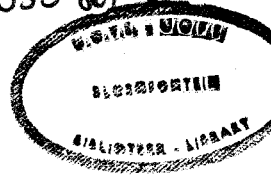


**WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORIES
OF
EXPERIENCE:
A CRITICAL STUDY IN THE
HISTORY OF ART
AND THE POLITICS
OF
AESTHETICS**

by

Gerhard Theodore Schoeman

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Submitted in compliance with the demands of the degree

MAGISTER ARTIUM

in the Faculty of the Humanities,

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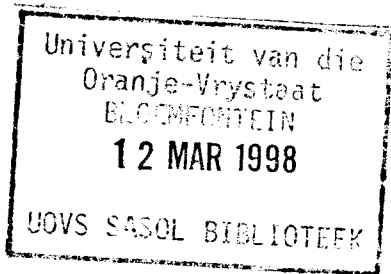
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The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. For this reason dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening.

Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*

For only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dream be recalled with impunity.

Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*

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* My brother and sister: the former whose enigmatic absence provides an ever questioning presence; the latter whose physis, bodily presence, and often striking and troubled subversiveness, tellingly interrupts my own pedantic approach.

* Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father: if it wasn't for his library, his sense for history, his inexhaustible intellectual support and patrician faith in me, none of this would have been possible. May this project be an *evictie* of his own nipped in the bud hopes.

Foreword

Reading Benjamin today is fraught with implications, both in the realm of aesthetics and in the realm of politics. A vast amount of literature has been published on his work and, as is often the case with contradictory writers, much of the writing polemicises against the author himself (a dubious procedure), and his thinking. It has been the aim of this thesis to avoid adding to the already sky-high funeral pyre that makes up secondary literature on the subject; which means that prolonged debate is not swept under the carpet but by necessity relegated to an *immanent* sphere.

It might be said that writing in-between the lines is a procedure not foreign to Benjamin himself — immanent critique, dialectical thinking, and the allegorical attitude have this in common. As Benjamin (1992a: 201) put it in the context of Proust: “We do not always proclaim loudly the most important thing we have to say”. It is not a question of cloning such a technique, however, that is beautifying, and hiding behind the appearance; but rather it provides a way to “de-construct” the immanent procedure, the material at hand, in such a way as to *enhance through unravelling* the actual academic form itself.

That Benjamin is an anti-systematic thinker is well known; the question then, of course, is how to fabricate a procedure which would *systematise* Benjamin’s thinking rather than harness it with a *system*. It is a problem which appears briefly, but methodologically, in part three of the thesis, discussed through Barthes’ discussion of Fourier’s systematising (referring as opposed to creating a system of the referent). Part three would then, in other words, signal a methodology implicit in Benjamin’s writing (the subject of the thesis), but also a methodology of reading him (the object at hand). In this way Benjamin’s double procedure — reading-writing — becomes immanent.

Pretensions aside, to return to the *historical* task at hand. The thesis is divided into three sections, a quasi-Hegelian dialectical move. The first section may be said to be a thesis: Benjamin’s thinking finds its “origin” in a theological, mystical, Judaic

philosophy of the revelatory power inherent in *language*. The argument develops through discussion of major elements of Benjamin's thinking pivoting on such "issues" as the romantic conception of *criticism*, Benjamin's rereading of *mimesis*, the *Kabbalah*, hermetic and orphic principles of *magical* language, the *inexpressible*, finding their "apotheosis" in Benjamin's reading of *allegory*, as it is developed specifically in the *Trauerspiel* dissertation. Allegory, then, forms the basis of the thesis, as its *subversive* nature would seem to be the basis of Benjamin's thinking *in toto*: his idea of allegory centres around a notion of the mortification of (symbolic or mythical) *appearances*, a crucial critical move; via a dialectical turn-about, allegory reads redemption through the abject, or eternal life through death, as is the case with Benjamin's "romantic" critique of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.

Part two finds its pivot in *images*, as in *dialectical* images finding material and theoretical fruition in *technological* or *mechanical* images. It will be argued that for the text-centred Benjamin, enveloped in the aura of the Judaic *Bilderverbot*, images or figuration provides *the* essential vehicle for writing and reading; images that we are able to interrogate, subvert, sublimate, destroy — emblematically, dialectically, transgressively. Part two is in this sense an exploration of Benjamin's political moves, in terms of revolutionarily going against the current. Images, then, provide for Benjamin "signs" of "awakening". The *destructive character* of Benjamin's conception of awakening is the deciding factor, the determining experiential move — as an antithesis so to speak.

Part three would suggest a synthesis. If images subvert the word for political reasons, the *ruins* of reality signal the "return" or "reversal" of the Messianic, *in the historic sense of the word or image*. In the face of *failure*, the "redemptive" move of allegory — reading salvation through the abject — takes over from immediate Brechtian notions of "middle-ground" pedagogy. The ruins of political reality, of modernity, allegorically open a small porthole for the Messiah to come through. Remembrance coupled with forgetting provides a historical grounding for outward *Erfahrung*, as opposed to inward *Erlebnis*. As a synthesis, then, part three finally "systematises" itself through a "utopian" reading of Kafka, the Angelus Novus, and Fourier: a move to

underscore the “redemptive” humour underlying the abjection that Benjamin has a love-affair with.

Finally, it must be added that Benjamin as a “mythologising” author, writes explicitly against the mythification of reality: a factor which, however implicitly, carries through from part one to part three. Benjamin sees the appearance of myth as much in art as in reality; in fact, a major part of his thinking is precisely directed against the ‘artification’ or ‘aestheticisation’ of reality which by an “inner logic” gives rise to the fascist flood. If it is argued that Benjamin is by nature always *against the system* (any authoritarian system), it would find its most vivid expression in his anti-fascist doxa. It is this side to his thinking, this positive destructiveness, which perhaps remains the most educational. It is the aim of this thesis to set such a possibility into relief, blazing a trail between modernity and postmodernity.

Part One

Origin and tradition: language

1. The metaphysics of youth

The period 1912-1917, which marks Benjamin's intellectually formative years, shows him strongly under the influence of Gustav Wyneken's idea of an independent youth culture.¹ Benjamin joined Wyneken's radical wing of the Youth Movement (*Jugendbewegung*) in 1912, a movement constituted under the Humboldtian ideal of a free and self-determining orientated science of education (*Wissenschaftsauffassung*), which together with its call for a political right of co-determination for the students (*Mitspracherecht*) saw it in direct opposition with the conformist and authoritarian system of education. Benjamin himself took a resolute stance against what he saw as oppression in the school and the parenthouse, "gegen *Skepsis und Erfahrung* der Philister und gegen die Spießbürgermoral" (Witte 1985: 18).

In 1913 Benjamin wrote a fragment entitled, "Erfahrung" (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 54-6). Here Benjamin directs a polemic (*Verriß*) against authoritarian adults for holding so-called *Erfahrung* over youth's head. According to Benjamin, adults held the view that youth was but a brief and fickle period in one's life, a short night ("deine Jugend ist eine kurze Nacht nur"; Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 54), but after youth had been outgrown, then true *Erfahrung* could begin. Benjamin regards this patronising attitude as life robbing, hampering as it does the freedom to experience things wholly other than merely quotidian, *bürgerliche Erfahrung*. Against these grave adults whose intolerance is as wretched as that of philistines, Benjamin commends the youth for serving values beyond

¹ "Wyneken's ideal of an elite and highly ethical *Männerbund* devoted to the ideals of Kant, Hegel, Goethe and Nietzsche was the most important influence on Benjamin in his student years" (Rabinbach 1985: 90).

mere experience. Youth gave value and meaning (*Inhalt*) to life through *Geist* (spirit and intellect);² life was not merely the sum of past experiences:

Jede unserer Erfahrungen hat ja nun Inhalt. Wir selber aus unserm Geiste werden ihr Inhalt geben. - Der Gedankenlose beruhigt sich beim Irrtum. "Du wirst die Wahrheit nie finden", rufft er dem Forscher zu, "ich hab's erlebt". Für den Forscher aber ist der Irrtum nur eine neue Hilfe zur Wahrheit (Spinoza). Sinnlos und geistverlassen ist die Erfahrung nur für den Geistlosen. Schmerzlich vielleicht kann sie dem Strebenden sein, aber kaum wird sie ihn verzweifeln lassen (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 55).

Benjamin, then, holds that the freedom to experience (not) lies with a youth who in their youthful spirit can overcome the adult claim *to have experienced*, to have seen, to have lived; free from that paradox which is in fact a sentimental *clinging to the past*, a "having experienced" mentality claiming authority over "green" youth. The experience or *Erfahrung* Benjamin talks about here is the one that the adults, like sentimental philistines *hating* youth ("Und Sentimentalität ist meist die Schutzfärbung dieses Hasses"), use to cage the youth in, to bracket life and rob it of its mystery: "Die *Maske* des Erwachsenen heißt 'Erfahrung'" (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 56 & 54; italics added).

But the youth, if they remain "young" in dream and spirit, know something other than merely the sum of experiences to which the adults cling in hate and resentment, "daß es Werte gibt — unerfahrbare —, denen wir dienen" (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 55). The spirit of youth then, is here the ability to open up the avenues of experience, to open the bourgeois parental house windows, and let in the fresh air of rejuvenating possibility, as it

² The intellectual side of *Geist* is crucial. Youth here is to be seen in the same context as, but as forerunner to, Benjamin's early anti-political position which is as intellectual as his early Judaism, the two going hand-in-hand (at first). As Benjamin addresses the issue of his Jewishness in a 1912 letter to Strauss: It is the idea that matters: "My experience brought me to the insight: the Jews represent an elite in the party of the intellectuals (*Geistigen*) For me Jewishness is not in any sense an end in itself, but the noble bearer and representative of the intellect." And on the issue of politics: "that politics are the consequence of intellectual principles no longer carried on by the intellect" (qtd. in Rabinbach 1985: 96 & 97). The question of what happened to this aristocratic ideal in Benjamin's later political program, in the sense of the dialectic between the Then and the Now, is of course the *sin qua non* of this thesis; suffice it to say that for Benjamin the *experience of ideas in relation to the world* was the governing force, it made him, in Sontag's words (following the title of an essay she wrote) "the last intellectual", for better or worse.

were:³ the ability for emphatic life, emphatic freedom from constraints, free from parental, authoritarian bondage, a life of value.⁴

Wir kennen aber Andres, was keine Erfahrung uns gibt oder nimmt: daß es Wahrheit gibt, auch wenn alles bisher Gedachte Irrtum war. Oder: daß Treue gehalten werden soll, auch wenn bisher niemand sie hielt. Solchen Willen kann uns Erfahrung nicht nehmen (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 55).

The aristocratic, Nietzschean value of youth (Witte 1985: 20) is an *ethical* idea to Benjamin. It pertains to an ethical attitude, a moral consciousness, which shines noble in the murky chambers of the pre-war Weimar republic. That Benjamin's outspoken bearing at the time (it is said that he was the Youth Movement's leading spokesperson) was strongly anti-political, against social engagement by the students (Witte 1985: 24), adds to, rather than subtracts from, his political consciousness. His despondency with the youth movement in the light of his intimate friend Fritz Heinle's war-time suicide, coupled with Wyneken's call to the youth to take up arms, a move which Benjamin took as a bitter betrayal of their original principles, amounted to an even stronger against the current, anti-war, anti-engagement program for Benjamin. But grounded as this theory was in the deep problem of a reality on the verge of catastrophe — spiritually, philosophically, and socially — it forestalled mere abstraction. For Benjamin's retreat into a "purely" intellectual position was a morally sound, political move, *against* the political consensus of the day,

³See Beth Sharon Ash (1989 : 18): 'In "A Berlin Chronicle", Benjamin perceives that a great injustice has been perpetrated against him by his parents, in that their assimilationist strategies are designed to make him more conventionally German than they are themselves. The son, coerced by the father to side with the oppressor, finds himself positioned to discredit both the oppressor and the (actually disenfranchised) father. The father considers himself a member of the great league of fathers, but the son knows better: because of race and history, the relation of Jewish fathers to power is inherently problematical. Walter tests the limits of Herr Benjamin's authority by stressing the fundamental insecurity of the Jewish patriarch's place in German society. Herr Benjamin's "stubborn" and "self-confident" social success is contrasted with the "sinister" character of his business; and his fief, Walter reveals, is actually "a ghetto held on lease" (B[erlin] C[hronicle]). Paternal tenure seems at best provisional, at worst malign: a fake and sinister authority.' Ash goes on to inscribe such anti-authoritarianism as fraught with Oedipal tensions — desire for the mother coupled with a *Sehnsucht* for *Vatermord* —, but rather than psychoanalyse "Walter", we, in the context of this thesis, turn instead to the *historiographic* spaces implied by *the writer* Benjamin's words.

⁴ Cf. later Benjamin: "We must wake up from the world of our parents" (Benjamin 1977a, 5: 1214, qtd. in Buck-Morss 1993: 329). The connection between early Benjamin and later Benjamin, in the sense of going against the political, social, philosophical and historical grain, *against conformism*, therefore speaks for itself, against mere psychoanalytic procedures.

“as the utopian promise of cultural universality” (Rabinbach 1985: 98) and universal ethics; and *language*, unpolitical language was to be its magical vehicle, the source (or *Ursprung*) of its essence.

2. Against the system: Kant and a metaphysics of language

The idea that life is more than merely the sum of experiences reappears in the (1917/18) essay, “Über das Programm der kommende Philosophie”. Here Benjamin postulates a new philosophy based on the Kantian system of knowledge (it would be the last time that he would attempt constructing a “system”); but a new philosophy that would revise the Kantian system specifically around the concept of “experience” (*Erfahrung*): the task of the modern coming philosophy was to establish an epistemological basis for a concept of experience that was not singular and time-bound, but of a kind of knowledge that transcended to a higher level of experience; that is: the inauguration of a metaphysics of experience that was to be the source of knowledge and truth.

For this higher realm of experience to be brought about, to be activated, the Kantian distinction between subject and object had to be neutralised by a dialectic of transcendence. The possibility for a higher realm of experience, pure experience which would form the basis for true knowledge, lay in the sphere of “total neutrality in reference to the concepts object and subject” (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 163). The purification of the theory of knowledge would mean a redefinition of both the concept of knowledge and the concept of experience, as they had been defined by Kant’s “subject”. Their purification was to take place in the realm of religion or metaphysics, which was, according to Benjamin, the highest form of experience, experience in its totality. What Benjamin was after here was to distinguish an experience which would transcend the more superficial forms of experience, experiences which Kant’s subject moulded, abstractly and scientifically.

Kant maintained that abstract or conceptual analysis of nature was necessary for scientific knowledge (the natural sciences) to exist, though he also made allowances for the teleological viewpoint with regard to metaphysics, ethics, the unsayable, the sublime. Both, he said, had validity, in their own right, but apart; the former could be known, the latter not. More precisely: the world as object could be fathomed — the laws of nature could be understood — by a subject, an “I” (*individuellen leibgeistigen Ich*), conceptually by the *Reinen Vernunft*; and suggested teleologically with regards to that which was beyond reason, the *Ding-an-Sich* which was sublime — but this only via the distinctions subject and object (*Subjekt-Natur*), from an empirical point of view, and by reason (we can only know things in their appearances). That which could not be known by reason was wholly other, it was sublime. By categorising it as sublime, as thing-in-itself, it would be determined by reason, and could thus be known; not in itself but as abstract concept.⁵

Benjamin, on the other hand, sought to transcend subject-object terminology and rational categorisation *per se* — Benjamin described as “mythology” the entire idea of knowledge as a relation between a subject and an object where an individual ego receives sensations. The reconception of knowledge and experience and their relation to subject and object required a “purification of epistemology” which would make metaphysics and experience logically possible” (Handelman 1991: 21); doing away with any idea of a “*personal experience*” as postulated by Buber and the nationalistic and proto-fascist ideologies of “blood and soil” (Handelman 1991: 20; Rabinbach 1984: 95).⁶

⁵ Adorno for example took Kant to task with regard this “subjectivist” claim that “the subject could not experience the object as it was in itself, but only as structured by subjective forms and categories — only, that is, as something essentially identical to the subject” (Buck-Morss 1977: 82-83). For Adorno ‘The subject of philosophical experience was the empirically existing, material and transitory human being — not merely mind but a sentient human body, a “piece of nature” (*Stück Natur*)’ (Buck-Morss 1977: 83). “Kant’s subject was creative only in the sense that it molded the objects in accord with the apriori forms and categories of rational understanding: the mind had a preformed, permanent structure to which the objects of experience conformed. But Adorno, in giving Kant’s Copernican revolution a turn, argued that the object, not the subject, was pre-eminent: it was the preformed, historically developed structure of society which made things what they were, including Kant’s reified categories of consciousness” (Buck-Morss 1977: 85).

⁶ Scholem remembers Benjamin’s ‘harsh ... rejection of the cult of “experience,” which was glorified in Buber’s writings of the time (particularly from 1910 to 1917). He said derisively that if Buber had his

He wished to prove the logic of metaphysics within the quest for metaphysical knowledge, that is, true knowledge, total experiences that unified identity and knowledge *im-mediatly*.⁷ But, as Handelman (1991: 20) points out, “Benjamin and Scholem both strongly opposed any cult of pure immediate experience, including Buber’s *Erlebnismystik* theology, which proclaimed the superiority of intuitive ecstatic experience (*Erlebnis*) to the truths mediated through language”. According to Axel Honneth (1983: 84-84), what makes up the reference point of Benjamin’s analysis is “the experience of the animated character [*Beseeltheit*] of all reality”:

To illustrate those borderline experiences in which reality as a whole is experienced as a field of subjective forces, Benjamin employs empirical examples, knowledge of which he largely acquired through his concern with contemporary research. Obviously following Lévy-Bruhl’s highly influential investigations, he mentions ‘primitive peoples’ who ‘identify themselves with sacred animals and plants,’ talks about the ‘insane’ and the ‘sick,’ in whose perception a dissolution of the borders of the self occurs, and finally even points to ‘clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to receive others’ perceptions as their own.’ [...] Each of the four examples vouches for the change in perception that we experience when we no longer maintain a division between the sphere of the objectivated and that of the intersubjective (Honneth 1983: 84 & 85).

Benjamin’s concept of experience, as developed in this early essay written when he was still a student, pertains to an experience deeper than a “rational” or scientific worldview could reveal; deep experience is unified in the metaphysical continuity of the Idea: “Für den vertieften Begriff der Erfahrung ist [...] Kontinuität nächst der Einheit unerlässlich und in den Ideen muß der Grund der Einheit und der Kontinuität jener nicht vulgären und nicht nur wissenschaftlichen sondern metaphysischen Erfahrungen aufgewiesen werden. Die Konvergenz der Ideen auf den obersten Begriff der Erkenntnis ist nachzuweisen” (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 167).

way, first of all one would have to ask every Jew, “Have you experienced Jewishness yet?” (Scholem 1982: 29).

⁷ See Benjamin’s famous polemical anti-political letter of July 1916 to Buber in which he stresses the magical quality of language in opposition to political rhetoric and chatter, that the *essence* of language could only be experienced “*im-immediately*” (Rabinbach 1984: 106).

Like Kant, Benjamin reasons that all philosophy takes place in language, not in mathematical numbers or formulas, but Benjamin takes the concept of language much further than Kant, who barely acknowledges it in his concept of experience which is “orientated so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines”. Benjamin, like Kant’s peer Hamann, relegates to language an essentially religious ground from which all true and total experience can be attained.⁸ Language or religious *Lehre*, is the ground from which true knowledge, in all its continuous multifariousness (“Erfahrung ist die einheitliche und kontinuierliche Mannigfaltigkeit der Erkenntnis”), can be gleaned, and the task of the coming philosophy is to make this manifest: “Auf Grund des Kantischen Systems einen Erkenntnisbegriff zu schaffen dem der Begriff einer Erfahrung korrespondiert von der die Erkenntnis Lehre ist” (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 168).

Furthermore, Benjamin’s interest in language has its roots, fundamentally in Judaism — commentary, tradition, Messianism — in relation to “specifically *modern* Jewish philosophical reflection on tradition and modernity” (Rose 1993: 176). Here, the reading and studying of the great text is the locus where true religious illumination, that is, emphatic experience, may occur. Tied to this, under the influence of his friend Gershom Scholem, was Benjamin’s interest in the Kabbala’s mystical text, the *Zohar*, in which the black letters themselves are evidence of the Divine, and the white spaces in-between take on creative and destructive connotations⁹, the mystical Godhead being both the abyss and the creative origin of form. True experience therefore had, as the Kabbalah teaches, an

⁸For the early Benjamin, the locus for absolute experience lay not in sensation or perception, but in language, an idea initiated by Johann Georg Hamann against the Kantian mode of thinking: “Jede Erscheinung der Natur war ein Wort, - das Zeichen, Sinnbild und Unterpfand einer neuen, geheimen, unaussprechlichen, aber desto innigern Vereinigung, Mittheilung und Gemeinschaft göttlicher Energien und Ideen. Alles, was der Mensch am Anfange hörte, mit Augen sah, beschaute und seine Hände betasteten, war ein lebendiges Wort; denn Gott war das Wort. Mit diesem Worte im Mund und im Herzen war der Ursprung der Sprache so natürlich, so nahe und leicht, wie ein Kinderspiel” (qtd. in Marleen Stoessel 1983: 65).

⁹Cf. to the “non-mystical” Jacques Derrida’s textual interpolations of light and dark. See Derrida 1987: 86: “But did not the Platonic sun already enlighten the visible sun, and did not the excedence play upon the meta-phor of these two suns? Was not the good the necessarily nocturnal source of light? The light of the light beyond light. The heart of light is black, as has often been noticed”. Cf. also the Gnostic oxymoron of a dark light, the alchemists speaking of a black sun and Bataille’s rotten sun.

essentially mystical linguistic character, in opposition to “personal” experience,¹⁰ and it had a paroxysmic character, a dual face of destruction and creation.

The paradox of destruction necessary for creation is at the heart of early Romanticism too, where Schlegel’s *Discourse* is often associated with the Dionysus myth: “Dionysus is the God who does not have a high opinion of the principle of individuation, who drags everything into the frenzy, makes women into hyenas, tears down the barriers between the sexes, and in general manipulates the separate realms of being as he wishes, by on the one hand pulling them down into the whirlpool of undifferentiated identity, on the other, as the liberating God dedicated to progress and evolution, separating the realms of being anew and — in the literal sense of the word — differentiating them. Thus he participates both in the principle of unity and separation.” (Manfred Frank cited in Bowie 1990: 55). Hence the aptness of Schlegel’s words: “Die wahre Aesthetik ist die Kabbala” (Rosen 1988: 169). Moreover, it is the *dialectic* between destruction and creation which is of concern to us here, in the different ways in which it is used by Scholem and Benjamin: “Like Benjamin, Scholem characterised his own thought as ‘dialectical,’ although they each used that term quite differently. Scholem’s dialectic involved a struggle between creative and destructive forces which paradoxically establish and abolish at once. Benjamin would develop a ‘dialectics at a standstill’ in his ‘historical materialism,’ where clashing images crystallised in moments of powerful shock and recognition” (Handelman 1991: 7). It is important to remember in this context that both Scholem and Benjamin’s thinking showed anarchistic tendencies — Scholem’s description: “theocratic anarchism” — and the dialectic of destruction-creation inherent in their “nihilism” was “purely religious rather than political” (Scholem 1982: 100, 204, 108, 155 qtd. in Löwy 1985: 46 & 47). It was religious in the linguistic mystical sphere, not in the personal or the social sphere of the war fields.

¹⁰ Like Benjamin, “Scholem’s insistence on the linguistic character of mysticism was the basis for his youthful rejection of Martin Buber’s *Erlebnis*-mysticism” (McGinn 1996: xviii). Scholem stresses the Kabbalists’ “impersonal” writings on their mystical experience: For in the books of the Kabbalists the personal element is almost negligible and so veiled in all manner of disguises that we must look very closely to find it. Very rarely did a Kabbalist speak of his own way to God. And the chief interest of the Kabbalah for us does not lie in such statements, but in the light it throws on the ‘historical psychology’ of the Jews. Here each individual was the totality” (Scholem 1996: 2). Here lies the *historical essence* of Benjamin and Scholem’s philosophy of experience.

Such thoughts on language, and the divine language crop up again later in such work as “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (1923); “Über Sprache überhaupt und die Sprache des Menschen” (1916); with regards children and language, “Brezel, Feder, Pause, Klage, Firlefanz” from *Denkbilder*; on children, play, dance, the primitive, astrology, language and similarity in “Über das mimetische Vermögen” (1933); and with regards divine violence and violence as such, “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” (1921). Throughout works such as these Benjamin suggests the possibility for an absolute “language”, a pure form of experience (of the divine).

In any case, for Benjamin, as for others like Scholem, Bloch and Rosenzweig, rationality failed to grasp the totality, a totality of experience which was to be revealed through language, and intellectuals had a task “to restore the ellipsis of reason” (Rabinbach 1984: 101 & 102). This “religious” or “irrational” experience, then, was fundamentally geared against the reductive thought of the Enlightenment; it was to be “an alternative to positivism that could fulfil the promise of returning thought to the realm of experience denied by rationalism” (Rabinbach 1984: 102):

But this is precisely what is at issue: the conception of the naked, primitive and self-evident experience, which, for Kant, as a man who somehow shared the horizon of his times, seemed to be the only experience given, indeed the only experience possible. This experience, however ... was unique and temporarily limited. Above and beyond a certain formal similarity which it shared with any sense of experience, this experience, which in a significant sense could be called a *worldview*, was the same as that of the Enlightenment. In its most essential characteristics, however it is not at all that different from the experience of the other centuries of the modern era. It was an experience or a view of the world of the lowest order (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 158-159; qtd. in Rabinbach 1985: 102).

Benjamin’s “messianic theory of language” was stimulated also by the neo-Kantian (or Kantian neo-Idealist) thought of Hermann Cohen, his *Logic der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902) and *Kant's Theorie der Erfahrung* (1871): “Cohen’s mathesis of the origin (*der Ursprung*), developed in the *Logic*, which forms the first part of his three-part System, also provides the mathesis of his late work, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. While he sought to overcome the neo-Kantianism, it is this grammar of origin

which Benjamin opposes to the logic of idealism in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to the *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*” (Rose 1993: 177). However, as Scholem recalls, their joint study of Cohen’s Kant in 1918 (in Switzerland) resulted in major complaints about his deductions and that “Benjamin had no use for the rationalist positivism that occupied us during the reading, because he was seeking ‘absolute experience’”: ‘He termed the book a philosophical vespiary’” (Scholem 1982: 60).¹¹

On the other hand Benjamin was stimulated by Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* (1921), where he writes: “And yet to this day there is no language of mankind; that will come to be only at the end. Real language, however, is common to all between beginning and end, and yet is a distinct one for each; it unites and divides at the same time” (qtd. in Handelman 1991: 219). For Rosenzweig the language of the individual is geared towards this end, this bridge between man and man, as it is “dominated by the ideal of coming to a perfect understanding which we visualise as the language of mankind” (Rosenzweig qtd. in Handelman 1991: 219). For Benjamin, as presented in his 1916 essay “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” man had already lost such a pure language, finding himself in a state comparable to the Tower of Babel, or the Lurianic Kabbalist *galuth* (exile; akin to the Gnostic ‘original crisis’), cause of the ‘breaking of the vessels’ (Scholem 1996: 112-113). Through Naming, which “is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated, and *in* which language itself communicates itself absolutely. In naming the mental entity that communicates itself is language”; “Man is the namer, by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks” (Benjamin 1978: 318). This is his redemptive possibility, humankind’s (and especially the Jew’s) ability to restore things to their rightful place, “by the secret magic of human acts, things are freed from their mixture and consequently, in the realms both of man and of nature, from their servitude to the demonic powers”. “Thus fundamentally every man and especially every Jew participates in the process of the *tikkun*” (Scholem 1996: 116-117). In Benjamin’s reading, the mending

¹¹ Scholem records that “Benjamin expressed himself on the attitude of Cohen the rationalist toward interpretation: ‘He said that for a rationalist not only texts of absolute dignity like the Bible [and, according to Benjamin, Hölderlin as well] were capable of multilayered interpretation, but everything that was a subject was put in absolute terms by a rationalist, thus justifying violence in interpretation, like Aristotle, Descartes, Kant’” (Scholem 1982: 60).

(*tikkun*) is signalled through the Messianic act of naming. But it is a *weak* Messianic act, a *weak* Messianic power.¹²

Man after the Fall, after the banishment into exile, is trapped by knowledge: “God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge [...] The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytical in nature in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word” (Benjamin 1978: 323). Man has lost the paradisiac language, the pure Adamite language of naming. According to Lurianic myth:

Adam’s fall corresponds on the anthropological plane to the breaking of the vessels on the theosophical plane. Everything is thrown into worse confusion than before and it is only then that the mixture of the paradisiac world of nature with the material world of evil takes on its full significance. Complete redemption was within Adam’s grasp — all the more drastic is his fall into the depths of material, demonised nature. Thus in the symbolism of Adam’s banishment from Paradise, human history begins with exile (Scholem 1996: 115).

Benjamin refers to man’s language after Adam’s fall as prattle (*Geschwätz*), following Kierkegaard in reading *the knowledge of evil as the collapse into evil*, the fall into demonic nature,¹³ knowledge and decay meaning the same thing, *symbolically* (meaning the end of symbolic language), *imagistically* as if beginning with the end.

According to Michael Löwy (and others, like Bersani 1990 and Ash 1989, who read Benjamin psychoanalytically), Benjamin suffers from a nostalgia, a yearning for the lost edenic harmony (the womb), that “the expulsion from Paradise is linked to the loss of the ‘blessed adamite spirit of language’ and the subsequent decay into the linguistic chaos of the Tower of Babel” (Löwy 1985: 53). However, in the light of Benjamin’s distinctive rejection of any form of nostalgia and sentiment as regressive,¹⁴ the prattle

¹² Benjamin (1992: 246) writes in his 1940 *Thesen*: “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim”. The weak Messianic power of naming and remembering is historical, in essence.

¹³ The Gnostic idea that the evil or demonic powers “that rule the world are incarnated in matter, and matter is ‘dark’” (Sontag 1996: 53).

¹⁴ As for instance the nostalgia of Jung’s archetypal images which “Benjamin categorically dismisses as ‘clearly regressive’” (Ackbar Abbas 1989: 45).

which is the fallen state of man — as Benjamin sees it, symbolically, but more specifically allegorically — could be seen to have more of a utopian *dialectic*, of the generative tension between the negative and positive: “Instead of arresting critical negativity in the name of the positive, Benjamin proposes to radicalize it to the point where it coincides with the name of the positive — with naming itself” (Wohlfarth 1986: 160); in the sense of reading *translation* as possibility, albeit in the paradoxical catastrophe-restoration (as we have seen, according to Kabbalistic teaching, there is immense transformative power in destruction, the way through the ruins):

Man communicates himself to God through name, which he gives to nature and (in proper names) to his own kind, and to nature he gives names according to the communication that he receives from her, for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language, the residue of the word of God, which is preserved in man as the cognizing name and above man as the judgement suspended over him. *The language of nature is comparable to a secret password that each sentry passes to the next in his own language, but the meaning of the password is the sentry's language itself.* All higher language is a translation of those lower, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language (Benjamin 1986: 331-332; added italics).

Hence the idea of the end as the beginning: “Apokatastasis, the hyphen between the theological and the political, the courage of one’s contradictions, the fidelity to one’s scraps” (Wohlfarth 1986: 165) — a “*weak*” utopian image.¹⁵

Handelman (1991: 219) points out the common influence of German thinkers such as Schelling and Humboldt on Benjamin and Rosenzweig, and that “Rosenzweig also found precedents for his ideas about language in Feuerbach, Hermann Cohen, and his exchanges with his friend Eugen Rosenstock.” Importantly “Both Benjamin and Rosenzweig assaulted philosophical idealism because it had lost confidence in and become hostile to language, had tried to create the world out of pure thought and logic, and refused to recognize language itself as a form of thinking and not a mere instrument. Idealism, writes Rosenzweig, left the “divinely created Eden of language” and sought a “human Eden, a human paradise”; “Idealism, at the moment when it rejected language,

apostheosized art.... art became for Idealism the great justification of its procedure.... [It] was incapable of acknowledging the word of man as answer to the word of God".¹⁶ Of course, for Benjamin, art was also the locus from which a redemption (*Rettung*) could be signalled, this being the fate of man after the fall of pure language (the decay of complete symbols?). The combination of language with images, its interchange according to a rebus principle, "counterparts to the ideas of revelation and redemption in the flash of *dialectical images*" (Wohlfarth 1986: 165; added italics), was the profane illumination at the heart of Benjamin's oeuvre.

Language, the *Origin*, and *Redemption* were themes that occupied Benjamin for a long time, through different shapes and foci (as the question of *remembrance* and *forgetting* would crop up time and again)¹⁷. The fundamental ground (*Ursatz*) of his work throughout was the idea that the world could be read like the face of a text (perhaps in the sense in which Derrida reads Levinas),¹⁸ that human experience, true (historical) *Erfahrung*, occurred when the things were read — perhaps somnambulistically, perhaps vigilantly — like a dark (*dunkle*) text to be deciphered, like a dream to be cited, like an emblem to be allegorically displaced, like a cosmogonic and hieroglyphic script in which the world (Word) was suddenly to be revealed in similarities; and with these "literary" techniques, true illumination could occur, in a flash of pure effulgent cognizance arising out of the clash of dissimilar fragments.

