation, however, is complicated and is rather a constellation of different factors. It is tied, on the one hand, to the "here and now" of the artwork, its singularity and localizability in a "peculiar weave of space and time,"[27] but also on its being "embedded in a context of tradition."[28] Indeed, the auratic work of art *bears* the history of its transmission in traces of physical changes and alteration; this inscription of history and transmission, in fact, is *only* possible because the work is singular and unique. This gives the auratic work its aura of *authenticity*, which is "the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it."[29] Taken together, this uniqueness which is attested to by its historical transmission gives art a *sacred* quality, or what Benjamin calls a "cult value."[30] By way of a simplification, then, aura is the quality of a work of art that is encountered as a singular condensation of history and ritual, which is here understood to be narrative and essentially tied to the idea of *tradition*. In this way, auratic works of art do not oppose their uniqueness to their being embedded in tradition; such uniqueness is rather *enabled by* their embeddedness in such a tradition.

Emphasising this sense of sedimentation or accumulation of history in auratic art, Paul North argues that the *Zerstreuung* of reproducible art enacts a "dispersal" of the aura, scattering its accumulated traces of history and uniqueness, and therefore its cult value, to the wind.[31] Aura, in decaying, is *zerstreut*. With regard to Dadaism's assault on aura, however, Benjamin does not employ *zerstreuen* but *ablenken*, as we saw in the quotes above. "*Dadaism*," Benjamin theorises, "*attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film*."[32] In attempting to produce these effects with painting and literature, however, Dadaism "kept wrapped, as it were," the *physical* shock effect of non- or anti-auratic art "inside the moral shock effect."[33] Dadaism, in other words, distracts and diverts attention away from the physical and material changes inaugurated by technologically reproducible art by way of an emphasis on *moral* rather than *perceptual* shocks. Dadaism thus presents an *Ablenkung* from the material and technological changes in art by deflecting these changes into moral provocations. In other words, in Dadaism the *Zerstreuung* of the aura is *abgelenkt*, diverted or deflected, into the realm of morality.

Konstellation

This, then, clarifies some of the differences between *Zerstreuung* and *Ablenkung* while also drawing them together into a *constellation,* in which they don't oppose one another but come together to form a historical picture, however distorted, of the changes at work in the age of "technological reproducibility." The motif of the constellation is well-known in Benjamin's work and it spans the length of his œuvre. Perhaps most famously, in the *Arcades Project*, the constellation names the "dialectical" or "historical image," in which "what has been [*das Gewesene*] comes together in a flash [*blitzhaft*] with the now [*Jetzt*] to form a constellation."[34] In this particular context, the constellation is a structure of a historical remembrance that contests that the past is "simply past" by emphasising the resonances of what has been with "the now." Perhaps Benjamin's most famous example of this is the relation of the French revolution to its image of Rome: "The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress."[35] The dialectical image is thus a constellation of *citations*.

In this constellation, however, it is important to hold in mind that "it's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past."[36] The constellation is a new image, a *Sternbild* or "star-image," as one can also call a constellation in German. More specifically, as Werner Hamacher explains, the image is the "correspondence between an 'image of the past' and a 'moment of its recognisability,' that is between a time that offers itself to cognition and a time in which this time becomes accessible to cognition," which means that the constellation "is not so much a placing-together [*Zusammen-Stellung*] as a standing-in together [*Zusammen-Einstand*]."[37] The present and the past come to stand together in a constellation to form a new image, and Hamacher is correct to note the way in which the constellation is always a bringing-together, a standing-in a particular historical moment, which is itself "always the constellation of at least two presents, moments."[38] It is further worth noting that, given the constellatory status of every moment and of every now in which a past moment can be recognised, it is also equally *zerstreut*. Each point of the constellation, including the one from which one is attempting to view the constellation, is scattered and dispersed. It is not only past moments that are only partially legible to us, but our *own* historical moment as well. One's own time is not a solid ground on which to stand, but is itself also split, constantly shifting, and never fully understood. Like all constellations, then, Benjamin's dialectical image is a

scattered, *diffuse* image. This scattering, however, is not something to be corrected for or considered a distraction or diversion (*Ablenkung*) from the strange figural unity of its image; rather, its figural quality, its *Zusammen-Einstand* is only possible *because* each of the points, each of the historical moments that come to stand together in the constellation, are subject to a historical movement of *Zerstreuung*. Benjamin emphasises throughout his thinking of the dialectical image that "in order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant [*Aktualität*], *there must be no continuity between them*."[39] The constellation is not only a historical or dialectical image but a scattered image; it is only the basis of this scattering that the task of Benjamin's historical materialist—the recognition and reading of such constellations—is made urgent or even necessary.

As we saw above, however, the historical materialist's own historical moment is not a solid ground, but is itself constellatory:

> by virtue of its "historical index" each Now is marked as the Now of another Now, and only by virtue of this internal split of the Now is each Now the "Now of a particular recognisability."[40]

The historical materialist, then, must not only be cognisant of the *Zerstreuung* of the image she is attempting to divine among the stars, but must also recognise that her own moment is *zerstreut*, not only a force field[41] of political and technological tension, but also split between its own actuality and the fact that its very existence is an index of its relation to the past.

Nevertheless, a thinking of historical time that foregrounds scattering does not therefore renounce the possibility of historical investigation, but rather announces a form of investigation that understands all reading to be a negotiation of the very possibility of legibility, a navigation of the shifting and indefinable border between legibility and illegibility. Indeed, constellations have long been used to help people find their bearings, especially out on the featureless expanse of the open ocean. In convolute N of the *Arcades Project*, we find the motif of the constellation explicitly related to its historical use as an aspect of nautical navigation. About halfway through the fragment, there is a flurry of nautical imagery related to the problem of being able to recognise dialectal images:

> What matters for the dialectician is to have the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking means for him: setting the sails. What is important is *how* they are set. Words are sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts.[42]

Just before this passage, he defines one particularly important concept: "On the concept of 'rescue' [*Rettung*]: the wind of the absolute in the sails of the concept,"[43] before deploying this concept as a description of the historian's relation to the dialectical image:

> What has been [*das Gewesene*] is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognisability. The rescue [*Rettung*] that is carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost.[44]

The last sentence here complicates the issue we have been developing in relation to the dialectical image, intensifying the "groundlessness" that enables the nautical motif to function. If the reader will indulge a brief exercise in the kind of "allegorical reading" that occupies Benjamin elsewhere in the *Arcades Project* and beyond, what is at stake here is a particularly complicated instance of a rescue at sea. The historical materialist must be aware of the winds and set the sails accordingly, while keeping his telescope, periscope, or binoculars fixed—through the "bloody mist" of the present—on his object, which threatens to disappear at any moment, and which may just be a mirage after all. Furthermore, this rescue is particularly complicated because neither the rescuer nor the rescued have a "native land," a proper place in history that would eliminate the need for such extreme measures. One can navigate from shipwreck to shipwreck, rescuing what is possible, but this exile at sea not only threatens to become *but has always been* interminable.

This compact allegory of nautical navigation, furthermore, returns us directly to the problem of *Ablenkung*. The second fragment of Convolute N opens with a comparison of the relation between the *Arcades Project* and other historical investigations into the 19th century via the image of a

> Schifffahrt, bei denen die Schiffe vom magnetischen Nordpol *abgelenkt* werden. Diesen Nordpol zu finden. Was für die anderen Abweichungen sind, das sind für mich die Daten, die meinen Kurs bestimmen. Auf den Differentialen der Zeit, die für die anderen die "großen Linien" der Untersuchung stören, baue ich meine Rechnung auf.[45]

Benjamin's use of the verb *ablenken* here describe ships being drawn off course by the North Pole is not poetic license but a technical term in German. The word-family around the verb *ablenken* has technical meanings not only in optics and electronics but indeed also in nautical terminology, where it means a deviation from course, especially one caused by an electromagnetic deflection in one's compass. Benjamin, however, as we see in the quote above, wants to treat these deviations not

as aberrations to be corrected for, but rather as the basis of his investigations. This new form of navigation, which is exemplified in Benjamin's encounter with Dada that we saw above, is *necessitated* by the internally divided structure of each Now.

Dada, like *Les fleurs du mal*, represents a privileged site of investigation *because* it seems to be "out of joint"[46] with its time and distracting for standard narratives of art history and methods of art historical investigation. Benjamin's claim that Dada is one of those movements which "creates a demand, whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come,"[47] emphasises the way in which it is not just the human cognitive apparatus that is subject to distraction, but *historical time itself*. The moment of emergence and the moment of legibility, as we have seen throughout this paper, do not coincide in a single moment, but find themselves deflected through history. Dadaism's relation to film is one such *Ablenkung*, which, by disturbing the continuity of a moment within history, opens up the possibility of catching sight of the historical constellation between this past moment and the investigator's own time. Constellations have always been a means of navigation in the absence or prehistory of more scientific instruments, which is to say they become necessary, become recognisable as important in *critical* moments, indeed in dangerous ones. The very appearance of constellations—themselves *zerstreute Bilder*—as a mode of navigation is made possible by the *Ablenkungen* of history, the "differentials of time."

Notes

[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

[2] Benjamin, *Correspondence,* 16.

[3] Benjamin, *Correspondence,* 16.

[4] See, for example, Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," in *boundary 2*, Vol. 30:1 (Spring 2003): 51-66; Rodolphe Gasché, "Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 183-204; and Carolin Duttlinger, "Contemplation and Distraction: Figures of Attention in Walter Benjamin," in *German Studies Review*, Vol. 30:1 (February 2007): 33-54.

[5] Adorno, in a letter to Benjamin, writes, "and despite its shock-like seduction, I do not find your theory of distraction convincing—if only for the simple reason that in a communist society work will be organised in such a way that people will no

longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction." Theodor Adorno, "Letters to Benjamin," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), 123.
[6] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," SW 4, 313.
[7] Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 6: "c'est Satan Trismégiste / Qui berce longuement notre esprit enchanté / Et le riche métal de notre volonté / Est tout vaporisé par ce savant chimiste."
[8] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," SW 4, 313.
[9] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," SW 4, 313-314 (emphasis added).
[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," SW 3, 104. All citations of the "Work of Art" essay are taken from the 1936 version, unless otherwise noted
[11] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 120 (emphasis in original).
[12] Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 144.
[13] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," SW 4, 313.
[14] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" [1939 version], SW 4, 267.
[15] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 116.
[16] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 109.
[17] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 113.
[18] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 119 (emphasis in original).
[19] We should note that the image of the crowd is important for Benjamin not only in relation to aesthetic concerns, but also a marker of the changing material conditions of urban life in the 19th century. The figure of the *flâneur*, for Benjamin, is, among other things, the site of a confrontation with the "crowd," a figure who is defined by his negotiation of the crowded urban space (see the 1935 and 1939 versions of "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century" in *The Arcades Project,* as well as "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"). For a detailed reading of the role the crowd plays in Benjamin's work on Baudelaire, see Elissa Marder, "Flat Death: Snapshots of History," in *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 68-87.
[20] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," SW 3, 119.
[21] As Paul North put it, "Mass is, though dense, internally '*zerstreut*,' that is, no matter how much pressure it is put under, it will not fuse into a unit. Participants give up their individual identities, but not for the sake of a group identity." Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction*, 165.
[22] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," SW 3, 119.
[23] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 119.
[24] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 119.
[25] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 119.
[26] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 104.
[27] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 104.

[28] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 103.
[29] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 103.
[30] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 106.
[31] Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction*, 165.
[32] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," SW 3, 118 (emphasis in original).
[33] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 119.
[34] Benjamin, *AP*, 462 (N 2a, 3).
[35] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," SW 4, 395.
[36] Benjamin, *AP*, 462 (N 2a, 3).
[37] Werner Hamacher, "'Now:' Walter Benjamin on Historical Time," in *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, edited by Heidrun Friese (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 180.
[38] Hamacher, "Now," 180.
[39] Benjamin, *AP*, 470 (N 7, 7; emphasis added).
[40] Hamacher, "Now," 181.
[41] The image of the "force field" is Benjamin's as well, but I owe my own realisation of its importance to my friend and colleague Matías Bascuñán. We find it addressed explicitly and elegantly in the *Arcades Project*: "every dialectically presented historical circumstance polarises itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant interpenetrates it. ‹See N 7a, 8.› And thus the historical evidence polarises into fore- and after-history always anew, never in the same way. And it does so at a distance from its own existence, in the present instant itself like a line which, divided according to the Apollonian section, experiences its partition from outside itself." Benjamin, *AP*, 471 (N 7a, 1).
[42] Benjamin, *AP*, 473 (N 9, 6).
[43] Benjamin, *AP*, 473 (N 9, 3).
[44] Benjamin, *AP*, 473 (N 9, 7).
[45] Benjamin, GS V.1 (N 1, 2). The syntax and composition of this particular fragment does not lend itself to a translation that would preserve what concerns us here. Eiland and McLaughlin have it as follows: "Comparison of other people's attempts to the undertaking of a sea voyage in which the ships are drawn off course [*abgelenkt*] by the magnetic North Pole. Discover *this* north pole. What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course.—On the differentials of time which, for others, disturb the main lines of the inquiry, I base my reckoning." Benjamin, *AP*, 456 (N 1, 2).
[46] The reference here is not only to Hamlet's famous monologue, but also to Derrida's reading of it in *Spectres de Marx*, among other places. See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 43. Following Derrida's reading there, what is at stake in Hamlet's famous dictum is a thinking of historical time that is *constitutively* out of joint, whose very historicity and temporality is made possible by not fully coinciding with itself. As Derrida says much earlier, in a footnote in *Cogito et histoire de la folie*, "Cette *différence* entre le fait et le droit, [c'est] l'historicité, la possibilité de l'histoire elle-même." Jacques Derrida,

"Cogito et histoire de la folie," in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 91.
[47] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," SW 3, 118.

SURVIVING CIVILISATION WITH MICKEY MOUSE AND A LAUGH: A POSTHUMAN CONSTELLATION[1]

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1

On 17th January 1930, the *Berliner Filmprüfstelle*, the authority in charge of supervising and censoring cinematographic works, approved the distribution by Südfilm AG of *The Barn Dance* (1928), the fourth Mickey Mouse short film and the first to be distributed in Germany.[2] The short film was classified with a *Jugendverbot*, that is, "suitable for adults only," and was shown the same evening at the *Berliner Universum Filmtheater* as a preshow to Johannes Guter's melodrama *Wenn du einmal dein Herz verschenkst* (1929). *The Barn Dance* was not enthusiastically greeted by the audience, due to its novelty as compared to the German cartoons of the time. However, thanks to the enthusiastic reception of Disney's mouse in the United Kingdom, Südfilm AG decided to organise a special show entitled *Micky und Silly*[3] at the *Berliner UFA-Marmorhaus-Filmtheater* at 5 pm on 17th February 1930. This show included the Mickey Mouse shorts *Steamboat Willie* (1928), *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), *The Jazz Fool* (1929) and *The Opry House* (1929), and the "Silly Symphonies" *The Skeleton Dance* (1929) and *Springtime* (1929). This time the reception by the press was very positive: on February 18, the magazine *Lichtbild-Bühne* came out with the title *Das Märchen lebt* (*The fairy tale is still alive*), and welcomed the birth of a fable "different from that of our grandmothers, a modern fable, fit for our times, magnificently alive."[4] The magazine *Film-Kurier* used the title *Kurzfilme, wie sie sein sollen* (*Short films as they should be*), and described Mickey as "an animal living to the rhythm of jazz. Each step is a dance step, each movement a syncopation. […] What a gift for the working masses! To forget everyday life in an hour of joy and serenity. All of this in a form up to the subtlest artistic demands."[5]

Thus, Südfilm AG started an unprecedented advertising campaign and, in order to lure also a younger audience, organised, on the morning of 24th

February, the first movie show explicitly aimed at children at the *Terra-Lichtspieltheater des Mozartsaales* in Berlin. On 1st May 1930, the *Berliner Marmorhaus-Filmtheater* started the first programme entirely dedicated to Mickey Mouse under the title *Micky, das Tonfilm-Wunder* (*Mickey, The Talkie-Wonder*): Mickey Mouse was thus upgraded from the status of a sideshow to that of true main attraction. In a few weeks, Disney's mouse became a "must" in almost all of Berlin's cinemas; at the same time, Mickey's image was used (often breaking copyright laws) to promote the most disparate products, and a true gadget industry arose. In a very short time, Germany was hit by a true "Mickey-hysteria," which lasted for years—with very few critical exceptions.

Among these exceptions was an article by Walther Schneider, published in the October issue of the liberal magazine *Querschnitt* under the title *Micky Maus ist geisteskrank* (*Mickey Maus is mentally ill*), which identified in Disney's mouse the symptoms of a maniac-paranoid mental illness: "a diagnosis of the thin-limbed, hydrocephalic, astigmatic and neurasthenic Mickey Mouse shows most of all disorders of the visual and hearing spheres (commonly 'sensorial illusions')."[6] But more importantly, an article in the provincial Pomeranian journal of the Nazi party, *Die Diktatur*, reported on 28th July 1931, in *Film-Kurier*:

> The blond and liberal German youth led by the nose by Jewish high finance. Youth, where is your pride? Youth, where is your self-awareness? Mickey Mouse is the most sordid and miserable ideal ever invented. Mickey Mouse is a debasing cure of the Capital. The healthy feeling says in fact to every decent girl and to every honest boy that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the great vector of bacteria in the animal kingdom, cannot be made to an ideal animal type. Have we nothing better to do than adorning our clothes with filthy animals [the popular Mickey and Minnie pins], just because American business-Jews want to make a buck? Down with the Jewish stultification of the people! Down with the vermin! Down with Mickey Mouse, wear the swastika![7]

Long before 1933, the Nazis opposed what they called the growing *Verniggerung* (*niggerisation*)[8] of German show business, mainly through imported American films, and in particular they demoted Disney's mouse to a "rat," an animal with which Jews have always been associated.[9] This opposition to Mickey Mouse remained, however, always partial and minoritarian, and even after the Nazi seizure of power, Disney's films, and in particular the Mickey Mouse shorts, continued to be imported and distributed.[10]

However, the cultural controversy opened by the Pomeranian Nazis must be evaluated within the wider contemporary debate about "Americanism,"

that is, about "a modernism predicated on industrial-capitalist rationalisation, on Taylorised labour and a Fordist organisation of production and consumption."[11] Beginning with the very first article in *Film-Kurier*, the figure of Mickey Mouse was associated with jazz, not only in a literal sense—one of the reasons of Disney's great success was in fact his ability and intelligence in synchronising the characters' movements with the rhythm of the music (which seldom was, properly speaking, jazz)—; but also in the wider sense that, just like Charlie Chaplin's slapstick comedies and jazz music, cartoons were associated with the "revolutionary" side of American consumerism, which seemed to subvert economic rationalisation through sprees of destruction, magic and parody. The little mouse presented that anarchic and ecstatic appeal that people expected from jazz.[12] And this holds not only for "popular" reception, but also for the intellectual elite.

If government censorship already deemed most of Disney's works to be "of artistic value" (*künstlerisch wertvoll*),[13] European intelligentsia welcomed them as true avant-garde works of art. Already in the 1920s the animated character Felix the Cat had become an icon of modernism, but the arrival of Mickey Mouse at the end of that decade eclipsed all other figures, to the point that the *Literary Digest*, a distinguished New York magazine, published in 1931 an article with the title "European Highbrows Hail Mickey Mouse."[14] Strange as it may seem today, at the beginning of the 1930s, Disney enjoyed in Europe the nearly unanimous—albeit short-lived—esteem of writers, artists and intellectuals, whose enthusiasm demonstrates how crucial modernism's relationship with the new media was. The most famous example is obviously Sergei Eisenstein, who, when he was invited to the US by Paramount Pictures in the spring of 1930, befriended Disney and considered him a great artistic innovator and a paragon of cinematographic art until his death in 1948.[15] For a short time, Disney seemed almost to become an epitome of cinema *tout court*: in 1934, in his American exile, Erwin Panofsky gave a famous lecture at Princeton entitled "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," which identified in Disney's films "a chemically pure distillation of cinematic possibilities."[16] And even from the opposite side of the political spectrum, Leni Riefenstahl, who went to the US in 1938 in order to find a distributor for her film *Olympia*, paid homage to Disney, who was one of the few to welcome her in Hollywood.

The great appeal the Disney's films in general and Mickey Mouse in particular exerted on European intellectuals was based on the fact that they became somehow emblematic of the contemporary debate about art, politics, and technology. By presenting a world dominated by speed,

fragmentation, grotesque perspective changes, an infinite metamorphosis, and the breakdown of the boundaries separating the living from the non-living and machines from animals, these films touched the fundamental questions of the dismantling of subjectivity, the crisis of tradition, and the domination of technology. They gave birth to new forms of imagination, expression and community, and were thus read and interpreted as "avant-garde," that is, anti-bourgeois and "modern." Moreover, in the context of a political situation dominated by the conflict between fascism, Stalinism and American Fordism, the analysis of mass culture took a highly political significance: how to face and come to terms with the new socio-cultural phenomena, simultaneously amazing and contradictory? Where to look for possibilities of change and revolution? How to reinterpret the relation between the body and technology? And how to invent a different organisation of the relation between humanity and nature?[17]

2

These questions lie at the heart of Walter Benjamin's interests and analyses at least since the mid-1920s. It is therefore no surprise that he, too, was intrigued and fascinated by such a pervasive and global phenomenon as the explosive success of Mickey Mouse. The Walter Benjamin Archive in Berlin stores a series of newspaper clippings in French and German about Disney and Mickey Mouse, which Benjamin collected throughout the 1930s. Those clippings show his careful attention towards the progressive development of what was at the time a true cultural "phenomenon." A distillation of these readings marks, even if impressionistically, some of his major works of the 1930s and deserves thus a careful analysis.

Already at the beginning of the Mickey Mouse "boom" in Germany, Benjamin identified in this figure a number of questions. A first 1931 fragment, *Zu Micky Maus*, a series of extemporaneous notes, starts off by relating Disney's mouse to the question of the body within the context of capitalist modernity:[18] Mickey's body (and that of the other characters of his cartoons, as well as the "body" of inanimate objects) is dynamic, elastic, flexible, and consists of interchangeable parts which can be recombined almost at will.[19] Benjamin sees here the *realistic*—but not *naturalistic*, as Esther Leslie clarifies[20]—expression of modern life circumstances: according to Benjamin, our body no longer belongs to us, it has been dismembered by the war, in which we maybe even lost some parts of it, or we ourselves have alienated it in exchange for money, and its unity gets lost in a continuous interchange with mechanical parts; its

existence is like that of "a file in an office:" dismembered, mechanised, deprived of experience, labyrinthine and discontinuous, and no longer linear and continuous like the route taken by a "marathon runner."[21] Moreover, before the progressive anthropomorphisation and normalisation he was subjected to throughout the 1930s, Mickey's body is a hybrid, it confounds and blurs the boundaries separating organic and mechanic, animate and inanimate, child and adult. And perhaps also the masculine and the feminine: as both Miriam Hansen and Esther Leslie note,[22] the word *Maus* (mouse) is feminine in German, and Benjamin uses the feminine pronoun to refer to (masculine) Mickey; moreover, the falsetto voice that Walt Disney himself lent to his character from the first Mickey Mouse "talkie," *The Karnival Kid* (1929), onwards and until 1934, contributes to this gender ambiguity. The boundary that Mickey crosses and confounds more explicitly, however, is that between human and animal, and in this way, he "disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind,"[23] founded on anthropocentrism. His equivalent is thus the uncanny (*unheimlich*) figure of the *Unmensch*, the "inhuman," which is a title that Benjamin gave to the satirist Karl Kraus in his essay of the same year: against the classical ideal of humanity, but also against Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, Benjamin's Kraus proposes a "materialist humanism" that would get rid of the traces of by-now obsolete cultural constructions.[24]

What the hybrid and "inhuman" figure of Mickey Mouse disavows and destroys, are the "eternal values" and the "false universalism" of bourgeois humanism, which Benjamin attacks in an article published in *Die literarische Welt* in April 1931.[25] This normative humanism is ideology, and its values are perpetuated by "high" culture, such as Maeterlinck's symbolism, or the atmospheres full of "interiority" and pathos of Mary Wigman's ballets.[26] If the Mickey Mouse shorts are "fairy tales," as the press had dubbed them from the very beginning, then they are so in the sense of the Brothers Grimm's "Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was," in which, in order to gain a new access to the world, one must abandon the "home" of bourgeois culture and confront monsters and ghosts to "learn what shuddering is."[27] Mickey Mouse leaves this "home" just like the "destructive character" of Benjamin's sketch published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (again in November 1931): young and cheerful, he "clears away the traces of our own age, […] sees nothing permanent," and that is precisely why "he sees a way everywhere:" "What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it."[28]

Bourgeois civilisation is by now lifeless, and in it, life is no longer possible. Using an image which also appears in the contemporaneous essay on Kraus,[29] and that will return with a variant at the end of his *Experience and Poverty* (1933), Benjamin argues that the Mickey Mouse films constitute a sort of "preparation" to "survive civilisation."[30] In the world that is presented *realistically* in these films, it is no longer "worthwhile to have experiences;" and yet, the figure of Mickey Mouse—however dismembered, distorted, mechanised and robbed of all experience— proves that it is possible to survive this kind of existence, with a grin or a sneer at the end of every short film.[31] The tone of these notes is intrinsically utopian: in Mickey, Benjamin glimpses the prefiguration of a transformed nature, of a nature freed from the anthropocentric, phallocentric and social oppositions and hierarchies, in which master and slave, work and play confront and erase each other.

3

The problem of experience is one of the central themes traversing the whole of Benjamin's thought, from the early sketch *Experience* (1913)[32] up to the notes for the Baudelaire book at the end of the 1930s. Though not always in an unambiguous way, Benjamin pursues time and again the possibility of reconceptualising knowledge and action in the face of the radical transformations occurring in modernity, which emptied out from within the very conditions of possibility of experiencing, knowing, remembering, and thus also of acting. According to Benjamin, capitalist modernity reduced every *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*. The first term, which stems from the verb *fahren* (to go by vehicle) and is etymologically linked to the term *Gefahr* (danger), gives experience a sense of mobility, temporal continuity, repetition, habit and return, and at the same time also a sense of risk for the experiencing subject. In contrast, *Erlebnis*, a term introduced into the philosophical vocabulary by Dilthey and later adopted by Husserl, and usually translated into English as "lived experience," comes from the verb *leben* (to live) and denotes instead a momentary, singular, punctual experience disconnected from a wider context. Benjamin will always lend *Erlebnis* the negative sense of "impoverished experience," and will pursue the project of establishing or inventing a new type of experience (*Erfahrung*) for late-capitalist humanity.

The event that most of all marked, for Benjamin's generation, the end of the 19th century dreams of technology and progress and thus literally "destroyed" the experience of modernity, was the First World War: the orgy of technology and mass destruction that marked the beginning of 'the

short 20th century' played an emblematic role for the intellectuals of the brief Weimar period, because it dismantled the traditional and familiar coordinates of knowing, communicating and acting, and emptied the "eternal values" and the "false universalism" of bourgeois civilisation and of the humanist idea of subject. Bourgeois humanism will always remain inadequate and unable to understand and manage both the psychological trauma of the war and that of the catastrophic economic crisis that ensued. The Weimar Republic ended on 30th January 1933, with Hitler's appointment as *Reichskanzler*, and thus, with a new, violent negation of the humanistic "eternal values." With it, a certain idea of the world and of "civilisation" ends for good. It is in this context that Benjamin, exiled to Paris since March 1933, composed a short, but fundamental essay, which somehow takes stock of the situation and defines many of the ideas that inhabit his analyses in these years—and which already appear in Mickey Mouse. Probably begun already during his long stay in Ibiza (April-October 1933), the essay was published on 7th December 1933 in *Die Welt im Wort*, a journal of German intellectuals exiled to Prague, under the title *Erfahrung und Armut* (*Experience and Poverty*), to which the editors had changed Benjamin's original title *Erfahrungsarmut*, poverty of experience.[33]

The image of the war—World War I on one side, and the "shadow" of a future war on the other—opens and closes this essay, reflecting the dramatic predicament of the end of the Weimar "civilisation" and the intellectual in exile (Benjamin was then, and remained until his death, also materially poor), while simultaneously giving a sense of threat and urgency. Before the immense technological destruction of the First World War, and threatened again by the overwhelming fascist tsunami looming over Europe, the recourse to humanistic culture is useless and ineffectual: this culture is no longer capable of connecting people with their cultural heritage through "experiences," which are by now nothing but simulations. The Weimar cultural "Renaissance," "in which so many people have placed their hopes," is but the "galvanisation" of a carnivalesque jumble of old ideas through electric shocks which, however, cannot provoke more than temporary convulsions in an already dead body.[34] The implicit but clear warning is the same that Benjamin will address a few years later to Hitler's opponents: it is useless to counterpoise to Hitler's destruction of culture the complacency of those who feel entitled to and legitimised by the cultural heritage (*Süffisanz der Erbberechtigten*).[35] The only way out consists in embracing the transformation, the poverty of experience, and in counterpoising to the fascist "barbarism" a new concept of barbarism.

The notion of "barbarism" and its relationship to culture is extremely complex: who are the "barbarians" and, above all, from which perspective do we consider them as such? Perhaps the most famous and celebrated phrase in Benjamin's entire oeuvre is his attack against the concept of "cultural heritage" that first appears in the 1937 essay on Eduard Fuchs and returns then in the famous thesis VII of *On the Concept of History* (1940): "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[36] The "cultural heritage" is but the spoils of the victors and its lineage cannot be contemplated without horror. If culture itself is intrinsically filled with barbarism, then the only alternative to its moribund and deadly decline consists in overturning the current cultural standards and stealing the energies of transformation from the "wrong" barbarism, in order to invent "a new, positive concept of barbarism."[37] In *Experience and Poverty*, Benjamin identifies the "new barbarians" in the great destructors/creators of modernism, who do not lament the impoverishment of experience but rather retransmit it by imitating the technological transformations at its origin and by formally incorporating them into their works: the Cubists and Paul Klee in painting, the Bauhaus, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier in architecture, Bertolt Brecht and, above all, Paul Scheerbart in literature. Their barbarism or anti-culture—the new "culture of glass," a culture with no "aura"—is the only means for an attempt to elicit from this poverty of experience "something respectable."[38]

The "popular cousin" of these new barbarians is Mickey Mouse, herald of an imagination that does not rest on experience.[39] Mickey Mouse embodies the dream that a humanity stuffed with experiences ("[t]hey have 'devoured' everything, both 'culture and people'"[40]) and tired of everything projects against everyday sadness and dejection, in order to imagine a simple but marvellous existence. And it is a dream that, more than the works of modernist intellectuals, is accessible to the masses. In a variant of the first version of the essay *Experience and Poverty*, one can read:

> We can tell them fairy tales again, in which the world is new and fresh as it is for children. Preferably film fairy tales. Who could have validated experiences as Mickey Mouse does in his films? A Mickey Mouse film today is perhaps still unintelligible for the individual, but not for an audience. And a Mickey Mouse film can rhythmically rule a whole audience. Only a few individuals can still orient themselves before the *Iliad* or the *Divine Comedy*.[41]

Mickey's popular appeal is perhaps due to the fact that, unlike the great modernist artworks, his films do not reproduce or imitate the forms and

functions of technology, but rather exceed them oneirically, while simultaneously making fun of them: nature and technology, body and machine, the animate and the inanimate merge and become one, which installs something light, cheery, lively and, above all, self-sufficient. In a sense, therefore, Mickey Mouse even surpasses the modernist incorporation and exposition of technology; he represents, perhaps, its "aesthetic self-sublation,"[42] and points thereby towards the original promise of modernisation: a redeemed existence beyond the stiff and disappointing outcome of practical domination.[43]

Finally, it is important that the Mickey Mouse films are comical: the voice of nature rebelling against its muteness, of the machine incorporating itself into the organic, of the masses freeing themselves from domination, is a *laugh*. A barbaric and inhuman laughter, echoing the laugh of another barbaric and inhuman creature dear to Benjamin: Kafka's Odradek, who laughs with "the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it."[44] It is with this laughter that "mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be."[45]

4

In this respect, Miriam Hansen notes that Mickey Mouse appears to be closer to the Surrealist fantasies than to the functional sobriety of the Bauhaus or the didactic rationalism of Brecht.[46] Benjamin explicitly establishes this link between Disney and Surrealism in some notes for his great unfinished work on the prehistory of modernity, the so-called *Arcades Project*. Here he cites twice an article by Pierre Mac Orlan,[47] "Grandville le précursor" (1934), in which the author presents Grandville precisely as "a forerunner of Surrealism, particularly of surrealist film (Méliès, Walt Disney)."[48] However, unlike Grandville, Disney's humour is neither melancholic nor morbid and does not bear in itself the seeds of death, according to Mac Orlan.[49] Benjamin's interest in Disney and Mickey Mouse can therefore be inscribed into the orbit of that project begun with the 1929 essay on Surrealism and centred on the task of "win[ning] the energies of intoxication [*Rausch*] for the revolution."[50]

From this vantage point, however, it is fundamental to emphasise the importance of the medium (the "surrealist *film*"), which opens a gap between Mickey Mouse and the modernist intellectuals mentioned in *Experience and Poverty*. In an entry of the *Arcades Project* entitled "On the political significance of film," Benjamin stresses that "[a]t no point in time, no matter how utopian, will anyone win the masses over to a higher art; they can be won over only to one nearer them," and he continues: "This will never happen with most of what is propagated by the avant-

garde of the bourgeoisie" (therefore, the Surrealists' attempt to establish Picasso as a revolutionary is useless).[51] If the masses require from a work of art "something that is warming," then only an art form that is able to dialectically subsume in itself the kitsch of mass culture will succeed in bringing itself near to the masses—and "[t]oday, perhaps, film alone is equal to this task—or, at any rate, more ready for it than any other art form." "Only film," Benjamin concludes, "can detonate the explosive stuff which the nineteenth century has accumulated in that strange and perhaps formerly unknown material which is kitsch."[52] These theses help us to better qualify the position of Disney's mouse within Benjamin's strategy: contrary to the "high" art of the new modernist barbarians, Mickey Mouse succeeds, thanks to the cinematographic form, in performing that *Aufhebung* of popular kitsch, in letting it "detonate" and permitting to co-opt its energies for the revolution.