The *Urschrift* of the world could be deciphered, thus releasing the Origin from the Word, and bringing about Redemption. Once again, true illumination, true superior

¹⁵ Cf. Mehlman 1993: 78-81 and Wohlfarth 1986: 143-168

¹⁶ Handelman (1991: 103) notes: "Just as Benjamin had interpreted the Genesis text to be a tale about the fall from a primal unity of the pure language of names into alienated human language, Hegel and Schelling used it to illustrate the fall into the alienating separation of subjective consciousness from nature and the objective world". Where Hegel goes on to see evil, suffering and alienation as a necessary part of the process of history in its path toward completion in the Absolute Spirit, Benjamin's idea is to interrupt or disrupt this continuum; Benjamin's dialectic remains unstable, tense, conflictual, incomplete, *un-symbolic*: *against the ideal of progress*.

¹⁷ See Benjamin (1977a, 1.3: 1223) in the letter introducing his *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*: "daß das Problem der Erinnerung (und das Vergessen) das an ihnen auf anderer Ebene erscheint, mich noch für lange beschäftigen wird". In the course of this thesis, and especially in the last section, the questions of redemption in remembrance are explicated.

¹⁸ Like the face of God in the Bible; Emanuel Levinas' face of the Other; and as Proust writes: "The human face is indeed like the face of the God of some Oriental theogony, a whole cluster of faces, crowded together but on different surfaces so that one does not see them all at once" (qtd. in Ríos 1994: 237).

knowledge, was not necessarily of the restrictive empirical world the scientists analysed, or better, categorised *a priori*; rather, pure illumination transcended life, *in* ineffable language (following the *Zohar* teaching of the shape and sound of letters or words being distinct from their meaning), to a higher realm; it was an experience of a universal ethical order, a disruptive and peculiar reality, situated within the Word.

To sum up: what Benjamin was criticizing in his “Programm” essay is reductionist models of experience — here, the limited Kantian and neo-Kantian mathematic-mechanic and scientific based models of knowledge, the specialised fields of the sciences. To this Benjamin opposed a kind of centrifugal-centripetal dialectic. Scholem (1982: 59) recalls:

Benjamin discussed the scope of the concept of experience that was meant here [in the “Programm”]; according to him, it encompassed man’s intellectual and psychological connection with the world, which takes place in the realms not yet penetrated by cognition. When I mentioned that consequently it was legitimate to include the mantic disciplines in this conception of experience, Benjamin responded with an extreme formulation: “A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee grounds and cannot explicate it cannot be a true philosophy.” Such prophesying may be reprehensible, as in Judaism, but it must be recognized as possible from the connection of things. As a matter of fact, even his very late notes on occult experiences do not exclude such possibilities, though more implicitly. Benjamin’s sometimes lively interest in experiences with hashish is explainable from this perspective and definitely not from any supposed addiction to drugs, which was quite alien to him and has been imputed to him only in recent years.

Benjamin counters the “myopic” rationalist systems with the call for a pure metaphysical and ontological¹⁹ *Erfahrung* or *Dasein*, based in language — the divine Word²⁰ — in

¹⁹ Like Adorno, Benjamin will do away with the ontological category in favour of a (negative) dialectic, a historical materialistic approach.

²⁰ See Martin Jay 1993: 148: “A religiously inflected notion of language in which the dichotomy of subject and object is transcended and ontological truth revealed”. [What is interesting is the similarities and the differences between Benjamin’s ontological concept of *Dasein* in language, and Heidegger’s concept of *Being*: According to Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (1994), there are affinities between Heidegger’s concept of ‘resoluteness’ (*Entschlossenheit*) and the politics of Benjamin’s time of the ‘now’ (*Jetztzeit*). The repetition of the given as the same was problematic for both thinkers, and both are ‘also sceptical of the overly subjective bias of individual *Erlebnis* and scientific *Erfahrung*, and [Heidegger] had no use of collective meta-subjects either’ (Benjamin & Osborne 1994: xii; Cf. Jay 1993: 148). The fundamental difference lies with the question of Being. “The comfort granted to Heidegger’s thought by the

which the ground principle of experience spills over into the totality which is knowledge in its immediate continuity.²¹ (In the course of this work we will see that this continuity differs substantially from the *continuum* which Benjamin specifically sought to burst open, for example, in messianic *Jetztzeit* which explodes linear history and the merely lived present; Proustian rejuvenation which occurred in a flash of consumptive remembrance; or disruptive surrealist chance encounters in the mode of gambling and love.)

This new (rejuvenated or radicalised) concept of experience also had an ethical basis, like Benjamin's early work regarding the youth, a basis which was to be a redefinition of Kant's ethics: "...daß der gesamte Zusammenhang der Ethik in dem Begriff den die Aufklärung Kant und die Kantianer von Sittlichkeit haben ebensowenig aufgeht wie der Zusammenhang der Metaphysik in dem was jene Erfahrung nennen. Mit einem neuen Erkenntnisbegriff wird daher nicht nur der Erfahrung sondern auch der Freiheit eine entscheidende Umbildung erfahren" (Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 165). For Benjamin therefore, any concept of experience in its metaphysical continuity has to be ethical, hence the religious *Lehre*, and particularly the messianic theory of language in which it is founded.

Moreover, in the "Programm", Benjamin calls for an experience that breaks down the barriers of mere empirical consciousness or reason (Kant's *Vernunft*) in order for a richer and fresher (magical) cognizance to be established. This breaking away from categorising tendencies, tendencies also found in the hermeneutic disciplines, was the attempt to grasp life in its fuller capacity, in its explosive surreality. Likewise for many of Benjamin's contemporaries, reason, as practised by the Enlightenment and the Kantians, was insufficient to establish the complex relation of man (and woman)²² in their experience of the world. Hence their turning to various contemporary but also ancient theories, regarding the unconscious, the paranormal, animism and preanimism, the world of the insane, the occult, the prophetic, the hallucinogenic, the anarchic, the mystical, the

determination of the present as the presence of Being is contrary to Benjamin's whole concept of history. Now-time eschews all ontological reduction by thinking the past in terms of the monadic structure of remembrance". The link between action and the present, experience and remembrance, with regards the ontological connotations that these concepts may have or make manifest, offers ground for further debate, at another time.]

²¹Benjamin 1977a, 2.1: 170.

dreamwork experience, the often magical or mantic function of perception, reception, cognizance, therefore *the world of myth*. Such interest occurs in the work of Bachofen and Preuss; (late) Freud and Jung; Kandinsky and Klee; Jünger and Klages; Warburg and Panofsky; Mallarmé and Breton; de Chirico and Ernst; Aragon and Baudelaire; Sorel and Blanqui; Kafka and Scholem amongst others, and often have their *Ursprung* in the theories of the early Romantics,²³ of whom Benjamin rightly said they had religious bearings. Furthermore, the essence of the *Frühromantik* “must be sought in Romantic Messianism” (Benjamin qtd. in Löwy 1985: 45);²⁴ they reinterpreted religious categories transforming them into “a secular world-view” (Handelman 1991: 103); and they were intrinsically and outrightly against the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

²² The predominantly male-orientated view prevalent in modernity has been the subject of much contemporary debate, often brilliantly so. This study however, due to a question of space rather than ideology, is not the place for an extended polemic. May the discrepancies speak for themselves.

²³ Notes Handelman (1996: 102): “It [German romanticism] plays a great role not only in the thought of Benjamin and Scholem but in the very creation of modernism, of which romanticism is a main undercurrent.”

²⁴ Later Benjamin, “in an antiromantic reaction”, would “attack the ideology of the symbol” (“and the organic whole so prevalent in German idealist aesthetics”) as “bad theology” (Handelman 1991: 106). Furthermore, a very interesting and disturbing twist in this tradition is the phenomenon or occurrence of a fascistic tendency in many of these thinkers; Jeffrey Mehlman (1993: 73-81), for example, in a terrific book, *Walter Benjamin for Children*, points to the anti-Semitic in the French writers Sorel, Céline, Gide, Daudet, Baudelaire, Aragon, writers who exerted particular influence on Benjamin (in his view of the city of Paris; the anarcho-cosmological potential in the modern; the beauty in the “flowers of evil”) , a German-Jew with what Mehlman strikingly refers to as a Sabbatian impulse, a twisted modern-day Luciferian element of entering evil to fight it from within: ‘If the Sabbatian call to fulfil the Law by violating it is based on a putative mission to defeat “evil” from within, and if our ultimate image of Benjamin has him waxing desperately messianic amid a fantasia of the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, does not (anti-Semitic) France itself come to occupy that exile — or “evil” — within which the Sabbatian is called on to exercise his transgressive calling?’ (73). Benjamin would in fact criticise “teutonic” thinkers such as Jünger, Jung and Klages, for what he saw to be fascist and regressive tendencies; that Benjamin’s eyes appeared closed to the bad destructive tendencies of some (people and places) whilst widely open to the malignant forces dominant in others - an extreme myopia/farsightedness polarity which was often Benjamin’s choice or tactic [“Benjamin’s idea of obstacles thrown up by his own temperament” (Sontag 1996b: 114)], seeing in one locus a way to conquer another and vice versa, “One position corrects another” (Sontag 1996b: 133) - adds not a little to the ironic pathos, the paradox and ambiguity, the tragi-comedy (*Trauerspiel?*) of the individual and the tradition, the emigré and the Fatherland, myth and truth, of solitude and exile proper, life and mind, of choice and fate, freedom and restriction, will and inescapable “baleful constellations”, and the work.

3. The early Romantics as a model of criticism

If we had to condense the romantic aesthetic into a single word, it would certainly be the word "symbol"
(Todorov ctd. in Handelman 1991: 104)

Early German romanticism was a non-Kantian, anti-rationalist movement whose method of endless reflection in the artwork was, thought Schlegel and Novalis, not merely a negative or destructive one, culminating as it did or saw itself to do, in the positive moment of self-transcendence. The romantic, symbolic artwork had 'religious' restorative powers; it had the power to overcome "the gap between the noumenal and phenomenal realms [a breach opened by Kant's theory of knowledge, GTS], the finite and the infinite, the material and the spiritual, sensibility and reason" (Handelman 1991: 106).

Benjamin (1977a, 1.1: 60) writes in his 1920 doctoral dissertation *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* that for the early Romantics "Die Kunst ist eine Bestimmung des Reflexionsmediums, wahrscheinlich die fruchtbarste, die es empfangen hat. Die Kunstkritik ist die Gegenstandserkenntnis in diesem Reflexionsmedium". For the early Romantics, Novalis and Schlegel in particular, the artwork (especially poetry) reflects itself endlessly, within itself. Romantic art is "still in a process of becoming; yes, that is its real essence, that it can eternally only become, can never be completed. It cannot be exhausted by any theory' and multiplies itself 'as if in an endless row of mirrors'" (Schlegel qtd. in Bowie 1990: 56).

Criticism, on the other hand, is an experiment with the artwork through which this endless reflection makes itself manifest, by which it calls itself to consciousness, to self-knowledge. Such experimentation is, furthermore, philological and historical, both in terms of the critic and the object of criticism. Benjamin (1977, 1.1: 65-66) writes:

Das Subjekt der Reflexion ist im Grunde das Kunstgebilde selbst, und das Experiment besteht nicht in der Reflexion *über* ein Gebilde, welche dieses nicht, wie es im Sinn der romantischen Kunstkritik liegt, wesentlich alterieren könnte, sondern in der Entfaltung, d. h. für den Romantiker: des Geistes, *in*

einem Gebilde. Sofern Kritik Erkenntnis des Kunstwerk ist, ist sie dessen Selbsterkenntnis; sofern sie es beurteilt, geschieht es in dessen Selbstbeurteilung. Die Kritik geht in dieser letzten Ausprägung über die Beobachtung hinaus, es zeigt sich in dieser die Verschiedenheit des Kunstgegenstandes von dem der Natur, der keine Beurteilung zuläßt.

The critic instigates the artwork's self-criticism (*Selbsbeurteilung*), or rather, reflects its process in the process of criticism. Moreover, like the dialectic of creation and destruction mentioned before, self-criticism here is a process of *positive* self-destruction by which the work's spirit (*Geist*) heightens its own consciousness, step by step, by negating each step: "Zwar erhebt sich der Geist in jeder Reflexion über alle früheren Reflexionsstufen und negiert sie damit — gerade dies gibt der reflexion zunächst die kritische Farbung —, aber das positive Moment dieser Bewußtseinssteigerung überwiegt das negative bei weitem." (Benjamin 1977a, 1.1: 66). Like the god, Dionysus, who creates out of destruction, "each reflection is destroyed in the next but the overall process is endless" (Bowie 1990: 56). Contrary to the reading of many modern readers then, Schlegel argued that this endless process was *positive* in its in-completion.

But because art was a medium of reflection, and the work a centre of reflection, that the *Geist* within the work reflected upon itself in a process of consciousness-heightening negation meant that the reflecting consciousness outside of the work, that is to say, the reader and the critic, were to follow, or better still, contribute to the process, in their own heightening of consciousness; the self-criticism of the work was a medium for the self-criticism of the reader/critic. And so a heightening of self-knowledge (in the epistemological sense of the word), in the positive sense of self-negation, would be the endless or infinite (transcendental) result.

The authentic artwork criticises itself but remains incomplete. Its *Geist* or Idea attains self-consciousness in an endless process of reflective destruction and creation. The true reader is neither the subjective reader who hampers a work with personal motives and likes, nor the dogmatic rationalist who boxes in the work's "freedom": "Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor sein" (Benjamin 1977a, 1.1: 68). Because the work in its self-reflection remains incomplete, the true reader reads the work in itself; that is to say, the authentic reader continues the work's inherent process of *immanent* self-criticism. The

process of reading is therefore both a negation and an affirmation, in the sense *that the true reader continues the work's Idea*, thus becoming a member of the “wirksamen Geistes” (Benjamin 1977, 1.1: 68), and so with the next reader. Once again, the reader does not impose on, he reflects *in* the work.

In effect, in Romantic philosophy as read by Benjamin, the critic has a consciousness-making role initially on a par with the artist (the genius); a higher talent which the reader is to reflect (if the romantic artist is to be a teacher, a priest, a prophet, a genius in order to create the transubstantial work, so the true reader it seems, in order to aid in the becoming process of the work of art, would have to have an “expert” character or talent, perhaps becoming that in the giving and taking). But in *implicitly* giving the *internal object*, the romantic and symbolic work of art, a supreme status, the critic surpasses the “objective” consciousness-making talent of both the genius and the reader: for his task of *showing* the process of endless reflection within the work rhymes or reflects this showing itself. Criticism takes the Idea immanent within the artwork (the object) as form, as the work of itself, its criticism, its performative dimension. What is performed, moreover, is the essentially *educative* nature of both the artist and the artwork;²⁵ the poet and the poem teaches.²⁶

Whereas the “authentic” reader may “impersonally” further or broaden the reflection of the work about itself, by reading, and the artist, specifically the “imaginative genius”, whose “internal” experience of the world results in the object or text to be reflected in, being placed in the reader’s sphere to begin with, the critic surpasses both in the methodology of consciousness-making: in the sense that the processes of nonsubjective creation of both is *performed* by the objective criticism itself. The Romantic artist’s essentially internal experience of the world, the idea of breaking free from the constraints of the external reality, the romantic idea of transcending reality,²⁷ an idea

²⁵ See Handelman (1991: 103-104) on the artist in the idealist tradition of *poiesis*— ‘the process of making’, ‘the power of form (*Bilden*)’ —, becoming ‘the “educator” of humanity’.

²⁶ And as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy in the context of Paul Klee notes, “The word ‘to teach’ derives from the Gothic ‘taiku-sign’ (our word token)”. The artist and the critic in the art object “is an interpreter of signs” (Klee 1986: 8 & 9).

²⁷ Romantic art as “an art of aspiration and transubstantiation, embodied in images which rise on an upward draught towards the higher reaches. Pegasus the winged horse stands here as symbol of the artistic

which is also reflected in the reader of the Romantic, symbolic poem or work of art, is shown by the critic to be not subjective and merely personal, but profoundly “objective” in the face or experience of the work (of the natural thing) as a symbolic object within itself, complete yet always incomplete, always in the process of becoming within *itself*; an object which symbolises the universality of the internal world (Cf. Novalis’s 1790s dream of the blue flower). The romantic or symbolic object is internal, and superior in its incessant musical movement of becoming, and the maker/reader reflects that within the work in turn, in order to help it along.

The criticism is both the reading and the poetry, both creating and the artwork, both reception and knowing, both criticism (*Rezension*) of philosophy and the philosophy of criticism, and is therefore education twofold: “Jede philosophische Rezension sollte zugleich Philosophie der Rezension sein” (Schlegel qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.1: 68). Art criticism is the art of criticism and criticises itself in the way that the great artwork criticises itself:

Dabei soll diese [the task of the critic, GTS] nichts anderes tun, als die geheimen Anlagen des Werkes selbst aufdecken, seine verhohlenen Absichten vollstrecken. Im Sinne des Werkes selbst, d. h. in seiner Reflexion, soll es über dasselbe hinausgehen, es absolut machen. Es ist klar: für die Romantiker ist Kritik viel weniger die Beurteilung eines Werkes als die Methode seiner Vollendung. In diesem Sinne haben sie poetische Kritik gefordert, den Unterschied zwischen Kritik und Poesie aufgehoben und behauptet: “Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden. ein Kunsturteil, welches nicht selbst ein Kunstwerk ist, [...] als darstellung des notwendigen eindruckes in seinem Werden, [...] hat kein Bürgerrecht im Rechte der Kunst” (Benjamin: 1977a, 1.1: 69).

Were it not for the critic the actions of the reader and the artist would remain essentially unknown. The critic, or rather poetic criticism, what Schlegel described as the ‘poetry of poetry’, reveals the work of art, and in so doing rejuvenates it — “poetry raised to a higher power” (Stephens 1996: 156): “Jene poetische Kritik [...] wird die darstellung von Neuen darstellen, das schon Gebildete noch einmal bilden wollen [...] wird das Werk

imagination” (Julian Barnes (1994: 14) in another context, on the art of the romantic-symbolist Odilon

ergänzen, verjüngen, neu gestalten" (Schlegel qtd. in Benjamin 1977a, 1.1: 69). The work is unfinished, or one can say, it unfinishes itself. "Nur das Unvollständige kann begriffen werden, kann uns weiter führen. Das Vollständige wird nur genossen. Wollen wir die Natur begreifen, so müssen wir sie als unvollständig setzen" (Benjamin 1977a, 1.1: 70). The object of art is unfinished like nature is, this is the relation between the two, perhaps the not-externally-descriptive "mimesis" of the Idea *in art* in and of nature. The *process of art* "mimetically" re-produces the *process of nature*: the Romantic artwork *appears* like nature,²⁸ and by symbolically representing nature in its cosmic, ideal light, the work moves closer toward its spiritual wholeness, its becoming complete. Furthermore, because criticism reflects art, it reflects nature, and is therefore in principle non-descriptively mimetic (looking below the surface). It is a mimesis which improves on the object by bringing it into a new (ideal) light; it re-presents the work's interior or Idea *in art* in order to know — like the artwork itself — in the movement of knowing, or gnosis.²⁹

Criticism shows the object of art, the poetry text to be incomplete, not absolute as of yet: "Jedes Werk ist dem Absolutum der Kunst gegenüber mit Notwendigkeit unvollständig, oder — was desselbe bedeutet — es ist unvollständig gegenüber seiner eigenen absoluten Idee". It shows the inchoate nature of art in the reflective process of knowing it: and in knowing it, criticism amends it, bringing it closer

Redon).

²⁸ But as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy wrote with regard to Klee's natural forms: "their appearance only matters in so far as it symbolizes an inner actuality that receives meaning from its [inter]relationship to the cosmos."; the symbolic, romantic work in nature points "away from the surface into a spiritual reality" (Klee 1986: 7).

²⁹ Harold Bloom (1994: 449) writes: "Gnosis, by definition, is a timeless knowledge, both of the self within the self and of the alien God whose spark remains in that innermost self". Handelman (1991: 114) points out that much recent poststructuralist linguistic theory sees *language* as "a special form of esoteric *knowledge*," suggesting a kind of "*modern gnosis*" (she mentions writers like Paul de Man and Harold Bloom). She writes of this theory: "The human arena is an intersection of linguistic and semiotic forces; the human is the subject of language. Understanding language proceeds independently of individual human selfhood and is a matter of deciphering codes or hidden meanings, or the modes in which texts subvert meanings, or the hidden intersection of social forces and literary codes — a gnosis". The early Romantic conception of the literary text as a self-contained object of reflection seems to suggest such a gnosis; and Benjamin's quasi-Kabbalist interest in the literary text as an object with hidden redemptive powers reflects this. And, as Handelman continues, Benjamin's turn to a more exoteric theory of language (precurring again recent feminist, political and cultural criticism) is but a development of his early esoteric critique of Kant: "language itself was a form of knowledge, but also a form of alternate 'experience' and a mode of 'redemption' of nature and history" (Handelman 1991: 114). The quasi-

to its own Idea: “Der Gegenstand wird in der Erkenntnis gesteigert, ergänzt, kann also nur, wenn er unvollständig ist, erkannt werden” (Benjamin 1977a, 1.1: 70). Moreover, what makes the art work perpetually incomplete is its endless reflection on its own absolute Idea, its *Geist*, a reflection which brings the Idea to know itself in the incompleteness, in the *becoming* of the art object; and criticism reflects this epistemological (and ontological) self-consciousness, helping the Idea along in its movement of self-knowing. The performance is therefore one of perpetually undoing itself as a way to know the completeness within the incompleteness; a knowing of the text’s inherent system of generating its opposites out of itself.³⁰ This knowledge is an improvement, an absolutisation. Criticism re-presents a purer form of the art object by showing the Idea perpetuating the incompleting self-reflection, its translation of a performance incessantly geared toward self-knowledge in fact brings this knowledge closer to its ideal. Criticism represents, therefore, a superior form of knowledge. In addition, criticism as *perfecting translation* reflects that other language, the — according to Novalis, *mystical* — translation of one language into another. Benjamin (1977a, 1.1: 70) cites him:

“Sie stellen den reinen, vollendeten Charakter des individuellen Kunstwerks dar. Sie geben uns nicht das wirkliche Kunstwerk, sondern das Ideal dasselben. Noch existiert, wie ich glaube, kein ganzes Muster derselben. Im Geist mancher Kritiker und Beschreibungen von Kunstwerken trifft man aber helle Spuren. Es gehört ein Kopf dazu, in dem sich poetischer Geist und philosophische Geist in ihrer ganzen Fülle durchdringen haben.” Vielleicht denkt Novalis, indem er Kritik und Übersetzung einander nahe rückt, an eine mediale stetige Überführung des Werkes aus einer Sprache in die andere, eine Auffassung, die bei der unendlich rätselhaften Natur der Übersetzung von vornherein ebenso statthaft ist, wie eine andere.

Abulafian contemplation of texts had explosive potential regarding a deep experience leading to action, not only a secret and esoteric knowledge.

³⁰ The early Romantic method of immanently un-doing the text in an endless process of self-reflection may reflect contemporary deconstruction, as has been suggested by Andrew Bowie (1990) for example; needless to say, such suggestions have many interesting implications — socio-historical in the Benjaminian sense of *Ursprung* meaning not genesis but “that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance” (qtd. in Frisby 1996: 16). This study, however, will refrain for the time being from entering into any overt post-modern debate.

Criticism as translation, and vice versa, purifies the object of language, revealing the greater language within or behind language. It is a mysterious mending which reflects one language in another. It is an immanent movement from one language to another which means, contra subjectively imposing from the outside, the Idea in the language is called up *interlinearly* by its own doing. In his introduction to his 1923 translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, Benjamin presents a (often sententious) theory of translation, which has its roots in the quasi-mystical or gnostic theories of Novalis and Schlegel. The latter's respect for the Kabbalah — "Die wahre Aesthetik ist die Kabbala" (Rosen 1988: 169) — returning in Benjamin's reference to the Lurianic Kabbalistic teaching of the broken vessels:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. [...] It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language (Benjamin 1992a: 79 & 80).

True translation, like authentic criticism mends the flawed object by the object's own immanent structure, interlinearly: "For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation" (Benjamin 1992a: 82).

In other words, returning to the early Romantic theory of criticism, the Idea within the object of art calls for its own criticism which would aid it on its way to reach its own ideal, its pure form, its spiritual truth. According to Benjamin, and contrary to much modern misinformed opinion (then and now), this perpetual movement, this becoming is quite the opposite of subjectivity, for the authentic criticism which is knowledge in the making takes place within the work, is not imposed onto it; and Schlegel was its most accomplished theorist: "Er [Schlegel] hat die Gesetze des Geistes in das Kunstwerk selbst

gebannt, anstatt dieses zum bloßen Nebenprodukt des Subjektivität zu machen" (Benjamin 1977a, 1.1: 71).

What was most important in the philosophy of criticism was the Idea or *Geist* immanent within the object rather than the subject or person, an Idea whose infinite reflection upon itself was the medium in which the reader and the critic aided its movement toward its ideal. As the movement was endless it overcame any dogmatic or rationalistic reduction of its paradoxical self-generative potentials.³¹ Its aim for interior self-knowledge was reflection of its exterior call to be known. And externally this would mean a process of purification, of idealisation, a revealing of the absolute within the perpetually incomplete. In the same way that the incomplete art object, the Romantic poem reflected nature in its incompleteness, so also the reader of the world in its different guises; and this (reading) reflection held the potential for a restorative cognition in the aesthetic: "Art might be a locus wherein the absolute manifested itself in the world, and in this sense it became a kind of substitute religion" (Handelman 1991: 104).

It should become apparent here that the ideal within early Romanticism of the generative powers within art (of the wholeness within the symbol), the artwork as religiously restorative, reflects or foresees that of later Romanticism's link to German

³¹ Bowie (1990), for example criticises the apparent Romantic tendency toward subjectless endless reflection in the artwork to avoid 'foreclosure' in deconstruction. Bowie calls for a grounding of meaning in a *subject*, something which the deconstructionist theory following the Romantic preference for the object, negates. "The reception of art becomes a constant battle between those wishing to fix signification, be it by historical research, attention to the life of the artist, computer analysis of texts, etc., and those, like the Romantics, who see such an enterprise as inimical to the very nature of art, and demand attention to the capacity of art for generating ever new significances. Deconstruction is, in this view, another version of Romanticism's questioning of the legitimacy of an Enlightenment which sees its task as the ordering of reality by scientific reason. Its theoretical roots are undoubtedly in aspects of Romanticism. The danger of this side of Romanticism lies in the tendency to elevate indeterminacy to the status of the ultimate virtue. However, the concern to avoid 'foreclosure', to avoid arresting the 'play' of *différance*, must at some level be grounded in the meaningfulness of the objections to foreclosure. [...] At some point, then, the 'infinite reflection' in the work of art has to be seen in relation to someone engaging with that work. Of course, there is no need to assume that this subject will provide an absolutely transparent, self-present ground for meaning. Without a subject of some kind, though, it is hard to see how one could ever begin to talk about problems of meaning. [...] Texts are inert until subjects engage with them." See Andrew Bowie 1990: 203-204. It seems, though, that the *problem* of the relationship between the subject and a text is precisely the point of the 'endless reflection' in the text, it is the interlinear and non-linear historical grounding, Benjamin in any case, gives the critic.

Idealism with its turn to art for the healing of a broken civilisation.³² For Hegel “History is the painful process of the Spirit’s self-education and coming to self-knowledge, a spiralling journey which ends by recovering in maturity an earlier stage of unity with itself and the world. But the teleology is now immanent, not aimed at an external goal or driven by a God who is ‘outside’ history and nature, but by the self-moving, self-sustaining ‘system,’ the manifestation of the ‘Idea,’ which generates its own opposites out of itself” (Handelman 1991: 103). Hegel “anticipated a time when literature would become so inner and self-conscious that it would actually be absorbed into philosophy” (David Miles qtd. in Handelman 1991: 104), culminating in a completion in *his* philosophy which would spell the end of philosophy, “philosophy completed and fulfilled in German Idealism and the Prussian state, which he identifies with the manifestation of universal history and reason” (Handelman 1991: 103).³³ Romanticism and German Idealism saw the aesthetic as integrative, restorative, “reconciling unity in beauty;” (Handelman 1991: 104) a road leading to Schopenhauer (the world as Will and Idea) and Nietzsche (world as Will to Power), the former seeing in music a redemptive will, the latter transforming the world into an aesthetic spectacle, “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (Nietzsche qtd. in Koepnick 1996: 276). From here, of course, it is but a short step to the Wagnerian aestheticisation (his *Gesamtkunstwerk* later lucidly demolished by Adorno’s negative dialectics) so appealing to Hitlerian fascism, Goebels’s aestheticisation of politics as “the highest and most comprehensive art there is, and we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists [...] the task of art and the artist [being] to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom

³² See Handelman 1991: 104 on Schiller introducing “the central romantic concept of art as that which can heal the divisions and fragments of a broken civilisation.”

³³ But the difference between Schlegel and Hegel is that the latter sees art culminating in philosophy, restoration taking place through reason; and the former limits a religious restorative function within art, the (religious) symbol itself (that which is — contra Kant’s “thing-in-itself” which is in essence unknowable — self-contained, autonomous, but pointing to something else also). Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy note that ‘for Schelling and Schlegel

art, the work, and the artist are in this perspective what the System, the Concept, and the philosopher himself ... are in the Hegelian perspective ... the religion in question here is not “religion within the limits of reason alone,” but rather *religion within the limits of art*.... For this reason, the great question of religion understood in this manner is that of the *formation of form*’ (Handelman 1991: 106).

for the healthy” (from his 1933 speech qtd. in Sontag 1996c: 92). Where, then, is Benjamin’s position — he of the fundamentally anti-subjectivist, anti-sentimental tenet, he who is so vehemently opposed to the irrationality of fascistic totalitarian and authoritarian dogmatism? The answer lies in Benjamin’s category of “appearance” (*Schein*).

In the early Romanticist theory of art as a medium of reflection and self-knowledge, the work as the centre of this reflection, Benjamin’s deep-seated anti-subjectivity coupled with his “spilt religiosity”³⁴ found a living working model. It was the idea of an *autonomous* work of art, an autonomous text infinitely generating its own oppositions and regenerative idealisation, a text which by virtue of the reader and the critic’s nonsubjective reflective input assumes an inexhaustible life of its own. The artist-cum-genius gives birth to an object which in essence remains unknowable, yet infinitely educative. Wrote Schlegel: “Eine klassische Schrift muß nie ganz verstanden werden können. Aber die, welche gebildet sind und sich bilden, müssen immer mehr draus lernen wollen” (Rosen 1988: 152). The authentic artwork is therefore only inexhaustible to the *learned* reader, and if the authentic artist would be a genius, so also the critic who would repeat the creative process immanently (Stephens 1996: 156). Furthermore, criticism of the art object is to be as immanent and self-conscious as nature is, its process being mimetic of the self-reflective process that is nature. Aesthetics reflects nature reflects art, endlessly moving towards its Idea, its ideal, its essence, but *limited* within itself.

But aesthetics culminates in an *appearance* of nature: the Romantic poem appears like nature in its “beauty”; the poem appears beautiful. The problem of beautiful appearance is one of a *representation* tending toward the totalising of an essentially unknowable “reality”. There is an inherent problem in the Romantic notion of an absolutisation in art, in its spilling over into “reality” it causes what Benjamin in his *Trauerspiel* calls “the terror of uninterrupted aesthetic immanence — the hypostatization of aesthetic appearance — the ‘abyss of aestheticism’” (Koepnick 1996: 276). Koepnick points out that according to Benjamin, this “abyss of aestheticism” is the result of

³⁴ T. E. Hulme’s famous phrase for romanticism being a “spilt religion”, Handelman 1991: 104.

Nietzsche's creation of a false totality in erasing the boundaries that limit and ground the artwork; Nietzsche's aestheticisation violates the limits set by the autonomous object, limits which show the artwork's essential appearance of nature, its appearance of truth:

Artworks may be called art only if the recipient knows that they are a substitution for nature, if they represent appearance through and through. Situated in the aesthetic tradition of German idealism, of Kant and especially Hegel, Benjamin interprets the literary artwork as a privileged site in which the appearance of truth takes place. Yet whereas theoretical knowledge "creates a regulative form of reasoning, truth resists the order of possession, observation, and mastery of the object and inconspicuously resides in moments of discontinuity." According to Benjamin, then, truth is neither a linguistic fact nor an absolute presence but rather, the form of self-representation; truth, as one of Benjamin's critics writes, "blocks all attempts at closure" (Koenick 1996: 274).