This revolution is first of all anthropological, or better, ontological (though the interpreters mostly use the term "utopian"), and it brings Mickey Mouse into a constellation with Charles Fourier: it is indeed in connection with Fourier that Mickey Mouse is cited, just once, in Benjamin's notes for the *Arcades Project*. The importance of Fourier's utopia for Benjamin's unfinished project is such that both the 1935 and the 1939 *exposés* of the work open with a section on Fourier: and this is because, as clearly appears in both texts, Fourier saw in the arcades the architectural canon for his phalanstery, and presents thus a sort of paradigm or "dialectical image" of their dissemination in the first half of the 19th century; but above all, because the secret cue of his utopia is the advent of "machines."[53] The second *exposé* adds a fundamental point: the technologisation of the Fourierist utopia distances itself from the idea of technology as exploitation and domination of nature: on the contrary, "in Fourier, technology appears as the spark that ignites the powder of nature."[54] Just like the Surrealists—and like Marx[55]—, Benjamin was fascinated by the way in which Fourier's fantastic visions assigned to technology a ludic use in the *reorganisation* of nature: not opposition and domination, but a merging of technological and natural, of mechanical and organic, which rebels against the double dictatorship of the organic and over the organic. Fourier's nature is a reformulated, enhanced, reinvented nature—oceans of lemonade, supplementary moons, anti-lions and anti-bears at the service of man—through and by means of its interpenetration with technology.

"For the purpose of elucidating the Fourierist extravagances," Benjamin thus writes, "we may adduce the figure of Mickey Mouse, in which we find carried out, entirely in the spirit of Fourier's conceptions,

the moral mobilisation of nature."[56] In other words, by confounding and reinventing the separations and boundaries between the human and the animal, the organic and the inorganic, the natural and the technological, Mickey Mouse cracks open "natural teleology," that is, the normative idea of natural fixity and finality, of a biological "destiny," and of a separation between human history and natural history.[57] "Nature," or the "human," are historical, ideological constructions, which as such can and must be modified and reinvented. The "cracking open of natural teleology proceeds in accordance with the plan of humour:"[58] just like Fourierist utopia, Mickey Mouse is clownish, ridiculous, and doubtless kitsch, but it is the laughter he arouses in the audience that demolishes the cage of final causes, of humanist idealism, and calls upon politics to the task of reinventing itself and reinventing the relation between the human and nature.

5

Another note from the convolute on Fourier of the *Arcades Project* links the act of cracking open natural teleology to an important feature:

> Fourier's conception of the propagation of the phalansteries through "explosions" may be compared to two articles of my "politics": the idea of revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective (analogy with the child who learns to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon), and the idea of the "cracking open of natural teleology."[59]

Both the concept of "innervation of the technical organs of the collective"[60] and the image of the child trying to get hold of the moon, reappear, again in reference to Fourier, in a footnote of the first versions of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*,[61] and this allows us to date these notes to the years of composition of the essay. And it is precisely in this essay (or in some of its versions) that Benjamin's most famous reference to Mickey Mouse appears.

The history of the composition and publication of the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* is extremely complex and articulated, and here I can only present a brief recapitulation:[62] a first "draft" (not included in the *Gesammelte Schriften* and named in the new *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* or *WuN* as "first version") was written in September 1935; the first "finished" text ("first version" in GS and "second version" in *WuN* 16) was completed in October 1935, already divided into chapters with numbers and titles, but still without footnotes, and only at this point did Benjamin start speaking about this text. To this

first draft Benjamin added then a series of footnotes and some modifications, but deleted the chapters' titles and changed their numeration from Arab numbers to Roman numbers ("second version" in GS and "third version" in *WuN* 16).[63] This text was translated into French by Pierre Klossowski with Benjamin's help, but was also "reworked" by Hans Klaus Brill, the Parisian secretary of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, following Max Horkheimer's instructions, and it was finally published in this journal in May 1936 ("fourth version" in *WuN* 16). Benjamin kept working on the text (the *terminus ad quem* is 1939), finally producing a shortened and simplified version ("third version" in GS and "fifth version" in *WuN* 16), which will however become the "standard" version after its publication in 1955 in the two volumes of Benjamin's *Schriften* edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno. In the version with titles, section 16 is entitled "*Micky-Maus*."[64]

In the economy of the "second" and "third" versions, this section plays a fundamental role, insofar as it centres on the social function of film as a paradigmatic art form in the age of its technological reproducibility. The primary and critical importance of film, so the section begins, consists in the fact that through it, a new equilibrium is established between human beings and the apparatus. And this, as Norbert Bolz emphasises, is independent from its content: what matters are the techniques and the instruments through which human beings find new representations of themselves and of the world, and learn new modalities of perception of space and time.[65] Literally exploding the traditional framework of our perceptions "with the dynamite of the split second,"[66] film not only allows a new understanding of the world, but also opens up an entirely new "field of action" (*Spielraum*),[67] which in the essay on Surrealism, Benjamin named as a space where image and body blend together (*Bild- und Leibraum*).[68] Film techniques expand space and time and enable the perception of aspects of reality and of movement previously unimaginable: "clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye,"[69] it is a modified nature, embracing both the creaturely and the artificial, but which also goes beyond the purely physical to include in itself the anti-physical and the historic. In a passage taken almost literally from his *Little History of Photography* (1931), Benjamin argues that technology as an "organ" of the collective opens to the perception of an "optical unconscious:"[70] not only does it clarify a perception that before was blurred or confused, but it also grants access to a perceptual zone that was previously entirely unknown.[71]

However, the psychoanalytical analogy goes further: the camera, by enlarging the *normal* spectrum of sensory perception, opens it to the

distortions and metamorphoses typical of psychoses, hallucinations and dreams. The collective perception can thus appropriate these *abnormal* perceptual modes through the creation of figures of a "collective dream," such as Mickey Mouse.[72] If until now Benjamin's use of this figure was in line with the way he mentioned it in previous years, the next step adds a new feature: it is precisely because they break with the naturalism of melodrama films and forcibly develop the sadistic-masochistic fantasies or obsessions created in the masses by the revolutionary process of technologisation, that oneiric figures like Mickey Mouse can function as a "vaccine," a "psychic immunisation" that could prevent their "natural and dangerous maturation."[73] In a very Freudian fashion, Benjamin seems to propose a sort of *psychopathology of technologised life*: everyday life in depersonalised and technologised modernity has fallen prey to mass psychoses, which, if left to their *natural* development, would lead to dangerous results—and here Benjamin obviously means the war, whose ghost haunts all his contemporary writings. This development—the return of the repressed of modern civilisation—can, however, be forced and controlled, as it happens in vaccinations: as Burkhardt Lindner notes, vaccination does not merely mean to administer an antibiotic, but rather it provokes, in an artificial and dosed way, an infection in order to activate the natural immune system.[74] Here the matter is thus not simply one of Aristotelian catharsis,[75] but rather an aesthetic, pre-emptive and medicalised outlet of mass psychoses, which the socio-cultural and political apparatuses—i.e. "civilisation"—are no longer able to manage, and that, therefore, must be taken over by that kind of new sanatoria or nursing homes that cinemas have become.

The advanced and therapeutic outlet of mass psychoses, which would allow to "survive" our (psychotic) technological civilisation, takes place in "collective laughter."[76] As already emphasised above, comedy is, for Benjamin, an essential and indispensable feature granting figures like Mickey Mouse a revolutionary potential. Incidentally, this is true already before Mickey Mouse: in a short note on Chaplin, published in *Die literarische Welt* in February 1929, Benjamin already defined laughter as "the most international and the most revolutionary emotion [*Affekt*] of the masses."[77] In this sense, Benjamin is again consistent with Freud's theory of laughter as libidinal outlet or "liberation," which he mobilises in a political perspective but never explicitly cites.[78] Unlike Freud, however, Benjamin seems to be interested in something that goes beyond the mere "funny" content of cartoons or slapstick comedies, and manages perhaps to identify a "comical" feature in technological reproducibility itself. Or at least this is Michael North's argument, who identifies in the mechanised

gestures of Chaplin and of the cartoons a sort of mimetic incorporation of the mechanised production process: it is the process itself that produces its own kind of nonsense and crazy, Dadaistic humour, which can only arise from the machine. Perhaps, North speculates, "modernity itself is governed by a comic rhythm, even when it is not particularly amusing."[79] This is the same rhythm, "quick and syncopated, […] fiercely and unusually cheerful," that Fabrizio Desideri sees as animating Benjamin's essay itself,[80] and to which perhaps modern civilisation must resort in order to outlive itself.

And yet Benjamin is not blind to the dark turn that both mechanisation and laughter can take and have in fact taken, and he seems unable to make a decision as to their true revolutionary potential. Already in the above-quoted *Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz* (1927), Benjamin wrote that the laughter provoked by slapstick comedies "hovers over an abyss of horror,"[81] and when adding the footnotes to the *Work of Art* essay (the "third version"), he accompanies his positive assessment of Disney with a long footnote:

> Of course, a comprehensive analysis of these films should not overlook their double meaning. It should start from the ambiguity of situations which have both a comic and a horrifying effect. As the reactions of children show, comedy and horror are closely related. In the face of certain situations, why shouldn't we be allowed to ask which reaction is the more human? Some recent Mickey Mouse films offer situations in which such a question seems justified. (Their gloomy and sinister fire-magic, made technically possible by colour film,[82] highlights a feature which up to now has been present only covertly, and shows how easily fascism takes over "revolutionary" innovations in this field too.) What is revealed in recent Disney films was latent in some of the earlier ones: the cosy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence. This renews an old tradition which is far from reassuring—the tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in depictions of medieval pogroms, of whom the "riff-raff"[83] in Grimm's fairy tale of that title are a pale, indistinct rear-guard.[84]

This footnote develops some notes taken for the third version on the "usability of Disney's method for fascism;"[85] in a variant of these notes, Benjamin speaks of a "dialectical correlation" dominating the relationship between horror and humour.[86] Benjamin is forced to admit that the "barbarism" wiping out the old bourgeois world, and the laughter accompanying it, could be the *wrong* ones; that is, that the very same elements are suited, dialectically, for contrary and opposite uses. This way he acknowledges the (partial) legitimacy of a negative—and much more

univocal—interpretation of mass culture, such as that proposed by Adorno.

The heavy criticism Adorno directed at Benjamin's *Work of Art* essay is well known: after Benjamin sent him the typescript (that is, the "third version") on 27th February 1936, Adorno replied, on 18th March, with a long letter from London attacking many of the pivotal points of the essay. In particular, he wrote that "[t]he laughter of a cinema audience […] is anything but salutary and revolutionary; it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism instead." As for Mickey Mouse, he accused Benjamin of romanticising this figure: its reproduction, he writes, rather belongs to the bourgeois "naïve realism."[87] These criticisms, also appearing in a short mention of Mickey Mouse in the "Oxford Postscript" to Adorno's Jazz essay,[88] will return with renewed force (and pushed perhaps to an extreme bordering the ridiculous) in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), where however Donald Duck takes the place of Mickey Mouse:[89]

> To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs.[90]

Whether it was because of Adorno's and Horkheimer's criticisms and requests, or because he could not solve the aporia he had encountered, the fact is that Benjamin ended up expunging from the new version of the essay (the "fifth version") all references to Disney and Mickey Mouse, together with those to the collective dream, the collective laughter, *Innervation*, and play.[91] The burden and the blame for these transformations are usually placed on Adorno, but the explanation could be much simpler: the last version seems to want to propose itself as a "scientific" theory, and expunges therefore the use of Surrealist-like concepts such as the dream-work or the fantasy nature of the optical unconscious; film and the camera are here proposed as "analytical" and "scientific" instruments, in a revolutionary perspective that, in Marxian fashion, counterpoises "science" to "utopia." In this new structure, in which the presence of Brecht becomes more and more important, there was simply no longer a place for the oneiric figure of Mickey Mouse.

6

Esther Leslie writes that when he "abandons" Disney and Mickey Mouse, Benjamin actually rejects something that had already changed with respect to its avant-garde and "revolutionary" outset.[92] By 1935, Mickey Mouse's "normalisation" was almost complete: the hybrid features of the rodent had been progressively humanised and tamed, his maverick and even perverse attitudes and behaviours had been "defused" into innocent and harmless *plaisanteries*, his mechanised world had been brought back to the fold of work ethics, and every eccentricity in this fantasy world had been idealised and sentimentalised; in a word, Mickey Mouse had become "respectable." And yet, Miriam Hansen wonders, even before this transformation, hadn't Benjamin's emotional investment in this figure been excessive? Certainly, Benjamin's enthusiasm was based on some features of Mickey Mouse which also his contemporaries had perceived, but in him we find perhaps a "utopian overvaluation" that, according to Hansen, was, after all, a reaction to the fear of finding, in the destruction of the subject and in the collective laughter, the *wrong* barbarism, that of bourgeois sadism or of Nazi pogroms.[93]

The fact is that by 1935, not only had Mickey Mouse been "tamed," but Disney's whole vision had turned towards an ever-increasing "realism."[94] The decisive breaking point was 1934, when the first Disney full-length movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was conceived and then finally released on 21st December 1937, after more than three years of production. Beginning with this film, Disney's animations abandon the anarchic and irreverent world of Surrealist fantasy and become an animated imitation of realist cinema: most of the huge commercial success of *Snow White* is in fact due to the technique of "rotoscoping" (in which the images are retraced following a previously filmed scene), and to the "multiplane camera" (a camera filming different scenes in motion on different superposed planes, in order to create a three-dimensional illusion). In this way, the laws of perspective and gravity are restored, which brings Disney's animation completely back to the "naïve realism," that Adorno had identified in it. To some extent, it is obvious that a full-length film cannot rest on a sequence of gags and on the avant-garde temporality of the interruption, but needs instead a plot and a stable narrative diegesis, and therefore Disney's "realist" evolution when producing full-length films is a "natural" development. Moreover, *Snow White* is the first animated film to extensively use dialogues in order to define the personality of the characters in depth, and to insistently seek to provoke "pathos," the most anti-modernist of emotions. Finally, from this

film onwards, the illusion of reality is accompanied by the melodramatic values and the prude and virginal morality of the Hollywood of the Hays Code—which indeed was fully and strictly enforced precisely since 1934.[95]

At the end of the 1930s, Disney's reputation among artists and intellectuals (with a few exceptions, such as Eisenstein) collapses, and his *Studio* will progressively become that symbol of kitsch moralism, cultural imperialism and industrial mega-corporatism that it is to these days. However, the questions raised by Benjamin's use of the figure of Mickey Mouse are still relevant: namely, the necessity of deactivating the normative boundaries separating organic life and machines, human and animal, male and female; the necessity of 'inventing' a different relationship between human beings, technology and nature, of breaking free from the teleology of 'biological destiny,' and of reaching thereby a different social, economic and sexual organisation. Benjamin's Mickey Mouse still puts forth for us, eight decades later, the question of the post-human.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this essay was published in Italian under the title "Sopravvivere alla civiltà con Mickey Mouse e una risata," as introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Mickey Mouse*, translated and edited by Carlo Salzani (Genoa: Il nuovo melangolo, 2014), 5-33.

[2] The first Disney short film to be distributed in Germany, on 12th July 1927, was *Trolley Troubles* (with the German title *Oswald und die Straßenbahn*), the first successful short of the series *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*. Cf. J. P. Storm and Mario Dreßler, *Im Reiche der Micky Maus. Walt Disney in Deutschland 1927-1945: Eine Dokumentation zur Ausstellung in Filmmuseum Potsdam* (Berlin: Henschel, 1991), 24; and Carsten Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel. Walt Disney und Deutschland* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992), 10. In 1928, when the film distributor Charles Mintz deceitfully stole the rights of Oswald from Disney, the latter, together with the cartoonist Ub Iwerks, was forced to invent a new character by slightly modifying Oswald, and so Mickey Mouse was born. The character was initially named Mortimer Mouse, but thanks to Walt Disney's wife Lillian, it was then renamed Mickey.

[3] In German, "Mickey Mouse" is Germanised (though less and less today) as "Micky Maus," and Benjamin also uses this spelling. "Silly" stands for *Silly Symphonies*, a series of short animated films produced by Disney between 1929 and 1939 (for a total of 75 animated subjects), which, unlike the contemporaneous Mickey Mouse series, did not use recurrent characters.

[4] Storm/Dreßler, *Im Reiche der Micky Maus*, 29-30 (translation mine, C.S.).

[5] Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel*, 18-19 (translation mine, C.S.).

[6] Storm/Dreßler, *Im Reiche der Micky Maus*, 62; and Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel*, 35-36 (translation mine, C.S.).
[7] Storm/Dreßler, *Im Reiche der Micky Maus*, 61; and Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel*, 34-35 (translation mine, C.S.). In 1991, Art Spiegelman used part of this quotation as the epigraph for the second volume of his graphic novel *Maus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991).
[8] The first Mickey Mouse—as well as the rabbit Oswald, from which it descends—is indeed completely black, apart from the eyes, the pants and the gloves (which he starts wearing only from its fifth short feature, *The Opry House*, 1929).
[9] The anti-Semite propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940) opens with images of rats and the following voice-over comment: "just as the rat is the lowest of animals, so the Jew is the lowest of human beings." Quoted in Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich* (Providence: Yogh & Thorn, 2013), 149.
[10] Contrary to propagandist rumours spread by Disney himself, the Nazi party leaders and even Hitler himself loved the character of Mickey Mouse. On this point see chapter 4 of Storm/Dreßler, *Im Reiche der Micky Maus* and chapter 5 of Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel*.
[11] Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.1 (1993): 33.
[12] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 33-35.
[13] Cf. Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel*, 37.
[14] Quoted in Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.
[15] At the beginning of the 1940s, Eisenstein started to work on a chapter on Disney for his unfinished study on *Method*, only posthumously published; cf. Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, edited by Jay Leyda, translated by Alan Upchurch (London: Methuen Paperback, 1988).
[16] This lecture was published first in issue 26 (1937) of the journal *Transition*; a second, revised version appeared in *Critique* 1.3 (1947): 5-28; here 23.
[17] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 28.
[18] Benjamin's interest for the question of the body dates at least from the early 1920s. See for example the notes *Outline of the Psychophysical Problem* (1922-1923), SW 1, 394-401.
[19] In *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), for example, Mickey throws his dentures to catch a cigarette in mid-air, which then settle back in his mouth, and then he lights the cigarette holding the match with his toes, which take the shape of a hand; when he dances with Minnie, their bodies twist and turn at will, and their prehensile tails extend to fetch a beer or to transform into a lasso or a spring; in *The Barn Dance* (1928), when he dances with Minnie, Mickey steps on one of her legs—with feet that become enormous—so much that this becomes disproportionally long, and in attempting to put things back in order, Minnie simply ties a knot and cuts the superfluous part; in *Steamboat Willie* (1928), the cat Pete (forerunner of Peg Leg Pete) pulls Mickey's neck, which extends out of proportion. In the same way, the bodies of the other animals and of the inanimate objects bend and twist at will.

[20] Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2004), 81.
[21] Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse," SW 2, 545.
[22] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 55; Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 308.
[23] Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse," SW 2, 545.
[24] Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," SW 2, 448; Edmund Jephcott's (correct) translation of *Unmensch* is "monster." Cf. Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 81. This new and different materialism, linked precisely to a reconfiguration of the body, had already been proposed by Benjamin at the end of his essay on Surrealism (1929): see SW 2, 217-18.
[25] Benjamin, "Literary History and the Study of Literature," SW 2, 460-61.
[26] Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse," SW 2, 545.
[27] In *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (London: Race Point Publishing, 2013), 12-18, here 13.
[28] Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," SW 2, 541-42.
[29] Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," SW 2, 448.
[30] Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse," SW 2, 245.
[31] All early Mickey Mouse shorts end with Mickey either grinning or sneering.
[32] Benjamin, "Experience," SW 1, 3-5.
[33] On the genesis of the essay, see the editors' note in GS II.1, 960-61.
[34] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW 2, 732.
[35] Benjamin, "A German Institute for Independent Research," SW 3, 312.
[36] Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," SW 3, 267; "On the Concept of History," SW 4, 392.
[37] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW 2, 732.
[38] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW 2, 734.
[39] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 40.
[40] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW 2, 734.
[41] Benjamin, "Anmerkungen zu Erfahrung und Armut," GS II.1, 962 (translation mine, C.S.).
[42] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 42.
[43] North, *Machine-Age Comedy*, 17-18.
[44] Franz Kafka, "The Cares of a Family Man," in *The Complete Stories*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 428.
[45] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW 2, 735.
[46] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 41.
[47] Pseudonym of Pierre Dumarchey (1882-1970), a prolific French writer and *chansonnier* close to the Surrealist movement.
[48] Benjamin, *AP*, 396 (K 4, 1). Cf. also B4a,2, 72. Actually Benjamin cites Mac Orlan's article three times (the third citation is in W 4a, 3, 627), but only the first two quotations mention Disney.
[49] Benjamin, *AP*, 72 (B 4a, 2).
[50] Benjamin, "Surrealism," SW 2, 216.
[51] Benjamin, *AP*, 395 (K 3a, 1).
[52] Benjamin, *AP*, 395-96 (K 3a, 1).

[53] Benjamin, "Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (Exposé of 1935), in *AP*, 5; "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (Exposé of 1939), in *AP*, 16.
[54] Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (Exposé of 1939), 17.
[55] In his notes, Benjamin quotes a letter written by Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann on 9th October 1866, in which Marx saw in Fourier's utopia "the anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world." See Benjamin, *AP*, 637 (W 10a, 2).
[56] Benjamin, *AP*, 635 (W 8a, 5).
[57] Benjamin, *AP*, 635 (W 8a, 5).
[58] Benjamin, *AP*, 635 (W 8a, 5).
[59] Benjamin, *AP*, 635 (W 7, 4).
[60] On the concept of *Innervation* and its importance in the first versions of the *Work of Art* essay, see Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 37-38, and, by the same author, the essays "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'," *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 179-224; "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (1999): 306-43; and "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (2004): 3-45.
[61] The footnote appears both in the first version with footnotes (named "second version" in the *Gesammelte Schriften* and the *Selected Writings*, and "third version" in the new *Kritische Gesamtausgabe WuN*), and the French translation ("fourth version" in the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*); cf. SW 3, 124, n10; GS I.2, 717-18; and Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, edited by Burkhardt Lindner under collaboration of Simon Broll and Jessica Nitsche, in *Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 109 and 174. (Hereafter, this volume will be abbreviated as *WuN* 16.)
[62] For an articulated exposition of this history, see the "*Entstehungs- und Publikationsgeschichte*," in *WuN* 16, 319-75.
[63] This version, initially considered lost, was found in the 1980s by Gary Smith in Horkheimer's archive and was published only in 1989 in volume VII.1 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*.
[64] The *Selected Writings* do not include this version, but section XVI of the "second version" (GS/SW) or "third version" (*WuN* 16), included in the *Selected Writings* (SW 3, 117-18), corresponds almost literally to it, so I will quote here mainly from this text. Hereafter I will use, however, the new numeration established by *WuN* 16.
[65] Norbert Bolz, "Walter Benjamin in the Postmodern," *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies* 18 (1994): 11.
[66] SW 3, 117. This expression, as well as also the core of the whole argument, had already been used by Benjamin in 1927 in his reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz's ferocious criticism against Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), published in *Die literarische Welt*; cf. Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," SW 2, 16-19.
[67] As Esther Leslie notes, the term *Spielraum* can mean in German both "space for play" (*Spiel*) and "room for manoeuvre," and perhaps this ambiguity or pun is intentional here (Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 105). A note for the third version, later not used in the text, links the motif of play to Disney's films: "The vanishing

of beautiful appearance [*Schein*] is identical to the vanishing of the aura. The two roots of the *Ur*-phenomenon of mimesis: appearance and play [*Spiel*]. Each develops at the expense of the other. On the radically different function of art based on appearance and of art based on play. In Disney, film deactivates for the first time the element of appearance in favour of that of play. The technological interests are solidary with those of play" (*WuN* 16, 146; translation mine, C.S.).

[68] Benjamin, "Surrealism," SW 2, 217.

[69] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," SW 3, 117.

[70] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," SW 3, 117; "Little History of Photography," SW 2, 511-12.

[71] Esther Leslie (*Hollywood Flatlands*, 114) argues that, by naming the section on the optical unconscious after Mickey Mouse, Benjamin wanted to suggest that animation is the film form that has most legitimacy. However, Michael North (*Machine-Age Comedy*, 59 and 207) points out not only that Benjamin never speaks about "animation" as a specific film form, but also that he rather tends to equate, quite vaguely and inaccurately, Mickey Mouse and Chaplin, animation and silent movies. The film "techniques" cited in this section (slow motion, etc.) cannot actually be attributed to a cartoon, which moreover tends, contrary to the fragmentation of *montage*, to create a "continuum" from scattered and artificial fragments.

[72] Psychoanalytical readings of Mickey Mouse and of Disney's films already begun at the end of the 1930s: see for example Fritz Moellenhoff, "Remarks on the Popularity of Mickey Mouse," *American Imago* (1940), reprinted in *American Imago* 46.2 (1989): 105-19. For a more recent psychoanalytical reading see Tsung-huei Huang, "Who's Afraid of Mickey Mouse? Revisiting the Benjamin-Adorno Debate on Disney from a Psychoanalytic Perspective," *Tamkang Review* 40.1 (2009): 29-60.

[73] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," SW 3, 118.

[74] Burkhardt Lindner, "Mickey Mouse und Charlie Chaplin: Benjamins Utopie der Massenkunst," in *Schrift Bilder Denken. Walter Benjamin und die Künste*, edited by Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), 152.

[75] The "purification" (catharsis) through art that Aristotle proposed in his *Poetics* (1449 b 21-28) consists in a purgation of extreme emotions and excessive passions—especially pity and fear—when watching an extremely emotional representation on stage (mostly tragedy), and which results in renewal and restoration. It is therefore precisely the opposite of "vaccination," though both metaphors come from the medical vocabulary.

[76] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," SW 3, 118.

[77] Benjamin, "Chaplin in Retrospect," SW 2, 224.

[78] See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. VIII, edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960); but also "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. XVIII, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other*

Works, edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 65-144. Freud's theory is in a sense opposed to the other great theory of the comic in the 20th century, namely that of Bergson, who sees laughter as an expression of the natural hostility of the organic against the machine; see Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by Cloudesley Brereton (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1998). For a discussion of these texts in relation to Benjamin, see Lindner, "Mickey Mouse und Charlie Chaplin," and above all the first chapter of North, *Machine-Age Comedy*.

[79] North, *Machine-Age Comedy*, 5.

[80] Fabrizio Desideri, "I *Modern Times* di Benjamin," introduction to Walter Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica. Tre versioni (1936-39)*, translated by Massimo Baldi (Rome: Donzelli, 2012), xv.

[81] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," SW 2, 17.

[82] The first "official" Mickey Mouse colour short, *The Band Concert*, was released precisely on 23rd February 1935, though Mickey had already appeared in a colour short not officially belonging to the "Mickey Mouse" series, namely *Parade of the Award Nominees* (1932).

[83] Benjamin refers to the fairy tale *Das Lumpengesindel* (see "The Pack of Ragamuffins"—sometimes translated as "Riff Raff"—in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 65-67).

[84] SW 3, 130, note 30. See also *WuN* 16, 132-33. The footnote appears, in a reduced form, also in the French translation (GS I.2, 732; *WuN* 16, 191).

[85] GS I.3, 1045; *WuN* 16, 146.

[86] GS VII.2, 689; *WuN* 16, 161.

[87] Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 130-31.

[88] Here Mickey Mouse is taken as an (obviously negative) paradigm of "jazz subjectivity," see Theodor W. Adorno, "Oxforder Nachträge" (1937) to "Über Jazz" (1936), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), 105.

[89] According to Miriam Hansen (*Of Mice and Ducks*, 34), this change is due to the fact that Donald Duck fits the authoritarian profile more easily than Mickey Mouse; but it could also simply depend on the fact that, in the 1940s, Donald Duck became much more popular than Mickey Mouse.

[90] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110.

[91] It makes no sense, however, to speak of a "drama of the footnotes," as Esther Leslie does (*Hollywood Flatlands*, 118), and to place the blame for Benjamin's hesitation with regard to Mickey Mouse on Adorno, as the majority of interpreters do, since the version Adorno received was the "third," that is, the one with footnotes—and thus also with the footnote quoted above.

[92] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 121.

[93] Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks," 50.

[94] This turn, clearly and painfully sought and pursued, would, however, contradict, according to Siegfried Kracauer, the very principle of animation in general, and of that of the first Disney movie in particular: if "every art form must fulfil its own specific function, reserved to it in compliance with its specific means," then animation and realism contradict each other; see Siegfried Kracauer, "Dumbo" (1941), in *Kino. Essays, Studien, Glossen zum Film*, edited by Karsten Witte (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 57-61 (translation mine, C.S.).

[95] The Motion Picture Production Code—popularly known as the Hays Code, after Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America from 1922 to 1945—was the set of industry moral guidelines that was applied to most films released by major studios from 1930 to 1968. It was adopted as early as 1930, but began to be strictly enforced in 1934, and spelled out what was acceptable and inacceptable content for motion pictures in the United States.

V

READING (IN) CONSTELLATIONS

THE GOTHIC THIRD WORLD: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE POETICS OF EXCLUSION[1]

JAVIER PADILLA

Baudelaire had the good fortune to be the contemporary of a bourgeoisie that could not yet employ, as accomplice of its domination, such an asocial type as he represented. The incorporation of a nihilism into its hegemonic apparatus was reserved for the bourgeoisie of the twentieth century.[2]
Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project

Opium and Cockaigne

Imagine a world where cooked pigs run around with knives on their backs, ready to be carved up for immediate consumption. A world of infinite leisure, populated by fit and attractive humans, where sex is always available, and work is not only frowned upon but also illegal. The weather is always temperate, and contingencies are of the best and most entertaining kind: there are showers of gold, trees with overhanging branches brimming with warm apple pies, and jugs with never-ending wine for bibulous gatherings. This is the world of Cock-a-doodle or Cockaigne, the utopian land of plenty, emanating out of the life of hardship and scarcity of medieval peasant folk. Cockaigne allowed the masses to dream collectively, and to playfully imagine a better life.[3] In his haunting collection of prose poems, *Paris Spleen*, Charles Baudelaire evokes this mythical place in the context of 19th century Paris:

> A true land of milk and honey, where all is beautiful, opulent, tranquil, honest; where luxury prides its orderliness; where life is rich, easy-going, altogether excluding disorder, turbulence, the unforeseen; where joy merges with quiet; where even cooking is poetic, at once plentiful and exciting; where everything, my angel, resembles you.[4]

Baudelaire adapts the European medieval legend to the consumerist yearnings of his modern surroundings: the urban metropolis. In other words, he superimposes the cornucopian fairy-tale upon the precariousness of the modern world. "Don't you feel the feverish illness wrapping us in bleak misery," he asks his beloved, "this nostalgia for a land we don't know, the anguish of curiosity?"[5] The disjunction between reality and the imagination, or better, the unbridgeable gulf between the idea of utopia and the actuality of 19th century Paris yields a pathos of loss and exclusion which cuts across a melancholy narrative of modernity. The poet yearns for a future without contingencies; a de-realised space where something as quotidian as cooking has the potential for poetic fulfilment and artistic revelry. Instead of the wilful immediacy embodied in the "forest of symbols" found in Baudelaire's earlier poem *Correspondences,*[6] here the aporia—the aperture—between reality and fantasy cuts through his posthumously published prose-poems.

Undeterred by the nostalgic pathos of his fantasy, the poet envisions this mythical, distant land in the debased reality of his squalid apartment. His urban furnishings become an intermediate zone, "where all is opulent, proper, gleaming, like a clean conscience, like magnificent kitchen utensils, like splendid gold-work, like gaudy-jewels!"[7] Instead of merely re-producing the mythical land of Cockaigne, Baudelaire re-inscribes the yearning for a land of plenty on a modern context. He brings the temporal preoccupations of modernity to bear upon the fairy-tale structure, as he emphasises the presence of brand new kitchenware and lurid jewels in a de-realised and fantastic space. This creates the retrospective illusion that even fairy tales and legends gravitate towards modernity, and Baudelaire does not stop this process, but instead accelerates it: the legends from the past become contaminated by the squalor of the present. In another prose poem from the same collection, *Fairy-gifts*, the poet inverts this strategy and brings the world of reality or actuality—the world of the Parisian proletariat—closer to the world of legends, myths and fairy-tales. The prose poem tells the story of a "grand assembly of the Fairies," gathered together to distribute their various gifts. Jarringly, even in the world of Fairies social injustice prevails, since "the power to attract fortune magnetically was allotted to a rich family," whereas the gift of poetry is reserved for the son of a poor stonecutter, "who could by no means aid in the development, or supply the needs, of his pitiable offspring."[8] By superimposing reality onto utopia and vice-versa, Baudelaire reveals the dialectic between imaginary re-inscriptions and processes of social exclusion.

Which is to say that in the modern period Cockaigne is relegated to the domain of fairy tales, child's play, and nursery rhymes. With the advent of industrialisation, the rigid stratification of feudalism is replaced by an equally hierarchical (and patriarchal) class system: the lords become robber barons and bourgeois magnates; the serfs become proletarians and the masses of the working class. But the fanciful idea of Cockaigne does not die. It is merely superimposed by the forces of modernisation, turning the naïve folklore into a powerful ideological construct. Whereas Cockaigne emanates out of peasant bonfires, the new ideology is forged in the ironworks of mass entertainment, in the illustrated pages of the *Image d'Épinal*. In the intermediate market zone of the urban arcades, emblematic of 19th century Paris, and in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin identifies a "dialectical fairyland,"[9] a place of monstrous hybrids where myth still palpitates, however tenuously, under the capitalist onslaught of the inorganic.

Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer finds the fairy-tale logic of Cockaigne in the illustrated newspapers of Weimar Germany: "After the twilight of the gods," he writes in *The Mass Ornament*, "the gods did not abdicate: the old nature within and outside man continues to assert itself."[10] His starkly titled essay *Photography*, is preceded by an enigmatic epigraph from the Brothers Grimm version of *The Land of Cockaigne*:

> In the days of cock-a-doodle I went and saw Rome and the Lateran hanging from a silk thread. I saw a man without feet outrunning a swift horse and a sharp, sharp sword cutting a bridge in two.[11]

"This is what the film diva looks like," Kracauer writes in the essay's opening paragraph, immediately after the Brothers Grimm quotation, which suggests that the epigraph is meant as a superimposition of the fairy-tale onto the image of the diva.[12] The diva bears the semblance of the land of plenty; she embodies the possibility of a realm beyond this debased world of repetition and social exclusion. Embedded in networks of production and consumption, the diva emerges recognised as semblance from the dot-matrix of the illustrated newspaper. In atavistic terms, she comes from a land of fairy-tales only to become an ideological construct of glitzy plenitude. The diva is glittery semblance, the thick pseudo-lustre adorning the world of commodities.

Rather than elevating the absurd logic of Cockaigne, Kracauer uses the legend to disrupt and destabilise his own analysis of Weimar culture. In the process, both Cockaigne and the harsh, often similarly absurd realities of everyday life become irrevocably intertwined. Fantasy and lived experience crash, beyond recognition. In their respective writings,

Benjamin and Kracauer transpose this operation, elaborating a discourse that foregrounds this process of superimposition to reveal the parallels between processes of historical inscription and exclusion. It is a critical programme that conceptualises photography as the quintessential space of modernity and its multifarious contradictions. If History—as the opiate peddled by the ruling class to hide the harsh realities of economic exploitation—is the photograph, then Cockaigne—as the utopian possibility of a better life—is the photographic negative. Behind the photographs there is an alternative history that unravels the genealogy behind the pedigree.[13]

The following is a series of constellated readings that both reflect and displace Benjamin and Kracauer's critical treatment of modernity. While their ideas are usually understood as symptoms of the catastrophic historical situation in Weimar Germany, this essay re-inscribes their theories upon the accelerated processes of modernisation which took place in the Third World during the last decades of the 20th century. Reading photographs by Susan Meiselas and Rafael Trobat, and the poetry of Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas in constellation with Benjamin and Kracauer, this argument works through the logic of temporal and spatial superimposition, and elaborates a poetics of exclusion as a tentative discourse on the utopian potential of the photographic image.

The Diva and the Dot-Matrix

In a way, Siegfried Kracauer uses the medieval legend of Cockaigne as an ornament for his essay on the modern medium of photography. He only cites the first four lines of the story and does not elaborate on the mythical land in the body of the essay. And yet Cockaigne hangs (by an ideological silk thread, as it were) over his ruminations. Moreover, in *The Mass Ornament*—an article on modern aesthetics which should be read in tandem with the *Photography* essay[14]—he returns again and again to the language of fairy-tales and uses it as heuristic tool to explain his larger argument about mass culture. Crucially, Kracauer complicates common assumptions about fairy-tales and reveals instead their bifurcated potential as vehicles for both ideological normativity and radical de-familiarisation. On the positive side—as far as social and political changes are concerned—fairy-tales carry a message of fairness, and they are inherently moralistic and didactic, since they "are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice." In fairy-tales, "natural power is defeated by the powerlessness of the good; fidelity triumphs over the arts of sorcery."[15] Cinderella triumphs over her evil

stepmother and over her garrulous stepsisters; her hard work and humility are timely remunerated; justice is ultimately served.

This bifurcated constitution becomes an important theoretical consideration in Kracauer's analysis of reason under late capitalism. Like fairy-tale justice, reason is double-pronged. It leads to liberty and justice, but also to limited concepts that exclude and reify reality. Reason under capitalism, for Kracauer, turns into *ratio*, a programmatic, normative use of reason that attempts to inscribe reality by excluding much of what it frames as such. Capitalism uses reason up to a point, "it rationalises not too much but rather *too little*."[16] For Kracauer, fairy-tales are merely a step in the process of demythologisation that characterises history. Capitalism is also a stage in this process of demythologisation, but like fairy-tales, capitalist narratives rationalise within the constrained logic of their own closed systems. The mass ornament—the Tiller girls hovering as limbs over the dissipated crowd of spectators—reifies the human image and enlists the masses by revealing itself as a "mythological cult that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction."[17] Like the mass ornament, the photograph burrows in the interstices between radical change and temporal continuity.

In *The Burden of Representation*, John Tagg frames photography as a medium imbricated, from the start, in the logic of capitalist consumption. Tagg argues that during the genesis of what we now know as photography, several trajectories were possible, but the development gravitated towards the readily exploitable and consumable; the relation between capitalism and photography was faithfully seared onto the pages of history.[18] It is therefore difficult to conceive of one without the other. Kracauer's originality lies in the fact that he extrapolates this diagnosis and stretches it to its logical conclusion. He argues that photography arose as the only medium that has shown nature *devoid* of meaning. Nature is no longer the "forest of symbols" of Baudelaire's *Correspondences*. "The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning,"[19] Kracauer writes, removing the issue of invention and human agency, and foregrounding instead the radical shift in human subjectivity involved in the invention of photography.

One of the many formulations that Kracauer assumes *a priori* is that photography is both imbricated and implicated in collective modes of homogenisation and surveillance. "The barren self-preservation of spatial and temporal elements," he argues, "belongs to a social order which regulates itself according to economic laws of nature."[20] The photograph destabilises the relation between nature and culture, so that reason—or rather its deformed clone, *ratio*—triumphs over the chaos of nature and

becomes the regulator of human experience. Inevitably, this triumph of what appears to be total semblance is an illusion, since photography both reveals and occludes the true aspect of things from the masses. The illusion of the demonic diva occludes the fuzzy dot-matrix, "the millions of little dots" that constitute her rendering.[21] With the triumph of economic *ratio*, mediation is no longer linguistic, nor typological. The forest of symbols has been cut down and has been replaced by the rectilinear trees of semblance and homogeneous order. *Quod me nutrit, me destruit*, goes the Latin saying, what nourishes also destroys, and in modernity the photograph both extends perception *and* reifies it. In the dot-matrix that allegorises the diva of the illustrated magazines, "people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving."[22]

To a certain extent, Kracauer's analysis of photography in conjunction with illustrated magazines anticipates Roland Barthes's structuralist exegesis of the photographic image. In essays like *The Photographic Message* and *Rhetoric of the Image*, Barthes emphasises the multifarious encodings—institutional and otherwise—that are shrouded in the apparent spontaneity of the photographic image. Since the image is mechanically mediated, it becomes a locus of apparent objectivity, whereas it is actually framed by various social and subjective forces. For Barthes, the allure of the photograph is precisely that it can encode and inscribe "as though the scene were immediate and spontaneous, that is to say, without signification."[23] However, Barthes insists that this naïve correspondence between signifier and signified is merely the confusion that attends to the paradoxical nature of the image as both spontaneous emanation and methodical encoding. Barthes uses this photographic paradox to illustrate the instantaneous association between the perception of phenomena and its interpretation. He argues that if "there is no perception without immediate categorisation, then the photograph is verbalised in the very moment it is perceived; better, it is only perceived verbalised."[24]

Like Kracauer before him, Barthes is keenly aware of the way photography changes both historical and spatial configurations of thought. He understands photography as a prosthetic device, a technology for recording that enlarges man's omnipresence in the world. "Hence in every society," he writes, "various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds […] to counter the terror of uncertain signs."[25] This dialectic of security and uncertainty reveals that photography changes everything precisely because it promises a world where everything is visually accountable and latently encoded. As Benjamin observes in his *Little History of Photography* (1931), before the industrialisation of the photographic apparatus "the human countenance had a silence about it in

which the gaze rested."[26] Similarly, for Barthes the radical disjunction between nature and culture inscribed in photographs "allow the assessment of the anthropological revolution it represents in man's history."[27] Finally, Kracauer sees the technical drive towards diminution and reduction embedded in the photograph "as the general inventory of a nature that cannot be further reduced." In a sentence, "photography is the *go-for-broke* game of history."[28] Writing decades before Barthes, and before the onslaught of globalisation and decolonisation, Kracauer's and Benjamin's theses on photography and Weimar society diagnose the fraught parallels between the homogenizing mechanisms of colonisation and the overbearing continuum of history.

In an early essay, *Travel and Dance*, Kracauer conceptualises a modern constitution in which time and space have become mere husks: forms empty of content. Crucially, this process of *kenosis* or demythologisation entails an obsession with form, movement, and spatial ambulation that is deracinated from the subject. "Radio, telephotography, and so forth," Kracauer argues, "each and every one of these outgrowths of rational fantasy aimlessly serves one single aim: the constitution of a depraved omnipresence within calculable dimensions."[29] The European bourgeoisie has entered the world of the travel agency and the miniaturised souvenir, where every space and temporality has its historicised ornament. In other words, one can extrapolate the illustrated dot-matrix over the face of the entire globe, so that each spatial dimension acquires a form, a convergence of encodings that signify it as a "foreign" place. Thus, photography becomes imbricated in discourses of space, conquest, colonisation, homogenisation, and ultimately, history.

Global Photography and the Continuum of History

In his idiosyncratic essay on photography and mourning, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes reconstructs a quotidian—indeed banal—*mise en scène*. "I was glancing though an illustrated magazine," he writes. "A photograph made me pause. Nothing very unusual: the photographic banality of a rebellion in Nicaragua."[30] It is a photograph by Koen Wessing, the year is 1979, and Barthes's words reveal how commonplace the struggle for sovereignty in the so-called Third World had become in Western countries by the late 1970s. So commonplace, in fact, that the photographs in the illustrated newspaper have become banal images seared with the pathos of cultural homogenisation. Barthes quotes Baudelaire ("the emphatic truth of gesture in the great circumstances of life") and admits that even if the pictures were shocking, "they bore no mark or sign:

their homogeneity remained cultural."[31] Barthes goes further, and elucidates how photography immediately imbricates history, or a certain kind of history (in Barthesian terms, the *studium*) of space and conquest, "a classical body of information: rebellion, Nicaragua […], ruined streets, corpses, grief, the sun, and the heavy-lidded Indian eyes."[32]

In other words, the photographer registers the colonial sediments, the racial register, and the logic of history, or better yet, the logic of historicism. For Kracauer, historicist thinking is intimately tied to photographic representation, insofar as both promise a sequence of events and spaces without gaps, a total history that is ultimately overbearing and homogeneous. The Nicaraguan insurrection is legible for Barthes only through the mediation of the illustrated newspaper, which is inextricably embedded in the *ratio* of reduction and accumulation. For the European reading public, the Nicaraguan revolution is merely a historical episode in the long Eurocentric narrative of emancipatory revolutions. The Nicaraguan armed conflict is legible as an aerial photograph taken from the totalizing vantage point of European historicism. In Kracauer's concise formulation, "the equivalent of [historicist] photography would be a giant film depicting temporally interconnected events from every vantage point."[33] Only if an event has been properly illustrated in the Western imaginary can it then be included in the spatio-temporal narrative of capitalist "world history."

One way in which Western media historicises events in the Third World is through the process of homogenisation and photographic miniaturisation or reduction. In the case of the 1979 Nicaraguan Sandinista uprising, the work of photographer Susan Meiselas is a classic case. Her work traces the rebellion in Nicaragua from early 1978 (when the prospects of a substantial revolution were relatively low) to the popular victory of July 1979. As such, her work is a valuable trove of heterogeneous pictures that form a valuable photographic archive of the entire conflict. Moreover, her work does not just focus on the conflict, but on the myriad ways the Nicaraguan population was affected by the upheaval.[34] Her most famous photograph of the armed uprising, however, depicts a beret-wearing Sandinista hurling a Molotov cocktail across a barricade, in a pose that can only be described as sculptural. It is a dramatic portrait and it lends itself to the *go-for-broke* narrative of historicism as conceptualised by Kracauer. The pyramidal hurler becomes an icon for what Benjamin calls the moment of recognition, when historical origin sears the image of the present. To borrow the gnomic terminology he employs in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, "the term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent

came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis."[35]

Figure 1: Susan Meiselas, Nicaragua, Estelí, 1979.

It is a hauntingly beautiful and jolting portrait. And yet, like all photographic representations, Meiselas's iconic image can be easily turned into a reified image, a homogenised abstraction under the heading "Third World Conflict." Such a reduction belies the preponderance of colonialist encodings and exclusions. The caption under the image of the iconic guerrilla fighter "directs the reader through the signifieds of the image […] by means of an often subtle *dispatching*, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance."[36] Meiselas's work is brutally honest, but its immediate power is ultimately lost in the homogenizing matrix of the illustrated magazine. As such, photographs of armed conflicts—particularly Third World conflicts—are rapidly organised and *rationalised* according to the fairy-tale logic set up by the forces of capital. The reductive icon—the discalced freedom-fighter—allows the *ratio* the means to quickly separate friends from foes, victims from perpetrators, and the dark forces of savagery from the holy order of civilisation. Through the prosthetic omnipresence afforded by the photographic apparatus, the

colonial unconscious separates, organises, homogenises and ultimately reifies marginal temporalities.

To be sure, Meiselas's iconic photograph carries a powerful message of sovereignty, independence and the power of revolutionary change. Indeed, it is what Benjamin calls a "dialectical image," since it represents a perilous moment in which now-time (*Jetzteit*) emerges and disrupts the continuum of history. As Benjamin writes in *Doctrine of the Similar*, this moment "offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars […]. It is like the addition of a third element […] to the conjunction of two stars; it must be grasped in an instant."[37] Nevertheless, this process does not necessarily take place at the moment the photograph is taken. In fact, since a photograph is not a subjective emanation, this dialectical potential depends on the way the photograph is interpreted, and it depends on a myriad of historical, political, and institutional contingencies. In the end, even the most politically charged photograph can fail to register in the blocked sensorium of the masses.

The preponderance of iconic images in the Western coverage of Third World conflicts raises several questions. For instance, what are the dangers of fetishizing and romanticizing photographic representations of armed conflict? Can photographs of quotidian, even banal circumstances have a political or social effect? What is the value of photographs that depict the precarious lives of the marginalised urban poor? The work of the Spanish photographer Rafael Trobat is a useful example to address these difficult questions. While both Meiselas and Trobat work in Nicaragua, their work differs in crucial temporal terms. Meiselas depicts Nicaragua in 1979, ravaged by civil war, a country in a brutal transition from *de facto* American protectorate to Cold War combat zone. Trobat's work, on the other hand, focuses on the so-called democratic period, from 1991 to 2006, a period of rampant neo-liberalism, corruption, and widening economic disparities. It is not a question of which photographs have a higher capacity to mobilise the masses or which photographer portrays Nicaragua in a better light. The real issue is how to read Trobat's photographs of urban poverty as superimposed images that foreground issues pertaining to representation and exclusion.

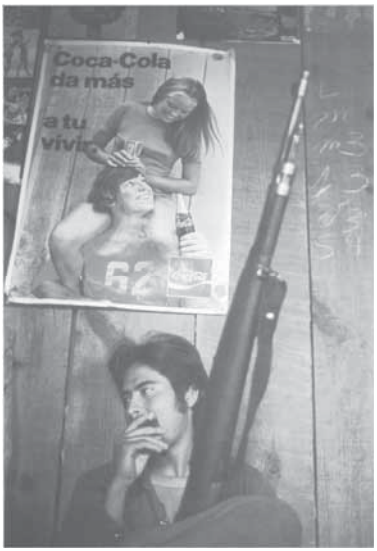

Figure 2 (left): Susan Meiselas, Sandinista in a home in Estelí, 1979.

Figure 3 (right): Rafael Trobat, Santa Claus en los Escombros, 1997.

In many ways, Meiselas's photographs anticipate Trobat's focus on the social and economic referents assembled before the camera. One of her photographs depicts a smiling Sandinista in olive green fatigues, rifle in hand, under a Coca-Cola poster. The parallels between the image-as-advert and the image-as-testimony reveal the preponderance of capitalist ratio in spaces ravaged by conflict and by the legacy of Imperialism. Similarly, Trobat's photographs usually have a benign double valence: his photos do not exclude but rather include both the centre and the margin. In a visually complex photograph, Trobat captures a destitute, shirt-less boy with his legs in the air, playing to the camera. On the tattered walls behind him one can make out a cut-out of Coca-Cola's cherubic Santa Claus, and a number of photographs that are barely legible, but which seem to be own Trobat's own work. Finally, the space depicted are the ruins of a building destroyed by the 1972 Managua earthquake, many of which became a refuge for Managua's poor.

Figure 4: Rafael Trobat, De vuelta al club Terraza, 2000.

By focusing on Old Managua's ruins, Trobat portrays both the destitution of the urban poor and the history of violence and loss that characterises Nicaragua. As such, he limns the tenuous parallels between photography and memory. Since, as Kracauer holds, "the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged,"[38] Trobat's photographs of Managua's ruins function as a meta-discourse of sorts, since the ruins can be read as the photographic evidence of the city's past—the ghost city inside the neo-liberal metropolis. Like old-fashioned crinolines and tattered buildings, the marginalised poor inhabit the spatio-temporal past:

> The tightly corseted dress in the photograph protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that is destined for destruction because the city centre has been moved to another part of town. Usually members of the lower class settle in such buildings.[39]

Trobat's photographs of the marginalised masses in a Third World metropolis foregrounds the dignity in the eyes of humans living in the peripheries of history. Importantly, his lens depicts the rich as well as the poor, and—like the photographs of the Weimar period by August Sander—his images function as an inscription or record of social types and other figures. This strategy makes it possible to view society horizontally,

as opposed to the capitalist insistence on verticality. This is the "photography of the literalisation of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate" that Benjamin speaks of.[40] Or in Barthes's auratic pronouncement, "the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence."[41]

Figure 5: Rafael Trobat, Bautismo Carismático, 1997.