The "closure" here (a theme ambiguously prevalent in Derrida, the idea that writing always intercepts closure) refers to the desire to possess the truth, the desire to make things the same, a desire which results in a descend into the "abyss of appearance". In closing the truth down, the artwork's essential will to appearance spills over into society or nature proper, erasing the object's self-criticism and with it the recipient's critical sense. Benjamin, on this point, surpasses or radicalises the early Romantic concept of criticism in that according to him:

the critic has to destroy the artwork's appearance if he or she desires access to its inner truth content; criticism entails the art of mortifying the work and its mythic totality, its appeal to beauty, in order to unearth the kernel of truth that is hidden underneath the work's material content (Koenick 1996: 274).

The beautiful appearance of the artwork which gives the bad false appearance of totality, must therefore be destroyed, *within the work itself*, in order to reveal the truth under its *appearance of truth*. This the task of the critic who does so in order to watch over the object's autonomy, its self-determination; because criticism is not judgement (*Beurteilung*) but completion (*Vollendung*) authentic criticism itself turns into an autonomous artwork. But, and this is the double face of Benjamin's "Romantic" criticism, he revitalises early

Romantic theory in the idea of the criticism turning into an autonomous artwork, but paradoxically it can only do so by radically questioning its actual basis, the classical, *symbolic* artwork (Witte 1985: 47). This doubling process means self-criticism, criticism which criticises itself in a *negative* rather than a positive definition of the artwork's truth content. Where the early Romantic critic idealised the text's self-criticism, Benjamin's critic takes this further by mortifying the work, destroying the *symbolic* appearance of beauty, of truth.

Benjamin's category of beauty marks his departure from Romanticism in that where previously the incompleteness of the artwork held its own completion as a kind of ontological continuity, its infinite process of becoming, for Benjamin this *appearance* of movement has to be interrupted in order to guard against a total aestheticisation, the terrorising appearance of totality. For Benjamin, art's will to appearance had to be shown to be just that, appearance, in order to interrupt its overflow into other areas of life, a flow that would in fact mean the loss of its intrinsic truth. It is a call for the self-limitation of art rather than the subjective and sentimental aestheticisation of society, which has the tendency to flow over into fascism. Where the former has the ability to criticise itself in its appearances, the latter gets lost in an uncritical myth of total appearance. There is a critical difference between art and reality:

True artworks contain in themselves the very forces that, activated by the critic, may interrupt their merely borrowed totality and crack the edifice of appearance built around their truth content. Aestheticism, by contrast, suppresses such critical powers while it imposes a false totality on the forms of social intercourse. If Nietzsche declares life to be an appearance through and through, he clears the ground for social spectacles, erases the very boundaries that authorize the aesthetic in the first place, and thus calls for a terrorist immanence of the aesthetic that forecloses every transcendental notion of truth or morality. The fascist aestheticization of politics — to map Benjamin's early discussion of the limitation of art onto his political criticism of the 1930's — explodes the uninterrupted aesthetic trembling into the public sphere and thus creates a closed aesthetic cosmos devoid of powers that might discontinue the immanence of aesthetic appearance. In aesthetic states, the will to appearance flows directly into the social realm and engenders a borderless harmony and totality that in fact are nothing other than terror (Koeppnick 1996: 276).

Furthermore, the abyss of total aestheticisation also involves the tendency to hero worship the artist. Benjamin pushes the mortification of the symbolic romantic artwork even further in that he distinguishes fundamentally between the artist and the work, the genius and the text, the life and the art. In 1922 Benjamin, influenced by Schlegel's critique of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, critiques Goethe's *Elective Affinities* in stark opposition to the "cult of the Genius", the "glaciating hero-worship" of classical poets³⁵ readings of Dilthey and Gundolf, readings which follow "Romanticism's promise that the artist would be priest and legislator to all humanity" (Norbert Lynton 1994: 34). Benjamin polemically reads against the grain of Dilthey's premise that poetry is nothing other than "Ausdruck und Darstellung des Lebens", a premise performed by the 1917 Goethe biographer Friedrich Gundolf, of the Stefan George Circle.³⁶ Unlike Gundolf, Benjamin does not read Goethe's life as an analogy of the artwork, "so daß schließlich dessen Leben als sein größtes Werk, der Autor selbst als Heros erscheine" (Witte 1985: 40). Benjamin, instead of falling into a kind of sentimental empathy (Dilthey's *Einfühlung*), fixes his critical attention on the autonomous work itself, the object of scrutiny being the text not the person behind it;³⁷ the *appearance* of the symmetry of the life and the art is therefore mortified.³⁸ For in the same way that the artwork is a transformation or transmutation of "nature" so also is it a transformation of the maker's experience or "life". And the critic's task (as a kind of go-between nature and the intellect) therefore is the double transformation of the object or symbol itself, destroying its appearances (both of nature and of life) in order to reveal the myths in which its "truths" may lie.³⁹

³⁵ See Mattenklott 1996: 165-166 on Benjamin's criticism of "Gundolf's image of the teutonic character of the artistic world: at the *base* there are dialogues and conversations, leading to a *massif* of letters, which lead up to the *summits* of individual works." Benjamin proposes instead, in the context of the reception of German classicism and Goethe's 1932 jubilee year, reading Goethe's letters (and in the context of this study, Goethe's artworks) "as such, not as monuments." Mattenklott notes wryly that "Retrospectively, the idolization of Goethe and of the *Kulturnation* seems pathetic or even absurd, because it was celebrated by a nation which was simultaneously preparing an apotheosis of barbarism".

³⁶ See Witte 1985: 39-47.

³⁷ Perhaps the beginning of the 'death of the author' (as in Barthes, Foucault, Derrida) and its return (see Burke 1993) may be found here.

³⁸ In Benjamin's scrutiny of great texts like those of Goethe, Proust, Baudelaire, Kafka and Karl Kraus he does make selective use of the life; however, Susan Sontag (1996: 111) makes the crucial point: "One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life".

³⁹ Whether Benjamin's essay on the *Elective Affinities* is vulgar as Anthony Stephens (1996: 149-160) entertainingly claims is another question. In the sphere of this limited study, the mythical reading which

In essence both the Romantic artist-critic and Benjamin's doubly destructive critic — the one positively, the other negatively — focus on the ideal of an artwork's self-contained truth — a truth which presents itself in nature, and is mimetically reproduced or translated into the art object, or rather the literary text, *transformed*, in order to present its inner logic or truth in language: "*transforming* it [the original], precisely so that its truth might be preserved."⁴⁰ For Benjamin it is a mimesis which traces the truth of a prehistory (*Urgeschichte*).

4. Mimesis

In his 1933⁴¹ essays "The doctrine of the similar" and "On the mimetic faculty" (the latter a revision after the former), Benjamin continues his divinatory/mantic/occult theory of language as a system,⁴² or better, a configuration of signs to be deciphered like the surface constellations of stars; prophetically reading the aleatory pattern of entrails, or coffeegrains at the bottom of a cup; penetrating the psychic images which the unconscious has concealed in handwriting like in a picture puzzle (*Vexierbild*). For language is the highest level of mimetic behaviour, and mimesis together with the surreal dissimilarities that can be gleaned from the unconscious — or even the preconsciousness (*Urbewußtsein*)

according to Stephens Benjamin projects onto Goethe's work, may in fact refer *allegorically* to the essence of symbolic works per se; Benjamin is perhaps reading the "story of Otilie" allegorically-destructively in order to clear the way to a transgressive reading of symbolic 'truth content' in the history of art proper. He *appropriates* Goethe's work to cite it out of place, for a different performative reason. Criticism and allegory in Benjamin go together in the mortification of symbolic appearances.

⁴⁰ Buck-Morss (1977: 87) on the reproduction of music and textual translation in Adorno and Benjamin respectively (the latter's activity being an influence on the former's), *truth being revealed in variation*.

⁴¹ And it is good to note that 1933 was the year the Nazis came to power, and Hitler ascended to chancellorship; that, as Handelman (1991: 78) importantly points out, Benjamin wrote these two 1933 essays "at a moment of extreme personal and historical crisis", a tendency that often surfaced in the writing of his major work.

⁴² To be sure, the first essay differs somewhat from the second in its exchange of linguistic-mystical motifs for mimetic-naturalistic linguistic theory (Rabinbach 1976: 62); but the two versions remain in dialogue with each other.

— may have restorative power for modern man and woman in their fragmentary experience of an ambiguously modern world. Benjamin (1977a, 2.1: 218) ends the fragment “Über das mimetische Vermögen”:

“Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen [Hofmansthal].” Dies Lesen ist das älteste: das Lesen vor aller Sprache, aus den Eingeweiden, den Sternen oder Tänzen. Später kamen Vermittlungsglieder eines neuen Lesens, Runen und Hieroglyphen in Gebrauch. Die Annahme liegt nahe, daß dies die Stationen wurden, über welche jene mimetische Begabung, die einst das Fundament der okkulten Praxis gewesen ist, in Schrift und Sprache ihren Eingang fand. Dergestalt wäre die Sprache die höchste Stufe des mimetischen Verhaltens und das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit: ein Medium, in welches ohne Rest die früheren Kräfte mimetischer Hervorbringung und Auffassung hineingewandert sind, bis sie so weit gelangten, die der Magie zu liquidieren.

Language — speech but especially writing — is a reservoir of archaic magical correspondences, of “nonsensuous similarities”. Benjamin (in Gnostic spirit), sharing “the general interest in ‘primitive thought’ of many writers and artists of his time, from Jung and Lévy-Bruhl to Cassirer to Scholem himself” (Handelman 1991: 80), writes that ancient and primitive people experienced magical correspondences in their surroundings (*Merkwelt*) to an extent quite foreign to modern man. Primitive man took magical control of such things in for example dance and ritual, where the collective mimicked the interstellar process, the signs in the sky. Similarity in mimicry, the groupings of the planets to the stars, the stars to people, and people with each other was an ancient way of reading the future, tempering the dark, unknowable powers that be: mimesis was a “life-determining force”. But what has happened to this ritual of ancient times? Has it disappeared or has it been transformed?

As Benjamin would have it, the pre-rational mimetic ritual is also found *transformed* in, for example, the modern child’s mimicry in play, echoing the belief of the ancient’s that the newborn child was in full possession of the “mimetic genius”, “and in particular to be perfectly molded on the structure of the cosmic being” (Benjamin 1978: 334). Astrology is also a process echoing the older imitation of the constellations in the sky, where the future may be recognised in a flash. But the highest form of mimesis, its

last vestige is found in language, that is to say, in the imitative behaviour formation of language, sensuous similarity, *onomatopoeia*: “Every word — and the whole of language” being “onomatopoeic” (Leonhard qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 207).⁴³ Against the “naive” Kantian and Enlightenment model of perception (its “epistemological mythology”), then, and rooted in the Romantic linguistic tradition, Benjamin turns to the pre-rationalistic world of perception in search of the origin of language: the world or workings of the primitive and insane person who in part *identifies* with the objects they perceive (Rabinbach 1976: 61).

Besides the magical side of language, Benjamin also notes the non-sensuous similarity side, the non-onomatopoeic element of language, its semiotic function: the fact that in different languages, the same word can mean different things, and different words can mean the same thing (Benjamin 1979: 67). Benjamin here has recourse to graphology to provide a possible link — “rather unconvincing” according to Handelman (1991: 81). The written word, as *Vexierbild*, is “an archive of non-sensuous similarities, or non-sensuous correspondences” (Benjamin 1979: 68). In the graphical picture puzzle the magical similarities of language may appear “in an instantaneous flash” (Benjamin 1979: 66).

Language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty: a medium into which the earlier perceptive capabilities for recognizing the similar had entered without residue, so that it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into relationship with each other, no longer directly, as once in the mind of the augur or priest, but in their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata. In other words: it is to writing and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers (Benjamin 1979: 68; qtd. in Handelman 1991: 81).

Only in the coherence of nonsensuous language, that is in the written word, may the imitative behaviour foundation of language, its original mimetic aspect be recognised, in a

⁴³ Rabinbach (1979: 61) also points to Herder’s influence, his view that “human beings invent language themselves from the sounds of living nature”.

flash, “that the written word, perhaps even more than certain combinations of sounds⁴⁴ in language, clarifies, in the relationship of the graphic image (*Schriftbild*) of words or letters to that which is meant or which gives the name, the nature of non-sensuous similarity” (Benjamin 1976: 67).⁴⁵ This points to the historical nature of Benjamin’s theory of language, both in the sense that Benjamin attempts to show that mimesis as a phenomenon changes historically (both phylogenetically and ontogenetically) and that his mimetic theory proposes a messianic-magical theory of the present. For the perception of similarity is time bound. Writes Benjamin (1979: 66):

It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities thus seems to be bound to a time-moment (*Zeitmoment*).

The important thing here is that mimesis, or its perception, is a physiological (historical) process: the reading of surface features to discover the inherent or underlying nature, is a

⁴⁴ See Benjamin in a letter (October 24, 1935) to Scholem on the similarity and fundamental difference between his (Benjamin’s) thoughts on nonsensuous similarity, as put forward in ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’ and similar ideas put forward by the author of the Kabbalist *Zohar*: “the concept of nonsensuous similarity developed there [Mimesis essay] finds manifold illustration in the way in which the author of the *Zohar* conceives of the formation of sounds — and written signs to an even greater extent, most likely — as the deposits of cosmic connections. Yet he seems to be thinking of a correspondence that is not ascribed to any mimetic origin. This may well follow from his commitment to the doctrine of emanation, to which my theory of mimesis presents the strongest possible opposition” (Scholem 1989: 169-170). See also Benjamin in his 1916 essay on language on the mute languages of things - their soundlessness, contra the language of man which is acoustic: “Things are denied the pure formal principle of language - sound. ... The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound” (Benjamin 1985: 321). In the above essay Benjamin proffers that man translate the dumb languages of things into the (once perfect, but still higher) language of man; that in the name the mute things find voice. This translation would also seem mimetically based, a copying (by a higher language of a lower) “until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds,” until the pure Ur-language pours forth through the translation.

⁴⁵ See also the connection between the mimetic theory and psychoanalysis, between speech and telepathy as constructed by (late) Freud. Writes Benjamin in a letter to Gretel Adorno in 1935: “I very much hope you read the contribution by Freud on telepathy and psychoanalysis. It is wonderful, if only because it brings before the eyes once again the style of the author in his old age - which cannot be sufficiently praised. But I am thinking of something specific. In the course of his consideration, Freud constructs, in passing as he often does his most important thoughts, a connection between telepathy and speech, in which he makes the first as a means of understanding - he explicitly points to the realm of insects - phylogenetically the predecessor of the second. Here I find once again the thoughts which are decisively discussed in the small sketch from Ibiza ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’” (Rabinbach 1979: 64).

reading/writing which (consciously or unconsciously) copies or reflects a process in order to have cognisance of a particular (infinite) unity in a moment which “flits past”. Writes Benjamin (1977a, 2.1 204) in “Doctrine of the Similar”: Insight into similarity “is to be gained less by demonstrating found similarities than by reproducing processes which produce such similarities”, like nature which produces similarities in mimicry. Language, then, produces similarities like nature does, albeit in a non-sensuous way, that of the graphic sign which communicates meaning in a coherent form. Benjamin’s point though is that underneath the unified graphic sign lies an original “meaning”, a preconscious similarity. The nonsensuous writing stands for something other than itself, not in any arbitrary sense, but rather closely linked to a specific sensuous “thing”, better, within that thing itself (as William Carlos Williams said, “No ideas but in things”). Like a picture puzzle the word holds within itself, as in a constellation, the phenomenon of which it is a name.

Notwithstanding the problematic aspect of these two fragments on the theory of language — the fact that the second version virtually extinguishes the mystical or magical aspect of the first in favour of a natural-linguistic flavour, pointing perhaps to a Marxist frame of mind; the issue of a historical-materialist turn to the essentially messianic theory; its basis in a symbolic Kabbalistic doctrine — the question of the magical, or shamanistic source of mimesis remains paramount: “When magic disintegrated, mimesis survived as a principle of artistic representation” (Buck-Morss 1977: 87). Mimesis for Benjamin played an essential cognitive role, it was an “ineluctable moment of cognition” (Tiedemann qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 88). Mimesis for Benjamin meant not merely copying “nature” but transforming it. For Adorno as for Benjamin, linguistic, artistic or philosophical representation “performed a metamorphosis, which, for all its enlightened reason, retained the faint image of a magic trick” (Buck-Morss 1977: 88). Hence the (dialectical) image of the *Vexierbild* which magically releases the unified moment of truth in a flash.

Mimesis in Benjamin’s case was not, as is often the case in traditional mimetic discourse, merely referential: in aesthetics, it was not so much nature as its process which

was the point, not the beautiful appearance of the object, but its essence.⁴⁶ In “copying” the process of nature — in its self-dividing *creation* [the *formative activity* (Handelman 1991: 75) or *poiesis* of language] of sensuous similarities, rather than the found similarities themselves — the representation turns into a picture puzzle: in it the archaic or mythical source of its nonsensuous similarities could be perceived in an instantaneous flash of recognition.⁴⁷ And this was the (critical or dialectical) truth to begin with (or so one could propose in this present context): that unlike the naive Kantian and Enlightenment model of perception which subjectively imposed *a priori* categories onto the objects of perception, rationally and reductively avoiding the mythological source from whence reason stems, or

⁴⁶ Bernd Hüpphauf (1996: 37-38) notes: “In his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin already confronts the problem of the disappearance of essential nature from the physical world as a consequence of its aesthetic appropriation. In the context of Romanticism, he distinguishes between an ‘authentic nature’, which constitutes the content of the artwork, and the ‘apparent visible’ nature; these, according to Benjamin, must be strictly distinguished from one another in conceptual terms:

in that the problem of a deeper essential identity of the ‘authentic’ visible nature is the artwork and of the (perhaps invisible, merely regardable [*anschaulbar*], pre-phenomenal [*urphänomenal*] nature present in the appearances of visible nature would then present itself. And this problem would possibly and paradoxically be solved in such a way that only in art and not in the nature of the world would the authentic, regardable, pre-phenomenal nature be visibly visible, while being present but hidden (obscured by the appearance) in the nature of the world.”

In the artwork therefore, the essence of the image or appearance as being that which is non-perceivable, pre-phenomenal in nature, would become perceivable. As mentioned earlier, the difference between the work and the object is fundamental in distinguishing the truth in both respectively. And Paul Klee, for instance, an artist admired by Benjamin, wrote of the artist: “The deeper he looks, the more readily he can extend his view from the present to the past, the more deeply he is impressed by the one essential image of creation itself, as Genesis, rather than by the image of nature, the finished product.” (Klee 1987: 45).

⁴⁷ Cf. “Romantic aesthetics [which] was permeated with a nostalgia for some lost, prior organic unity or ‘totality’ of being [*Ganzheit*] which would be restored dialectically after a process of self-division, alienation, and fragmentation; the symbol was the means to repair the breach.” (Handelman 1991: 105). Here one should recall Benjamin’s transgression of the Romantic symbol, in that criticism had to fundamentally put into question the symbolic artwork, in order for the criticism to turn into an autonomous work, one that would further the task of reaching the Idea. Language or the word as symbol is turned around to show language to be fundamentally fragmentary, but that only through these fragments (*Bruchstücke*) may the pure language be glimpsed. The marvellous paradox: the symbol is to be mortified in order to reveal the truth within “the appearance of truth” (totality); to destroy one symbolic whole making way through the ruins for another? But not permanently, fundamentally ephemerally: the destruction-procreation dialectic (a tension of form and formlessness) does not stop in a Hegelian synthesis, it is — to be sure, in the Romantic spirit — an infinite task: “the Romantic sublime, the sense of the infinite and absolute as the unbounded and unattainable but necessary aim of finite humanity’s endless strivings, echoed in the early Benjamin and Scholem’s ideas about the ‘pure language’ as contentless, formless unbounded, and unattainable” (Handelman 1991: 104). This, then, constitutes Benjamin’s messianic utopian impulse, its double destruction.

may stem (hence its “epistemological mythology”). “Benjamin was interested in the capacity to perceive similarities as a prerationalistic way of thinking which had its own validity - a validity denied to it by Enlightenment thought” (Handelman 1991: 82). Benjamin (and with him Adorno) allowed the object to take the lead, the subject “formed the object only in the sense of *transforming* it into a new modality. [...] Truth as mimetic, linguistic representation meant calling things by their name” (Buck-Morss 1977: 88). And that which is called by its name, in this case, is the prehistory in which modernity is embedded. Benjamin’s recourse to ancient and mythical man, both in terms of mimesis and the origin of naming, lies less in a nostalgia for a Paradise lost than in the awareness of the myth of the Paradise of the present. The symbolism lies in the reaction to a social, industrial world, of its underlying myth. As Benjamin (1977a, 3: 560; qtd. in Löwy 1985: 45) sagaciously said of the Romantics:

The Romantic appeal to dream life was an emergency signal; it pointed less towards the way home of the soul to the Motherland, than to the obstacles that had already barred this way.

Moreover, the category of “myth” is revealed, named, poignantly represented in the symbol-allegories of the Kabbalah, from whence stems Schlegel’s and the Romantic theory of aesthetics in general, which in turn influenced Scholem’s study of Jewish mysticism,⁴⁸ and coloured Benjamin’s own theory of language.

⁴⁸ See Handelman (1991: 103) on “Scholem’s seemingly uncritical and naïve application of certain German romantic aesthetic categories to his studies of Kabbalah”.

5. Kabbalah

Schlegel wrote “the true aesthetic is the Kabbalah”. Handelman (1991: 76) writes that “German romanticism and French symbolism themselves in turn had absorbed, via the Christian Kabbalah, currents from various esoteric philosophies. [...] Jewish kabbalistic ideas about language and symbol were themselves transformed and radically changed in the process of mediation through the Christian Kabbalah, and those changes were then absorbed and perpetuated in Scholem’s attempts to reconstruct Jewish mysticism.” In the process

As Moshe Idel has brilliantly shown, the distinctively Jewish *halakhic*-theurgic elements were dropped, and Kabbalah was translated into a primarily speculative and symbolic theosophical system. To take it a step further than Idel, this symbolic theosophy then was “aestheticised” in German romantic thought. Kabbalah then emerges in Scholem conceived as a great work of “art,” a great revitalizing upsurge of “creative myth” and “symbol” in the heart of “sterile” rabbinic-*halakhic* Judaism and the “dry empty” rationalism of Jewish philosophy (Handelman 1991: 76).

In the Kabbalah language is seen as the receptacle of the Great Name of God, which is secret. Language, that is to say, of the Holy Scripture, is the symbolic expression of the essence of the universe in the relation between the finite and the infinite. The essence of the universe lies in the Divine Name — “the metaphysical origin of all language, and language is the explanation of this name” (Handelman 1991: 76-77). The language of God, a primal language (in Benjamin’s words, *Ursprache*), makes up the Scripture and “is itself crystallised in the ‘Name of God’” (Handelman 1991: 77).

But this pure language of Names has no, or goes beyond, communicative meaning in language — as God has no direct meaning (in Luria’s idea of *tzimtzum*, God withdrew or contracted in the process of creation, into and from Nothing). In God is both form and the formless, He comprises both the abyss into which meaning disappears and from which meaning comes. (The abyss is compressed.) But not only statically, Luria’s *tzimtzum* presents the Nothing not as a negation of the finite world but as its dynamic

activation (Handelman 1991: 96). (The Nothing is in constant flux.) In this way the pure word becomes “Nothing”, or “In Scholem’s view, the ultimate word was ‘meaningless’ though giving rise to infinite meaning; the ‘Nothing’ led to an anarchic plurality of interpretation, to an upsurge of myth, and religious vitality, and so forth” (Handelman 1991: 96).

The Divine Name is expressed not directly but symbolically in all language of which it is the basis. This symbolic “patterning” becomes a secret glyph, the *textus* of the Torah, a mysterious shape or rune, woven with the tetragrammaton as nucleus, which only the adept can decipher. There is no direct communication of God’s name JHWH, and the other names of God, only a whispered trace. Moreover, “Since the Divine Names are a concentration of divine power, Scholem perceives a dialectical tension between ‘magic’ and ‘mysticism’ which carries over into a belief in the extraordinary powers of the human word as well” (Handelman 1991: 77). In the name the “magic” immediate connection of the word with the thing is active, as a creative power, a power, says Scholem and with him Benjamin,⁴⁹ which “language has over the [mute] world of things” (Handelman 1991: 77).

In short, for the Kabbalists God’s language, which is the creative essence (or *Ursprung* in Benjaminian terminology) of the world, is crystallised within the Great Name, transmuted within God’s secret Names; “the secret life of God is projected into the Torah; its order is the order of the Creation” (Scholem 1996: 41), which in turn is enshrouded like a whisper of secret things, within the language of man. God’s infinitely creative language has withdrawn from man’s finite language, leaving traces however, potential powers of Naming, of rescuing mute nature. It is within the mystery of language — one is tempted to say, in reading the symbols of language as *Vexierbilder*; or as Scholem would have it, like poets do — that a powerful creative or redemptive force may be concealed/revealed. The Origin, from whence comes the Divine power of Naming, is therefore the goal.

According to Richard Wolin two myths emerging from Kabbalist lore appear in Benjamin’s thinking: the first concerns the myth of creation, the second is based on the

⁴⁹ Handelman (1991) makes a strong argument against thinking that Scholem’s theory of the Kabbalah influenced Benjamin, vouching for the opposite, Benjamin’s (early) theories of language influenced Scholem.

thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia's Neoplatonic "the science of the combination of letters" (Wolin 1982: 37 & 40). But a third myth may be added, that of Luria's idea of the "breaking of the vessels" which goes together with the Lurianic principle of *tikkun*, or the mending of the broken vessels.

The Kabbalist myth of creation involves the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, "designed to explain the Torah before and after the fall of man from paradise, and also to provide an image of the state of redemption to which life will return with the coming of the Messiah" (Wolin 1982: 37-38). Scholem 1971: 40) writes:

Since Adam sinned, the world has been governed not by the tree of Life as it properly should be) but by the Tree of Knowledge. The Tree of Life is entirely and exclusively holy, with no admixture of evil, no adulteration or impurity or death or limitation. The Tree of Knowledge, on the other hand, contains both good and evil, purity and impurity, virtue and vice, and therefore under its rule there are things forbidden and things permitted, things fit for consumption and things unfit, the clean and the unclean. In an unredeemed world the Torah is revealed in positive and negative commandments and all these imply, but in the redeemed future uncleanness and unfitness and death will be abolished. In an unredeemed world the Torah must be interpreted in manifold ways — literal, allegorical, mystical; but in the redeemed future it will be revealed in the pure spirituality of the Tree of Life, without the 'clothing' it put on after Adam sinned. It will be wholly inward, entirely holy.

The original *Ur*-world (the garden of God) as represented by the Tree of Life was unified, complete, whole. But the fall resulted in a "separation between good and evil, holy and unholy, pure and impure, etc." (Wolin 1982: 38). This separation brought on the need for knowledge, a knowledge of good and evil. Before the separation there was no need to have the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil as all things were one. Together with the Tree of Knowledge, the Torah of Exile resides over the fallen world — where nature is originally purely spiritual, evil is now mixed in with it (Scholem 1996: 115) — and guides man who is in an unredeemed, mixed state: "It takes on a proscriptive and admonitory character insofar as the forces of evil permeate the world after the fall" (Scholem 1996: 115). Wolin cites Scholem on the converse state of things, a world in redemption:

Only the redemption, breaking the dominion of exile, puts an end to the order of the Tree of Knowledge and restores the utopian order of the Tree of Life in which the heart beats unconcealed and the isolation in which everything now finds itself is overcome. Thus the inner logic of this conception of the Dominion of the Tree of Knowledge as the legitimate form of revelation in an unredeemed world had to return home to Paradise where all things will again be in their true place (Wolin 1982: 38).

With the return to Paradise, the original unsullied state of things, the Torah of Redemption dissolves the prohibitive Torah of Exile, and its allegorical and esoteric content is revealed. Under the Torah of Redemption the confused language of separation is once more unified; the world of *galuth* is returned to its original universal harmony. Origin is the goal (*Ursprung ist das Ziel* - Karl Kraus)⁵⁰.

But, as Wolin (1982: 39) points out, there is a static and a dynamic view of this origin. Where the former merely restores a broken unredeemed world back to its pristine conception, the latter infuses a radical element into redemption, signifying a “return to a content merely *implicit* in the original paradisaical state, whose ultimate, eschatological meaning will fully unfold only after the profane realm of history has been surmounted and the will of the Messiah realised”.

Origin is still the goal, but not as the fixed image of the past that must be recaptured *in toto*, but rather as the fulfilment of a potentiality which lies dormant in origin, the attainment of which simultaneously represents a quantum leap beyond the original point of departure (Wolin 1982: 39).

This dynamic quantum leap signifies man’s ability to aid — albeit not directly — in the return, and signals in, together with the exegetical practises of Abulafia, the third myth mentioned before, the Lurianic principle of *tikkun*. Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1532-72), later called Ari (“the Lion”), created the most highly authoritative Kabbalah. Luria’s system viewed the *galuth* (Galut or exile) as the inclement, terrible condition of the whole universe — even of the deity. This bold idea had three central conceptions, which actuate the Lurianic system: limitation, destruction, reparation.

According to Luria and his followers, God confined and concealed himself, and in so doing, revealed the world: “There is a profound inward Galut, not the Galut of one of the creatures but of God himself, who’ll limited himself and thereby made place for the universe. This is the Lurianic concept of concentration, *tzimtzum*, which supplanted the simpler idea of creation held by the Spanish Kabbalists” (Scholem 1971: 43). The Spanish Kabbalists proffered a doctrine of emanations:⁵¹ God manifested himself in the world externally. Writes Scholem (1971: 43), “Through the descent of the lights from their infinite source all the worlds were emanated and created; our world is but the last and outward shell of the layers of divine glory. The process of creation is thus something like progressive revelation”. According to Luria’s conception of creation, on the other hand, God had to retreat within himself, in order for a thing to come into being. God, therefore, had to go through a process of inner concentration, in order to shine light into the vacuum of limitation. Creation had a double face: that of limitation and emanation.

Without limitation everything would revert to the divine, and without emanation nothing would come into being. Nothing that exists can be uniform, everything has this basic Janus character - the limiting force and the emanating, retreat and propagation. Only the concurrence of the two disparate motifs can produce being (Scholem 1971: 43).

God is therefore seen as a living being. He created vessels which were to serve the manifestation of His divine being, because anything that “wishes to act or manifest itself requires garbs and vessels, for without them it would revert to infinity which has no differentiation and no stages” (Scholem 1971: 45).

The divine light entered these vessels in order to take forms appropriate to their function in creation, but the vessels could not contain the light and thus were broken. This is the phase which the Kabbalists call the “breaking of the vessels”. And what is the consequence of the shattering of the vessels? The light was dispersed. Much of it returned to its source; some portions, or

⁵⁰ Benjamin uses this Kraus citation in his 1940 *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*.

⁵¹ Recall, as mentioned before, Benjamin’s opposition to the author of the *Zohar*’s doctrine of emanation, in the context of his theory of mimesis: “his [the author of the *Zohar*] commitment to the doctrine of emanation, to which my theory of mimesis represents the strongest possible opposition” (Scholem 1989: 170).

“sparks”, fell downward and were scattered, some rose upward (Scholem 1971: 45).

The “breaking of the vessels” signifies the Lurianic destruction. This shattering explains the *galuth*: from now on nothing is perfect. Instead of defining the divine light in its specifically appointed places in the world, the vessels broke, and thus the light escaped. Everything is broken, everything awry. Nothing is in the place where it ought to be, but scattered in exile or Diaspora. Furthermore, there is also a *galuth* or exile of the divine, sparks of holiness which are bound in earthly shells:

Into the deep abyss of the forces of evil, the forces of darkness and impurity which the Kabbalists call “shells” or “ofscourings,” there fell, as a result of the breaking of the vessels, forces of holiness, sparks of divine light. Hence there is Galut of the divine itself, of the “sparks of the Shekhinah” : ‘These sparks of holiness are bound in fetters of steel in the depths of the shells, and yearningly aspire to their source but cannot avail to do so until they have support’ (Scholem 1971: 45).

After the destruction, which is the breaking of the vessels, everything exists in *galuth*, even God. This brings us to the third Lurianic principle: the reparation, the healing. This healing process must be carried out by man, “fundamentally every man and especially every Jew participates in the process of the *tikkun*” (Scholem 1991: 117). You and me together must mend the primal flaw: the original breaking of the vessels resulted in God handing over the creative language of reparation to man, so that he could complete the healing task.

Adam — who at first was a cosmic, spiritual, supernatural being, a soul which contained all souls — fell from his station, whereupon the divine light in his soul was dispersed. Henceforth even the light of the soul would be imprisoned in a dungeon with the sparks of the Shekhinah under a single doom. All being was again scattered in Galut. In all the expanse of creation there is imperfection, flaw, Galut (Scholem 1971: 46).

According to Luria, the Jewish people must amend themselves and therefore the world: through the Torah and the commandments. Through the Sacraments the divine light may

be freed to assume or to return to its rightful place. This freeing of the sparks of the Shekhinah is done by the children of Israel by their deeds, by their profane actions, in the *galuth*. Each man who amends his own soul amends the soul of his neighbour. ("Whoever saves a single Jew," teaches the Babylonian Talmud, "Scripture ascribes it to him as though he had saved an entire world".) This is the belief in transmigration, the doctrine of metempsychosis, a doctrine which acclaimed wide popularity in the Jewish generations following the Lurianic age:

Every living being is subject to the law of transmigration from form to form. There is no being, not even the lowliest, which may not serve as a prison for the sparks of the "banished souls" seeking restoration from their Galut (Scholem 1971: 47).

To amend is to redeem:

redemption is synonymous with emendation or restoration. After we have fulfilled our duty and the emendation is completed, and all things occupy their appropriate places in the universal scheme, then redemption will come *of itself*. Redemption merely signifies the perfect state, a flawless and harmonious world in which everything occupies its proper place (Scholem 1971: 47).

Every man must work toward this completion. Each act of observing a commandment has universal significance; each profane act guided by the Thora is a mending. Redemption, in the Lurianic tradition, is no longer catastrophic: the transition may be difficult, but it will no longer be accomplished by revolution and disaster. Redemption is the organic, logical, historical conclusion. Every man is involved in the process. Moreover, the Messiah will not bring about the redemption, he is merely a symbol of the completed task of restoration. The Kabbalists have no need for a personal Messiah with a human personality (neither do they postulate a subjective, personal, mystical experience), though they do except him.

Galut and redemption are not historical manifestations peculiar to Israel, but manifestations of all being, up to and including the mystery of divinity itself. The Messiah here becomes the entire people of Israel rather than an individual



Redeemer: the people of Israel as a whole prepares itself to amend the primal flaw. Redemption is a consequence of antecedents and not of revolution, and though the redemption of Israel in the national and secular sense remained a very real ideal, it was widened and deepened by making it the symbol of the redemption of the whole world, the restoration of the universe of the universe to the state it was to have attained when the Creator planned its creation (Scholem 1971: 48).

Every man, and especially every Jew may aid in the dynamic return to the original unmixing harmony, but only indirectly, in a parallel manner. The profane world is the antithesis of the Divine world, “history and salvation are *antitheses*” (Wolin 1982: 39). There is a chasm between the Torah of the Exile and the Torah of Redemption, one that cannot be bridged by man directly.

For since the Torah of the Exile and the Torah of Redemption are opposites, a reading of the former in order to gain insight of the latter can only be accomplished by way of a highly esoteric and anagogical approach to knowledge. To be sure, “knowledge” in the customary sense must be forsaken, since it is a profane operation of mind (corresponding to the rule of the Tree of Knowledge) flatly incommensurable with the transcendent nature of salvation (Wolin 1982: 39).

Benjamin himself made an obscure reference to the indirect esoteric assistance of the profane, *through being profane*, in the fulfilment of the messianic realm in his (*circa*) 1921 text *Theologico-political fragment*:

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach (Benjamin 1986: 312).

The profane sphere is the one of *galuth*, a world mixed through with the material forces of evil; it is a world of exile. But according to Lurianic tradition, “anchored in the centre of a profoundly Jewish gnosis, the idea of exile as a mission makes its appearance” (Scholem

1996: 116). Although in Lurianic teaching the mission is less tortuous, less individualistic and more community orientated, exile as a mission stems from a particularly Gnostic idea in the view of the individual caught in a world or cosmos vacated by the divine, each individual trapped in the conflict between material demonic forces without and a soul seeking redemption within. The feverish tension in the experience of exile may in fact become a powerful force in the fight for freedom, a freedom which can only be dark, desperate, destructive; it is a freedom for which the individual must be prepared to make sacrifices, such as breaking with “the world”, setting the soul free from personality.

And freedom requires an arduous preparation. Whoever seeks it must both accept extreme humiliation and exhibit the greatest spiritual pride. In one version, freedom entails total asceticism. In another version, it entails libertinism - practising the art of transgression. To be free of “the world,” one must break the moral (or social) law. To transcend the body, one must pass through a period of physical debauchery and verbal blasphemy, on the principle that only when morality has been deliberately flouted is the individual capable of a radical transformation: entering into a state of grace that leaves all moral categories behind. In both versions of the exemplary Gnostic drama, someone who is saved is beyond good and evil. Founded on an exacerbation of dualisms (body-mind, matter-spirit, evil-good, dark-light), Gnosticism promises the abolition of all dualisms (Sontag 1996a: 52-53).

It should be clear that the Gnostic impulse of transgression correlates with the Sabbatian impulse toward transgression which Jeffrey Mehlman found in Benjamin’s thinking (mentioned earlier). In Benjamin’s thinking entering evil in order to fight it from within seems to be a principle that appears, disappears and reappears in varying permutations and combinations. The subversive idea of going against one’s tradition, subverting precisely that which makes up the basis of one’s thought, committing the immoral act of transgressing the Law (in Benjamin’s case, the Torah) that permeated one’s existence⁵² — the subversion as being strangely and daemonically liberating and regenerative — this Gnostic-Sabbatian impulse fuels and re-fuels Benjamin’s destruction-creation paradoxes.

⁵² See Scholem’s record of his outrage at Benjamin’s “unscrupulous” dialectical undermining of moral categories: “He recognized moral categories only in the sphere of living that he had fashioned about himself and in the intellectual world.”; Benjamin and his then wife accusing Scholem in turn of “outrageous wholesomeness” (Scholem 1982: 54).

Sometimes Benjamin's tendency toward subversive transgression is filled with pessimism, sometimes hope, sometimes despair. But always the underlying regulation — be it anarchic, nihilistic, utopian or merely ironic — would seem to be the idea of helping the coming of the Messianic reign along, helping the return to a dynamic pure *Ursprung* — albeit *as radical undermining metaphor, trope, subversive medium, explosive analogy* and indirectly, acting *in the profane*. Sinking into the profane means opening oneself up to the demonic forces which are spread throughout the material; only here within the material that is suffused with evil or abysmal confusion may the purity or clarity of the original nature be made manifest - esoterically, exoterically. The preparation for the dissolution of the good-evil dualism is a parallel or parallactic process which occurs in the dark; the profane concept of knowing is radically altered in order for salvation which is radically other to be intimated. The process is doubly mysterious, and has in Benjamin's case a profoundly linguistic basis. This, then, is the indirect connection with the Kabbalistic mystical approach to the Scriptures: "there seems to be definite parallels between his [Benjamin's] conception of literary works of art as hieroglyphs of redeemed life and the Kabbalistic idea of a state of redemption whose nature can be intuited through a linguistic analysis of sacred texts" (Wolin 1982: 39). The gnostic idea of entering a dark freedom seems to be reflected linguistically in Benjamin's esoteric readings of esoteric texts, like those of the Kabbalah, in search of redemption.

Such esoteric text-ural practise is found in the ecstatic, mystical tradition of exegesis as developed by the Spanish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (b.1240):

Under the influence of Neo-Platonic doctrines, Abulafia sought a pure, unsullied path toward mystical communion with God. The chief obstacle to this goal, however, was man's contamination by the impure, finite world of the sense — rendering him unfit for any such transcendental experiences. Consequently, Abulafia looked for an object of meditation that would be capable of elevating the mystic above the world of sense, an object that would be sufficiently supramundane so as not to distract him from his higher spiritual pursuits. What he discovered were the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Wolin 1982: 39-40).

According to Abulafia himself, his aim was to untie the knots which bind the soul and keep it separated and scattered in multiplicity; once untied the souls return to the origin “which is one without any duality and which comprises the multiplicity” (Scholem 1995: 131).⁵³ Man had to find a way to free the soul from natural, sensual forms, free from himself, opening him up to the divine light without causing him to be blinded in the process. Abulafia thought he found in the abstract letters of the Hebrew alphabet an absolute object of contemplation, “one capable of stimulating the soul’s deeper life and freeing it from ordinary perceptions” (Scholem 1995: 132).

Basing himself upon the abstract and non-corporeal nature of script, he develops a theory of the mystical contemplation of letters and their configurations, as the constituents of God’s name. For this is the real and if I may say so, the peculiarly Jewish object of mystical contemplation: The Name of God, which is something absolute, because it reflects the hidden meaning and totality of existence; the Name through which everything else acquires its meaning and which yet to the human mind has no concrete, particular meaning of its own. (Scholem 1995: 132-133; Cf. Wolin 1982: 40).

Abulafia then went on to devise his “science of the combinations of letters” by which is meant a disciplined meditation aided by letters and their configurations. And if the letters have no meaning in themselves, although it is true the letters take place in the divine language which is the source of all language, so much the better for not distracting the mystic. The process of configurating (“meaningless”) letters in varying patterns to achieve a trance is a methodical discipline which is meant to induce a higher consciousness (of God). There is, then, a careful pattern to the seeming endless and random combinations of letters; there is a method at work in the fortuitousness. The trance of losing oneself in order to attain an illumination is a dangerous process which if pursued without the discipline of preparation may be perilous, or merely self-delusive. The “descent” into the “pure thought” of “music”, where the alphabet takes the place of the score, and the “listener”, free from the distraction and bindings of the self and sensuality, ascends and descends in order to suddenly gain access to the Great Name of God, the source of life

⁵³ Scholem (1995: 131) notes that “As a symbol of the great mystic liberation of the soul from the fetters of sensuality the ‘untying of the knots’ occurs also in the theosophy of northern Buddhism”.

and the ultimate truth, can very easily decline into even greater confusion or the madness of a sourceless “high”. Without control the rhythm regresses into noise. Instead of attaining bliss the mystic collapses into snafu. But when controlled, “every letter represents a whole world to the mystic who abandons himself to its contemplation” (Scholem 1995: 134).

Every language, not only Hebrew, is transformed into a transcendental medium of the one and only language of God. And as every language issues from a corruption of the aboriginal language — Hebrew — they all remain related to it. [...] For, in the last resort, every spoken word consists of sacred letters, and the combination, separation and reunion of letters reveal profound mysteries to the Kabbalist, and unravel to him the secret of the relation of all languages to the holy tongue (Scholem 1995: 134 & 135).

Abulafia’s mystic-exegetical theory radicalises the Kabbalistic doctrine that all the cosmos exists by virtue of, and in, the Great Name of God, the tetragrammaton. According to the Kabbalists, all the world is language based. But instead of being merely communication-orientated, language has dormant within itself the original power of divine naming, when words and what they signified are one. In the Name all multiplicity or Diaspora comes to an end. In God’s language the world exists pure and unified; God brought the cosmos into existence through language, through creatively naming things. “Hence all existence”, writes Wolin 1982: 40) “has its ultimate origin and significance in the creative language of God.

While human language retains close ties with divine language, it is merely *receptive* and *cognitive*; i.e., it is confined to the world of knowledge. Divine language, however, is *creative*; i.e., it has engendered the world and everything in it. This accounts for the Kabbalists’ mystical fascination with language as the object in which the ultimate secret of creation is concealed. The name of God, the Tetragrammaton JHWH, is the chief object of mystical contemplation insofar as all earthly names have their origin in the creative power embodied in the divine name.

And according to Benjamin, as transcribed in his 1916 essay *On language as such and on the language of man* — the essay in which he takes recourse to the myth of creation as

laid-out in the first two chapters of the biblical book of Genesis — naming proper circuitously mimics the *Ursprung*, the pure, untempered state of things. In other words, the pure language of divinity lies concealed within the language of man, as a potential. The pure language is revealed not through communicative language but indirectly through the magical immediacy of language (much like the magical, esoteric actions of man may aid indirectly in the process of *tikkun*). According to Benjamin naming is the innermost nature of language itself; not the bourgeois naming of a mental being by a name, not as a means nor as an object nor addressee of communication, not in an arbitrary system of signs, but rather “*in naming the mental being of man communicates itself to God. [...] Naming is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated, and in which language itself communicates itself absolutely*” (Benjamin 1986: 318). In the name God’s word calls itself to itself.

Benjamin relates that according to the story of Genesis God gave his creative power of language to Adam to complete his creation: by naming the things and the animals of the world. Human language is different to the language of things, in that nature and its things are mute, according to Benjamin’s re-reading. human language is closely related to God’s language in its *mental* power to name:

The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound. The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language (Benjamin 1986: 321).

Man alone was charged with the task to name,⁵⁴ by which he was to call things to their rightful place, their metaphysical place in God’s name. *Adam was to call the mute things*

⁵⁴ It goes without saying that, in the context of a politico-feminism there is a marvellous problem in Benjamin’s idea of Adam as the “namer” of his wife, Eve; it suggests a highly dubious possessiveness and domination of woman. In the same breath, one notes the problem in elevating man above nature, man as namer of “imperfect” nature denotes domination over “her”. The problem spills over from the female into the environment via the fundamentally problematical male-orientated Bible (of much religion *per se*), and this could be a study in itself. But perhaps it can be said here that the myth of domination, the myth of being in control, just by virtue of being named here (in this study and in Benjamin’s text), creates an implicit counter-consciousness. That the male-orientated attitude goes back to the mythical origin of the truth, points to the “de-mythologising” attitude inherent in feminism and suggests that a de-mythologising

to speech: “but this man, who is not created from the word [but made from earth], is now invested with the *gift* of language and is elevated above nature” (Benjamin 1986: 322). The calling of the mute things to speech was an act of translation; in the name the imperfect language of things was translated into the creative language of man. “Only through the linguistic being of things can he gain knowledge of them from within himself — in name. God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks” (Benjamin 1986: 319); “By bestowing names upon things man elevates them, grants them dignity, redeems them from the fate of speechless anonymity” (Wolin 1982: 42). Man was to call things by their names through his knowledge of them, using words which were complete names within themselves: “Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator” (Benjamin 1986: 323).

Furthermore, “All human language is only reflection of the word in name” (Benjamin 1986: 323). Human language is limited in terms of cognition compared to the infinity of God’s creative word. God’s gift to humankind was an analytical ability to name and complete his creation — one could say in miniature form. The human language of naming *reflects* God’s creative word, in the name. The name isn’t God’s creative word (knowledge isn’t creation) but allows for God’s word to shine through it.

In name the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth (Benjamin 1986: 325).

But Adam failed in his task — he sinned — which resulted in the fall. And the knowledge that was once singular and unified in the sense of grasping things exactly, mentally-linguistically, not arbitrarily with signs, is lost. Instead man acquires a fallen knowledge of

attitude proper [at least, re-reading Rey Chow (1989: 64), the subversive discourse, or “discourses of subversiveness” which would implicitly criticise — dialectically speaking — its own ambiguity “with regard to the social relations of gender”] has, inherently, or implicitly “feminist” characteristics. As for re-mythologising de-mythologising, such as the Romantic “new mythology,” depending upon the myth of Adam’s first wife before Eve, “Lilith,” the demonic woman with liberating energies, or, for example Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ (1994) Jungian feminist uses of archaic myths — as sources of liberation and justification, there are obvious pros and cons. And it is, then, the pros and cons of Benjamin’s (“gnostic”) use of myth against myth which is our concern — in his work but also in the concurrent work of others, said or not said.

the duality of things: the distance and arbitrariness between thing and word, the chasm between subject and object, the breach between good and evil is opened up. The pure Adamite language of naming and completing God's cosmic project is forsaken for the imperfect language that Kierkegaard devastatingly termed "chatter" (*Geschwätz*). Like the Tower of Babel which caused a multiplicity of languages, the Fall results in chaos. Adam's knowledge is scattered, his naming word is broken into fragments: "The paradisaical language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge; whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of languages" (Benjamin 1986: 326-327). Adam sinned, for through vanity he wanted to become God; his perfect miniature knowledge of things was no longer enough, he was tempted to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, emblem of Judgment,⁵⁵ to have absolute knowledge of God. Thus he gave up the bliss and harmony of the pure language-mind of man, "In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means" (Benjamin 1986: 328). And knowledge becomes something nameless, it becomes prattle.

For that the language of paradise was fully cognizant, even the existence of the tree of knowledge cannot conceal. Its apples were supposed to impart knowledge of good and evil. But on the seventh day, God had already cognized with the words of creation. And God saw that it was good. The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiac state. Knowledge of good and evil abandons name, it is knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact, and which has stepped out of name language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic. The word must communicate something (other than itself). That is really the Fall of language-mind. The word as something externally communicating, as it

⁵⁵ Benjamin (1985: 328) notes: "The Tree of Knowledge did not stand in the garden of God in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner. This immense irony marks the mythical origin of law." (1985: 328). Knowledge of good and evil means judgment, and as this knowledge is prattle, judgment must be folly. The mythical origin of such a truth, or the truth which lies in such a myth says a lot about the myth underlying several walks of life, not least the myth underneath the judicial sphere of law. One could say, for example, as did Benjamin, that Kafka wrote magnificently in such a mythical or primal sphere — as Benjamin puts it, the primal world being Kafka's secret present (Scholem 1989: 135). Hence the ubiquitous and daunting spectre of Guilt in his Scriptureless parables.

were a parody by the expressly mediate word, the creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful, Adamite language-mind that stands between them (Benjamin 1986: 327; Wolin 1982: 42-43).

The external word and the knowledge of evil is closely linked: they stand outside the name. Where Adam's knowledge of things resided in the inward name, fallen man having abandoned name knows only externally in prattle. Knowledge, therefore, is no longer something complete within itself, but perpetually (pointlessly?) about something other. The prattle of knowledge and the multiplicity of language is the *galuth* of fallen man. But still beneath the chaos, within the imperfect language of man a dim view of the pure *Ursprache* can be had:

The oblique relation between the two, the conception of the latter as the distant horizon of a linguistic-critical method of literary exegesis, in which the lost paradisiac language of names contains within itself the hidden script of redeemed life, becomes the focal point of Benjamin's critical energies. The pure language of names is the "origin" that has become the "goal," inasmuch as its affinity to the divine language of creation lends it the greatest proximity to a state of redemption. For the Kabbalists the texts which revealed the most immediate contact with the word of God were those of Scripture. In Benjamin's quasi-secularized [quasi-mystical, GTS] interpretation of this doctrine, not scripture alone, but also literary works of art, are legitimate objects of the exegetical quest for the key to redemption (Wolin 1982: 43).

For Benjamin the Kabbalah presented a theurgic model to be subverted. Like the quasi-religious Romantic theory of art and criticism, an essentially *symbolic* program, the Kabbalah's symbolism had to be mortified, allegorised - in order to reveal the mythic domain in which it was rooted. In the same way that Benjamin used a Romantic model of criticism to turn criticism on its head, Benjamin made use of the mythic symbolism of the Kabbalah as a method to turn myth on its head. In both cases Benjamin was after a truth content inherent in the material category of myth. He believed that in the re-writing of the mythic (in the allegorical re-reading or subversive re-presentation of a traditional fable) a prehistory of the present would be exposed, radically or even polemically, but always following (in creating) a theory of knowledge that is grounded in a philosophy of history.

Menninghaus⁵⁶ presents a very solid (historical) case for showing Benjamin's epistemological conceptions to be closely related to but essentially different from the following:

the eighteenth-century *Enlightenment* concept of myth; the *Romantic* concept, which asserted itself against the Enlightenment concept from about 1795 onward and largely determined the nineteenth-century view of myth; mythical reflection in the *philosophy of religion*, such as Benjamin encountered it in Hermann Cohen; Sigmund Freud's *psychoanalytic* concept of myth; C. G. Jung's *deep-psychological* notion of myth as archetype; Aragon's *surrealistic* mythology; and the radically unhistorical, formal *semiological* concept of myth of twentieth-century structural anthropology (Menninghaus 1988: 293).

Furthermore, and together with Adorno, Menninghaus (1988: 314) argues that Benjamin's idea of blasting apart myth is "not realized in the mere destruction of myth, but in its reconciling redemption". According to him a "passage" through myth is found in Benjamin's concept of *Erfahrung*. The process is dialectical, which is the determining factor that separates Benjamin from the above-mentioned conceptualisations of myth: "Experience, then, breaks apart myth by its own means - a dialectical *passage de mythe*" (Menninghaus 1988: 322). Menninghaus argues that Benjamin's early separation of truth and myth (as in the Goethe study) — his rejection of the Enlightenment "identification of myth and truth" — is negative, whereas in the later *Passagenwerk* it becomes ambiguous — "Benjamin's formulation in the Elective Affinities essay is negative ('no unequivocal clarity in myth,' *keine Eindeutigkeit*), whereas in the *Passagen-Werk* he speaks of the more positive term, 'ambiguity' (*Zweideutigkeit*)" (Menninghaus 1988: 298 & 299). But, read *dialectically*, as Benjamin does essentially if only implicitly, the passage *through* myth, penetrating or crossing over the threshold of myth as it were, would be the *conditio sine qua non* of Benjamin's theory of knowledge, his philosophy of art and of history.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Menninghaus 1988: 292-325.

⁵⁷ Menninghaus, amongst others, points out that Benjamin's conception of myth is fundamentally located in the philosophy of history — especially as he later explicated his intentions in the *Passagen-Werk* — against ahistorical conceptions like those of Nietzsche, his dubious "aestheticism," a "purely aesthetic conception of myth" leading to his "renunciation of its understanding [...] in historical-philosophical terms" (Menninghaus 1988: 294); and Cassirer, against "the one-sided evolutionary schema myth-religion-theoretical knowledge, a schema rooted in Cassirer, despite his structuralist tendencies."

In his Goethe study Benjamin set out to “destroy” or sublimate (as in Hegel’s tripartite *Aufhebung*) the symbolic work of art by critically presenting its substructure as mythical. It was a method of using a work of art to present a broader (method of) truth. Benjamin saw concealed in the (symbolic) work a myth, the myth of nature in fact, through which he hoped, as through deciphering a hieroglyph, a truth in the form of a “pure language” could pour forth. As he hoped to show in the Romantic work of art, the object mimicked nature’s *appearance* of truth. The appearance of truth was the myth of beauty. The symbolic work turned on a false appearance of beauty, of totality, a myth of completion. It was the task of the destructive critic to break open the symbolic or Romantic object or text, cracking open its semblances to make way for an *Ur-language*. It was a destructive reading founded on a re-invented theory of mimesis which instead of being descriptive turned the thing (of nature) inside out. Therefore “re-describing,” the appearance of things meant exposing the nature below the false surface. In the myth underlying the work Benjamin thought he saw, as Kafka put it somewhere, “the whisper of true things”.

In Benjamin’s thinking myth “has the status of a methodological principle” — to use a phrase coined by Eliezer Schweid regarding Scholem’s allegory/symbol distinction (Handelman 1991: 105). It is a double critical procedure: the category of myth is presented within the language of the work, as its origin, its false appearance, but also as the way to its concealed truth. Benjamin developed the idea that the myth of nature⁵⁸ is that of an appearance of reality, it is the illusionistic surface of the symbolic language of certain works of art, and of human language in the broader sense of the word. Underneath this appearance lay a purer truth — the inner process of reality, its scheme, the movement which leads to language or speech in the first place. In other words, with the help of the

Furthermore, “Benjamin wants to appropriate the universalizing capacity of a purely formal conception of myth, to the extent it is compatible with a specific historical-philosophical orientation, which sharply separates him from structuralists, especially Lévi-Strauss” (Menninghaus 1988: 295). It should be noted also that Benjamin’s historical blasting apart of myth finds its culmination especially in his later work, when he thought to break away from the entrapments of myth as presented by his linguistic program, through the loaded dialectical images collected in historical materialist fashion.

⁵⁸ As in the Kabbalist myth of creation, or the myth of astrology, ancient man as mythic reader, the myth of primal man’s rituals, his mythic *Umwelt* and *Merkwelt*.

philosopher-critic⁵⁹ the mythic appearance at the heart of the work of art, underlying language, even underlying nature and history itself, is to be revealed as the source through which a truth, a double truth may be revealed or redeemed: the myth of the garden of evil becomes a subversive model of self-criticism. Turning the myth against itself means exposing it: blasting it apart but also redeeming it, *dialectically*. Once exposed, the (re-invented) myth becomes like a *Vexierbild*: it is the picture whose puzzle hides the method of the origin of the truth, the nature of the truth (that which is inexplicable, hidden in the object of language, underneath the surface of the world, below transitory totality).⁶⁰ Once seen through — once the picture puzzle is solved — the glyph appears to disappear.⁶¹ As Benjamin himself puts it in his 1916 essay on language:

⁵⁹ In the Romantic sense of criticism itself becoming a work of art, philosophy being its own criticism as the criticism of philosophy takes on the shape of philosophy, all the time developing itself, deepening and strengthening its own awareness, through self-reflection.

⁶⁰ The notion of myth against myth is brilliantly illustrated by Benjamin's acute reading of the parabletic Kafka, who like Benjamin himself had a predilection for (re-writing) fairy-tales. Benjamin could also be speaking on his own dialectical procedure when he wrote: "Reason and cunning have inserted tricks into myth; their forces cease to be invincible. Fairy tales are the traditional stories about victory over those forces, and *fairy tales for dialecticians* are what Kafka wrote when he went to work on legends. He inserted little tricks into them; then he used them as proof 'that inadequate, even childish measures may also serve to rescue one'" (Benjamin 1992: 114; added emphasis). A classical case in point is Benjamin's rejoinder to "the board" who rejected his *Habilitationsschrift*, in the form of a retrospective preface to the *Trauerspiel* book — an unpublished rewrite of the story of Sleeping Beauty, for whose "redemption" we must thank Irving Wohlfarth (1988: 225-259):

I would like to tell the story of Sleeping Beauty a second time.

She sleeps in her hedge of thorns. And then, after so and so many years, she awakens.
But not from the kiss of Prince Charming.

The cook it was who awoke her, when he gave the scullery boy a resounding slap that echoed throughout the castle with the pent-up force of so many years.

A beautiful child lies sleeping behind the hedge of the following pages.

Let no Prince Charming clad in the shining armor of modern scholarship venture too close. For as he embraces his bride, she will bite him.

To awaken her, the author has, instead, reserved for himself the role of the cook. Too long has the slap been overdue that is intended to send reverberations through the corridors of academic scholarship.

Then this poor truth will also awaken, having pricked herself at an old-fashioned spinning wheel when she trespassed into the lumber room in order to weave herself a professorial gown.

Frankfurt a/M 1925

⁶¹ The mystic procedure of Abulafia in essence meant looking *through* language, breaking through the interchanging random patterns of the Hebrew letters in order to reach the ecstatic moment of a direct experience of God, the *unio mystica*.

the object is neither biblical interpretation, nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as a revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts (Benjamin 1986: 322).

In *initially* following a sacred text like a symbolic work of art, destructively,⁶² a positive development is attained in the negation. Benjamin re-reads the “sacred” in search of a broader reality or experience, a quasi-mystical penetration of the mythical surface of things. And he has this in common with practitioners of “hermetic” and “Orphic” theories of language, for example, Coleridge, Mallarmé, Blake, Rimbaud, Apollinaire.

The hermetic attitude defines the essence of literary language by its deviation from ordinary social and communicative discourse. It turns language away from the world and back upon itself into a pure realm of forms, that is, a world of solely interlinguistic structural relations analogous to music. The less “content” — or reference to practical, ordinary worldly communication — the more “pure” and essential, the “higher” the apprehensions to which language gives rise. Language becomes its own transcendence, its own intransitive world. In the nineteenth century, paradigmatic expressions of the hermetic attitude are found in the French symbolist tradition, especially in Mallarmé’s idea of poetic language as a purifying word which seeks to return to an original pure void apart from all external meaning and human expression (*le Neant*), a Nothing which constituted the highest Beauty. [...] The orphic tradition, by contrast (named after the ancient mythical figure, the singer Orpheus), exalts poetic speech as a creative power based on an ideal unity of word and being that establishes the human and natural world — like the creative Word of God — and thus makes all signification and knowing possible (Handelman 1991: 33-34)

The hermetic attitude can be found in contemporary literary criticism such as the different varieties of formalism, from New Criticism to structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction. The orphic attitude may be seen in Heidegger and phenomenology. Whereas much contemporary thinking would separate the hermetic from the Orphic, Benjamin, in true

self-professed Janus-faced style, often esoterically, and very idiosyncratically interweaves the two, in his early “idealist” texts and in his later, more politically orientated, historical materialism. In both phases, Benjamin would inject a “messianic” element into (the being of) language and into the (historical) world, into the dialectical relation between the antitheses.⁶³ It was the philosopher-critic-prophet’s task to reveal the dialectical messianic glimmer in things.

Benjamin, then, boldly sees his task as a redeemer of language, of things, of history and nature itself. He speaks of nature as being “mute”, and that it “mourns” this fact: “Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature” (Benjamin 1986: 329). And for its redemption the language of man — not only the poet — lies in nature. Human speech redeems nature in nature; or, Benjamin’s theory of language lies in the myth of the garden of Eden, as redemptive medium. The traditional idea or concept of nature based on an Eden is mythical, it is appearance and “beauty” orientated: that which lies below this superficial veil needs to be recovered, in and by language as a source of a superior knowledge. Language mimes nature which is mute, redeeming or elevating it to a higher level. In language nature finds voice, a step upward to the truth (of God), the truth of creation; or, in criticism the appearance of myth is elevated as a medium or trope to the truth. Truth lies concealed in the cipher of nature, the puzzle of myth. Human language may aid in bringing the process to completion, the philosopher-critic’s method furthers the poet’s development toward the truth beneath reality.

But still nature mourns. For human language is imperfect, it wants to know, to communicate, and this expands the chasm between the word and the thing. Nature unnamed is melancholic — for human language over-names: “over-naming as the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) of all deliberate muteness” (Benjamin 1986: 330). Furthermore, Benjamin (1986: 330) sees

⁶² Again like Schlegel, like Dionysis, like Kabbalistic dialectic, gnostic and Sabbatian transgression.

⁶³ As referred to before, Benjamin (and Adorno with him) moved away from ontology (the “Dasein” of his *Programm*) to a more historical materialist attitude; but then his thinking was always “thing” based, orientated to material rather than human beings: *the truth lies in the object not the subject*. Finding authentic, socio-historical experience — *Erfahrung* — in the object, in opposition to the *Erlebnis* of the subjectivist thinkers, as a *dialectic* of seeing, reading.

man's language as tragically over-precise: "the overprecision that obtains in the tragic relationship between languages of human speakers". Human language is over-precise, it lacks the ambiguities and subtleties of the things before knowledge. Human language, according to Benjamin, is infinitely imperfect, tragically so. The muteness that is the cause of not being named is heightened, deepened by human imperfect (over-)naming. In communication, moreover, a deliberate muteness or misunderstanding is the cause of too much saying, a saying that is too technical.⁶⁴ The paradox of language is that instead of closing the gap between humanity and nature, between man and woman, it deepens the abyss.

But notwithstanding the pessimistic, melancholic nature of Benjamin's theory, or better, precisely because of, or in its pessimism, dialectically he finds a creative or redemptive possibility in the paradox — profoundly not in the communicative aspect of language but in its noncommunicative, expressionless, symbolic aspect.⁶⁵ From the abyss

⁶⁴ And here again we may note Benjamin's essentially anti-systematic philosophy, anti-traditionalist categorising thought; and against the idea of language as an arbitrary system of signs, contra Saussure whose *Course in General Linguistics* had been published in the same year (1916) as Benjamin's completion of his essay on language. Handelman (1991: 22) writes that for Benjamin "language was not merely a conventional instrument of communication or an arbitrary system of signs (contra Saussure and the Saussurean legacy to recent semiotics and poststructuralist literary theory). Its main function was not to impart information; rather, language was a superior mode of knowledge".

⁶⁵ Handelman (1991: 78) argues that Benjamin's anti-propagandistic, anti-political theory of language during (in reaction to) World War I, the problem of the relation between pure language, fallen language and brute nature — "If the ultimate language is contentless, noncommunicative or pure word, and the relation of language as sign to things outside itself is a fallen relationship, then what indeed is the efficacy of the languages of names in the mute material world?" — is not only an idealistic or nihilistic streak of his earlier work, a problem he avoided in his later materialist phase, but that rather the one mirrors the other, the problem is further developed in material re-workings.

Benjamin's disgust with the propagandistic uses of language in World War I was one of the motives which had led him to assert the contentlessness of the "pure language" as a purifying instrument. Interpreters such as Michael Jennings connect this to his nihilism: i.e., redemption can come only through destructive purgation. But as Benjamin's thought progresses and the situation in Germany drastically declines in the 1920's and 1930's, he tries to rework this relation of language to the *material* world. In this sense, preoccupations with the pure language of names are not the opposite of, but in clear *continuity* with, his later historical materialism — linked through the idea of redemption, a redemption which he sometimes treated ironically, sometimes apocalyptically, sometimes with nihilistic despair, sometimes with hope. In other words, Benjamin's materialism and idealism are mirror images — inextricably linked (Handelman 1991: 78).

Both the theory of a contentless, pure language and the materialistic theory of things are programs against the norms of a certain political climate, a particular historical period. One can say that the one motion

(like from the Lurianic Nothing), Benjamin in mourning finds a theory of possibility, “a whisper of true things” — in the “expressionless” (*Ausdrucklose*).⁶⁶

The expressionless is that critical force which, although it cannot separate appearance and truth in art, nevertheless prevents them from intermingling. It possesses this power, however, as a moral word. In the expressionless the sublime force of truth appears in the same way that truth determines the symbolism of being according to the laws of the moral world. [...] The expressionless, you see, shatters what in all beautiful appearances continues to survive as the heritage of chaos: the false, lying erring totality, in short the absolute totality (Benjamin qtd. in Koepnick 1996: 176).