Poetic Inscription and Detritus

In *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin again returns to the tropes of superimposition, reduction and exclusion. For Benjamin, the poet is genealogically correlated to ancient modes of shamanism, divination and clairvoyance, which gradually gave rise to forms of script, language or what he elsewhere calls "nonsensous similarity."[42] Which is to say that even if the poet loses the gift of divination and prophecy, he gains the ability to make allegorical images out of dissimilar runes. Thus, the poet can commemorate phenomena and record them using the allegorical constellations of symbols or script; it is a process conceptualised by Benjamin as a kind of *technē*. "To command nature herself to stand still […] is the dreamer's delight," he writes. "But to utter a call that will freeze it anew is the gift of poets."[43] However, in Baudelaire's poetry, Benjamin

reads an anxiety over inadequacy and modernity, or "the 'here' in which the inadequate becomes an actuality."[44] It is almost as if Baudelaire pimps himself as a poet; he advertises himself and uses the imbricated language of the crowd in the gaudy bazaar. His poetics are shot through with "an urbanity that would befit a refined amateur."[45] Re-purposing the atavism of the poet's commemorative ability, Baudelaire superimposes the pathos of the lyric to capture the passing semblance of the modern city—the modern poet's visionary power is turned into a photographic device. Like the Holy Ghost, embodied in the prosthetic human body, Baudelaire becomes the mediator—the photographic apparatus—for the collective experience of the modern crowd. "The poet finds the refuse of society on their streets and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse," Benjamin concludes. "This means that a common type is, as it were, superimposed upon their illustrious type."[46]

The prose poems of *Paris Spleen* are emblematic of this photographic motif. As little poems in prose, they are framed as reduced portraits of scenes, thought-images organised both as a sequence and as constellations of phenomena and their interrelated interpretation. *The Old Showman*, for instance, depicts an urban fair where the Paris poor "forget their discomforts, labours; they become like children."[47] It is an atmosphere of revelry and debauchery where the proletariat can forget about their quotidian hardships and take part in the escapism of the mass ornament. But in the margins of the fairgrounds, the poet sees a "poor showman, as if in shame self-exiled from all these splendours, bent, worn, decrepit, a human ruin". In the peripheries of glitzy urban entertainment, the ostracised showman stands as a figure of destitution, failure, and surrender. His isolated demeanour destabilises the gaiety of the crowd and leads Baudelaire to not only question the holiday proceedings but to identify with this excluded figure. "I tried to figure out my sudden sadness," the poet writes, "saying to myself, here I have seen the image of the old man of letters who has outlived the generation he amused so brilliantly."[48]Like the cumbersome crinoline or a ruined arcade, the poet is excluded and discarded. He is dismissed as a worn-out novelty.

Benjamin identifies this poetic attitude, which hovers in between fascination with the masses and traumatic exclusion, as the defining feature of Baudelaire's poetics. Crucially, this precarious oscillation operates through the logic of superimposition. On the image of the poet as unfettered libertine, "another one was laid […]; it shows Baudelaire as the exemplar of aesthetic passion […]. No study of Baudelaire can fully explore the vitality of its subject without dealing with the image of his life."[49] Caught up in the incipient logic of capitalist consumption and mass

culture, Baudelaire adopts the image and pose of the excluded poet. He "was obliged to lay claim to the dignity of the poet in a society that has no more dignity of any kind to confer." [50] Immensely aged and bent down by the exigencies of the market, the martyred poet superimposes his art on the faceless masses.

Like Walter Benjamin, the Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas (1924—1998) recognises the uniqueness of this poetic perspective and uses it to elaborate his own poetics of precariousness and exclusion. Widely recognised as one of the most important Nicaraguan poets of the 20th century, Martínez Rivas published only two poetry collections during his lifetime. Distrustful of the literary market and unconcerned about posterity, he shunned the limelight, choosing instead to live a quiet life of writing marked by persistent bouts of alcoholism—the disease that would eventually kill him. In the introduction to his posthumously published *Collected Works*, the editor Pablo Centeno Gómez—the poet's close friend and literary executor—provides excerpts from the transcription of a rare poetry reading held by Martínez Rivas in the National University of Managua in 1984. In it, the poet meditates on Baudelaire's poetic achievements and on the French poet's influence on his own artistic development; an influence which he does not deny.

Tellingly, Martínez Rivas evokes Charles Baudelaire by describing his self-portraits, "and other portraits of his made by Gustave Courbet and Nadar (when photography transitioned from the daguerreotype to the portrait), Duchamp Villon's bust, and the treacherous cartoon by Daumier." He goes on to present his own poetic portrait of Baudelaire, "which is really the portrait a friend gave to him in 1866, before he departed Brussels, only to die in Paris in 1867."[51] Martínez Rivas's evocation of Baudelaire is titled *Ecce Homo: On One of Baudelaire's Last Photographs*. In the excerpted transcripts, he comments that the photograph would have been Baudelaire's last portrait and goes on to share his poetic rendering of the modern poet's physiognomy:

> [F]ixed without stepping away from the ascetic rictus of the débauche forehead furrowed manuscript manuchrist thorns brow draft nocturne illegible print proofs footprints of the old man after the new failed enterprise yes but someone had to undergo the relay a case of military vocation there is always a volunteer the volunteer of a bankrupt will and let the enforced parable remain prodigal that cornerstone graft in between the communion of saints and the communion of sinners for the sinning church so that narrow solidarity remain unbroken and never extinguish the species lineage and his traits remain copies [*ejemplares*] this photography of c. b. was taken in Brussels circa 1867[52]

Written in 1957—when Martínez Rivas lived in Beatnik California, working odd jobs and struggling to maintain his young family—, the poem stands out for the absence of punctuation and its experimental bent. Reading the poem is an unhinged experience, insofar as the words stumble into each other, verbs crash into nouns and adverbs, and images scintillate and evanesce in a torrent of fluid words and opaque ideas. The poem, however, is literally "fixed" from the start: the chaotic meditation is predicated on a still image; on the photograph of a deceased figure; on the mummified trace of a deceased physiognomy. In short, Martínez Rivas writes a little poem in prose for Baudelaire, superimposing his form to delineate his physiognomy.

Developing a dialectical fulcrum between movement and arrest, the poem becomes a copy of the "original" photograph. Imbricated in a tradition of portraits of Charles Baudelaire—portraits rendered in a myriad of media, like painting, sculptures and lithographs—Martínez Rivas's prose poem foregrounds the "species lineage," that form a discursive network that is both authentic and specious, original and copy all at once. His poem is an "exemplar" of Baudelaire and works both as a celebration of his originality and as yet another "instant," or as yet another copy in the after-life of Baudelaire's image. Deeply aware of poetic genealogies, Martínez Rivas recognises that citation—far from being mere plagiarism—is often associated with the elaboration of a poetic locus built out of imaginary traces; out of images from a petrified past that shed light on a darkened present.[53] Conscious of the influence of Baudelaire's *imago* on his own artistic growth, Martínez Rivas grants that he has learned from him to "behave in a literary way, in both habit and work ethic." He has taken from Baudelaire "the tendency to view life and the world from the same austere and bitter angle, preserving the correction of urban language, but this is a coincidence that is less literary than personal […]. I think about Baudelaire every day; not only as a favourite poet in my library, but as a deceased friend lost forever."[54]

In an abrupt spatio-temporal jump, Martínez Rivas adopts the perspective of the French poet and superimposes it on his perspective as a Third World poet and on his poetics of detritus and exclusion. In a montage of poems grouped together under the heading *The Poverty Statutes*, the Nicaraguan poet uses the photographic motif to inscribe those that have been excluded by the overbearing ratio of capital. In one of his most powerful poems, *To Those Who Never Lost Because They Never Had*, Martínez Rivas elaborates a poetic discourse that foregrounds images of hunger, destitution and exclusion:

To write about Hunger,
not poetry of protest but of experience,
is difficult if you never go hungry.
……

Sure, with a good camera, with a Leica,
you can photograph hunger.
One can give a graphic testimony of hunger.

Children from India or Africa
that are only little bones and belly.
The bellies full of hunger described
by Leonel Rugama.[55]

The poem starts by stipulating the problem of adequately representing destitution and deprivation, particularly from the snug vantage point of those who have never experienced hunger pangs. Words will not adequately represent the amoebic bellies if the speaker himself has not experienced the crippling weakness of an empty stomach. Moreover, the allusion to the Sandinista martyr-poet Leonel Rugama[56] inscribes the poem in the struggle for social justice and sovereignty. Using the very inadequacy of his discourse, Martínez Rivas frames his poem as a photographic panorama of detritus and exclusion.

Instead of using the deracinated and pompous language of poetry, the poet devices a photographic motif, "a Leica," in order to capture the evanescent struggles of the marginalised poor around the globe:

A man with a miserly piece of dry bread
under the bombs in Eritrea.
A little girl in emergency care undergoing war
surgery, anesthetised, not asleep,
with rubber tubes in her little nose.

In Haiti, during the famine
of 1975, a little boy as if carved
from wood, so squalid;
and that little girl from Vietnam,
the one that flees naked and burned
on the asphalt highway.

With nothing to do, with no domicile, a grandma without grandchildren
sleeps in the abolished New York-Pennsylvania Station.[57]

The descriptions are marked by the overbearing pathos of the weak and the downtrodden. Martínez Rivas achieves this effect in the first stanza by

emphasizing the smallness of the little girl, the invasiveness of the medical equipment and the oxymoronic valence created by the smallness of her innocence, and the massive engines of war. In the second stanza, the poet displays two contrasting processes of inscription. In the first, the simile depicts the precarious Haitian boy as a carved statue, bearing the inscription of his economic exclusion and malnourishment on his emaciated skin. The second process is more properly photographic, insofar as it is an ekphrastic reduction of Nick Ut's iconic photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc covered in scalding Napalm. Eritrea, Haiti and Vietnam: marginalised Third World countries excluded from networks of power and exchange. And yet the last image superimposes the ratio of violence and exclusion in the capitalist metropolis. The excluded burrow in the centres of power as well, deep in the underground ruins of a ghostly subway station.

Martínez Rivas's poetic meditation on hunger, violence and exclusion ends with an image of solemnity and detritus:

> And a couple, husband and wife, decrepit,
> photographed by the SIPA-PRESS Agency,
> 'Gothic Third World,' with a background of trash:
> he, toothless; she the august, wrinkled brow.
> But so united in their dignity and misfortune
> that one even envies them.
>
> What I am referring to
> when I titled
> this note: TO THOSE WHO NEVER LOST
> BECAUSE THEY NEVER HAD.[58]

These last two stanzas both echo and amplify the preceding photographic registers. In a sense, the poem returns to the logic of its frame: the problems that obtain an honest representation of hunger, poverty and destitution. A second frame returns as well, the frame of the illustrated magazine, embedded in the matrix of international news agencies and the revealing headline "Gothic Third World." This reflexive move yields a vision of the downtrodden: the poet sees the dignity of the excluded behind the encodings of the illustrated magazine. The last stanza seals this semblance of recognition by turning the poem into a photograph, a commemorative device inscribed by its title—its referent—that rehearses the possibility of a poetics that reckons with the frames of visual, political, and economic exclusion.

Postscript: Superimposition and the Poetics of Exclusion

"Always of interest:" writes Baudelaire in his prose poem *Widows*, "joys of the rich reflected in the eyes of the poor."[59] Perhaps one can read a certain amount of envy in the piquancy of his aphorism, the same kind of envy Martínez Rivas reads in the eyes and semblance of the world's marginalised. In this dialectical triad, the poor idealise the world of the rich and famous propagated by the fairy-tale ratio of the illustrated magazine. The poor are excluded from these glitzy frames, populated by flashy commodities, royals in tiaras and demonic divas. On the other hand, the rich both exclude the poor and fail to recognise their humanity. The poet—excluded by the ratio of capital and defrocked of his poetic aura—superimposes and allegorises his social alienation by recycling the detritus of the mass ornament. In the words of William Carlos Williams, "man, starved in imagination, changes his milieu so that his food may be richer—The social class, without the power of expression, lives upon imaginative values."[60] As poets, Baudelaire and Martínez Rivas foreground this process of social and poetic superimposition and produce lyrical traces that recycle and re-inscribe—however tenuously—the excluded human gaze behind the diva's demonic dot-matrix. Their images are superimposed on actuality. They reveal that the potential for change nests not in the photography of the *status quo*, but in the excluded detritus of the anonymous masses.

Notes

[1] My sincere thanks to Susan Meiselas and Rafael Trobat for waiving the necessary copyrights and permissions to reproduce their vital and arresting photographs. Moreover, and with the usual caveats, I would also like to thank Eduardo Cadava, Michael Jennings, Zahid Chaudhary, and my colleagues at Princeton University for their encouraging words of advice, as well as for their invaluable feedback at varying stages of drafting this article.

[2] Walter Benjamin, *AP*, 385 (J 91, 5).

[3] Herman Pleij, *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*, translated by Diane Webb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 6.

[4] Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose*, translated by Keith Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 33.

[5] Baudelaire, *Spleen*, 33.

[6] Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs de Mal*, translated by Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), 15.

[7] Baudelaire, *Spleen*, 34.

[8] Baudelaire, *Spleen*, 38-39.

[9] Tiedemann, *AP*, ix.
[10] Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79.
[11] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 47.
[12] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 47.
[13] Raymond Geuss, "Nietzsche and genealogy," in *Morality, Culture, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-28.
[14] See Thomas Y. Levin, "Introduction," in Kracauer, *Ornament*, 21.
[15] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 80.
[16] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 81.
[17] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 81-83.
[18] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photography and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 5.
[19] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 62.
[20] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 61.
[21] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 51.
[22] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 58.
[23] Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 23.
[24] Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 28.
[25] Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 36-39.
[26] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," SW 2, 512.
[27] Barthes, *Image*, 44
[28] Kracauer, *Ornament* 61.
[29] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 70.
[30] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 23.
[31] Barthes, *Camera*, 25.
[32] Barthes, *Camera*, 25-26.
[33] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 50.
[34] See also her short essay, "Return to Nicaragua: The Aftermath of Hope" in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 166-170.
[35] Benjamin, *Origin*, 45.
[36] Barthes, *Camera*, 40.
[37] Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," SW 2, 695-696.
[38] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 55.
[39] Kracauer, *Ornament*, 55.
[40] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," SW 2, 527.
[41] Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 51.
[42] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the similar," SW 2, 696.
[43] Walter Benjamin, "Short Shadows (II)," SW 2, 701.
[44] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," SW 4, ftnt. 63, 353.
[45] Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," SW 4, ftnt. 66, 353.

[46] Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," SW 4, 48.
[47] Baudelaire, *Spleen*, 27.
[48] Baudelaire, *Spleen*, 28.
[49] Benjamin, "Central Park," SW 4, 168.
[50] Benjamin, "Central Park," SW 4, 168.
[51] Quoted by Pablo Centeno Gómez, "Poeta y Maestro," in Carlos Martínez Rivas, *Poesía reunida* (Managua: Anama ediciones, 2007), 71. All subsequent translations from the Spanish are mine (J.P.).
[52] Carlos Martínez Rivas, *Poesía reunida*, 453.
[53] See in this regard Benjamin's commentary on citation: "The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however; that the historical object in each case is torn from its context." Benjamin, *AP*, 476 (N 11, 3).
[54] Quoted by Pablo Centeno Gómez in Martínez Rivas, *Poesía reunida*, 73.
[55] Martínez Rivas, *Poesía reunida*, 373-374.
[56] Leonel Rugama was a Nicaraguan poet and Sandinista guerrilla fighter. He was murdered by the U.S. backed Somoza regime in 1970.
[57] Martínez Rivas, *Poesía reunida*, 374.
[58] Carlos Martínez Rivas, *Poesía reunida*, 373-374.
[59] Baudelaire, *Spleen*, 25.
[60] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 69.

"Ins Romantische zurück und ins Politische voran": Benjamin and Sebald

Nikolai Preuschoff

Introduction

The first book by Walter Benjamin that the 20-year-old Winfried Georg Sebald read was, almost certainly, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*), which the student from Bavaria had bought in the summer of 1964 in a bookshop in the south-west German college town of Freiburg im Breisgau. He purchased the *Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch* print of Rolf Tiedemann's 1963 edition, which is now stored at the *Deutsche Literaturarchiv* in Marbach, filled with Sebald's reading marks and notes.[1] No more than a month later, Sebald bought Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*). Those two books, along with other works of Benjamin's later discovered, would shape Sebald's career—first as a scholar and then as the writer that he famously became.[2]

When Benjamin published his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, a scholarly book which had originally been written to obtain the *venia legendi* at Frankfurt University's Philosophy department, the academic career he had hoped for had been put to an end with the controversial decision of the *Habilitation* committee in July 1925, to reject—or, more correctly, to force him to withdraw—his submission.[3] The *Trauerspiel* book was eventually published in 1928, almost simultaneously with *One-Way Street*, a collection of assembled aphorisms. Benjamin, separating from his wife Dora this very year, ultimately had to recalibrate his career plans and was forced to focus on making a living as a critic, a translator, and a journalist.