And the (messianic) critic’s (ethico-magical) task is to mobilise this expressionless “nothing less than the truth content of the work of art” (Wolin 1982: 64), to make apparent the pure possibility of communication within the imperfect nature of communicative language itself. ‘Through the mortification of the material content ... the critic allows the “expressionless,” the truth content of the work, to step forth’ (Wolin 1982: 65). According to Benjamin, the expressionless lies dormant as a (magical, mystical, miraculous) possibility in the incommunicative symbols of language; and by way of the destruction of the appearances of the language or “material content” (the beautiful appearance) of the text (of language in the world proper), but also through translation (a radicalised, romantic idea stretched across the borders of textual translation),⁶⁷ this

holds the other within itself (the pure language within the material, the material within the pure language), continuously interchanging their positions, as “political” strategy. It is a dialectical movement that is geared towards outwitting the enemy who is conformist. Against the current. Against traditional — academical, social, political, historical — blurrings of the truth.

⁶⁶ Cf. Adorno’s idea of the “intentionless”, contra Husserl’s “intentionality” of the imagination. The issue of the objectivity of the truth in opposition to the subjectivity of the truth.

⁶⁷ As Benjamin puts it in his essay “The Task of the Translator”: meaning is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux — until it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all the various modes of intention” (Benjamin 1973: 75). As Handelman (1991: 30) notes: “a translation which aimed primarily at imparting the content or ‘information’ of the original would be a bad translation. There is a larger issue involved, of course, for the purpose of ‘life’ is not, as in *Lebensphilosophie*, an immediate ‘expression of its nature’ but something higher, the ‘representation of its significance.’ This is done through, in, by and for languages”. Stéphane Mosès (qtd. in Handelman 1991: 87) writes that early Benjamin “sees language as a system of signs that conceals itself as a secret but ideal center behind the endless multiplicity of concrete utterances”. The world has fallen into a Babelistic confusion, signification is scattered, fragmented. According to Benjamin: “Human language is imperfect and fragmentary on account of the breakdown of the original correspondence of word and thing, but translation is a function within language that can help redeem it:

possibility toward the truth content burning underneath or behind transitory reality and language may be made manifest. The critic or translator is thus able to read a “pure language” which paradoxically is “contentless, formless, unbounded, and unattainable” (Handelman 1991: 104); he or she must read the everlasting life behind mythic fate,⁶⁸ perhaps in the way of Benjamin’s “The destructive character” who *opens up space without filling it*.

The critic has to break through what something looks like, in order to get to the schema, the design (*Entwurf*), even the Genesis underlying it. The artwork or thing of noncommunicative language has to be mortified first in order to reach its expressionless truth: in the experience of *that which appears*, “the *Schein des Scheinlosen*, the appearance of that which cannot appear, the emergence of something infinite, the truth, from something that is man-made and finite, a work of art” (Wolin 1982: 30). The mortification of the work — of the symbolic (classical) work of art and of the symbol itself, that is, of material reality as fallen into myth — means its opening, opening up the mythic or false appearance, clearing the ground, breaking through the illusion of beauty and the pretension to totality, cutting through the transitory and superficial appearance, making space, shedding light, purifying.⁶⁹

“The utopian function of translation is in no way that it aids communication, but that it attempts to recreate the original essence of language as magic. Behind every concrete text is an ideal meaning which is hidden by the linguistic utterance. It is the duty of the translator to free this hidden meaning” (Handelman 1991: 87). The task of redeeming significance by translation seen in its broader context is ethical; the critic has a moral duty to uncover and recover the truth (pure language) in a “text”. But, importantly, the critic does not moralise: the ethics of his task is suffused in his historico-philosophical methodology, as schematical process; rather than appearing in the form of cheap content, or propagandistic intention. The truth is linguistic, intentionless. And the critic redeems its expressionless light through the decay of myth, through the knowledge of evil, through the darkness of the catastrophe of history. The process is (immanently) dialectical.

⁶⁸ Wolin notes that Benjamin, in his Goethe essay, emphasised a critical “mortification” of the “mythic” material content of the *Elective Affinities* first, in order to reveal the everlasting truth content, “the hope for everlasting life *beyond* the spell of mythical fate that governs this-wordly existence” (Wolin 1982: 63-63).

⁶⁹ In his Arcades Project Benjamin was to take recourse to the category of “reason,” with which it seems he meant a critical faculty proper (of conscious-making, of awakening from the dream) rather than the “reason” of the Enlightenment; Benjamin’s “reason,” like the critico-destructive faculty was also employed to clear the way, to rid the ground of myth: “To make arable areas [to clear fields] where up to now only madness [delusion] is rampant. Advancing with the sharpened axe of reason and without looking left or right in order not to fall prey to the horror lurking out of the depth of the jungle [primeval (Ur-)forest]. All ground had to be made arable once more by reason, had to be cleared from the undergrowth of madness and myth [reason must clear the entire ground and rid it of the underbrush of

Benjamin inverts the word, the thing, turns it around: the world of arbitrary knowledge is the locus for the attainment of a superior knowledge — in the profane, its radical inversion; in material history, its diametrical opposite; in decay, salvation, bringing to mind again the Gnostic oxymoron of dark light. And the aesthetic paradox is solved, at least *temporarily* in the theological light. It is a destructive process — anarchic, nihilistic, critical, political, strategic, subversive, dialectical and fundamentally rejuvenative (or so it claims). It is also a dialectical destruction which does not close in a “bad” Hegelian synthesis, but remains open. As Benjamin put it elsewhere:

No vision inspires the destructive character. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty space, the place where the thing stood or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs this space without its being filled. [...] The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always positions himself at cross-roads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for the way leading through it (Benjamin 1986: 301-302 & 302-303).

It is this *positive pessimism, optimistic negativity* which like Kafka’s “negative theology” runs throughout Benjamin’s life and thinking. It is also most stridently developed in his theory of “allegory,” a theory which fuelled by a theory of melancholy or mourning, turns on another, that of “symbol”; Benjamin’s allegory — and the emblem of the *ruin* as hieroglyph through which the light of truth pours forth connects up with the idea of reducing the world to rubble in order to find a way through it.

delusion and myth]” (qtd. on opening page of Fischer 1996; and different translation by Menninghaus 1988: 297-298).

6. Allegory and symbol

The distinction allegory/symbol first finds its way into Benjamin's work, in his rejected *Habilitationsschrift* of 1925, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Charles Rosen in his acclaimed essay "The ruins of Walter Benjamin" astutely noted the "esoteric" *Zeitgeist* in which Benjamin wrote his "difficult"⁷⁰ study on the much neglected seventeenth-century *Trauerspiel* and derided in neo-Aristotelian fashion "as a mistaken, barbarous, and pedantic imitation of Greek tragedy" (Rosen 1988: 140

Benjamin's conception and Scholem's conception of the allegory/symbol distinction differ markedly. Scholem, implicitly adopting "the romantic ideology of the symbol, which is by no means a 'scientific critical-philological category'" and neglecting

⁷⁰ Scholem writes in his memoir on Benjamin that "Hans Cornelius and Franz Schultz, who had the final say on Benjamin's application for Habilitation" had not understood "a word of his book" (Scholem 1982: 129). Whereas Scholem believed the promoters did not feel ill will toward Benjamin, Wohlfarth in self-confessed "apocalyptic" fashion, together with Nietzsche and Benjamin himself, brilliantly reads resentment in Schultz's (re)actions:

Both Nietzsche and Benjamin have a healthy respect for the sick politics of resentment — for politics *as* resentment. *Personal* resentment is only one factor in the situation that Benjamin describes ("Denn schließlich spielt tausenderlei hinein, und auch Ressentiment"); its precondition is a larger, institutionalized resentment. The psychology of resentment is, as in Nietzsche, *no mere* psychology. Schultz, is above all, a political animal who knows how to change his tack, blow hot and cold, keep a low profile, stay out of trouble, pass the buck, play the rules, etc. Not merely do his "Jesuitical" ploys exemplify Nietzsche's various accounts of resentment in (re)action, but his whole behavior can hardly be explained *except* in terms of a Nietzschean psychology of resentment (Wohlfarth 1988: 230-231).

In any case, there is a long history of "anti-academic institutions" intellectuals and academics (Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Wohlfarth to name but a few), and personal and institutionalised resentment is inevitable in *any* professional set-up. Benjamin's failure to attain *Habilitation*, though, may coupled with the psychology of resentment inherent in the institution, have something to do with his own ineluctable habit of "causing" his own "failure" through not least of which would be a "pathological vacillation" which Benjamin "noticed in myself from time to time" (Scholem 1982: 156), to which he surrendered like the courtier's "despondent surrender to an impenetrable conjunction of baleful constellations [that] seem to have taken on a massive, almost thing-like cast" as Benjamin describes it in his *Trauerspiel* book (Sontag 1996b: 119). The book's "difficult" nature, *eo ipso* represents a more general interest in the "difficult" in the same way as the esoteric for Benjamin "revealed something about literature in general" (Rosen 1988: 153). Through the rehabilitation of a neglected, esoteric art form — *Trauerspiel* and allegory — Benjamin's "difficultness" in subject and style critically personifies in miniature a broad cultural and social topography in its tendency, which is "no *mere* psychology", to re-present, reject but also laud the "difficult" phenomenon that is the indecipherable thing.

Abulafia's ecstatic anti-symbolic, *allegorical* expression of a direct and unitive experience of God, in favour of the nonunitive theosophical Kabbalah for which symbolism was essential, "defines kabbalistic linguistics pre-eminently as an expression of the 'symbolic nature of language,' and identifies the symbol as that which paradoxically tries to communicate the incommunicable" (Handelman 1991: 105). Pervaded in the *theological* grounding of the term in German Romantic criticism, Scholem uses the term "as if it were some 'objective' category in his historiography". Furthermore, the "romanticist distinction between allegory and symbol is wholly taken over by Scholem, becoming in his analysis a further contrast between rationalist Jewish *philosophy*, which he identifies with an allegorical mode of thought, and Jewish *mysticism*, which he maintains is essentially symbolic" (Handelman: 105 & 107). As opposed to symbol and symbolic mysticism, philosophy and allegory for Scholem are debased forms of experiencing and comprehending the truth:

Allegory is associated with the "death" of the text, symbolism with its life and vitality. Allegory, continues Scholem, arises from the *gap* between form and meaning; in allegory everything can represent everything else — that which is allegorized loses its own meaning and becomes a vehicle of another meaning. Although this lack of inherent connection between form and meaning does lead to a certain "infinity of meaning" as an infinite network of connections, Scholem characterizes allegory as "immanent" in contrast to the kind of "transcendence" glimpsed in the symbol (Handelman 1991: 107).

In the symbol the whole is represented, the gap between the finite and the infinite is mediated, expression is given to the expressionless, form is given to the formless, the private experience is given a public expression, the internal is made external. For Scholem the symbol comes to represent transformation itself, wholly within itself.

Benjamin, in sharp contrast, "in an antiromantic reaction" (Handelman 1991: 106), acclaims the multifariousness of meaning in allegory to be *the* artistic model for a fallen world, a decadent world, an age in decline. Allegory would be the critical opposite of the symbol's false appearance, its myth or illusion of totality. In a fragmented, broken world, the fragment (*Bruckstück*) of the allegory, the ruin (*Trümmer*), would seem to be closer to the essence or process of reality than symbol. Through allegory, which as an

empty shell can mean absolutely anything, the *signs of recovery* are best compiled. For in its incompleteness lies its ability to represent the most diverse aspects of life and death, not hampered by any strict system or pattern: the "common practise" of allegory is "to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea or goal" (Benjamin 1977b: 178). Allegory undoes the symbol's claim to represent the whole, especially Romanticism's organic whole, complete, perfect nature of things, by turning instead to the dead and broken things scattered "in ein Trümmerfeld" throughout nature and history. Furthermore, the ruins which are "the allegorical emblem par excellence [...] thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin" (Owens 1996: 1054). Nature, is not as depicted in the symbol, "beautiful", but, like history presents a death and destruction side in allegory: "Ist aber die Natur von jeher todverfallen, so ist sie auch allegorisch von jeher. Bedeutung und Tod sind so gezeitigt in historische Entfaltung wie sie im gnadenlosen Sündenstand der Kreatur als Keime enge ineinandergreifen. [...] Mit einer sonderbaren Verschränkung von Natur und Geschichte tritt der allegorische Ausdruck selbst in die Welt" (Benjamin 1972: 183 & 184). Contra the symbol which always has, as Croce puts it, "an ideal character" (Owens 1996: 1058), allegory is imperfect, unfinished, supplemental. But it is precisely this fragmentary imperfection which lends allegory and the allegorist with it, the inexhaustible will to meaning in a time of crisis or a moment of danger.

Handelman (1991: 105) writes that "The strict opposition of allegory and symbol was invented by the romantics as one way of legitimating their own philosophy", and Craig Owens (1996: 1056) notes that "The critical suppression of allegory is one legacy of romantic art theory that was inherited uncritically by modernism". Symbol became the predominant model for representing, or better, *intuiting* a perfect world; Croce writes that symbol "is a synonym for intuition itself" (Owens 1996: 1056 & 1058). Writes Handelman (1991: 105):

Again, we must go back to Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* had pointed to the necessity of some third term to reconcile reason and sensibility, for the ideas of reason are not presentable in intuitive form. For Kant, the symbol could be a partial link between reason and sensibility, because symbolic apprehension was intuitive and sense-based; a symbol was not merely a sign of

mathematical or abstract reason. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant thus gave a new meaning to the “symbolic.” Prior to that, *symbol* had no special status and was often interchangeable with words such as sign, allegory, emblem, and so forth.

Symbol came to represent a bridge from the finite to the infinite, “the infinite was said to appear ‘symbolically,’ in images, in signs, in poetic language, but not directly through logic” (Handelman 1991: 105). The breach between the noumenal and the phenomenal would be repaired in the symbol, and in it the absolute was to be experienced immediately. No longer unknowable as a “thing-in-itself”, the symbol was a thing wholly in itself that could be known in its self-contained existence, its “dialectic” between sensibility and reason, “placing the finite in immediate relation to formless absolute truth” (Handelman 1991: 106).

Goethe’s famous condemnation of allegory would become the classical adage of Romantic symbolic sensibility. He wrote:

Es ist ein großer Unterschied, ob der Dichter zum Allgemeinen das Besondere sucht oder im Besondern das Allgemeine schaut. Aus jener Art entsteht Allegorie, wo das Besondere nur als Beispiel, als Exempel des Allgemeinen gilt; die letztere aber ist eigentlich die Natur der Poesie: sie spricht ein Besonderes aus, ohne ans Allgemeine zu denken oder darauf hinzuweisen. Wer nun dieses Besondere lebendig faßt, erhält zugleich das Allgemeine mit, ohne es gewahrt zu werden, oder erst spät (qtd. in Benjamin 1972: 176).

According to Goethe (and Winckelmann and Creuzer after him), the living symbol intuited the infinite and inexpressible (*das Unaussprechliche*) immediately, implicitly, unconsciously, within itself; the allegory by contrast is arbitrary, conventional and external, devoid of any unconscious, self-possessing knowledge or meaning:

Roughly speaking, the symbol was characterized as natural, intransitive, immediately intuitable, existing in and for itself as well as for what it signifies; it was an indirect expression of the inexpressible, a passage from the particular to the general via *participation* of the ideal in the object. Allegory, by contrast, was characterized as mechanical, external, arbitrary, utilitarian, and rational, a transmission of an intellectual meaning which dispenses with the object once it has been used to convey the meaning: a mode which seeks the

general *through* that particular rather than *in* the particular (Handelman 1991: 106).⁷¹

Goethe sees symbol as carrying within itself, unconsciously, an inexpressible and inexhaustible idea. In fact, the symbol is its own idea, “Es ist das Göttersymbol, das die Schönheit der Form mit der höchsten Fülle des Wesens wunderbar vereinigt” (Benjamin 1972: 180). In this self-possessing symbol a higher or superior form of knowledge could be intuited, immediately, in a grasp of the particular which unconsciously released an idea of the general as well, *post festum*. Allegory, on the other hand, started with an intellectual idea of the general and searched “for a particular to embody it” (Handelman 1991: 107).

Goethe further differentiated between the “concept” in allegory and the “idea” imaged in the symbol. Whereas the concept is “bounded” within the allegorical image (i.e., allegorical meaning is finite, complete, dead), the idea is “unbounded” in the symbol; meaning is infinite and inexpressible, ever active and living. An infinite, inexpressible, and unbounded meaning generates endless interpretation. Writes Goethe, “Symbolism transforms the phenomenon into an idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible” (Handelman 1991: 107).

As should be clear, Benjamin re-writes these distinctions which the romantics and Scholem with them, take over from Goethe. Where the romantics see symbol as an agent of redemption in itself, in the realm where philosophy and theology is fused in the aesthetic, and aesthetic activity and aesthetic form becomes the locus where the formless, inexpressible absolute may be experienced (Handelman 1991: 109); Benjamin disturbs the

⁷¹ Handelman continues that “This distinction reflects the older debate over the nature of language: whether language was conventional and arbitrary, or natural and organic — a mechanism or a medium, directly connected to the knowledge of things, or only to ideas the mind has about things.” This makes manifest Benjamin’s broader problem of using arbitrary language to signal language completed in the name of things. The natural perfection and superior claim to knowledge of the symbol is sought through allegory which in itself is problematic. In other words, the dialectical paradox of following a methodology whereby the appearance of perfection and immediacy is destroyed in order to reach a more fundamental and essential perfection or completion through the *Bruckstück*. The self-completing idea unconscious in the symbol is reached through the destruction of the appearance of beauty, through critical allegory which is both convention and expression.

chimerical *appearance* of such an immediate redemptive experience in symbol — devalued through allegory which has no meaning in itself, is a dead thing, and always stands for something else. Schelling, for example, saw in symbol a fusion of contraries: “the symbol does not simply signify, but also *is*: in other words by the intransitivity of that which symbolizes. In the symbol, ‘the finite is at the same time the infinite itself, and does not merely signify it’” (Todorov citing Schelling, qtd. in Handelman 1991: 109). This ontological idea of “the symbol as the sole appropriate vehicle for the sensuous representation of the nonsensuous (the expressionless)” (Wolin 1982: 65), both sign and signified, form and the formless, expression and the expressionless, unified “form” and “content”, was to be interrupted and challenged by setting in relief the unfused *double content* encoded within the one kind of the hieroglyphic allegory, the cipher (*Chiffer*).

Benjamin agrees with Friedrich Creuzer’s distinction in his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* between the category of time in allegory and symbol. Whereas the measure of time in the experience of symbol is the fulfilled mystical *Nu*, “momentary totality” “in welchem das Symbol den Sinn in sein verborgenens und, wenn man so sagen darf, waldiges Innere aufnimmt” (Benjamin 1972: 182); the temporal structure of allegory is the progression of an infinite and unfulfilled “series of moments”. The one signals immediate redemption, the other infinitely remote, *redemptio absconditus*.

Während im Symbol mit der Verklärung des Unterganges des transfigurierte Antlitz der Natur im Lichte der Erlösung flüchtig sich offenbart, liegt in der Allegorie die *facies hippocratica* des Geschichte als erstarrte Urlandschaft dem Betrachter vor Augen. Die Geschichte in allem was sie Unzeitiges, Leidvolles, Verfehltes von Beginn an hat, prägt sich in einem Antlitz — nein in einem Totenkopfe aus. Und so wahr alle “symbolische” Freiheit des Ausdrucks, alle klassische Harmonie der Gestalt, alles Menschliche einem solchem fehlt — es spricht nicht nur die Natur des Menschendaseins schlechthin, sondern die biographische Geschichtlichkeit eines Einzelnen in dieser seiner naturverfallensten Figur bedeutungsvoll als Rätselfrage sich aus. Das ist der Kern der allegorische Betrachtung, der barocken, weltlichen Exposition der Geschichte als Leidensgeschichte der Welt; bedeutend ist sie nur in den Stationen ihres Verfalls. Soviel Bedeutung, soviel Todverfallenheit, weil am tiefsten der Tod die zackige Demarkationslinie zwischen Physis und Bedeutung eingräbt (Benjamin 1972: 183).

But where Benjamin follows Creuzer's temporal structures in allegory and symbol, he disagrees sharply with Creuzer's opposition of the symbol's instantaneous sacredness with a reading of *myth* as a "series of moments", giving myth an allegorical form in the process. Menninghaus writes that Benjamin "rejected the theory that the form of myth is allegory and that both derive from the unfolding of pre-mythical symbols. He undertook to establish the opposite association: symbol relates to both magic and myth, whereas allegory figures in the blasting apart of myth" (Menninghaus 1988: 313). In Benjamin's allegorical reading symbol is akin to myth in its fusion of image and meaning in an appearance of totality, an undifferentiated "primal forest", a "forêts de symboles". The interior of the symbol is forest-like (*waldiges Innere*). As mentioned earlier, Benjamin read Goethe's *Wahlverwandschaften* as having a mythic world material content, proven as Menninghaus notes, by the "symbolism of death". In Benjamin's incomplete *Passagen-Werk* which was to be an excavation of the mythical prehistory underlying the nineteenth-century and the twentieth-century, Benjamin "refers to the world as a 'symbol world'" (Benjamin qtd. in Menninghaus 1988: 313):

Benjamin, like Cassirer, saw no reason for a clear-cut, semiotic distinction between magical and mythical symbolism; both were taken as similar in their contrast to conceptual (and allegorical) thinking, in their merging of being and signifying, and in their capacity to produce or incorporate sensuous totality. With respect to this, allegory becomes myth's direct antagonist (utterly antithetical to Creuzer's view) in its correlation to a sharp distance between image and meaning and through the dispersion of every appearance of totality (Menninghaus 1988: 313-314).

Where Scholem, on the one hand, hailed the Kabbalistic revitalisation of myth through the symbol, interpreting the Kabbalah along theosophical lines as a "great living myth" (Handelman 1991: 109), Benjamin's thinking, on the other hand, is set in a dialectical "field of tension between myth and anti-myth" (Handelman 1991: 314). Benjamin juxtaposed the abyss of myth in the symbol with the empty space of the ruin in allegory. The undergrowth (*Gestrüpp*) in the former had to be cleared away through the latter. Time is condensed and converted into spatial forms; for the seventeenth-century baroque dramatists "chronological time is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image". The serene

appearance of the ontological essence of the symbol as *being* that essence was to be countered by a “death’s head”. Not Olympian nature but baroque nature as a stage on which a *Leidensgeschichte*, the *Urgeschichte* is played out as a play within a play where “history merges into the setting” (Benjamin qtd. in Sontag 1996b: 116).

There is a dialectic to death and suffering in a world without meaning. In a world of chaos and decay the allegorist reigns supreme. He gives meaning to the “dead things”, under his melancholy gaze (*unterm Blick des Melancholischen*) the fragments scattered through the landscape become ciphers of transient life, which when deciphered turn into their antithesis, eternal life. The solution of the riddle of broken nature is salvation. The allegorist appropriates the empty and imperfect things which lie arbitrarily in the material world, a world beset by demonic forces, and in dis-placement, the things (cited out of context) take on a new meaning. Out of place, the dead things turn around to become allegories of redeemed life.

Death is no longer idealised as in the “beautiful” symbol but problematised in the allegory. Instead of the moral world (*sittlichen Welt*) immanent in the beautiful, “als symbolisches Gebilde soll das Schöne bruchlos ins Göttliche übergehen” (Benjamin 1972: 175); allegory finds its place in a decadent and fragmentary (*zersplitterte*) world. The immediate presence of the symbol turns into absence. The allegorist, however, is in sovereign control to bestow new meaning to the historical world of decomposition. The allegorist reads death as meaning life. Every thing — incomplete, not ‘one’ with what it signifies like in the symbol — becomes a riddle (a rebus) to be solved by the allegorist.

The marvellous paradox of *Trauerspiel* is that — going back to the antique period with its Aristotelian joining of genius with madness (*Wahnsinn*), and, following Aristotle’s *De divinatione somnium*, “daß melancholische Genialität besonders im Divinatorischen sich zu bekunden pflegt” (Benjamin 1972: 159 & 160) — melancholy is conducive to visionary genius, the melancholy of the allegorist dialectically turns him into a seer who, under divine inspiration, transforms the dead things into allegories of redemption. Under the constraint of melancholy the allegorist scrutinises a world of things not people, lifeless things yield themselves to be contemplated by him who knows that

“the more lifeless things are, the more potent and ingenious can be the mind which contemplates them” (Sontag 1996b: 120).

Benjaminian allegory is dialectical: it, like the theory of melancholy⁷² is comprised of antitheses. Wolin writes: “In theological terms, it provides the key to a negative theology whereby fragments of profane life are transformed into emblems of salvation”. Allegory, like melancholy, is founded in a duality, a polarity: “The ‘dialectic’ of allegory causes all manifest content to be transformed into its opposite; the death’s head becomes an angel’s countenance” (Wolin 1982: 70 & 71).

The allegorist accumulates or collects the lifeless things, the fragments or ruins: “Allegories are in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things” (Benjamin qtd. in Sontag 1996b: 120). The allegorist who is struck inert by the sign of melancholy “sees the world itself turn into a thing: refuge, solace, enchantment” (Sontag 1996b: 125). These things do not exist in and for themselves but for something other. The ruin, contra the symbol, is open-ended: any meaning can be attached to it. But as “the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory” (Benjamin qtd. in Sontag 1996b: 124), in his extravagant passion he *theologically* turns the dead and fateful things into double signs or emblems of freedom. Benjamin writes: “For a critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word” (Wolin 1982: 70). Under the theological allegorist’s melancholic gaze the ruin turns into a rite of passage, a passage signifying salvation:

Basing itself on the theological conception of the diametrically opposite relation in which profane life stands to the life of salvation, it goes all out in its attempt to dramatize the *wretched* nature of earthly life in order thereby to set in contrast all the more emphatically the *blissfulness* of the life beyond. *Trauerspiel* proceeds according to the religious conviction that the more frank its avowal of its own baseness, the more readily it will qualify for admittance into the sphere of eternal life (Wolin 1982: 71).

⁷² As historically laid out by Benjamin in the *Trauerspiel*; read through Giehlow’s “Dürer’s Stich ‘Melancholia I’ und der maximilianische Humanistenkreis”, and Panofsky and Saxl’s “schönen Studie” of the same etching — see, for example, Benjamin 1972: 162-164.

The allegorist (like the critic as laid out by Benjamin in his Goethe study) must start with the material content (the material world, the myth of surface reality) in order to break through to the other side, the truth content. Instead of falling prey to the horror lurking in the abyss of myth, however, instead of succumbing to a symbolic *Weltanschauung* encumbered by the world of *schöne Schein*, the allegorist turns to the *disjecta membra* lying in wait for decipherment, for rescuing. Benjamin (1977b: 233) writes: “An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses of allegory”. By allegorically reinstating the world-thing with meaning, allegory shows “its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear” (Owens 1996: 1052). Allegorical reinterpretation in what Benjamin called the baroque “world of things (emblems, ruins) and spatialized ideas” (Sontag 1996b: 120) is critical and historical. Its two most fundamental impulses are: “a conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present” (Owens 1996: 1052).

The compelling problem of an *arbitrary* world, of arbitrary knowledge lies in the paradox of a fallen state of things where “creative” melancholy is *the* attitude of the allegorist in surveying the thing-like decay around him. It is the pessimism which a profane world of chaos and decomposition brings on that turns “positive”; it is in the realm of the babble of knowledge, a realm where the fissure between history and salvation is vast, that the melancholic finds a way to procure access to the realm of hidden knowledge: “For the two contrasting visions are merely the complementary poles of the drama of sin and atonement in which creaturely life finds its ultimate meaning” (Wolin 1982: 71).

The melancholic allegorist is given free reign in the post-paradisical chatter of dead things to appropriate meaning, to re-read the confused landscape into a map showing the way in-out. Benjamin writes that the allegorist rules in the domain of allegory “like a stern sultan in the harem of objects [...] by no means avoiding that arbitrariness which is the most drastic manifestation of the power of knowledge” (Wolin 1982: 68). Under his gaze, the things which are infinitely removed from their names, banished into the exile of knowledge, caught up in a language which refers knowledgeable to itself only, having lost its original purity of being, its *Ursprache* — under the melancholic gaze these lifeless

things of arbitrary knowledge turn into enigmatic inscriptions (*ratselhafte Inschriften*), emblems inscribed with the double expression “profanity and salvation”. It is the allegorist’s talent to find a secret knowledge in a realm which would *ipso facto* negate enlightenment.

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any significance or meaning of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places meaning within it, and stands behind it: not in a psychological but in an ontological sense. In his hands the object becomes something different; through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as the emblem of this (Benjamin 1977b: 183-184; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 68).

The allegorist appropriates signification freely, he gives meaning to that which is empty, that which is infinitely removed from its own “symbolic” meaning. The allegorist “possesses” the things which he “collects” arbitrarily, and by so doing he reinterprets their status from lifeless things to ciphers of illumination. In the mortification of the material appearance of the things (the melancholic’s gaze which drains life from things), in the destruction of the appearance of symbolic “totality” and “oneness”, endless avenues of possibility are opened up. Through the space of the ruin the allegorist who is a dialectician connects hitherto unconnected signs — and says something different from what it seems, that is, the allegory, contra the singularity of the symbol, always has a *double meaning*, a double scriptural meaning: “allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another” (Owens 1996: 1053; added italics).

The Benjaminian allegorist *textualises* the dead things; he turns nature and history into a dialectical book, a script to be studied like a library in the sense of disparate and fragmentary texts. Benjamin astutely noted that Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, in its intimate connection between contemplation and studying, anticipates the Baroque:

Das Wissen des Grüblers und das Forschen des Gelehrten haben sich auf ihm so innig wie in den Menschen des Barock verschmolzen. Die Renaissance

durchforscht den Weltraum, das Barock die Bibliotheken. Sein Sinnen geht in die Buchform ein (Benjamin 1972: 152).

It is the allegorist who in emblematically studying and contemplating the “book of nature” and the “book of the times” finds meaning in all the disparity and brouhaha. By reading one thing through another, reading one book through another book as in curiosity cabinets: “In allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest” (Owens 1996: 1053). In order to gain a better understanding of the *Merkwelt*; to penetrate into greater knowledge of the things; to learn⁷³ — “allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning” (Benjamin 1972: 152).

But the allegorical process also takes place within the work. The baroque allegorists turned their historical world of social upheavals — “an era marred by the Thirty Years War and the fleeting alliances and counteralliances of Counter-Reformation political intrigue” (Wolin 1981: 71) — into *Trauerspiel* (literally: sorrow play), as a means of commenting and criticising their “fate”, in-between the lines, through the play within the play. Benjamin, *through his Trauerspiel study*, also commented interlinearly not only on the historical phenomena of the seventeenth-century baroque, but *dialectically* on his own historical and political location.

Benjamin mortifies commentary of the material content of the Baroque drama in order to penetrate into the material’s truth content mirrors a double process. Two ideas are followed by Benjamin in *his study* — firstly, the idea that allegory is *the* attitude and model of commentary and criticism for ages of decay reflects the 1920s in the Baroque; and secondly, the dialectical methodology of reading through a work’s material content in order to expose its underlying truth content — should also be followed by us in reading *his work*. For “the allegorical work tends to prescribe the direction of its own commentary” (Wolin 1982: 71). That is to say, by following Benjamin’s method of

⁷³ And “Learning was a form of collecting”, a melancholic process of contemplation, hence the view “daß in dem Umkreis der ‘Melancholia’ Albrecht Dürers die Gerätschaften des

exposing the political dialectics of Baroque *Trauerspiel*, the reader can expose the political dialectics of Benjamin's own work, in so doing perhaps universalising whilst contextualising the allegorical principle.

A double process of commentary and criticism is at work. Lutz Koepnick takes the *political* route mentioned above. He writes: "For in writing about the seventeenth century, Benjamin overtly alludes to the cultural conditions and political predicaments of the 1920s; the *Trauerspiel* book simultaneously reads the baroque through the lenses of Weimar and mirrors Weimar in the baroque, making the baroque read constellations of twentieth-century art and politics" (Koepnick 1996: 281-282). Koepnick then goes on to argue that Benjamin offers an implicit critique of the political theories of Carl Schmitt under whose influence he was at the time of writing *Trauerspiel*. Through his *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin criticises the aestheticisation of practical and political life, the blurring of the boundaries between art and life. In the same way that the Baroque dramatists implicitly critiqued their political heyday through setting up "scenarios in which modern instrumental politics fails by virtue of its decisionistic impoverishment of practical reason and, for better or worse, appeals to aesthetic or charismatic powers in order to restore political authority," and "Even though Schmitt's decisionism is key to any understanding of Benjamin's early politics, the *Trauerspiel* book uncovers with great subtlety Schmitt's own political aestheticism, the 'aestheticizing oscillations' Habermas rightly attests to Schmitt's political thought" (Koepnick 1996: 282).

Susan Sontag, for example, referring to being born under the sign of Saturn (which, as Benjamin also notes in his *Trauerspiel* study causes slowness, inertia, melancholy), sees a *self-referential* process — and one should add, in the self-deprecating or self-critical sense of the word — in Benjamin's use (and appropriation) of certain themes in the sense that "Benjamin projected himself, his temperament, into all his major projects, and his temperament determined what he chose to write about" (Sontag 1996b: 111). In writing about Kafka, Baudelaire, Proust, Kraus, Goethe, Benjamin exposes his temperament through their temperament. Through the method of other writers Benjamin

tätigen Lebens am Boden ungenutzt, als Gegenstand des Grübelns liegen" (Benjamin 1972: 152).

developed his own methodology. Through the *Trauerspiel* Benjamin *critically* exposed his own *Trauer-spiel*.

It is a critical talent which Benjamin would later refer to as “profane illumination”, critically entering into a debased material world, blasting open the mythical apparitional appearance of reality, to expose the dialectic of truth lying dormant below it. In the case of his *Trauerspiel* study, “once the profane material content of *Trauerspiel* [that of excessive scenes of cruelty and anguish, GTS] is consumed in the fire of critical examination, their truth content as allegories of redemption is revealed” (Wolin 1982: 71). Which means that in a double reading once we break through the sententiousness of the style, a more practical critical methodology may be revealed. If we read Koepnick’s and Sontag’s critiques dialectically, the one referring to the other — cross-temporally, cross-textually, interlinearly — Benjamin’s *allegorical technique* is made manifest in content and form that is not fused, not blurred, not the same, but different in the sense of the one questioning the other through reflection.

Furthermore, the critical process takes place both “objectively” and subjectively”. In the sense of the “object”, together with Benjamin we thus observe the potential in the *expressionless* grounding of art, the *un-said* criticism underlying commentary, the powerful possibility in *allusion* contra illusion — in the art object. Art separated from politics does not necessarily mean “l’art pour l’art”. In fact, once the *symbolic* artwork has been mortified, *allegory* may implicitly take on critical factors, that is, the allegorist-critic may give the thing in allegory allusive meaning.

Allegory is loaded with the potential to interrupt the totalising properties in the symbol, in the aestheticisation of politics. And in the sense of the “subject”, following Sontag’s reading, Benjamin critiques himself through the “subject” of others: “Thus he describes Proust’s ‘loneliness which pulls the world down into the vortex’; explains how Kafka, like Klee, was ‘essentially solitary’; cites Robert Walser’s ‘horror of success in life’”. But not the glorification of the artist, Benjamin makes “selective use of the life” in his work, not in order “to use the life to interpret the work” but to “use the work to interpret the life” (Sontag 1996b: 111).

But if Benjamin uses both object and subject he vehemently objects to *subjectivity*. Benjamin's criticism always aimed at being essentially object-related, his language "neutered" into *objectivity*, "This style and writing, neuter and at the same time highly political, aim to lead to what is refused to speech".⁷⁴ As argued before, Benjamin profoundly rejected — not only in his early work but throughout his oeuvre — any subjective theory of art and art criticism. His dialectical philosophy of history was geared toward reading the truth *through the thing*, not in the person reading (that is the writer, reader and the critic). How then Wolin's seemingly justified claim that the allegorist — the allegorist whom Benjamin in a theological light uses as a critical model for freely appropriating the things of history, giving them doubly allusive, cross-temporal meanings, in the form of hieroglyphics or riddles, wherever he pleases — is entirely *subjective*, inward turned?

It is no accident that Benjamin rediscovered the significance of allegory in the intellectual climate of the early 1920s. For the extreme subjectivism of the allegorical method immediately calls to mind the proliferation of like-tempered artistic movements that came into existence at this historical juncture as a self-conscious reaction to the mechanization of social life that had proceeded unchecked since the time of the industrial revolution. One thinks of the appeal to the powers of *Verinnerlichung* enunciated in Kandinsky's expressionist manifesto, "Über das Geistige in der Kunst" (1911); the *Blaue Reiter* Almanac, edited by Kandinsky and Franz Marc, and its rehabilitation of folk art, children's art, and other forgotten genres; André Breton's exaltation of the sovereign power of the imagination in his "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924); and the related surrealist adoption of the technique of automatic writing. In addition to these examples from the artistic avant garde, one might also list the unprecedented subjectivization of narrative structure in the novels of Proust and Joyce. In sum, these tendencies are united in a rejection of "realism," a renunciation of a mimetic approach to the artistic representation of reality, and a concomitant turn to more spiritualized, subjectivist modes of expression. With the rapid expansion of photography and journalism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the arts increasingly began to distance themselves from the task of the *description* of external reality and moved toward the *expression* of man's "inner self." To be sure, the extreme devaluation of the empirical world and the accompanying subjective derivation of meaning characteristic of allegory would find itself at home in this spiritual environment. In fact, the genesis of allegory in the baroque is attributable to an

⁷⁴ See Benjamin's letter to Adorno qtd. in Lyotard 1993: 258-259.

analogous dialectic. Its Counter-Reformation world view was polemically directed against the self-confident this-worldly orientation of the Renaissance, whose reintroduction of pagan (Greek) figures and humanist themes was perceived as a direct threat to authentic Christian values. The popularity of allegory in medieval art proceeds from a similar impulse: the desire to divert men's minds from the temptations of profane life, symbolized by the pagan values of the Greco-Roman world, and to turn them instead toward the contemplation of other-worldly beliefs. All three periods — medieval, baroque, and expressionist — seek salvation through a subjectivized conception of experience once it is clear that their hopes for fulfillment are only repulsed in empirical reality (Wolin 1982: 75-76).

But, firstly, against Wolin's argument, the theological outlook of the great German playwrights of the baroque was *Lutheran*, in strict opposition to the Counter-Reformation of Catholicism. In opposition to the rigid discipline of profane life as laid out in Catholicism, it was, in fact, Lutheranism which signalled a turn away from the everyday. Lutheranism had an antinomic relationship to everyday life: 'Der rigiösen Sittlichkeit der bürgerlichen Lebensführung, die es lehrte, stand seine Abkehr von den "guten Werken" gegenüber' (Benjamin 1972: 149). Faith took precedence over righteous conduct. Human conduct in general became moot which resulted in an emptied world. What is more, Calvinism saw this problem and reintroduced righteousness. The Lutherans, however, could not see any worth in human life if there was no faith in it. Calvinism, with its (strictly intellectual) rule of conduct is rooted in what Calvin termed "knowledge of the works of righteousness". To be sure, Calvin himself speaks of "the light of faith as well as righteousness, which would be sufficient to attain heavenly life and eternal bliss". However, unregenerate man is deprived of these gifts in his banishment from the kingdom of God, "that the natural gifts ["soundness of mind and uprightness of the heart"] were corrupted, but that his supernatural gifts ["faith, love of God, charity toward neighbor, zeal for holiness and for righteousness"] were stripped from him" (Calvin qtd. in Miller 1970: 71), and that he must rely solely on the grace of God as revealed in the Bible — Luther's *sola scriptura* (Miller 1970: 70). According to Calvin, then, man's knowledge of God comes solely through the light of the Spirit, or God's benevolence as shown in "God's own work" (Miller 1970: 74) — "If we confess that we lack what we seek of God, and he by promising it proves our lack of it, no one should hesitate to confess that he is

able to understand God's mysteries only in so far as he is illumined by God's grace" (Miller 1970: 76-77). And finally, "a right standard of conduct by natural law" renders man inexcusable to feign ignorance in the face of sin, man must act even though he knows "well by experience how often we fall despite our good intention" (Miller 1970: 77 & 80) — in the knowledge that "Every day we need the Holy Spirit that we may not mistake our way" (Miller 1970: 80), a knowledge which would lead to Calvin's *de rigueur* law of conduct — there was no faith in it. In strict opposition to this, according to the Lutherans life without faith was shallow. Work only, produced a *taedium vitae*, which was to be countered with grace through faith, or *freedom*. But, ironically, argues Benjamin, this faith which denied "good works" any spirituality turned the world into the empty place (*eine leere Welt*) that Calvin set out to overcome with his infamous (legalistic) restrictions, laws of conduct. Seen in the context of a Catholic and Calvinist dogma founded on righteous conduct, the Lutheran belief led to, according to Benjamin for one, an emptied world of freedom, producing an excess of thinking which in turn produced grief (*Trauer*) and of course melancholy. Although faith instilled a strong obedience to civic duty into the people, in its great men it produced melancholy (*Trübsinn*).

What is more, and this is crucial in understanding Benjamin's *un*-subjectivity, is that the mystic's inward gaze — Meister Eckhart said that the search for the secret word "is always within and never outside — but always inward" (qtd. in Miller 1970: 67) — which is reflected in the *Innerlichkeit* of the expressionists is decisively turned "inside out" by Benjamin. Following the Kabbalists' emphasis on *not* recording a *personal* experience, Benjamin turns the subjective experience *objective*, a private and usually overly emotional experience is made public, recorded soberly. What is significant lies outside, in the material world. It is through the profane that the spiritual may be abetted. It is precisely the fallen nature of the things *outside* the melancholic which offer the way *through* it — *not to the self, but to the other*. One could cross-temporally refer to Levinas who said that through the face of the other the transcendental Other may be experienced. Like Levinas, but quite different, Benjamin's allegorist reads the multi-layered face of God through the lifeless and deprived things outside of him. This is not escapism into the safety

of the inner self, on the contrary, it is finding salvation *in the world*. The transfiguration in allegory occurs *through* allegory, not in the allegorist.

In Benjamin's reading the allegorist's "subjectivity" is not one of inner time but of outer space. The key lies not in the idea of expressing yourself, but in revealing the *expressionless* within the other (thing), that is, allegory is an expression, *not* the allegorist. One could call this an "inner silence" akin to the one the mystic alludes to, but Benjamin's idea would seem to lie more in the realm of silent things than people. The experience of the mystic for Benjamin becomes an idea, a philosophical idea for which the authentic artwork would be a metaphor. One such an idea is that subjectivity is shown through allegory to be a knowledge of evil, a knowledge of something which doesn't exist:

Allegory goes away empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents. The absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers, are allegories. They are not real, and that which they represent, they possess only in the subjective view of melancholy.... By its allegorical form, evil as such reveals itself to be a subjective phenomenon (Benjamin 1977b: 233).

Subjectivity is shown to be an illusionary knowledge (in the sense that after the Fall man can only "know" things subjectively, that knowledge of evil is an illusion), and melancholy is dialectically turned around in the process of this recognition. In Benjamin's reading, the melancholy suffered in excess contemplation — in and of the *ipse* — is turned productive: like the critic, the allegorist understands the ruin as a ruin, to be transformed in a multi-layered reading. Destruction and ruin is transfigured into signs of redemption; subjectivity and melancholy is turned "objective" or materially redemptive in the knowledge that evil in this state is non-existent. The fear of doom, the fear of baleful constellations of evil is revealed to be subjective, grounded in myth, by way of allegory which can mean absolutely anything else. But this does not mean that the allegorist is merely subjective in his reading of lifeless things, on the contrary. The allegorist's subjectivity realises its own illusory nature in the play within the play.

Wolin's argument that "by virtue of its inauthentic origin in the subjective contemplation of the allegorist, the evil of *Trauerspiel* ultimately proves illusory. [...] Only *for man* — that is, subjectively — does evil exist" (Wolin 1982: 73) would mean *only* that the objective "material content of *Trauerspiel* is rendered null and void in itself and is miraculously transfigured into an allegorical image of redemption". He fails to see that this would have a double meaning: the original subjectivity of the Lutheran allegorist revealed in the redemptive turn-about of the allegory also means that subjectivity is itself rendered null and void, by the allegorist himself. By virtue of the political 'content' in-between the lines of *Trauerspiel*, which turns around into the implicit political content in the Benjamin's study of it. In other words, Benjamin's double reading of the allegorist's initial subjectivity turns that subjectivity dialectically objective, mortifying the self into a material thing. Mere knowledge of evil which is the result of vanity (and the vanity of Adam and Eve resulted in shame and expulsion) becomes a superior or more universal knowledge of how such a process of decline works. The way in which Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* text is dialectically doubled makes this transformation or transgression manifest through the interlinearity of the historical reading.

The question of the difference between subjectivity and idiosyncrasy is coupled with a knowledge of the "beauty" of the "transgressed" object:

The business of the critic, for Benjamin, is not to resuscitate the dead, or to reconstitute the original which now stands before us fragmented, but to understand the work as a ruin, and in so doing paradoxically to awaken the beauty present in it as a ruin (Rosen 1988: 152).

The beauty mentioned here is not the external and superficial beauty of the symbolic work which is to be destroyed, but the longer-lasting beauty which shows through the knowledge of the mortified work. If the Kabbalah teaches that there are at least forty-nine meanings to everything, the Benjaminian allegorist is its keenest student. For he knows that there is at least a double meaning to all things considered. In Benjamin's reading, the allegorist sees the impermanence in all things, but this paradoxically means something longer-lasting. (The allegorist would rescue the transient things for eternity.) In the *memento mori* of the ruin of *Trauerspiel*, through allegory's dialectical inter-relationship

between site and work, through the ruin's often mythical "content" which needs to be deciphered (Owens 1996: 1054), the work as ruin is reinterpreted to be able to mean its opposites, both objectively and subjectively.

Benjamin's allegorist's melancholy is not expressionistic however. Although, as Scholem remembers, Benjamin early on in his life had close relations with the circle around Stefan George from whence stemmed literary expressionism, although he "had great admiration [...] for certain phases of the Expressionistic painting of Vasily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, and Paul Klee" (he also wrote a laudatory essay on the painter James Ensor) and the mystical elements in Kandinsky's *Über das Geist in der Kunst* appealed to him, and although "the rediscovery, or the invention, of the literary baroque of Germany was stimulated by expressionism, just as the expressionist painters of the *Blaue Reiter* had made El Greco's cause their own: the exaggeration and the violence of the expressionist poetry and drama of such writers as Gerog Trakl and Franz Werfel stimulated an interest (which Benjamin qualified as largely sentimental) in similar manifestations in the works of the seventeenth century" (Rosen 1988: 140), Benjamin's rehabilitation of *Trauerspiel* and allegory had quite different *sobering* intentions in mind.

In the same way that Benjamin would later criticise Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, a book he was strongly influenced by, for remaining caught in the realm of dream, and in the same way in which he talked of opening up the forest-like myth inside the "eternal" symbol which Baudelaire claimed to be behind the modern, "transient", everyday things, Benjamin implicitly criticised the options remaining in the realm of extravagant ornamentalism. After all, the profane material content of baroque *Trauerspiel* in all its excesses, had to be mortified in order to penetrate into its *Apollonian* truth content.⁷⁵ Once more, it was the realm of *Innerlichkeit* which had to be *transfigured* into a site, a cypher, a concrete albeit fragmented hieroglyph or emblem through which the *space* or expressionless truth *of the object* or dead thing could be signalled — an expressionless,

⁷⁵ Allegory, in the *reflective performance* akin to the Romantic theory of criticism, also has its allegory and in "describing" its fragmentary material content — again, having *transformative* mimesis in mind — the truth content is revealed as a double ruin.

objective truth which through the particular or described detail would signal a cosmic or universal truth. The work as ruin not the ruined subject was the critico-historical case.

In effect, Benjamin's reading of "allegory" has more in common with modern abstract art than with German expressionism proper, even though the work of the initial expressionists in Germany, the *Die Brücke* association of painters as represented by Kirchner's paintings *Market Place with Red Tower* (oil on canvas, 47½ × 35, Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany, 1915) and *The Street* (oil on canvas, 47½ × 35, The Museum of Modern Art, 1913) for example, have their "inner force" roots in the Middle Ages, whose Gothic or Romanesque art seems to be an unsaid precursor of the Baroque drama (from whence stems Benjamin's theory of allegory to begin with), consciously or unconsciously, specifically in its twisted and crowded "stage" spaces. Furthermore, in the broader sense of expressionism, James Ensor's work, for instance, like his *Skeleton's Fighting for the Body of a Hanged Man* (oil on canvas, 23¼ × 29, Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp, 1891), seems to fit in more with "the little hunchback" of *Die Knaben Wunderhorn* fame than with the "horror" of early German *film noir* or even less with the inner angst of an Edvard Munch, however *personal* Ensor's "inner torments" may be. Similarly Klee's work, generally regarded as expressionist together with Kandinsky and Marc's work seems to be more abstract than expressionist, or better, Klee's work is more *scriptural* than gestural, even though the experience of music also seems to resonate in his "ideas" like in Kandinsky's *Klänge*. It is the *Apollonian* or spiritual side to the disaster of history which shines through Klee's work, and there is a lightness to the mystical side of Ensor's figurations, his masked horror, his mad carnivals. Moreover, Benjamin's interest in demonology has its dialectical counterpart in angelology and vice versa, the sun being black in alchemy circles, gnostic light being dark.

Benjamin, and certainly Kandinsky, Chagall and Klee with him, was more interested in re-presenting "spirituality" than *angst*; the horrors of the first World War called for a *need* to develop or rehabilitate an artform which could signal a purification, an illumination through all the rubble and death. Certainly not merely a retreat into the self, making and analysing art, for Benjamin at least, signalled a *political*, an ethically universal position (like his earlier position on "pure language" in opposition to rhetorical political

language as represented by Buber's "blood and soil" cult of *Erlebnis*). Looking *through* the horror of the then present war meant rescuing "culture" - the universalised form of the ethical self — from completely collapsing into solipsism and barbarism. The "abstract" or allegorical artwork, rather than descriptively mimicking the world, was to penetrate into the spiritual *Eidos* of "nature", an object's "inner essence" as "distinguished from the apparent outer form" (Maholy-Nagy in Klee 1986: 11). The abstract sign or site would signal a way through the chaos. Allegory (rather than the allegorist) as an abstract, problematic, and paradoxical cypher was to be "solved" in a theological or spiritual light. Writes Birringer (1983: 138) on "spirituality" in modern art:

The expression "spirituality" functions largely as a metaphor, hinting at imaginative possibilities that may promise new meanings for the connection between the work of art and the world it represents. In this sense, modern art could be said to resemble modern theology: the painted canvas, very much like the theological discourse, presents an "icon of our times," a text that metaphorically substitutes its own meanings for its own disconnectedness from any reference in the "real world".

The metaphoricity and disconnectedness of the work of art is the site through which the dialectical process of experiencing and conceptualising art is made manifest, that is the dialectic of "the non-objective conception-as-creative-process" (Biringner 1983: 140). Bohringer also notes the emphasis given in expressionism and abstraction to the "inner nature" or "inner necessity" of the artist's relation to the artwork and the artist/viewer/reader: in the context of the "viewer's [reader's] experience, the work becomes alive, it affects something inside us, and there is an intercommunication between the inner being of the art object and the inner being of the human self" (Biringner 1983: 139). The artist's "strong sense of self" is what gives him the strength to travel further into the "empty wilderness", like "Malevich's art [which] dramatizes the loss of meaning *and* the space for meaning precisely by emphasizing the no-thingness that is represented": "For only there is transfiguration" (Biringner 1983: 139 & 140).

The artist's experience and conceptualisation is intricately and dialectically linked. Art like theology consists of 'interrelationships (between such concepts as experience, feeling, spirit, reason, intellect, and the forms into which fundamental values of

things, the world, body and mind, can be “transformed”)’ (Bohringer 1983: 140). It is a personal, sensuous experience which is the beginning of the deeper, universal artwork. And yet, notes Bohringer (1983: 144), “It is indeed curiously paradoxical to idealize an emotional rapport with physical appearance while expecting the artist to give form to his inner spirit which has already outgrown mere sensuous perception and experience” .

The idea of “universal expression” and of “inner necessity” which Kandinsky couples with a “spiritual art” involves both his own self and the “secret soul” of things (Birringer 1983: 144)⁷⁶. Braque’s Neo-Kantian assertion that “things in themselves do not exist at all. They exist only through us” holds true for Kandinsky, Klee, Marc, Picasso, Gris, and Feininger also;⁷⁷ and this dictum, as should be clear, immediately brings to mind not only Benjamin’s notion of the artwork’s Idea but also, as Wolin noted, the allegorist’s sovereign freedom in giving the dead things absolutely any meaning. Furthermore, the idea of “absolute creation — giving form instead of accepting or taking form — is the necessary human claim to a prerogative that was once thought to be cosmic or divine” (Birringer 1983: 145) — may be linked up with, as mentioned before, Klee’s idea of a pure genesis, an “inner essence and form-giving cause” (Moholy-Nagy in Klee 1986: 11) demonstrated by the artwork. And this in turn may allude to Benjamin’s idea of an immanent truth which goes beyond appearance, an idea which goes back to the Romanticist *Geist* which is both idea and spirit, an idea of the expressionless truth of “eternal life” experienced through the (mortification of the) authentic artwork. A cosmic awareness of the energies and forces that shape life, therefore, marries the mystic with the expressionist or abstract artist, alluding in turn to Benjamin’s *subversive* — and allegory is a model for subversiveness, an *intertextual undermining* of a text, an *ironic* use of words to signify their opposites, that Benjamin will take recourse to throughout — ideas on criticism and allegory.

However, the question of “inner” individuating spirit in relation to the spirit of “outer” reality is the point where Benjamin separates himself from such mainstream art movements as expressionism, Neue Sachlichkeit, cubism, abstraction. For Benjamin, in

⁷⁶ Compare Adorno’s notion of “inner logic”, the unintentional truth in the artwork itself.

⁷⁷ And brings to mind again Bowie’s conception of the need for a subject before a text can be studied for meaning at all.

regard *art interpretation*, the first priority lay in the object, the work, the thing (*das Ding*) — not in the “suffering” or “ecstatic” artist or critic or reader, or the “no-thingness” of the work, but also not *only* in the sense of the object as a symbol. Mysticism, for Benjamin, seemed to be an idea for which the artwork *as a thing* was a metaphor. The “inner necessity” or “inner compulsion” toward “abstraction” in the artist becomes for Benjamin solely the inner truth *of the artwork*, or rather, the interior truth underlying the appearance of a symbolic work, which is fathomed only *in the mortification of the sensuous*, beautiful appearance; or that which can be fathomed *through* the thing as fragment, as allegorical ruin of a symbolic whole (it will be remembered that for Benjamin the symbol *is* the whole, whereas allegory is always fragmentary, about something else). One could say, paradoxically, that the ruin lies below the symbol, that through allegory an idea of the whole can be “known”.⁷⁸

Again, for Benjamin the symbol — being something complete within itself, not as referent but as something which *is* — has to be mortified. The ruin or allegory is seen not in terms of “is” but as something which infinitely stands for something other (*but in the material* world or cosmos), through its ongoing fragmentariness. The complete nature of symbol (both as concept but also as living “nature”) has fallen into a myth of appearance and needs to be “destroyed” through the idea of the ruin, through the physical debris left behind in nature’s cycles and through the “skeleton” that is allegory, history that is catastrophe. Whilst the symbol for the Symbolists is *whole*, allegory for Benjamin is a *wound* of sorts. Knowledge of, or insight into the one is achieved only through the experience of the other. This allegorical theory of knowledge is no longer one of transcendental idealism, and although there are affinities with Ludwig Klage’s “symbolist” antirationalist ideas of immediate non-intellectual “intuition” and in his transformation of

⁷⁸ See Bernd Witte (1985: 47) who also notes this “ambiguity” in Benjamin’s theory of criticism: “Er will sagen, daß gerade das Fragmentarische, zu dem die Kritik das Werk zurechnet, ein zutreffenderes Bild des Daseins gibt als die erschlichene heile Welt des Symbols. Allerdings bringt die Formulierung auch die tiefste Ambiguität des Benjaminschen Interpretation zu Vorschein. Das symbolische Weltverständnis wird nur negiert, um dadurch um so sicherer den absoluten Wahrheitsanspruch der Kunst zu retten”. And yet as *paradox*, as *dialectic*, the ambiguity makes sense in its ephemerality: in the tradition of constructive opposites, be these Dionysian, Sabbatian, Gnostic, Kabbalistic.

Plato's *anamnesis* from the beyond into the actual material "primal picture",⁷⁹ Benjamin's rejection of the symbolist mode of immediate aesthetic knowledge situates him elsewhere.

For Benjamin, experience and knowledge of the artwork lies not in the complete sensual thing but in the completion of the fragmentary thing through allegory or criticism. By way of the double reflections of the (textual) *disjecta membra* in dynamic and interrelating configurations, knowledge of the whole (book) underlying or within the forest-like myth of immediate symbolic intuition, may be had — in a flash, perhaps, but not in the mystical *Nu*⁸⁰ — the difference being that where in the latter meaning is already cyclically complete within itself and personal, in the former meaning is additive and historically prone to difference.⁸¹

That is, for Benjamin "inner" means not self, not merely personal experience, but rather the broader historical experience which lies behind the particular false appearance of beauty, in the temporality of reality, below the thingness of the work, underneath the decay of history, beneath the symbolic whole as experienced through the *collective self* one might say. Not oneness of meaning⁸² but the multifariousness of meaning.⁸³

Allegory⁸⁴ is a critical model for a time in which history as catastrophe has its most devastating paradigm. The experience in allegory, being both commentary and criticism, is not a flight from this disastrous and destructive reality but rather an unconscious transformation of its more latently malignant myths. And the experience of the allegorist which is essentially melancholic, and which is, one can say, inward turned in

⁷⁹ See Roberts 1982: 104-109.

⁸⁰ As Benjamin (Frisby 1986: 266) wrote in typical striking fashion in his *Passagenwerk*, "In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in flashes [at the moment of danger]. The text is the thunder rolling long afterwards".

⁸¹ It will be in this context that Benjamin will later try to blast open the mythic idea of history as "eternal recurrence" with his idea of *Jetztzeit*, which, although not meaning an equivalent of *Gegenwart* or present, does not, as Hannah Arendt thinks, mean the mystical *nunc stans* (see Benjamin 1992: 253). Knowledge in allegory which is additive rather than immediate takes the form of a *pallimpsest*.

⁸² "In Coleridge, then, the symbol is precisely that part of the whole to which it may be reduced. The symbol does not represent essence; it *is* essence" (Owens 1996: 1058).

⁸³ The fragment may signal absolutely anything other than itself; allegory distinguishes itself through a *multi-intertextual* (to use a phrase used by writers on Derridean deconstruction) cross-fertilisation, interruption, detour.

contemplation, revels in the sovereign freedom to reread and rewrite the rubble and debris, turning the ruins of the world into sites of transfiguration.

Most important for Benjamin — contra Wolin’s “subjective” reading of Benjamin’s allegorist, although allegory and the allegorist as put forward in *Trauerspiel* is intimately connected to the religious or theological subjectivity and “inner vision” of the artists and theorists of expressionism and abstraction proper — is the *paradoxical* solution to the riddle of nature’s death’s head — the *facies hippocratica*, contra the beautiful totality of the nature of the symbol — as read through a dialectic of salvation through damnation, read through the broken things as sites, through the experience of “the nature of space itself” (Birringer 1983: 149). Through the appearance of subjectivity, into the inner core of the haunted and haunting thing itself; turning melancholy productive or visionary.

Benjamin’s ethics and soteriology (doctrine of religious salvation) as defined through his theory of art interpretation is primarily paradoxical for a reason: it has a *positive* subversion in mind. For Benjamin re-reads the subjectivity of the allegorist *dialectically*, turning it *outward* in a constellation in which an idea of the *socio-historical experience* may be known. He re-reads the aesthetical experience historico-critically in the broader epistemological sense of the word.

⁸⁴Allegory which like language functions as expression (expression of the expressionless; appearance of the non-appearance), “ist nicht spielerische Bildertechnik, sondern Ausdruck, so wie Sprache Ausdruck ist, ja so wie Schrift” (Benjamin 1977b: 178).

7. A critical theory of knowledge

In Benjamin's thought the notion of redemption (*Rettung*) is a recurrent theme, together with mortification or destruction as in the *renewal* of tradition. As he homiletically delineates his art philosophical programme in the infamous "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" — a piece of writing which then and now has a tendency of rubbing people up the wrong way — his study of allegory and the seventeenth-century baroque *Trauerspiel* is to be a "rehabilitation" or "rescue" of a degraded art form — a *modus operandi* which follows directly the example of Alois Riegl's 1901 *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*, a rehabilitation study of late Roman art which Benjamin rated highly (Cf. Kemp 1978: 225).

In both projects an art historical period is chosen "whose art violated the fundamental classical canons of aesthetics, an art that was — to most eyes — neither beautiful nor vital, but awkward and lifeless" (Rosen 1988: 140). Benjamin, moreover, follows Riegl's radical intention of concentrating on the particular work, finding *expression* of an epoch in the fragment or detail⁸⁵ (Kemp 1978: 225), the "minutiae" (*das Kleinste*). But Benjamin takes his departure in Riegl's failure to lay bare the socio-economic factors determining the historical expression of the work (Kemp 1978: 226) - an idea Adorno would take further in his negative dialectic secularisation of Benjamin's more theological orientated project. Moreover, Benjamin would claim that not only was there no such thing as an independent art history (Rosen 1988: 141), but he would argue implicitly in religious vocabulary and in quasi-prophetic tone of voice, that it was the representation (*Darstellung*) of a philosophical truth which was the concern of the art scholar in the study of the history of particular, exemplary works:

For it is not a question of presenting written works in the context of their time, but of articulating the time which grasps them — namely ours — in the time in which they originated (Benjamin 1977, 3: 290).

⁸⁵ Compare Warburg's motto, "der liebe Gott im Detail wohnt".

The history of the work rather than “a history of material or history of form” as most art historians would have it, would not be presented as a model in which the work of art serves merely as an example (Benjamin qtd. in Rosen 1988: 141), but the work would be represented in a *constellation*. The work of art viewed in this way would follow a kind of ongoing *interpretation* which would “relate the work to history while respecting its essential function of stepping out of the historical time and space in which it was produced” (Rosen 1988: 141). In the case of *Trauerspiel* Benjamin argues that not only does it comment on “contemporary Spanish baroque, and the late Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas”, and that German *Trauerspiel* can only be adequately be described in “reference to the drama of Shakespeare and Calderón” (Rosen 1988: 145), but, furthermore, that in the event of its ruin⁸⁶ *Trauerspiel* will exist as the philosophical truth immanent within it, in its idea: “As a ruin, the *Trauerspiel* is an allegory of art in general” (Rosen 1988: 151).⁸⁷

For according to Benjamin, in certain historical ages when man’s relation to the absolute has become enshrouded in darkness and uncertainty — e.g., medieval times, the baroque era, romanticism, and expressionism — the production of “perfect” works of art is given over to epigones and the creation of authentic works assumes the form of fragments or ruins. For these are ages “possessed of an unremitting will to art. This is true of all periods of so-called decadence. The supreme reality in art is the isolated, self-contained work. But there are times when the well-wrought work is only within reach of the epigone. These are periods of ‘decadence’ in the arts, the periods of artistic ‘will’⁸⁸ (Benjamin 1977b: 55; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 59).

In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory, it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendent

⁸⁶ *Ruins as exemplary artworks* read specifically in times of degeneration or decadence (*Verfall*) as in the time of expressionism and the Baroque era.

⁸⁷ Compare to Adorno who, following Benjamin and Bloch, wrote: “only in traces [*Spuren*] and “ruins” was there “hope of ever coming across genuine and just reality” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 76).

⁸⁸ Benjamin would criticise Dilthey’s Schopenhaurian notion of the “life of our will” whereby reality lay in “inner experience” (*Erlebnis*). The “will” was the “concrete inwardness” of nature which in turn became the mere shadow of the former. Will was the realisation of values and, according to Dilthey, was the particular human faculty of overcoming the tediousness of mechanical exterior nature (Roberts 1982: 79).

as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last (Benjamin 1977b: 268; Wolin 1982: 76-77).

The idea of the plan as revealed through the fragment, the *Bruchstück*, is the focal point for the art scholar.⁸⁹ The detail of the fragment, its empirical phenomenality is paradoxically the locus of its philosophical nouminality. The material particular is the site through which the universal idea may be reimplicated. Not as in Plato's notion of the phenomenon as a pale shadow of its Idea which is also found within the phenomenon, but in an inverse reading, Benjamin proposes that "the phenomenon appear as truth in the ideas, so that the 'dignity' of the transitory particulars is maintained" (Buck-Morss 1977: 92).

In his "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" Benjamin presents a theory of monadic "ideas" as the wider historical constellation or configuration mentioned above. Ideas can not be known intuitively and are also not physically perceivable, but they are 'represented' in empirical data, irradiating the things, drawing "the empirical phenomenon up to their own exalted level of truth" (Roberts 1982: 116). Furthermore, ideas can not be separated from the phenomena: "For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements" (Benjamin 1977b: 34; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 92). Benjamin introduced a notion of "concepts" as mediators collecting the phenomena and distributing "them up among what Benjamin called the 'eternal constellations' of the ideas" (Roberts 1982: 116), in this mediation rescuing or redeeming the phenomena by their own "inner logic" to use Adorno's term.

The phenomena, however, do not enter whole into the realm of the ideas, not in their raw empirical existence, mixed as it is with mere appearance (*Schein*), but they are redeemed alone in their elements. [...] In this partitioning of them, the phenomena stand under concepts. It is the concepts which carry out the unravelling of the phenomena into their elements (Benjamin 1977b: 15; Buck-Morss 1977: 91).

⁸⁹Benjamin wrote splendidly in *Einbahnstraße*, a book published the same year as the *Trauerspiel*, that "The work is the death mask of its conception" (Benjamin 1986: 81).