Sebald must have known that, about fifty years before he bought those two works, their author had begun his studies at the department of philology at Freiburg's Albert Ludwigs University, just like himself. And while Benjamin, of course, was not yet part of the German department's

curriculum in 1964, Sebald will later emphasise how important the discovery of his writings had been for him—particularly at a university that was still in the shadows of Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede.* "Often," Sebald writes 36 years later in an essay on Johann Peter Hebel,

> I have asked myself since then [the beginning of his studies in 1963, N.P.] how murky and untruthful our understanding of literature would have remained if the writings of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School appearing one by one […] had not opened other perspectives.[4]

Born in 1944, Winfried Georg Sebald studied in Freiburg (later in Fribourg, Switzerland, and, as a PhD student, in Manchester, UK), where he discovered Benjamin, Adorno and other writers connected to the Frankfurt School. In a 1999 interview, Sebald states about this discovery: "When I came across Walter Benjamin, I stared at what he had written in amazement."[5]

Other Benjamin editions soon followed Sebald's purchase of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* and *Einbahnstraße*, including the two Suhrkamp volumes of his Selected Works, *Illuminationen* and *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin became an important reference in Sebald's master's thesis on Carl Sternheim, and, more importantly, in his dissertation on Alfred Döblin, as well as in his essays on Franz Kafka and Robert Walser. Sebald remained a reader of Benjamin throughout his entire academic and later literary career—starting with the prose poems of *Nach der Natur* in the mid-1980s, followed by *Schwindel. Gefühle* in 1990. Both as a scholar and a writer, he consistently referred to Benjamin's theoretical and literary work. And it is clearly in Sebald's later literary texts, which revolve around the topics of modernity and destruction, exile and trauma, the German past and the Holocaust, that the significance of Sebald's reception of Walter Benjamin comes to the fore.

Benjamin began exploring non-academic topics and forms of writing well before July 1925. His translations of Charles Baudelaire were published in 1923, followed by two volumes of Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* in 1928 and 1930, co-translated with Franz Hessel. Likewise, Benjamin's major 'academic' projects themselves seek to combine and to juxtapose the disparate, such as baroque and modernity in the *Trauerspiel* book, or theology and historical materialism, as famously captured in the image of the automaton chess player in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.[6]

In a letter written to his friend Gershom Scholem in February 1925, when the *Trauerspiel* book had taken shape, but still before he submitted the *Habilitationsschrift,* Benjamin explains how he intends to push this exploration of thinking in extremes further. He makes the following

statement about his next project, based on a fragment in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*:

> The next project […] is on 'Die neue Melusine.' In it, I intend to go back to romanticism and (perhaps already) go on to political things; I want to work in a polar climate. This would be very different from what has become for me the all too tempered climate of my baroque project […].[7]

Benjamin and Sebald

In what follows, I argue that it was Benjamin's unorthodox proximity to the poetic, as well as his thinking in "polarities," that would become significant for Sebald's literary work. While Sebald's prose writings are not dialectical in a strictly philosophical sense, they undertake to combine vastly different themes and (literary) forms—such as the travelogue, the essay, the tale, the montage—, defying classification and genre.

Sebald's departure from academic writing, at least in its stricter forms, had already begun before he established himself as an author of German-language literature in the 1990s—a transformation that evolved in way more navigable waters than Benjamin's.[8] His literary oeuvre fluctuates between research and imagination, documentary and fiction, between a melancholic tone and an elaborated, old-fashioned style, which at points might seem incongruous with the tragic biographies of its protagonists and the catastrophic historical events its narrators ponder.[9] The most apparent polarity in Sebald's writings is perhaps the visual one between the text and the inserted images. Text and images do not always necessarily complement or comment on each other. However, Sebald attributed to photographs an imaginative potential; they can be the impulse towards language, and language can rescue them, while they can also "supplant" a text.[10]

While the impact of Benjamin's writings on Sebald's prose and poetry has not gone unnoticed by scholars and critics (indeed, it was mentioned early on),[11] the relationship remains quite complex. Examining the constellation "Benjamin-Sebald" will require identifying some of its key elements. It unfolds throughout Sebald's almost four decades of scholarship and teaching, and while Benjamin had been crucial to Sebald's thought as a scholar, it is during his transition away from academic forms of writing, that an elective affinity with Benjamin becomes a key element of his literary writing, superseding other thinkers in importance, such as Adorno, Bloch, Lévi-Strauss, Marcuse, or Wittgenstein.[12]

Even as they take on increased importance, Sebald's readings of Benjamin often overlap with those of other scholars, such as the

aforementioned thinkers. But still, this hardly means that we can only refer to the intertextuality of Sebald's oeuvre, as if the singularity of a certain author must remain indistinguishable in the noise of countless earlier texts. On the contrary: using one of Benjamin's key notions, the various readings Sebald gathered in his prose narratives as "ideas" can be described as *constellations*. As Benjamin famously defined them in the *Trauerspiel* book,

> Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed, so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes.[13]

In accordance with Benjamin's definition, those ideas do not appear (as "given") in Sebald's texts, and likewise, Sebald's Benjamin does not appear as a phenomenon, but is brought into different alignments, "subdivided and at the same time redeemed."[14] The influence of his thought is revealed suddenly and "crystallised." It is worth pointing out in this regard that the name "Benjamin" appears only once in all of Sebald's prose writings, namely in a list of writers in *The Emigrants*.[15]

Moreover, "Sebald's Benjamin" is a complex relationship, because Benjamin's thinking aimed for graphicness (*Anschaulichkeit*), yet being so intricate at the same time that it cannot be reduced to simple "outcomes." As a "thinking in extremes" (*Denken in Gegensätzen*), it unfolds itself according to a logic that embraces the labyrinthine and the detour rather than proceeding systematically or linearly.[16] And it is this deeper, methodological understanding, that I call "writing with Benjamin," and that distinguishes the constellation "Sebald-Benjamin" from other literary-philosophical pairings, such as Freud-Schnitzler, Mann-Nietzsche, or Mann-Schopenhauer, to name just a few.

Finally, there are considerations that require the constellation "Benjamin-Sebald" to be reflected on with some scepticism. Sebald was, after all, born in 1944, four years after Benjamin's death and just before the end of the war. To proclaim a "relationship" between the two writers and thinkers therefore requires one to juxtapose the writings of an early and a late 20th century author—presupposing, of course, that the actuality of the earlier will be found in the work of the latter, but also constantly risking that the gap in historical time that is marked by World War II will be ignored. This gap was deepened by the historical separation that opened up between Jews and Germans following the war. As Gershom Scholem pointed out in a speech given in 1966, which Sebald read, it would be

negligent to conceal this fissure, because only by acknowledging it is there hope for a restitution of language between Jews and Germans.[17]

These intricacies often seem to be ignored in the numerous essays pointing to Benjamin's importance for Sebald's writings.[18] On the other hand, it remains surprising that only a few Benjamin scholars have taken a closer look at Sebald's work. Eric Santner's book-length study *On Creaturely Life* (2006) and Irving Wohlfarth's essay *Anachronie. Interferenzen zwischen Walter Benjamin und W. G. Sebald* (2008) remain two major, yet quite different studies; essays by Claudia Öhlschläger and Anja Lemke take a more thematic approach to the constellation "Sebald-Benjamin."[19] However, only Wohlfarth poses the question in how far Benjamin's writings can serve as a model for a literary project like Sebald's: a work that revolves, from its beginning, around the German past and the Holocaust. A partial answer to this question, which I will try to develop in what follows, might lie in the polyvocal, "dialectical" character of Sebald's approach to literature and history,[20] as well as in Benjamin's notion of constellation.

Benjamin and Constellation

According to Rolf Tiedemann, the aim of the *Arcades Project* is to organise texts and images in such a way that material and theory, quotation and interpretation are brought into constellations.[21] "I needn't *say* anything. Merely show," Benjamin writes, defining his approach as "literary montage:" "This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage."[22] Adorno, tracing Benjamin's method to seek out the peripheral and to decentralise ideas back to his interest in German romanticism, describes his "conception of the fragmentary as a philosophical form whose fragile and incomplete character holds something of the power of the universal, which gets lost in every completed draft."[23]

As Daniel Weidner has highlighted, Benjamin's oeuvre as such emerged only posthumously, by the collective editorial efforts of his friends, while his thought and methodology as a writer is very much concerned with the question of such an afterlife.[24] Similarly, Sebald's literary method, which is often linked to the term of intertextuality as coined by Julia Kristeva,[25] could be described as a variation on Benjamin's romanticist technique of "writing in quotations." As Wohlfarth points out, both Benjamin and Sebald develop "the art of citing without quotation marks" to "the highest degree."[26]

For Sebald, Benjamin's documentary writing style—a chronicling of multiple voices, based on archival work—becomes, supplemented by his

own personal encounters and conversations, a literary model that should be read in the context of his search for ways of writing in German after the war. As Peter Fritzsche puts it (clearly, if indirectly, addressing Sebald's work here):

> To even begin to adequately understand the history of exile and mass death in twentieth-century Germany, and to write against the idea of a common past, the historian needs to write narratives from a variety of perspectives and adopt techniques of intertextuality.[27]

Sebald's literary writings explore these narrative techniques, combined with the montage of text and image and the use of different textual genres, thereby defying traditional boundaries of telling the "untold" events of the past. That each of these techniques can directly be traced back to Benjamin, underlines the latter's significance for Sebald. But Sebald's writings also cast light on Benjamin in turn, bearing out the ongoing relevance of Benjamin's thought for literary as well as historical narratives.[28]

Sebald's Writing After Benjamin

The reception of Benjamin's work might have passed its zenith today.[29] However, a growing variety of adaptations of his life and work in different media testify to his persistent presence in intellectual debates and general cultural. Laurie Anderson's 1989 studio album *Strange Angels*, for example, features Benjamin's angel of history in a song called "Progress" (a. k. a. "The Dream Before"). Jay Parini's *Benjamin's Crossing* (1996) is a biographical novel, which critics found unconvincing, and Charles Bernstein's and Brian Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime* (2004) was labelled a complex "thought opera."[30] While the claim of a "Walter Benjamin Industry" seems without doubt exaggerated, it is certainly a response to the continued popularity of his work—among academics, but also among artists.[31]

In opposition to these examples of Benjamin adaptations, Sebald never refers to Benjamin too directly, and he rarely implements fragments of Benjamin's works without comparing and arranging them together with those of other writers. Both Benjamin and Sebald shared the understanding of reading and writing as an act of "collecting." Like another European writer, Jean Paul, Sebald draws from his multilingual readings and, consequently, produces texts in and with the voices of other writers. Jean Paul's humour and experimental nihilism seem to be mirrored in Sebald's proclivity for irony and (often-times black) humour. These tendencies go

hand in hand with a profound sense of humanity.[32] Finally, like the French-German "Jean Paul," Sebald changed his first name to "Max," omitting the all-too-German "Winfried."[33]

Sebald's proximity to Benjamin is arguably most visible in his last, longest and most famous narrative, *Austerlitz,* which its author (likely because of Adorno, and because of Benjamin's interest in the storyteller) refused to call a novel.[34] The book's cover is composed of a single photograph, an *objet trouvé,* perhaps found at a flea market*,* showing a young boy dressed as a "Knight of the Rose" (*Rosenkavalier*). The title *Austerlitz* refers to both modernity (Napoleon's battle) and iron architecture (the Paris train station *Gare d'Austerlitz*, but also the *Pont d'Austerlitz*, "one of the first iron structures in Paris"), and thus announces its proximity to Benjamin's *Arcades Project.*[35]

This proximity to Benjamin becomes palpable in the *Deutsche Literaturarchiv Marbach*, where Sebald's literary legacy is archived. The archive contains an alphabetical index, that Sebald used to collect material for his *Austerlitz* project and, likely, for earlier ones as well. In his table, "A" is for "Ausgewanderte" (emigrants) and "Austerlitz," "G" for "Gletscher" (glacier), "I" and "J" contain "Istanbul," "Ipswich," "Ireland," "Japan" and "Jerusalem;" "K" stands for "Klosterneuburg," "N" is "Napoleon," "Naval Battles" and "Naufrages" (shipwrecks).[36] Even though the topics in Benjamin's index did not always match the letters they were listed under (Baudelaire is filed under J, for instance), Sebald's index very likely takes up Benjamin's method of collecting quotations, archival findings, and images to develop a writing that is dedicated to the documentary. A writing, which, however, not only exploits, but simultaneously also undermines a purely documentary style, by employing multiple narrative modes and voices (and thus avoiding the pitfalls of a single, authorial perspective), and by exploiting the tension inherent in the polarity between fact and fiction, narrative text and the documentary status of the image.[37]

While Sebald wrote *with* Benjamin since the beginning of his academic career, as the references in his academic work display, his literary references to Benjamin become clearer in the mid-1990s, during the time he worked on the travelogue *The Rings of Saturn.* Sebald's third book of prose fiction draws from several hikes through England's south-eastern counties, combining them with other literary and historical excursions. An excerpt was published in 1974 in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*. The title, *The Wooden Angels of East Anglia. An individual stroll through Norfolk and Suffolk*, might already reveal a Benjaminian allusion, as it envisions the history of South East England under the sign of an angel.[38]

When Sebald published the "extended" version some twenty years later in Hans-Magnus Enzensberger's *Die Andere Bibliothek*, he chose a title that refers even more directly to Benjamin. The text in question is, of course, Benjamin's *The Ring of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction* (1929), a brief essay, written before the two exposés for *The Arcades Project* of 1935 and 1939, respectively. Here, Benjamin takes a lithography by the Parisian *Charivari*-caricaturist Grandville, *Le pont des planètes* (1844), as his point of departure to arrange thoughts about early iron architecture, capitalism and commodity character. Just as the world exhibitions construct a universe of commodities, he argues, Grandville projects the commodity character onto the universe.[39]

The title of Sebald's travelogue is likely inspired by Susan Sontag's third essay collection *Under the Sign of Saturn*, and her essay on Benjamin with the same title.[40] The essay analyses Benjamin as a melancholic, blurring the boundaries between his life and work. And it is in this regard that the melancholic temperament explored in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* can be seen as a "bridge" to Benjamin and his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*: While the philosopher Thomas Browne serves as a kind of baroque patron saint for Sebald's travelogue, the book's table of contents, with its numeric structure and subordinated keywords, looks exactly like the ones in Benjamin's *Baroque* book. To quote some of Sebald's chapter titles: "Levitation"—"On the natural history of the herring"—"Berlin Childhood"—"The Temple of Jerusalem"—"emotional disturbances of the weavers."[41]

As Benjamin's book on the baroque mourning play "exposed the 17th century to the light of the present day," and the *Arcades Project* was meant to achieve something similar, but "with greater distinctness" for the 19th century, the walking narrator in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* similarly explores a history of modernity through its ruined manifestations.[42] The reference to glass and iron architecture as the birthplace of the 19th century is apparent in the first chapter of *The Rings of Saturn,* when the narrator visits Somerleyton Hall and the site of its glass dome (destroyed by a fire in 1913), constructed by the industrialist Sir Morton Peto. At the end of the book, the narrator turns to 18th century looms as a symbol of the origins of the Industrial Revolution:

> […] it hardly seems possible that even then, before the Industrial Age, a great number of people […] spent their lives with their wretched bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails, hung with weights, and reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages. It was a peculiar symbiosis which, perhaps because of its relatively primitive character, makes more apparent than any later form of factory work that we are able

> to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented.[43]

Here, Sebald clearly follows Benjamin's historiographical return to the image of an *Ursprung* of modern times. But he does so without the Marxian distinction between the ownership of the means of production and the workers—the weavers, with their tortured bodies, are in an awkward "symbiosis" with their looms. And this does not lead the narrator to thoughts of the 1844 weaver's revolt in Silesia, but is, almost surprisingly, converted into a mood of resignation, emphasised by a drive towards natural history at the end of the quoted passage. But the resignation dissolves into irony in the next sentence, when the weavers and the "nature" of their melancholic work is compared to that of "scholars and writers."[44]

Conclusion

While this essay can only serve as a small sketch of the constellation "Benjamin-Sebald," it hopefully illustrated the extent to which Benjamin's theoretical and literary texts, methods and techniques are engrained in Sebald's literary oeuvre—despite the various other "authors on loan" in his texts.[45] Precisely because the concept of constellation is at the very core of Sebald's writing, his methods for borrowing do not follow any one exclusive framework, nor should his work be read as an adaptation of a particular writer. More importantly, by adopting Benjamin's concept of constellation, Sebald avoids—with very few exceptions—a too direct and necessarily inept adaptation of Benjamin's writings, while Benjaminian ideas, not despite, but *because* of this, shine through all of his books.