Via the mediating concepts, the phenomena are redeemed in the ideas, the phenomena do not contain the ideas: “Denn in Ideen sind die Phänomene nicht einverleibt. Sie sind in ihnen nicht erhalten. Vielmehr sind die Ideen deren objektive virtuelle Anordnung, sind deren objektiven Interpretation” (Benjamin 1972: 15). It was to be a double process: “die Rettung der Phänomene und die Darstellung der Ideen” (Benjamin 1972: 17); the representation of the ideas not given in the realm of the phenomena would in turn redeem the things *in their elements*, that is, the essence (*Wesen*) underlying the appearance — through *objective interpretation*. The seeming paradox between the noumena and the phenomena being the fact that “the ideas were nothing but the empirical phenomena and yet as constellations they were more” (Buck-Morss 1977: 92); that only through the material transitory particular could the inexpressible and not immediately knowable or intuited eternal essence — ‘either in the Kantian sense [of *Anschauung*] or according to the Husserlian program of an “intuition of essence” (*Wesensschauung*)’ (Wolin 1982: 93) — be unveiled — sublated in a dialectic of redemption meaning the objective restoration by the eternal ideas or truth of the dignified essence of the empirical things in the concept mediated configurations.

The philosophical representation of the truth in the constellations of ideas, then, although Kantian in the noumena-phenomena dichotomy, is opposed to the Kantian notion of the *possession of knowledge* in experience (*Erkenntnis ist ein Haben*). The philosophical representation of ideas (*Erfahrung*) is not a cognitive process but “the revelation of truth” (Buck-Morss 1977: 91). The method of representation rather than abstract classification could strip the phenomenon down to its essential elements, where “The concepts of understanding [...] function as the *emissaries* of the noumenal realm in the subaltern world of phenomenal being” (Wolin 1982: 94), a supposition Kant thought impossible. As Buck-Morss (1977: 92) writes on these mediating concepts, “the fate of the phenomena [lie] in the hands of the concept, rather than in conceptualisation *per se*:

The former was achieved by means of abstraction: the particular entered into the concept and disappeared. But in truth’s representation, the particulars, although conceptually mediated, re-emerged in the idea; or more accurately, they became the idea in the conceptual arrangement of their elements. The role of the subject, to draw connections between the phenomenal elements, was

not unlike that of the astrologer, who perceived figures in the heavens: "Ideas are related to the phenomena as constellations to the stars".

Truth here would not be an intentional conceptualisation but an *unintentional* being (*Sein*) represented in ideas. Not the intentional cognitive conceptualisation which would approach the phenomena from the outside, *subjectively*,⁹⁰ but rather the concept mediated, unintentional, immersion and absorption (*Eingehen und Verschwinden*) of the phenomenon in the idea. Writes Benjamin (1972: 17) seductively: "Truth is the death of intention". Truth is objective and differentiated from the appearance motivated subjective intentionality of knowledge.

Knowledge is the medium of the concept, whereas the medium of the idea is the truth. Although they embody qualitatively opposed forms of cognition, there is nevertheless a point of contact between them: it falls due to the concepts of knowledge to achieve the rearrangement of phenomenal elements in the constellation, and in this way it participates in a subordinate manner, in the process whereby ideas become manifest. It is through this function alone, when subordinated to the imperatives of the higher "realm of ideas," that the concepts of knowledge prove capable of divesting themselves of their profane, merely analytic character: "Conceptual distinctions are above all suspicion of destructive sophistry only when their purpose is the salvation of phenomena in ideas." For conceptual knowledge proceeds by way of division and dispersal; in and of itself it remains incapable of providing the moment of "collection" which Plato, in his description of the art of the dialectic in the *Sophist*, deemed equally important, the moment which alone can account for the *unity* that remains essential to the idea of truth (Wolin 1982: 93-94).

But the phenomena do not enter into the ideas whole, rather, they are "mortified", stripped down to their elements by the analytical concepts, a task necessary for their entrance into the truth. This, then, the double task mentioned above, the task of the concepts to "collect" the phenomena and by the powers of understanding to divide them within the arrangement which brings about both the representation of the ideas and the redemption of the phenomena.

Benjamin, in religio-mystic fashion (Buck-Morss 1977: 91), entrusted the ideas to a sphere previously occupied by the "pure word" or "names" of his theory of

⁹⁰Benjamin writes of philosophical Synkretismus "der die Wahrheit in einem zwischen Erkenntnissen gezogenen Spinnennetz einzufangen sucht als käme sie von draußen herzugeflogen" (Benjamin 1972: 8).

language, the word which is unutterable, “unspeakable”, *unintentional*, a naming or *vergöttlichte* word which has no direct informational or communicative value. It is a word which names in pure revelation rather than in cognition. After the hypothetical Fall, however, the pure language or *Ursprache* is now characterised as the level of ideas (Roberts 1982: 116). The names “bestimmt die Gegebenheit der Ideen” (Benjamin 1972: 18).

Ideas are given not so much in a primary language as in a primary understanding where words retain their nobility as names without having lost them to cognitive signification (Benjamin 1977b: 36; Roberts 1982: 116).

In philosophical contemplation the idea is released from the heart of reality, reclaiming its name-giving right. Ultimately, however, this is not the attitude of Plato, but the attitude of Adam, the father of the human race and the father of philosophy. Adam’s action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words. Ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored (Benjamin 1977b: 37; Wolin 1982: 103-104).

Ideas in the sense of the name take on the characteristic of the *symbol*. Because words exist in the empirical realm, next to their profane meaning (*Bedeutung*) they have a more or less hidden symbolic value. According to Benjamin’s “tractatus”⁹¹ the philosophical task lies in re-instating the original *symbolic* value to the word, in which the idea comes to self-fruition (*Selbstverständigung*) devoid of outward signification. In this way the idea would be a deified word: “The idea is something linguistic, indeed, it is that moment in the essence of the word in which it is a symbol” (Benjamin 1977b: 36; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 104). This notion recalls the Kabbalah with its mystical theosophical teaching of revelation of God through the Name of God as found in the symbols that is each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Moreover, the symbolic dimension of language or representation means its

⁹¹The most appropriate vehicle for the program of philosophically representing the truth, *ex cathedra* (Benjamin 1972: 8).

andererseits erkannt sein. In jedem Ursprungsphänomen bestimmt sich die Gestalt, unter welcher immer wieder eine Idee mit der geschichtlichen Welt sich auseinandersetzt, bis sie in der Totalität ihrer Geschichte vollendet daliegt. Also hebt sich der Ursprung aus dem tatsächlichen Befunde nicht heraus, sondern er betrifft dessen Vor- und Nachgeschichte. Die Richtlinien der philosophischen Betrachtung sind in der Dialektik, die dem Ursprung beiwohnt, aufgezeichnet. Aus ihr erweist in allem Wesenhaften Einmaligkeit und Wiederholung durcheinander sich bedingt. Die Kategorie des Ursprungs ist also nicht wie Cohen meint, eine rein logische, sondern historisch (Benjamin 1972: 30).

Wolin situates Benjamin's notion of "origin" in Kabbalistic lore on the one hand, according to which, it will be recalled, origin has a teleological dimension in the sense of denoting an original purity and harmony to which not a static return would be the goal, but a dynamic leap beyond it: "In this sense origin constitutes a return which is simultaneously a qualitative leap beyond the original condition of perfection, its realization on a higher plane" (Wolin 1982: 96); and, on the other hand in Goethe's concept of the "Urphänomen" in the *Farbenlehre* which Benjamin transfers from the realm of nature, "from the pagan natural context" (Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 953; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 97) to the theological realm of Jewish history, figuratively turning the *Urpflanze* into a concept of the authentic, original work of art. To these notions of origin, restoration and yet imperfection and incompleteness may be added the Romantic notion of the infinitely self-reflecting, perpetually incomplete artwork, determined by a process of becoming through self-destruction and rejuvenation.

Moreover, according to Benjamin, the *authentic* phenomenon is the *original* one, it is an object of discovery and rediscovery (*Wiedererkennen*). The authentic art object will be singular, unique, exemplary, eccentric and extreme, derived from "the weakest and clumsiest experiments and the overripe fruits of a period of decadence" (Benjamin 1977b: 46; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 98). The unique artwork like Goethe's *Urpflanze*, only now in the realm of Jewish history, will be an ultimate model "for other works of a given genre and offer privileged access to the supra-historical world of ideas" (Wolin 1982: 98). The original object contains an *essential* history, a natural history, the pre- and after-history of the being of the phenomenon. Writes Wolin (1982: 98) succinctly: "For if it is 'authentic,' it will contain, foreshortened the entire past and

objective side: “It is communication — language used for an individual purpose, the Ideas reduced to concepts — which is subjective” (Rosen 1988: 159).⁹²

The *Schein* of totality is therefore mortified by the re-read or renewed concepts which mediate the phenomena to the constellations of the ideas, “in order to achieve a ‘totality’ through idea-guided contemplation” (Roberts 1982: 118). Not the conceptualised symbol of cognition which brings about a false sense of categorical totality, through a propositional analysis of the *general*; but a restoration of the symbolic character of the name to the word, through which the ideas in constellations of “totality” come into being, by virtue of configurations of *extreme* points. This may be achieved through a Platonic *anamnesis*, a “remembrance” of the *Ur*perception or primordial mode of apprehending the “truth” which is already and eternally present in the world. The techniques of *anamnesis* vary. Klages for instance reads *anamnesis* as a memory of *material* “primal pictures”, even though this memory may be of the distant things of the past (Roberts 1982: 109). The generation of *anamnesis* for Benjamin takes place through the categories of “origin” or *Ursprung* and the “monad”.

Wolin writes that for Benjamin the concept of origin is an attempt “both to ensure the actuality of ideas in empirical reality and to account for their relation to history” (Wolin 1982: 96). As a historical category, origin has nothing to do with genesis (*Entstehung*), that is, the description of the emergence of a specific being at a determinate moment in time; but entails rather the description of “that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance” (Benjamin 1977b: 45; qtd. in Frisby 1996: 16). Benjamin is concerned not with empirical history but an *essential* history. He writes:

Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel und reißt in seine Rhythmik das Entstehungsmaterial hinein. Im nackten offenkundigen Bestand das Faktischen gibt das Ursprüngliche sich niemals zu erkennen, und einzig einer Doppelseinsicht steht seine Rhythmik offen. Sie will als Restauration, als Wiederherstellung einerseits, als eben darin Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes

⁹²Again, as stated previously regarding the allegorical attitude, the *appearance* of symbolic totality as found in the arbitrary language of communication and in the myth of nature was to be mortified in order for the authentic “symbolic” essence of the now ruined thing to be made manifest, or, said differently, in order for the phenomenon stripped down into its elements to be subsumed under or in the idea. The paradox of this mortification, as will be remembered, is to be dialectically “solved” (but not in the Hegelian sense) in a theological light of redemption.

Nicht um Einheit aus ihnen zu konstruieren, geschweige ein Gemeinsames aus ihnen abzuziehen, nimmt die Idee die Reihe historischer Ausprägungen auf. Zwischen dem Verhältnis des Einzelnen zur Idee und zum Begriff findet keine Analogie statt: hier fällt es unter den Begriff und bleibt was er war — Einzelheit; dort steht es in der Idee und wird was es nicht war — Totalität. Das ist seine platonische “Rettung”.

In contrast to the “literary historian”, the “art philosopher” removes the dimension of time and space and leaves history only as the “colourful border of a crystalline simultaneity” (Roberts 1982: 118). History merges into the setting in the objective interpretation in and of the monadic image, as in the singular and extreme work of art as origin.

The image of the world in the monadic sense is an inward one (inward in the phenomenon or object not the subject), not boundless but of an *essential* being which can therefore comprise both a pre- and after-history — like in the concept of *Ursprung*. And the phenomena seen in both the pre- and after-history of their being signals their redemption (Wolin 1982: 99), a Platonic “Rettung” (Benjamin 1972: 31) brought about by the arrangement by concepts of the phenomena in their *essence* in the ideas.

Ist dies gerettete Sein in der Idee festgestellt, so ist die Präsenz der uneigentlichen nämlich naturhistorischen Vor- sowie Nachgeschichte virtuell. Sie ist nicht mehr pragmatisch wirklich, sondern, als die natürliche Historie, am vollendeten und zur Ruhe gekommenen Status, der Wesenheit, abzulesen (Benjamin 1972: 32).

According to Benjamin’s redefinition this would be where the fundamental task of philosophy would lie: in the representation of ideas that would also be the detection of the essence or becoming (*Werden*) of phenomena in their being. In the concept of origin this becoming is coupled with disappearance, as described in “der Aufzehrung seiner Geschichte” (Benjamin 1972: 32): the concept of the phenomenal being “*subsumes* history, as opposed to “unoriginal” phenomena which remain at the mercy of history, and thus unredeemed”. Wolin (1982: 97 & 99) rightly notes the connection between the category of “origin” and the later notion of “Jetztzeit” — “which is also endowed with the capacity to transcend the unfulfilled continuum of historical life” — and the connection between the “monad” and Benjamin’s later materialist conception of “dialectical images”

subsequent history of an art form within itself, collected magically into a totality, a focal point, as it were. It will thereby serve as living proof of the thesis that the universal must be deduced from *within* the boundaries of the particular". This concept of the work as the origin⁹³ is the "telos" of Benjamin's conception of "immanent criticism", his philosophical monadology.

For Benjamin (1972: 32), re-reading Leibniz's monadology, writes:

Die Idee ist Monade. Das Sein, das da mit Vor- und Nachgeschichte in sie eingeht, gibt in der eigenen verborgen die verkürzte und verdunkelte Figur der übrigen Ideenwelt. [...] Die Idee ist Monade — in ihr ruht prästabliert die Repräsentation der Phänomene als in deren objectiver Interpretation. Je höher geordnet die Ideen desto vollkommener die in ihnen gesetzte Repräsentation. Und so könnte denn wohl die reale Welt in dem Sinne Aufgabe sein, daß es gelte, derart tief in alles Wirkliche zu dringen, daß eine objektive Interpretation der Welt sich drin erschlosse.

The idea as monad contains an *image* of the world, foreshortened in time and in space. The monad knows history not in its empirical and extensive being but as something "*integral and essential*" (Wolin 1982: 98). The compressed image recalls "the *entire extent*" (Roberts 1982: 118) of history, spatially and temporally, "not pure history but natural history" (Benjamin 1977b: 227; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 99). According to Benjamin's "art philosophy" an image of history is formed by its *extremes* as opposed to the "literary-historical" method⁹⁴ of converting "all divergences into an indifferent historical motion" (Roberts 1982: 118). Roberts points out that for Benjamin "these extremes do not occur at the same point in history, but as a succession; this is what leads to the illusion of development as portrayed by 'literary historians'". Benjamin (1972: 31) writes:

⁹³And writes Rosen: "The word names an Idea, the work of art is a metaphor for an Idea" (Rosen 1988: 155).

⁹⁴As Benjamin notes, the "Synkretismus kulturhistorischer, literargeschichtlicher, biographische Betrachtung" (Benjamin 1972: 40) followed by his contemporary immature (*Unselbständig*) generation of critics, who, under the banner of expressionism and under some influence of the Stefan George school of thinking approach the baroque "Zeitgeist" through a veil of Diltheyan "Einfühlung", "Wie ein Kranker, der im Fieber liegt, alle Worte, die ihm vernehmbar werden, in die jagenden Vorstellungen des Deliriums verarbeitet, so greift der Zeitgeist die Zeugnisse von früheren oder von entlegenen Geisteswelten auf, um sie an sich zu reißen und lieblos in sein selbstbefangenes Phantasieren einzuschließen" (Benjamin 1972: 40), a personal, fantastical absorption in the baroque which Benjamin deems forceful and mostly sentimental (Benjamin 1972: 40 & 41).

— “in which the course of history — now, no longer ‘essential’ history, but *real* history — is frozen into an image in order thereby to demystify it in its natural givenness and thus make it serviceable for concrete revolutionary ends” (Wolin 1982: 97 & 99). Once more, the *redemption* of individual phenomena is the key concern.

Although Benjamin’s monadological programme of supra-historical ideas has idealist connotations, his metaphysical philosophy here remains essentially anti-idealist. For Benjamin criticises the idealist system-builders for exceeding the realm of things in favour of the realm of ideas. The ideology of especially Plato, Leibniz and Hegel undervalue the empirical realm and view “truth and being as nonempirical absolutes” (Buck-Morss 1977: 93). Benjamin, on the other hand, grounds his noumenal rediscovery in the particular, individual, exemplary phenomenon. As mentioned before, ideas do not exist on their own (although they are self-sufficient, isolated in interlinear relations with fellow ideas), but are intimately joined up with the realm of things. Benjamin’s philosophical representation of ideas, in the revelation of truth, is, contra an immaterial metaphysics which floats in the realm of ideas, driven toward a rediscovery of the extreme phenomena in the totality of the ideas. One could say he re-reads the idealists in a material fashion (he finds the material in the rediscovered and renewed idea). Writes Buck-Morss (1993: 97):

When Benjamin treated the phenomenal elements as absolutes while viewing the ideas, and hence the truth, as historically specific and changing, he was inverting the long-established Platonic conception; when he used empirical reality in constructing a metaphysics, he fused the “intelligible” and empirical realms which Kant saw as unalterably opposed. As for the term “constellation,” he had brought it down to earth, turning a prescientific concept into a tool for materialist enlightenment.

Starting with a given philosophical tradition of ideas and concepts, Benjamin argues, offers the essential opportunity for renewing the ideas through philosophical contemplation. He writes that “In dieser Erneuerung stellt das ursprüngliche Vernehmen der Worte sich wider her” (Benjamin 1972: 19). In other words, as in the case of the specific material given, the authentic original thing itself which prone to historical change is juxtaposed in a constellation of supra-historical ideas, the object’s “Einmaligkeit und

Wiederholung” — for its renewal or *Rettung*, Benjamin argues that the mission of philosophy is to start with the *objective given*, “the re-presentation of a few, always the same words — of the ideas” (Benjamin 1972: 30 & 19). It was the art philosopher’s task to re-read the historical object in the supra-historical ideas which tradition hands down from generation to generation — not to impose the ideas onto the things but rather to re-read or re-new the given concepts and ideas through the changing phenomena. In this Benjamin would implicitly oppose the philosophical method of Heidegger (and with him of course the Heidegger reader Jacques Derrida), of the “dubious undertaking to introduce new terminologies” (Benjamin 1977b: 37; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 102). Observes Benjamin (1972: 19):

Solche Terminologien — ein mißglücktes Benennen, an welchem das Meinen mehr Anteil hat als die Sprache — entraten der Objektivität, welche die Geschichte den Hauptprägungen der philosophische Betrachtungen gegeben hat.

Philosophical contemplation *à la* Benjamin means a renewal, an inversion, an “authentic transposition” (Wolin 1982: 102) of that which is universally given through history — through the specific, historically changeable material. As supra-historical ideas lie behind historical and original objects, so also vice versa; in the *subjective* introduction of new terminologies, *intentionality* takes precedence over the *unintentional* objective interpretation within the terminology, within noncommunicative language as being *objective* in its representations, its individual nonsubjective symbols — in this way losing track of the object itself, the monadic object which is the origin to begin with in the first place. Benjamin writes (1972: 19):

Alle Wesenheiten existieren in vollendeter Selbständigkeit und Unberührtheit, nicht von den Phänomenen allein, sondern zumal von einander. Wie die Harmonie der Sphären auf den Umläufen der einander nicht berührenden Gestirne, so beruht der Bestand des mundus intelligibilis auf der unaufhebbaren Distanz zwischen den reinen Wesenheiten. Jede Idee ist eine Sonne und verhält sich zu ihresgleichen wie eben Sonnen zueinander sich verhalten.

Without the exemplary object, however, the self-determining ideas become merely abstract and idealist: without the pre-given self-sufficient ideas the object loses its historical objectivity — according to Benjamin, its theological hope for individual redemption in the nexus of a totality. In the discrepancy between image and meaning, and “the historical non-identity between subject and object,⁹⁵ between the real and the ideal” (Wolin 1988: 105), the anticipation for the material’s “symbolic” redemption becomes the crux of the philosophical matter and tractatus.

When the *essence* is of concern in the historical sense of the before- and after-life of a phenomenon’s being in the idea, the determining factors are the *dialectical Aufhebung* of its singularity in the totality on the one hand, and its conversion from ideality to reality on the other hand. If one were to judge this sometime mannered philosophical procedure by the often fecund Adornian method of immanent negative dialectics, a method which derives from Benjamin’s partly Romanticism derived conception of criticism - namely, that “It is only from within a work that one could derive the principles by which it was to be judged” (Rosen 1988: 134) — its experiential possibilities manifest themselves in opposition to the subjective intentionality-orientated conceptions of *Erlebnis*.

⁹⁵As in Adorno’s conception of the object’s nonidentity with itself, but also “its nonidentity with the knowing subject, the mind and its logical processes” (Buck-Morss 1977: 77).

8. *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*: Traditions of experience

The concept of “experience”, particularly in the realm of epistemology and cultural criticism, was developed by several theoreticians, amongst others Kant, Dilthey, Buber, Klages, Husserl, Bergson, Heidegger, and Ernst Jünger. As has been seen thus far, Benjamin’s theory of experience drew a sharp distinction between a personally lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and a socially, historically integrated experience (*Erfahrung*) — a conception which will link him to and differentiate him from such thinkers as Dilthey, Klages, Jünger, Buber and Husserl.

From the outset it would seem that Benjamin’s call for a historical experience reflects Wilhelm Dilthey’s call for historical consciousness through experience, contra philosophical or Hegel’s absolute knowledge.⁹⁶ Historical knowledge for Dilthey meant something quite different than the critical philosophy postulated by the neo-Kantians. Experience for the latter was used solely as a source for verifiable discoveries, in the investigation of nature: “that which detaches itself from the experience of the individual and constitutes part of the reliable stock of experimental knowledge”. For Dilthey, on the other hand, “the structure of the historical world is not based on facts taken from experience which then acquire a value relation, but rather on the inner historicity which belongs to experience itself” (Gadamer 1979: 195). As Dilthey put it himself:

The first condition of possibility of a science of history is that I myself am an historical being, that the man who is studying history is the man who is making history (Dilthey qtd. in Gadamer 1979: 196).

Furthermore, Dilthey, in a move against a theory of history based on material causality, distanced himself from any immersion in the “tediously mechanical necessity of external nature” (Roberts 1982: 79) as reflected in the contrast he struck between *Erlebnis* (or *das Erleben*) as “inner lived experience” with *aüssere Erfahrung* as “outer sensory experience”: “Whereas the latter was grounded in the discrete stimuli of mere sensation,

⁹⁶Dilthey’s work had great influence on the intellectual circles which Benjamin moved in during his formative years, like the circle around Stefan George.

the former involved the internal integration of sensations into a meaningful whole available to hermeneutic interpretation” (Jay 1993:146). According to Dilthey, because we *are all historical beings, the inner historicist experience (Erlebnis) of the individual subject* acquires universal proportions. It is through the *continuity* of experience — the “life of our will” — of the individual that a universal continuity is forged (a notion which recalls Bergson’s conception of *durée*). Unity is created around *significant* parts in the individual’s inner experience of life, and is re-experienced by others through biographical knowledge. The unity of life (*Lebenseinheit*) is therefore created in the individual’s inward experience, fused into a “structural continuity” (*Strukturzusammenhang*) or, as Dilthey later called it together with Husserl, “significance” (*Bedeutung*). As can be seen in the following two quotations Gadamer traces this back to the method of Romantic hermeneutics wherein life is turned into a unified text:

Like the continuity of a text the structural continuity of life is determined by a relation between the whole and the parts. Every part expresses something of the whole, i.e. has significance for the whole, just as its own significance is determined by the whole (Gadamer 1979: 197).

Dilthey starts from romantic hermeneutics. With its aid he succeeds in concealing the difference between the historical nature of experience and sciences’ mode of knowledge or, better, in harmonising the mode of knowledge of the human sciences with the methodological criteria of the human sciences. [...] Romantic hermeneutics here came to his assistance since [...] it took no account whatsoever of the historical nature of experience. It assumed that the object of understanding is the text that has to be deciphered and its meaning understood. Thus every encounter with a text is for it an encounter of the spirit with itself. Every text is strange enough for it to present a problem, and yet familiar enough for it to be fundamentally soluble even when we know nothing of a text but that it is a text, writing, an expression of mind (Gadamer 1979: 212).

But where the Romantic text interprets itself, for Dilthey, like Klages, it is *life* which interprets itself, life has its own hermeneutical structure. Dilthey’s hermeneutics of experience is based on a philosophy of life — *Lebensphilosophie* as in Klages’s conception of a “life-world” — which he considers to be above Hegel’s “intellectualism” or rationalism, Leibniz’s “monadology”, and any “metaphysics of individuality” per se. Philosophy is grounded in “life” not in speculative or abstract conceptualisation. As a

“metaphysics of the irrational” it was opposed to “scientific positivism and to the instrumental domination of Nature” (Stauth & Turner 1992: 46).

To show the transition from “subjective” individual experience or *Erlebnis* to “objective” historical knowledge or “objective mind”, Dilthey introduces three key epistemological terms best approached through language, especially literary language as the closest thing to objectivity (Roberts 1982: 80): understanding (*Verstehen*), expression (*Ausdruck*), and sympathy (*Sympathie*). According to Dilthey, writes Gadamer (1979: 198), “To understand is to understand an expression. What is expressed is present in the expression differently than is the cause in the effect. It is present in the expression itself and will be understood when the expression is understood”. Contra Hegel, for whom “the return home of the spirit takes place in the philosophical concept”, for Dilthey “the significance of the philosophical concept is not as knowledge, but as expression” (Gadamer 1979: 202) — that is to say, as *expressions of life*: “Historical consciousness extends into the universal, in that it sees all the data of history as manifestations of the life from which they stem: ‘Here life is understood by life’” (Gadamer 1979: 202).

Similar to Hegel’s “spirit” returning to itself in “self-knowledge”, in Dilthey’s reading, life (and later Dilthey would in fact refer to life as “spirit”) returns home to itself in the expressions of itself — not in speculative concepts, however, but in historical consciousness which sees or understands historical spirit in all things expressed. The understanding of the infinite in the finite is the question, and here Dilthey differs from Hegel only in terms of “the apriorism of his conceptual speculation”. Dilthey retains Hegel’s idea of the “infinity of the mind, which was positively fulfilled in the ideal of an historically enlightened reason, matured to the point of the genius who understands everything” (Gadamer 1979: 205). Hegel’s ‘absolute knowledge’ is transformed into a universal historical consciousness based on the *genius’s* self-knowledge in life, *in literature*.

Empathy (as in Dilthey’s conception of “Einfühlung”) consummates this process of life’s self-knowledge (life’s understanding of its expressions), for according to Dilthey, “only sympathy makes true understanding possible”. Sympathy, like love, gives insight. But like expression, it is “more than merely a condition of knowledge: Through it

another person is transformed at the same time” (Gadamer 1979: 205). “Universal sympathy”, then, would ideally transcend all subjective barriers of preference, through the “continuing conditioning of one’s own life” by the “actual inner self” expressed in the great object or monument. However, as Gadamer (1979: 206) notes, this sympathy remains a “subjective condition of knowledge”

Even though Dilthey sees the phenomenon of knowledge in life itself as life’s objectification of itself, that “in every expression of life, knowledge is already operative and hence truth can be recognised”, “pure expression of experience in art” and expression in life “are all forms of objective mind“ (Gadamer 1979: 208), his idea of objective literary language is fundamentally rooted in subjective *Erlebnis*, that is, *an inward experience* which, though Dilthey, could be shared, or better, *understood* by another “inwardness” through the “permanence and objectivity” of literary language (Roberts 1982: 80). Although Dilthey’s notion of experience would claim historicity in its move “from relativity to totality” (Gadamer 1979: 209), moving away from the transience of the individual to the genuine community — created through a sharing of “inwardness” “across the hostile chasm of material change and degeneration” (Roberts 1982: 80), from the methodological criteria based on contingent phenomena of the natural sciences to the knowledge of the human sciences, and grounded in a reading of life as an intelligible historical text to be deciphered — history “not so much [as] as chain of material causality as a tissue of “significance”(Bedeutung) and “sense” (Sinn)” (Roberts 1982: 79), it remains caught up in the expressions of the subjective individual, who like Husserl’s imaginative and fantasy orientated subject (contra Adorno’s conception of an unintentional “exact fantasy”) comes precariously close to falling into Cartesian solipsism.

Although Benjamin, as with Klages before him, echoed Dilthey’s attack against the belief in “the autonomy of reason, the solidarity of society, and its progress towards the best possible world by means of control over nature, the regulation of state and law, and the overcoming of all ecclesiastical and political resistance” (Roberts 1982: 80), he would argue through his notion of *Erfahrung*, that that which may be known through an inward *Erlebnis* — Dilthey’s idea of the expressions of an autonomous artwork — as in great literature “whose ‘permanently fixed expressions of life’ were the

pre-eminent organon of all history” (Roberts 1982: 80) — remains in the realm of a limited personal experience where biographical detail both of the “reader” and the “maker” takes precedence over the “objective truth” configured in and through the material itself.⁹⁷

It would be precisely Dilthey’s inward notion of reality⁹⁸ that Benjamin would seek to penetrate: like in Plato’s trope of the cave, to escape from the shadows in order to reveal the truth or idea behind it, as a historical awakening or process of maturing, an actual breaking free from a pre-animistic spell or dream — a notion of Benjamin’s which points toward his interest in a loss of innocence in terms of the loss of the Paradisical state and the loss of the child’s experience, not expressed biographically, or inwardly as from one inward individual to another, nor nostalgically as many critics have thought. Benjamin sought to lay bare historical truth not through an *Erlebnis*, which as Husserl would have it, rises above the material, but through an *Erfahrung* which, for all its melancholy, cuts through the apparitional appearance of the material. For Benjamin the historian or “student” (as historical type) enters into history as if into a picture puzzle,⁹⁹ an experience which “explodes” the subject, materialistically “blasting” the pre-historical past into the present (*Jetztzeit*), laying the material behind the appearance bare in the process.

Interestingly, Benjamin’s later use of *Erfahrung* as determined by *Jetztzeit* to discontinue what he thought to be the *historicist* ideal of progress through the continuum

⁹⁷ As one of the major thinkers of the Stefan George Circle, Ludwig Klages’s cosmological perspective that “concrete objects attain a representation of the past” (Stauth & Turner 1992: 56) had a fundamental influence on Benjamin, although Benjamin would reject the symbolist theory underlying Klages’s ‘metaphysical *Lebensphilosophie*’, as Benjamin’s work “is in many fundamental respects a transformative rejection of symbolism (Roberts 1982: 105), especially the kind of mythological symbolism which in the form of wish-images regresses into fascism, a tendency Klages’s philosophy is infamous for. Nevertheless, Klages, following Alfred Schuler, introduced the concept of “aura”, which represented an attitude toward history and nature whereby nothing about the spirit of a past epoch could be known except in its left-over objects in which the consciousness of the past has left its traces. In this reading, the historical observer is integrated into a ‘cosmic sphere’ in the cognizance of the “aura” of “pictures, buildings and objects of everyday use” (Stauth & Turner 1992: 56), an idea which in various forms returns in Benjamin’s picture and object theories.

⁹⁸ As Julian Roberts puts it: “Reality, for him [Dilthey], lay in ‘inner experience’; images of nature were merely a shadow of this concrete inwardness” (Stauth & Turner 1992: 79).

⁹⁹ Benjamin (1978: 40) writes in his “A Berlin Chronicle” that “There are people who think they find the key to their destinies in heredity, others in horoscopes, others again in education. For my part, I believe that I should gain numerous insights into my later life from my collection of picture postcards”, an idea which truly illuminates Benjamin’s notion of “autobiography”, of writing and criticism, of memory and experience, his dialectical theory of *cognition through images* subtly related to Klages’s picture theory of cognition (see Stauth & Turner 1992: 50).

of *das Erlebte* empty time, a mythological time dominated by a Nietzschean eternal recurrence, an idea Benjamin also found in Blanqui and Baudelaire, is a time which Dilthey also set himself against, albeit with the idea of a creation of a “second world” through the exchange of inward *Erlebnis*. Writes Roberts (1982: 80-1):

Dilthey capped his comparison of human and natural history with a Nietzschean motif, the theory of eternal recurrence. In this interpretation only human history had the freedom actually to develop. Human actions, proceeding from the spontaneous valuative roots of the will, set their own conditions and established their own objectivity. Natural events, however, were always part of a chain of causal determination, a mechanical sequence which at any moment contained the elements of what was to follow. Only the human individual could go beyond this “empty and barren repetition of the course of nature”.

Writes Blanqui as quoted by Benjamin in his Arcades-project:

there is no progress. [...] What we call progress is bolted shut onto every earth and vanishes along with it. Always and everywhere in the terrestrial sphere, the same drama, the same backdrop, on the same narrow stage: a noisy humanity, infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as though it were an immensity, only to succumb in short order along with the globe which bore — with deepest contempt — the burden of its haughtiness. The same monotony, the same changelessness on foreign stars. The universe repeats itself endlessly and swaggers in place. Eternity imperturbably offers the same performances throughout infinity (Mehlman 1993: 43-44).