It is *with* Benjamin that Sebald, as Ernestine Schlant concluded in 1999, could "succeed in breaking the narrative patterns and perspectives in which the Nazi past has been discussed in post-war German literature."[46] Always careful not to be roped into a certain category, Sebald indirectly agreed with Schlant's description in his 2001 speech at the *Stuttgarter Literaturhaus*, where he defines literature as "An Attempt at Restitution." Answering the question "What is literature good for?", he says:

> There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship.[47]

Why only in literature? With Derrida, Sebald could have replied that "we must sometimes, in the name of reason, be suspicious of rationalisation."[48]

And Sebald's answer in this speech, which is fairly rooted in the spirit of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, is quite similar: "Perhaps only to help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by casual logic."[49]

This finds a pendant in Benjamin's use of quotation and montage in works like *One-Way Street* or the unfinished *Arcades Project.* But for Benjamin, these "literary montages" are based on philosophical reflection; at least in the *Arcades Project,* the "poetic" without a theoretical antithesis was "inadmissible," as he writes in a letter to Gretel Adorno.[50] Still, as for Sebald, Benjamin's montages contributed to the work's purpose of graphicness (*Anschaulichkeit*) and facilitate an experimentation with different means of historical representation. Their purpose is to give justice to the cast-off bits, rags, and garbage, and to allow them "to come into their own."[51]

Sebald's prose writings are an attempt at exploring the catastrophic history of modernity in its ongoing, diachronic relations. But he does not choose simply to adapt Benjaminian methodology in order to recreate his work for the 20th century.[52] For Sebald, writing *with* Benjamin means to write in a non-linear way, "polar" in its combination of voices from the past and the present, and graphic (*anschaulich*) through its use of different media, while it also means to build a carefully crafted narrative, in which the process of the construction itself remains more or less hidden.[53]

The vast dimensions of Sebald's excursions in historical time and space find a remarkable posthumous comment in the *Arcades Project*'s Convolute N, where Benjamin writes on the "dietetics of historical literature:"

> The contemporary who learns from books of history to recognise how long his present misery has been in preparation (and this is what the historian must inwardly aim to show him) acquires thereby a high opinion of his own powers. A history that provides this kind of instruction does not cause him sorrow, but arms him. Nor does such a history arise from sorrow, unlike that which Flaubert had in mind when he penned the confession: "Few will suspect how depressed one had to be to undertake the resuscitation of Carthage." It is pure *curiosité* that arises from and deepens sorrow.[54]

Taken as a statement about the importance of describing a historical event from its origins, this passage seems to provide a legitimation of Sebald's literary excursions into the history of modernity, as in *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn.* It thus contributes to his conception of "restitution" as the task of the author, who must "arm" the contemporary reader, preparing her for what is to come. But the passage also introduces

Benjamin's critique of empathy (*Einfühlung*) as an approach to historical understanding. His stance here, similar to his statement in the seventh thesis of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, is that, historically (and in historicism), "empathy" is only empathy with the victor. In this regard, the above-quoted passage leads us to the question of the role of melancholy in Sebald's prose fiction: As much as Sebald owes to Benjamin for his writings on melancholy as a disposition and as a method of historical understanding, one could suspect that there is a revival of empathy in Sebald's literary texts, particularly through their fusion of historical reality and fiction. In this regard, Sebald seems to miss how critically Benjamin viewed Flaubert's sadness, when he writes: "It is pure *curiosité* that arises from and deepens sorrow."[55]

Benjamin, aware of the danger of a mere return "to romanticism," forced himself "to go on to political things," as he wrote in the above-quoted letter to Scholem. In his later work, the revolutionary force of political change is linked to his concept of messianism—analogous to Marx's idea of a classless society, which for Benjamin "secularised the idea of messianic time."[56] Does this imply that Sebald follows Benjamin "back into romanticism," but is too hesitant or careful to proceed "on to political things"? At least in passing, Sebald addresses this very question in an introduction to one of his essay collections on Austrian literature. "Melancholy," he states, "is a form of resistance."[57] Returning to the book on the baroque mourning play, and thus to his first reading of Benjamin, Sebald's own literary work at points does not seem to depart far enough from the "all too tempered climate" of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels,* which Benjamin later self-critically identified.[58] At the same time, it is apparent that for Sebald's post-war and post-reunification poetics, the work of remembrance has become the political itself.

Notes

[1] Sebald signed his Benjamin copy with "Winfried Sebald / Juli 1964." All other volumes of Benjamin's work that are now stored at the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach* are either signed a later year or were published after 1964.

[2] For a detailed overview of Sebald's years as a student in Freiburg (1963-1965) and later as a lecturer in Manchester (1966-1968), see Richard Sheppard, "The Sternheim Years: W. G. Sebald's 'Lehrjahre' and 'Theatralische Sendung' 1963-75," in *Saturn's Moons. A W. G. Sebald Handbook,* edited by Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Routledge, 2011), 42-107. For a brief history of Sebald's Benjamin reception, see Nikolai Preuschoff, *Mit Walter Benjamin. Melancholie, Geschichte und Erzählen bei W. G. Sebald* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015).

[3] For a recent account on these events, see Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2014), 177-239.

[4] "Oft habe ich mich seither gefragt, wie trüb und verlogen unser Literaturverständnis wohl geblieben wäre, hätten uns die damals nach und nach erscheinenden Schriften Benjamins und der Frankfurter Schule […] nicht andere Perspektiven eröffnet." W. G. Sebald, *Logis in einem Landhaus* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1998 [2003]), 12 (translation mine, N.P.).

[5] W. G. Sebald, "The Questionable Business of Writing," interview with Toby Green, 1999, Amazon UK website, http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/21586/ref%3Ded_art_121649-txt1 (last accessed August 2017).

[6] See Benjamin, SW 4, 389.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 261. "Bereits mit der nächsten [Arbeit, N.P.], […] der 'Neuen Melusine' will ich ins Romantische zurück und (vielleicht schon) ins Politische voran; ganz anders polar arbeiten, als in dem mir nun zu temperierten Klima der Barockarbeit […]." Walter Benjamin, *Briefe,* vol. 1, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), 373.

[8] Sebald established a successful academic career outside of Germany at the University of East Anglia, where he was appointed chair of German Literature in 1987, and in 1989 became the founding director of the British Centre for Literary Translation.

[9] Regarding this contrast, see the chapter "Die Leichtigkeit der Schwermut. Sebalds 'Kunst der Levitation,'" in Ben Hutchinson, *W.G. Sebald. Die dialektische Imagination* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009), 145-165.

[10] Christian Scholz, "'But the Written Word is not a True Document': A Conversation on Literature and Photography with W.G. Sebald," translated by Markus Zisselsberger, in *Searching for Sebald. Photography after W. G. Sebald,* edited by Lisa Patt (Los Angeles: ICI Press, 2007), 104-109, here 104. "Beim Schreiben erkennt man Möglichkeiten, von Bildern erzählend auszugehen, in diese Bilder erzählend hineinzugehen, diese Bilder statt einer Textpassage zu subplantieren […]." W. G. Sebald, *Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis. Gespräche 1971 bis 2001,* edited by Torsten Hoffmann (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2011), 166.

[11] See, for example, James Wood's review of *The Rings of Saturn*, "The Right Thread," *New Republic*, 6th July 1998, 38, and Susan Sontag's review "A Mind in Mourning," *Times Literary Supplement*, 25th February 2000, 3-4.

[12] See Richard Sheppard, "The Sternheim Years," 54.

[13] Benjamin, *Origin*, 34-35. The German original reads: "Die Ideen sind ewige Konstellationen und indem die Elemente als Punkte in derartigen Konstellationen erfaßt werden, sind die Phänomene aufgeteilt und gerettet zugleich." Benjamin, GS I.1, 215.

[14] Benjamin, GS I.1, 215; see also GS I.1, 702-703.

[15] See W. G. Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1992), 86; and W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants,* translated by Michael Hulse (London: New Directions, 1997), 58.

[16] The figure of the labyrinth is present in most of Sebald's prose writings. Describing his method in an interview, he states: "When I do research for my books, I do not do it according to academic methods: one rather follows a diffused instinct, the trace of the research can then no longer be tracked, because it looks like the way a dog runs across a field to follow a sent." W. G. Sebald, *Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis*, 118 (translation mine, N.P.).

[17] "Nur im Eingedenken des Vergangenen, das niemals ganz von uns durchdrungen werden wird, kann neue Hoffnung auf Restitution der Sprache zwischen Deutschen und Juden, auf Versöhnung der Geschiedenen keimen." Gershom Scholem, "Juden und Deutsche," *Judaica,* vol. 2 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 20-46, here 46.

[18] And Benjamin is thus reduced, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht points out in a similar context, to a more or less "ornamental" ingredient. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Ein neu zu erkundender Kontinent. Konturen einer zukünftigen Gegenwart von Walter Benjamins Werk," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6th December 2014, Literatur und Kunst, 59.

[19] See Anja Lemke, "Figurationen der Melancholie. Spuren Walter Benjamins in W. G. Sebalds *Die Ringe des Saturn,*" *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 127:2 (2008): 239-267; Claudia Öhlschläger, "Der Saturnring oder etwas vom Eisenbau. W. G. Sebalds poetische Zivilisationskritik," in *W. G. Sebald. Politische Archäologie und melancholische Bastelei,* edited by Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschläger (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006), 205-218. See also Peter Schmucker, *Grenzübertretungen. Intertextualität im Werk von W. G. Sebald* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2012).

[20] See Hutchinson, *W. G. Sebald. Die dialektische Imagination*.

[21] Rolf Tiedemann, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in GS V.1, 11-41, here 13.

[22] Benjamin, *AP*, 458 (N 1, 10).

[23] Theodor W. Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 37 (translation mine, N.P.).

[24] Daniel Weidner, "Life after life. A figure of thought in Walter Benjamin," paper given at the conference *Afterlife. Writing and Image in Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg*, Universidad Federal de Minais Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, October 2012, see http://www.zfl-berlin.org/tl_files/zfl/downloads/personen/weidner/life_after_life.pdf (last accessed August 2017).

[25] See Julia Kristeva, „Word, Dialogue and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader,* edited by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 34-61.

[26] Irving Wohlfarth, "Anachronie. Interferenzen zwischen Walter Benjamin und W. G. Sebald," *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 33:2 (2008), 197. See also Benjamin, *AP*, 458 (N 1, 10).

[27] Peter Fritzsche, "The Archive," *History & Memory* 17:1/2 (2005): 15-44, here 39. Fritzsche, however, seems to refer directly to Sebald's work here, as he mentions him, alongside with Enzensberger, on page 33 of his essay.

[28] For a reading of Sebald's work in a historiographical context see Lynn Wolff, "Literary Historiography: W. G. Sebald's Fiction," in *W. G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writing,* edited by Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 317-330.

[29] Gumbrecht quotes in his 2014 article the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, stating that the number of references to Benjamin was the highest in 2007. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Ein neu zu erkundender Kontinent."

[30] Anthony Tommasini, "For a New Operatic Type, Complexity Rules," *New York Times*, 23rd July 2005.

[31] See Udi Greenberg, "The Politics of the Walter Benjamin Industry," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25:3 (2008): 53-70. Similarly, Sebald's work has by now prompted several exhibitions, theatre plays and documentaries. See, for example, New York's New Museum exhibition of the Sebald-inspired show *After Nature* in July-September 2008, or the album *Patience (After Sebald)* by electronic artist Leyland Kirby (2012).

[32] See Richard Sheppard, "Guest Editor's Preface," *Journal of European Studies* 41:3-4 (2011), 202.

[33] Similarly, the acronym "W. G. Sebald," which the author will later use, could be described with a sentence Benjamin wrote about Siegfried Kracauer, stating that his "laconic S. in front of the last name" prevents the reader from judging the author by his very German first name ("uns zu schnell uns einen Vers auf seine Erscheinung zu machen"). Benjamin, GS III, 219 (translation mine, N.P.).

[34] See, for example, the interview with Wood, where Sebald states "that fiction writing, which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself, is a form of imposture, which I find very, very difficult to take. Any form of authorial writing, where the narrator sets himself up as stagehand and director and judge and executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable." James Wood, "An Interview with W. G. Sebald," *Brick* 59 (1998): 23-29.

[35] Benjamin, *AP*, 151. Benjamin, GS V.1, 212.

[36] Some of the terms refer back to the Sebald's earlier prose narratives, such as "Klosterneuburg," a town close to Vienna, where the narrator of *Schwindel. Gefühle* visits the poet Ernst Herbeck in a mental institution; others like "Ireland," "Japan" or "Naval Battles" (all of which occur in *The Rings of Saturn*) refer most likely to later writing. The index therefore was very likely either meant to collect material for on-going literary projects, or to gather material from topics, both new and previously established, for the latest project, *Austerlitz* (2001).

[37] See Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust* (New York, London: Routledge, 1999), 225. See also Adrian Daub, "'Donner à Voir'. The Logics of the Caption in W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* and Alexander Kluge's *Devil's Blind Spot*," in *Searching for Sebald. Photography after W. G. Sebald,* edited by Lisa Patt (Los Angeles: ICI Press, 2007), 306-329, here 311.

[38] W. G. Sebald, „Die hölzernen Engel von East Anglia. Eine individuelle Bummeltour durch Norfolk und Suffolk," http://www.zeit.de/1974/31/die-hoelzernen-engel-von-east-angelia/komplettansicht (last accessed August 2017).

[39] Benjamin, *AP*, 885-887; Benjamin, GS V.2, 1060.
[40] Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980).
[41] One of the most remarkable references to Benjamin in the book is, however, the double-sided photograph of a miniature model of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in W. G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1997), 292-293 and W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* translated by Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998), 246-247—the image appears cropped in the English edition. The blurry reproduction of a photograph of what is almost certainly the interior of the miniature temple described in the text shows a striking similarity to a Parisian arcade. The blurriness of the photograph marks Sebald's temple miniature as an arcade-like threshold space, thus bringing Benjamin's reflections on miniature, history, photography, and on exile and writing together. As a miniature, the model of the temple both represents a specific historical time and the irrevocable detachment from it. However, brought together with Grandville's *Le pont des planètes* and the series *Un Autre Monde* (1844), it represents the artwork's potential to create another time, a countertime.
[42] Benjamin, *AP*, 459 (N 1a, 2). See Benjamin, GS V.1, 572. For the afterlife of Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* see also Dominik Finkelde, "The Presence of the Baroque: Benjamin's 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels' in Contemporary Contexts," in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin,* edited by Rolf Goebel (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 46-69.
[43] W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 282-283. "[…] nimmt es mich wunder, in welch großer Zahl […] die Menschen bereits in der Zeit vor der Industrialisierung mit ihren armen Körpern fast ein Leben lang eingeschirrt gewesen sind in die aus hölzernen Rahmen und Leisten zusammengesetzten, mit Gewichten behangenen und an Foltergestelle oder Käfige erinnernden Webstühle in einer eigenartigen Symbiose, die vielleicht gerade aufgrund ihrer vergleichsweisen Primitivität besser als jede spätere Ausformung unserer Industrie verdeutlicht, daß wir uns nur eingespannt in die von uns erfundenen Maschinen auf der Erde zu erhalten vermögen." Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn,* 334.
[44] Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 335.
[45] See Susanne Schedel, *"Wer weiß, wie es vor Zeiten wirklich gewesen ist?" Textbeziehungen als Mittel der Geschichtsdarstellung bei W. G. Sebald* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), 177.
[46] Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence,* 226.
[47] W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo,* translated by Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005), 205. „Es gibt viele Formen des Schreibens; einzig aber in der literarischen geht es, über die Registrierung der Tatsachen und über die Wissenschaft hinaus, um einen Versuch der Restitution." W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2006), 248.
[48] Michael Mack, "Between Elias Canetti and Jacques Derrida: Satire and the Role of Fortifications in the Work of W. G. Sebald," in *W. G. Sebald. Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writing,* 233-256, here 244.
[49] Sebald, *Campo Santo,* 204.

[50] See Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* 506-507.
[51] Benjamin, *AP,* 460 (N 1a, 8). This is, again in Fritzsche's words, a condition that allows one "to even begin to adequately understand the history of exile and mass death in twentieth-century Germany." Fritzsche, "The Archive," 39.
[52] See Kenneth Goldsmith's attempt, *Capital. New York, Capital of the 20th Century* (New York: Verso, 2015).
[53] See Adrian Daub, "Donner à Voir," 314.
[54] Benjamin, *AP*, 481 (N 15, 3). "Zur Diätetik des historischen Schrifttums. Der Zeitgenosse, der da erkennt, von wie langer Hand die über ihn hereinbrechende Misere hat vorbereitet sein wollen—und dieses ihm zu zeigen, muß dem Historiker am Herzen liegen—bekommt eine hohe Ansicht von seinen eignen Kräften. Eine Geschichte, welche ihn so belehrt, macht ihn nicht traurig, sondern bewehrt ihn eher. Sie geht auch nicht aus Traurigkeit hervor, zum Unterschied von der, die Flaubert vorschwebte als er die Konfession niederschrieb: 'Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu etre triste pour entreprendre de ressusciter Carthage.' Die reine curiosité geht aus Traurigkeit hervor und vertieft sie." Benjamin, GS V.1, 603.
[55] Benjamin, *AP*, 481 (N 15, 3).
[56] Benjamin, SW 4, 401 (thesis 17a). See Irving Wohlfarth, "Anachronie," 207-209.
[57] W. G. Sebald, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Essays zur österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1994), 12 (translation mine, N.P.). For a recent study on melancholy in Benjamin, see Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy. Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
[58] Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* 261.

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