For all its similarity, however, a similar *raison d'être* is subverted by a different approach. In Benjamin's reading the *interiority* of an *Erlebnis* would precisely become the target of his attack against the empty time of always-the-same, or *Immergleiche* (bourgeois) historicism — the latter according to Benjamin, also represented by Bergson's ontological notion of *durée*. The double-barrelled, dialectical, historical materialist *Erfahrung* and *Jetztzeit* was to cut short the phantasmagorical terror of the subjectivised and homogenised *interieur* or prison of being.

The ontology and historicism of Dilthey was further developed but transposed in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl who noted trenchantly that “It is easy to see that any fully thought out historicism [that is, Dilthey's standpoint, GTS] must turn into an

extreme sceptical subjectivism” (Roberts 1982: 84). Husserl argued that *Erlebnis* of the pre-reflexive *Lebenswelt* was richer and intuitively more meaningful than the scientific and neo-Kantian notion of *Erfahrung*, which he said was inferior, it being based on conceptual reflection in “nature” (Jay 1993: 146). Like Dilthey, Husserl sought to distinguish ideal unities “which stood above space and time” in (spiritual) “consciousness” rather than in “nature” or the material world (Roberts 1982: 85). But against the “subjectivism” of Dilthey and Rickert, Husserl set forth a more radical theory of individuation grounded in the idea of a *transcendental imagination* (Husserl’s transcendental logic) through which the subject could freely fantasise, so allowing for ideality to reveal itself without being hampered by the limitations of the material object; nevertheless, Husserl and the other new ontologists did return to sensory apprehension of the object as in Heidegger’s statement that “Knowledge is only knowledge when it is knowledge of an object” (Roberts 1982: 85) and Husserl’s call *zu den Sachen selbst* (Roberts 1982: 86). But emphasis was placed on the imagination, “of the formal realm rather than merely of the material realm, which in an “individual disclosure of essence” transformed the object into an *eidetic* image, “liberated from any general material forms such as time and space, and thus also from causality in the scientific sense”. Through *das Erleben* of these eidetic images Husserl thought to identify “absolute, timeless values” (Roberts 1982: 85), the ideal *essence* of the object. The *Erlebnis* of Husserl thus signified an “ideal” rather than a “real” world.

There are similarities between Husserl’s “grasping the essence” and the critical and immanent methodology of Adorno and Benjamin, except for the fundamental distinction between the phenomenologist or idealist ontology-based philosophy of the former and the materialist philosophy of the latter. In both cases universalising propositions, “indirectly symbolic and mathematical methods”, and the “apparatus of conclusions and proof” are rejected — for Husserl it is in favour of “an understanding on the basis of individual apperception” (Roberts 1982: 87), in Adorno it is based on a “negative dialectic” of the object, and in Benjamin it is based on what Susan Buck-Morss (1988) acutely termed a “dialectics of seeing”. The individual apperception of Husserl is *Erlebnis* orientated, whereas Benjamin’s dialectic of seeing distinguishes itself in *Erfahrung*. Husserl’s idea of the inner or primal, active force in the object itself (keeping

Klages in mind) seems to reflect Benjamin's neo-Platonic notion of the idea behind the appearance of the thing. But where the one is known through a continuum of intentional *being* the other is philosophically represented in constellations of particular and isolated phenomenal elements in the being of ideas, by way of renewed concepts of mediation, through an unintentional material, objective *interruption*.¹⁰⁰

Ernst Jünger — a conservative revolutionary and a World War I veteran who had been wounded several times, a writer who edited the 1930 volume of essays, *Krieg und Krieger*, devoted to the glory of modern warfare, which Benjamin reviewed critically in a piece entitled "Theories of German Fascism" — very much like Martin Buber, celebrated warfields as the place where true, authentic *Erlebnis* took place, in contrast to the dry *Erfahrung* of the bourgeois civilian (Jay 1993: 146).¹⁰¹ Honneth (1993: 89) writes that "Jünger is also a rationalist, who is interested in the social transformation of modernity in terms of its negative implications for the perceptive potential of magical experiences. If, however, for Jünger such reflections lead to the consequence of an elitist re-enchantment of the world, then Benjamin, by contrast, possesses a philosophy of history that is to assign a completely different task, namely an emancipatory one, to this

¹⁰⁰Incidentally, Husserl's theory of the active force within the object making it "intelligible without the intercession either of the senses or of conceptual algebra", is an ideology which finds its fruition in Heidegger's theory of *language* as a repository of objective, primal, and individual intelligibility of Being (*Dasein*), from the particular word to the universal, intelligible individuality as "allowing something to show itself" (*Zeigenlassen*), where the object does not "need to be identified as something" (Roberts 1982: 87 & 89), and where language allows the object to make itself manifest *immediately* by its own agency, a theory which finds a faint echo in Benjamin's ontic and hermetic theory of a magical language of naming as that which does not need to be expressive *of* something, although Benjamin was devotedly opposed to the linguistic and grammatical postulations of the 'Existenzialontologie' of Heidegger's 1927 *Sein und Zeit*. Here, then, the interesting problem of the relation between language and ontology as found in Benjamin's early theosophical and Abulafian Kabbalist theories of language which could perhaps be followed up through a critical comparison between Benjamin's "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" to his 1926 *Trauerspiel* study and the Heidegger text, a critique turning on Heidegger's phenomenological notion of a cosmic "direct revelation" or *Weltenschlossung* of Being in language, the immediate entry of the object into speech, the "radical inseparability of subject and object in speech" (Roberts 1982: 90), and "a continuum between the *appearance* of the object in speech and the phonetic" (*Ibid*; added italics), a notion, it should be clear, which Benjamin would want to *mortify*.

¹⁰¹It would be interesting to compare Jünger's conception of the war and (its) technology as healing, or conducive to a more richer and magical, albeit elitist *Erlebnis* to Joseph Beuys' conception of war. As is known, Beuys had been shot down during World War II and had survived due to natives who had healed him through the use of felt and fat; these "symbols" appear ubiquitously throughout Beuys' work and performances as healing properties, healing for the community as a whole (every man is an artist). Here war is not celebrated for its mechanistic prowess, quite to the contrary — the *earth* assumes healing and emancipatory properties.

experiential potential". Jünger's front-line hero, in fact, is a conservative proto-fascist akin to the narrator Serenus Zeitblom of Thomas Mann's "portrayal of the so-called 'Kridweiss circle', a group of proto-fascist conservatives who champion Sorel in the name of a 'deliberate rebarbarization'" in his novel *Doktor Faustus* (Wohlfarth 1994: 165), a phenomenon very much in the tradition or the "vexed topos of 'Jewish self-hatred'" in which a certain anti-Semitism rears its ugly head in the Jew himself, giving occasion to the taunting idea of "the Jew as proto-Nazi".¹⁰² There is a fascist blurring of essential distinctions in Jünger's writing, a totalising and aestheticising tendency which, as mentioned before, Benjamin fundamentally opposed; a fascist tendency toward "bad" overall subjectification found in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, in Hegelian and Leibnizian ideological conceptions of history, and found in the Jew himself.

Buber, in similar pro-war vein as Jünger, Marinetti and the Futurists, in his "blood and soil" theory referred to earlier, claimed, much to the disgust of Benjamin and Scholem, that the Jew should realise his true Jewish identity through direct *Erlebnis* of war on the World War I fields. Again, this *Erlebnis* would be a profoundly personal one, the personal Jewish experience as put forward in "Buber's idea of Judaism as a purely inner experience" (Rabinbach 1985: 100) was a blithe spiritual idea which Benjamin vehemently rejected. *Erfahrung* in language and history is in strong opposition to the "feeling" permeated *Erlebnis*.

What ties the above mentioned theories together, is that here "*Erlebnis* was an honorific term for subjective, concrete, intuitive responses to the world that were prior to the constructed abstractions of science or the intellect" (Jay 1993: 146). To be sure,

¹⁰² See Mehlman 1993: 77-97. The haunting ambiguity within the Jew is succinctly represented by Thomas Mann whose "Jewish Jesuit Naptha" character from *The Magic Mountain* anticipates the ironic portrayal of the "Luciferian" (Scholem 1982: 97) Oskar Goldberg in the figure of the super-Nazi Dr. Chaim Breisacher: 'But Leo Naptha, the ex-Jewish nihilist and "reactionary revolutionary," whose taste for blood is traced by Mann back to his father's vocation as a ritual butcher, is, according to critical tradition, "the John the Baptist of fascism." As such he is plainly an anticipation of Chaim Breisacher, the "Jewish fascist" of Dr. Faustus, said to be modelled on Oskar Golberg, the bogus messiah of Scholem's memoir of Benjamin. Again: the Jew as proto-Nazi.' (95-96) Earlier (96-98), Mehlman makes the connection between the "false messiah" Sabbatai Zevi who exerted a profound influence on Benjamin through Scholem's work, and Oskar Goldberg whose "impure aura", as Scholem remembers, also had a profound effect on Benjamin, one of abhorrence, but one which, nevertheless, foraged his curiosity in this "Jewish sect ... right into the Hitler period" (Scholem 1982: 97 & 98). Once again, the "diabolical" duality in Benjamin's Sabbatian subversiveness.

Benjamin disclaimed the Kantian and the scientific (positivist) notion of *Erfahrung*, which according to Benjamin was too narrowly rationalistic. Benjamin was also critical of the notion of an epistemology based on *Erlebnis* as subjectively immediate and intuitive.¹⁰³ Benjamin reread the notion of both concepts in what one together with Gadamer could call a “dialectical mode of experience”.

Benjamin's redefinition of *Erfahrung* is concerned with a fecund experience in and of specialised time in which “calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness” (Benjamin 1992a: 253). The theory of *Erfahrung* has experience of history mapped out in an open-plan dialectic of two components. On the one hand there is a wisdom carried over from the past into the present through tradition: “a learning process over time, combining negations through unpleasant episodes as well as affirmations through positive ones to produce something akin to a wisdom that can be passed down via tradition through the generations” (Jay 1993: 146). And on the other hand there is the abrupt discontinuing of tradition in an apocalyptic, anarchistic, nihilistic, gnostic, messianic explosion of the past into the present, a Blanquian call for rejuvenation through destruction, a revolutionary tiger's leap into the past “filled with the [alchemical] presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” (Benjamin 1992a: 261), shattering the everyday world “by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of the far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling” (Benjamin 1992a: 229), or, as Blanqui put it, in speaking of a dead world of eternal recurrence in the imagery of extinguished stars: “How might they re-ignite if not through movement transformed into heat in gigantic proportions, that is through a collision [*entrechoc*] which volatilizes them while calling them to a new existence.” (Mehlman 1993: 44). The sometime volatile dialectic between the two readings - the one sentient, the other explosive — and the *dialectic within each pole*, points to the Judaic *noble destructiveness* implicit in Benjamin's reading of history, where an essentially apocalyptic doctrine co-exists with a conservative tradition, whilst reading the idea of catastrophe and redemption into a secular realm of world history.

¹⁰³The antisecularism of the neokantians gave rise to an antimaterialism, a point of contention for Benjamin.

Unlike Dilthey, Benjamin did not call this dialectic expression *Erlebnis*. Writes Martin Jay: “The immediate, passive, fragmented, isolated and unintegrated inner experience of *Erlebnis* was, Benjamin argued, very different from the cumulative, totalizing accretion of transmittable wisdom, of epic truth, that was *Erfahrung*” (Jay 1993: 146). In Judaic tradition, Jay’s description represents the historical *Haggadah* side of *Erfahrung*, the handing down of truth from generation to generation in the form of parables and interpretation, as opposed to the *Halakah*, which is revealed truth. On the flip-side of Benjamin’s *Erfahrung* lies historical *apocatastasis*, a Jewish apocalyptic and neo-Platonic-gnostic idea of a messianic retrieval of everything and everyone, bringing the entire past into the present, discontinuing the continuity of tradition — by the rupture restores a displaced world (of dream) back to its former proper relations, whilst the goal is a return to an origin. *Erfahrung* here is modernist, messianic, cosmological, destructive, restorative; it is in true Kafkain spirit “a desperate and paradoxical attempt to preserve the transmissibility of truth without truth” (Kearney 1991: 158).

The historically grounded notion of experience was not an isolated, subjective, inner experience — an experience Benjamin reviled particularly as bourgeois, but rather concerned the collective memory, the collective unconscious. This idea of a historical collective unconscious brings to mind the iconographic tradition of Aby Warburg, Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky; and the deep-psychological mythology of Carl Jung’s notion of universally unconscious archetypes. Warburg outlined his notion of a social memory with the idea of *Säftesteigen*, a rising of the sap, by which the residues or archaic strata of primitive events come to mind, an idea which suggests a parallelism with Jung’s archetypes and racial memory although Jung’s name never appears in Warburg’s writings. Semon’s idea of an “engram” or symbol as the trace of an (*Ur*-)event stamped as *Ur*- or primitive memory on the mind, a trace composed of mnemonic energy, together with Lamprecht’s idea of the body social as a bundle of stimuli (*Reize*) comprises Warburg’s overall social memory theory. Gombrich writes that for Warburg “The symbol or ‘engram’ is a charge of latent energy, but the way in which it is discharged may be positive or negative — as murder or rescue, as fear or triumph, as Pagan maenad or Christian Magdalen. [...] The inherited consciousness of maximalised impressions stamped on the

mind (engram) passes them on without taking cognizance of their emotional charge, simply as an experience of energy tensions; this unpolarized contiguum can also function as a continuum. The imparting of a new meaning to these energies serves as a protective screen" (Gombrich 1970: 248 & 249).

For Warburg — re-reading Nietzsche's conceptualised idea of the Apollo-Dionysus struggle, a "struggle between instinct and structural arrangements [...] where Dionysus represented the energy of the life process, while Apollo represented the necessity of form, consistency and organization" (Stauth & Turner 1992: 53) — the latent irrational trace had to be transformed into the ordered or ordering *symbol*, one which through dynamic serenity would demythologise the cult of the monster, Dionysian frenzy, the magic of primitive man. The chaos of the *Ur*-conscious had to be ordered, re-orientated through the detached artistic temperament, re-interpreted by "dynamic inversion" into the "dynamogram", or else these dangerous memories would overpower man.

Jung's depth-psychological metaphysics of a collective unconscious, on the other hand, stimulates a reading of "myths as collective dream images, suprahistorical archetypes of human existence absolute" (Menninghaus 1988: 302). The Jungian link between artistic images and archaic images, like Freud's idea of a dreaming individuum, has "little to do with a concrete historical concept of specific collectives" (Menninghaus 1988: 302). This suprahistorical mythologising tendency is one of the reasons why Benjamin distanced himself from it, another reason being Jung's idea of the "nostalgia" of the artist in seizing the image of the unconscious and bringing it into consciousness,¹⁰⁴ which Benjamin criticised as being "clearly regressive" (Abbas 1989: 45). Warburg's iconographic battle with the bipolar "engram", the constant attempt to counter the destructive forces in the engram through a re-interpretation of its meanings (bringing to mind the allegorist's sovereign power of giving meaning to the ruins), however similar to

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin in his *Passagen*-project very critically quoted a passage from Jung's essay "On the relationship of analytic psychology to the poetic work of art": "The nostalgia of the artist retreats from dissatisfaction with the present until it reaches that source image in the unconscious which is suited to compensate the one-sidedness of the spirit of the age. His nostalgia seizes the image, and as he brings that into consciousness, the image changes its shape until it can be adapted by contemporary man to his own context" (Abbas 1989: 45).

Jung's idea of using the archaic image for its psychological potential, seems to retain a more definite art historical *specificity* (the Benjaminian dialectic between the historically changeable art object and the suprahistorical realm of ideas) in its theory of a re-orientation of negative formative forces, bringing it closer to Benjamin's dialectical idea of the "dreaming collective" (Menninghaus 1988: 302). Moreover, Warburg's theory is also devoid of the mythologising racialism found in Jung's latently anti-Semitic idea of an Arian psychology.

Instead of pertaining to one individual's experience, one individual's biography, Benjamin's idea of *Erfahrung* denoted the essence of a historical configuration or site, the experience of the contemporary collective as made manifest in the concrete *dialectical images* which are to be brought to the historical surface or historical consciousness from the (myths of the) collective unconscious. Not Dilthey's, according to Husserl "absurd" "second world" community (Roberts 1982: 84), but the collective unconscious experience of history "merged into the setting", by the collective, in the "collective's concrete dream images" (Roberts 1982: 84). And yet, as Hamacher succinctly points out, an ambiguity in Benjamin's analyses arises, where he speculated in his early "Über Sprache überhaupt" on a "magical community": "Benjamin's observations in his treatise on language, according to which 'the material commonality of things [must be thought of, GTS] in its imparting [*Mitteilung*]', and according to which one must think of a 'communality' that 'encompasses the world in general as an undivided whole'. [...] Such speculations on the 'magical community' [...] which recall Böhme, Hamann and the Romantics no less than they recall Lévi-Bruhl, always move in the proximity of a philosophy of totality, whose doctrinaire and obscurantist features Benjamin elsewhere exposed with all due respect" (Hamacher 1994: 135). Benjamin's communality, when the chips are down, remains aristocratically individualist, although this should not detract from its immanent grounding in the socio-political *Merkwelt*; or more accurately, following Adorno on the "successful" failures in bourgeois thinking, "truth surfaced in the inconsistencies of his theory" (Buck-Morss 1977: 80).

The project of historical *awakening*, then, meant a "therapeutic" translation or re-interpretation of "psychological findings [in images or anagrams, GTS] 'from the

individual to the collective' so that he is 'more on the track of things than of the soul'" (Benjamin 1977, 5: 281; qtd. in Menninghaus 1988: 302). This emphasis on the spirit, essence or *eidos* in things rather than on the soul of man points to a definite influence of Klages on Benjamin, that is, Klages's idea of a soul (*Seele*) found not only in man but in animals and nature in general as well — a theory where "the soul is identical with life itself, and the rhythmic structure of the cosmos as a whole" (Stauth & Turner 1992: 49). Klages's anthropology of the constitution of human consciousness developed the idea of a human duality of being:

While there is a relation between our active-being and consciousness, related to mechanical organs of the spirit which recognize reality as things and attributes, the human person also possesses a potential for experience and passive cognition through the soul which is the essential experience of pictures or images. This is an adequate perception of the floating pictures and rhythms of changes which exist in reality, while the spiritual acknowledgement of reality as fixed things does not adequately refer to the state of nature (Stauth & Turner 1992: 51-52).

Taking in mind Benjamin's lines on a particular experience of images in "A Berlin Chronicle", "of images that, according to the teaching of Epicurus, constantly detach themselves from things and determine our perception of them" (Benjamin 1978: 29), it should become clear that Klages's ideas on the cognitive potential in pictures stretches deep, albeit re-orientated in Benjamin's thinking. Benjamin's ideas on images, experience and cognition return to a large extent to Klages's "theory of cognition which related to the reflection of pictures which are seen as the soul of the world corresponding with the soul of the human being. Klages developed this essential articulation of pictures as the basis for a reconciliation between humanity and nature" (Stauth & Turner 1992: 50). It is Klages's picture theory of cognition developed through his idea of experience in the "life-world" as opposed to the instrumental rationalism of civilisation, which influenced both Benjamin and Adorno, although, putting aside an enthusiastic mention of Klages and Bachofen in an early letter to Scholem (Stauth & Turner 1992: 56) and acutely pointing out the relation between Bachofen and Klages in a review of Bachofen's work, Benjamin mentions Klages's name but once in his own work, and then, quite rightly, critically — as essentially

a fascist thinker. Adorno, together with Horkheimer dismissed Klages rather prematurely as being a “mystical philosopher of nature” (Stauth & Turner 1992: 47).

To be sure, although Benjamin shared Klages’s neo-Romantic interest in a mystical experience of nature, his own definitions of “spirit” and “soul” were often (ambiguously) of a negative kind, focusing rather on the *duality in things* (bringing to mind Warburg’s bipolar anagrams). Moreover, he would follow an allegorical intention of destroying the organic appearance of the living, revealing on the one hand Klages’s ghost-like “floating pictures” of nature, and on the other hand the dead things of history. Both Klages and Benjamin make use of Alfred Schuler’s term “aura” signifying an attitude toward history and nature wherein the observer can no longer experience the spirit of a past age, and can only experience the various objects within it as “left-overs” or debris: “A basic understanding of the spirit of earlier epochs is no longer possible and past forms of consciousness become objectified within pictures, buildings and objects of everyday usage” (Stauth & Turner 1992: 56). In these concrete objects the past “spirit” has left its traces — but Benjamin’s antinomian reading would both rescue and efface the traces, sublating (*Aufheben*) the “aura” of nature and history, and in the things left-over.

Furthermore, Benjamin inverts Klages’s dualities, re-reading and using specific definitions completely out of context, and without making reference to Klages. Where in the one context a particular definition or concept could mean one thing, in another it means something completely different. This happens not only in Benjamin’s highjacking, or misreading in the Harold Bloom sense of the word, of Klages’s and Schuler’s “original” meanings, but Benjamin in his own work doubly subverts certain terms by jumping from one context into another, without a definitive and systematic argument. Writes Stauth & Turner (1992: 57) on Klages’s use of “spirit” as opposed to his use of “soul”:

Spirit in the Klages perspective occupied a basic position of struggle and contradiction against any life or soul or ‘inner life’ (*Seelenleben*); spirit is seen in contradiction and not in the position of a complementary relationship. In this situation of struggle, spirit becomes the destructive principle in history; human history becomes a development towards decadence and decline.

According to Klages this duality lay at the heart of the decline of civilisation, as the fate of human beings (Stauth & Turner 1992: 52) — an idea which appears in Benjamin, and in

Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of "instrumental reason" being the cause of the decline of civilisation. In Benjamin's reading "spirit" or "instrumental rationalism" would delineate itself in a tension field between myth and anti-myth, in the dialectic of the underlying myth in the pre-history of modernity. In any case, Benjamin's (later) antipathy toward the "soul" and the "spirit" was Marxist in its implicit critique of petty bourgeois interiority and spirituality, and he would implicitly criticise Dilthey's aforementioned Schopenhauerian idea of the "will" which regressed into a fascist "triumph of the will".¹⁰⁵ However, Benjamin's link to Klages connects him to a certain 'metaphysical' type of *Lebensphilosophie* with its Bachofenian theory of a pre-history, one which instead of narrowing the picture — of Benjamin's theory of *Erfahrung* — opens it up.

What should be remembered is Benjamin's dialectical reading of "picture relations", a dialectic which could point the way to a tentative solution — in the form of a *dialectical configuration* — to the contradictions in Benjamin's speculations on the *Erfahrung* of the community, for example: from his early neo-Romantic aristocratic thoughts on youth and language to his later marxist orientated "sociology", a historical sociology which nevertheless retained its earlier melancholic, aristocratic tone of voice (Rosen 1988: 168). Following a Benjaminian reading of an image *pattern* of *things*, his ideas on community reveals its origin in the image of the modern as a world of ruins, dead things, akin to the baroque stages of *Trauerspiel*. In the mannerist collection of these lifeless things or emblems in Benjamin's varying theories, ranging from a hopeful to a dispassionate tone of voice, from conservative to apocalyptic, a historical map saturated with disparate gnostic-theological motifs makes up the 'magical community' mentioned above. The community at the centre of this re-orientated map no longer functions utopianly or idealistically, nor distopically, but *imagologically*. That is, as one of Benjamin's crucial dialectical images of cognition which have a tendency to turn on a paradox.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ See Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* of the 1934 Nazi-gathering at Nuremberg.

¹⁰⁶ Ironically, whilst speculating on, and sometimes temporarily being a member of an "esoteric", "magical", "socialist", or an "anarchic" community (from the Youth Movement, to the George Circle, to a group of socialists gathered under Brecht and Asja Lacis, Benjamin even considering joining the communist party, and later being closely associated with and attending several meetings of Georges Bataille's and Pierre Klossowski's "closed and secret group", the *Acéphale*), Benjamin was more drawn to

Writes Susan Sontag: “The mark of the Saturnine temperament is the self-conscious relation to the self, which can never be taken for granted. The self is a text - it has to be deciphered. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for intellectuals.) The self is a project, something to be built. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for artists and martyrs, those who court the ‘purity and beauty of a failure,’ as Benjamin says of Kafka.) And the process of building a self and its works is always too slow. One is always in arrears to oneself”. Furthermore, work as intoxicant, and “melancholics make the best addicts, for the true addictive experience is always a solitary one.” (Sontag 1996b: 117 & 127). Paradoxically the writing of the work is also about awakening from “that most terrible drug — ourselves — which we take in solitude” (Benjamin 1978: 190).

The project of the lone and solitary artist is the construction of a work or text through which an *Erfahrung* may be had in and of historical knowledge or *Weltbewußtsein*, one which will be epistemological in its inexhaustible intelligibility.¹⁰⁷ The inner self of the melancholic artist is dialectically transformed into the work as in a map in the form of a Haggadaic tradition but also as the epistemological and revolutionary historically explosive time of now (*Jetztzeit*), a “sudden illumination” (Benjamin 1978: 56), a profane revelation of the truth, the anarchic rupture of tradition in *apocatastasis*. Knowing an epoch through the individual and particular bipolaric work or text may happen in an absolute flash of lightning as in revelation; or slowly, interlinearly like the interpreting experience of a student in front of a sacred but broken text. Note the marvellous paradox of the artist’s “inexperience” — Proust did not know “how to make a fire or open a window” (Benjamin 1992a: 208-209) — as impetus toward creating and

individual, lonely, melancholic, ascetic, hermetic, tortured artists than schools or fashionable credos - as Scholem noted, “he had little use for catchwords in general and was less attached to schools than to specific phenomena” (Scholem 1982: 65); and said Benjamin to Brecht, regarding his late reading of Marx’s *Capital*: “I prefer reading the most talked-about authors when they are out of fashion” (Benjamin 1992b: 118); he himself preferred the life of an outsider, studying degraded and forgotten texts and writing his texts during solitary, nocturnal working hours, writing often and late into the night like his counterparts Kraus, Kafka, Proust. The aesthetic and melancholy suffused experience formed the Romantic basis of his theory of *Erfahrung*, turning the self into a project, the individual into a collective, memory into a thing, site or citation (hence his ideal for the *Passagen*-project, which had its first traces in the *Trauerspiel* book, was as a book comprised in the way of a collage entirely of citations, suspending any subjectivity in the process.

interpreting the iconographic object of *Erfahrung*. In the tradition of Warburg's positive re-orientation of the negative forces in the "engram", the artist turning his (individual) disease into a (collective) strength, the dialectical motive behind the concrete.

According to Benjamin experience in the modern world was in a state of atrophy, and the task of re-establishing an authentic historical *Erfahrung*, a communal (magical-linguistic) experience, was indeed a problematic conjecture. Benjamin attempted to show the *possibilities* of consummated experience chiefly by a theory of magical language and by a theory of the modern city as a labyrinth, a library, a book, an imagological text to be deciphered. The modern city as experienced by its literary theoreticians (i.e. Baudelaire, Kafka, Proust) and as experienced by the child, the intoxicated and the emigrant as types,¹⁰⁸ as the site or locus of historical knowledge. The experience of the modern city also lead Benjamin to an investigation of the possibilities for an "absolute experience" by a self-alienated collective which modern equipment such as the cinematic apparatus had the potential to activate or motivate

The possibility for incandescent experience, that is, awakened *Erfahrung* of a critical historical consciousness, as opposed to isolated, merely lived interioristic *Erlebnis*, could, according to Benjamin, be found in the peripheral experiences, experience of the things usually ascribed to the outskirts of general existence (the debris of life in the modern *Großstadt*). Benjamin sought to ground his theory of *Erfahrung* in the mythological prehistory of the modern city, the storehouse of latent, potentially sinister mythology encased in the arcades, experienced in the surreal spirit of hashish, under the influence of Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, and following Baudelaire's allegorical *correspondances* (and Warburg's idea of the primitive association between the micro and the macro in correspondences). Thus the connection between Benjamin's Orphic and hermetic theory of "the secret language of things" where language is magical rather than informational and the magical (but no longer caught in a primitive, mythological spell)

¹⁰⁷ Wrote Warburg: "Der Kampf mit dem Monstrum als die Keimzelle der logischen Konstruktion"; and on the torture underlying the historical task of the scholar, as delineated and personified by his parallel Burkhardt, "Burkhardt als Erleider seines Berufes zu verstehen" (Gombrich 1970: 251 & 254).

¹⁰⁸See Benjamin 1986: 133-134: "For childhood is the divining rod of melancholy, and to know the mourning of such radiant glorious cities one must have been a child in them" and Benjamin 1977, 1.2: 672: "Emigration as a key to the metropolis".

peripheral experiences of the city as a historical text or dark script to be deciphered, the link or threshold between language and the city being a dialectical epistemology.

It should become clear now that although Benjamin shares certain factors of various traditions of experience — from the Romantics, to Nietzsche, to Bergson, to the Symbolists, to Klages, to phenomenology, to iconographic thought, to esoteric doctrines and marxist systems — his idiosyncratic re-readings *eo ipso* differentiate him from any “group” or “school” of thinking proper. But locating Benjamin in the broader net is a vital concern nevertheless. Schematically and in abbreviated form, the various traditions of experience would look something like this:

Firstly, primary human experience is by nature multifunctional - the many functional ways in which we, subjectively, are situated in the world and experience ourselves as connected with, and opposed to the world, the environment and each other, e.g. through physical contact, organically co-habiting, being aware in a focused and background way of the sensory world, being socially and politically active, etc. — conditions and constraints which are comparatively constant, yet highly unsettled and ideologically governed in history.

Secondly, the extreme reduction of this rich field by the main traditions of rationalism, e.g. the sense data or sensory impressions of empiricism, or experience viewed exclusively from the narrow perspective of rational knowledge, as well as the progressive and positivistic technologising of experience on this scientific basis.

Thirdly, the many forms of reaction against centuries of reductive reliance on scientific knowledge. In this process, experience became overextended in reactions which focused on various categories of irrational experience (e.g. the vital, the contingent, the absurd, the unconscious, the intuitive, crisis, etc.). Philosophically speaking, such anti-positivist, anti-rationalist or irrationalist movements or schools of thought, rooted in a “metaphysics of irrationality” which can be traced back to romanticism and symbolism, can be found in

neo-idealism, phenomenology, *Lebensphilosophie* or vitalism, existentialism, pragmatism; and in the contemporary modern art movements like avant-garde expressionism, dada, surrealism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, futurism etc. Coupled with these is the marxist and neo-marxist, materialist and dialectical tradition. Although, blindly following the doctrine of Marx and Engels, it very often collapsed itself into Leninist, vulgar positivism and the dark era of Stalinist irrationalism, general marxist thinking shared in the “anti-rationalist” or “anti-Enlightenment” reactions, a reaction extending from the New Left of the late 1960s and early 1970s into recent communist and political thought and neo-marxist social and critical theory as found in Terry Eagleton, Julian Roberts, and Fredric Jameson.

Fourthly, following Gadamer’s definition of artistic modernism as it evolved since the eighteenth-century, as being in essence *Erlebniskunst*, autonomous art as being the expression of authentic, subjective experience. This notion of subjective, autonomous art rose against preceding notions of allegorical art. As has specifically been pointed out earlier, Benjamin’s rehabilitation of “allegory” therefore marks his departure from any subjectivism or subjective modernism in general. Moreover, Benjamin’s re-definition of allegory fundamentally precursors postmodern practises of deconstruction as delineated by Paul de Man, for example, in his *Allegories of Reading*.

And fifthly, the key to Benjamin’s *sui generis* position lies not primarily in any of the contemporary intellectual, political and artistic movements or schools but rather in the older, esoteric and mythologising doctrine which Benjamin knew in the Kabbalah — the negative categories of experience going back to gnosticism (*gnosis* as an alternative redemptive variety of knowledge from which experience is derived, or against which experience is measured). In this, of course, he is part of a large complex going back to Pythagoras and the mystery cults of antiquity, through to the gnosticism and Christian mysticism of the Middle Ages, the occultists and classical Rosicrucians of early modern time, the occultists, Freemasons and Modern Rosicrucians of modernity, right up to the New Age and counter culture of Postmodernity.

It would seem legitimate, then, to locate the peripatetic Benjamin in-between the last three categories, in vacillation rather than confinement. His place somewhere in the third category can only be realised when the fundamental premise of allegory (in the sense of language and images) in the fourth category is seen in light of the complex last category, as in a constellation. Finally, Benjamin's notion of *Erfahrung* as a critique of *Erlebnis* has an exegetical gnostic conception, whereby as far as epistemology is concerned, only in the critical *writing* of history may the Aristotelian entelechy, as it were, the essence of the things be illuminated - that dark side of history underlying the written side, a dark submerged side which presents itself in fascism, a relation, for example, which Adorno and Horkheimer, after Benjamin, set out to expose in their pessimistic *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stauth & Turner 1992: 55).

Benjamin set out to expose the dark, unwritten undercurrent of history through dialectical images. That is to say, through dialectical images — which are also made up of monadic images, “The image is not garrulous. It has a hermetic, monadic quality; it closes itself off from explanation” (Abbar 1989: 52) — such as antiquity and modernity, history and prehistory, the once only and the once again, the new and the ever-same, the masses and the city, the *flâneur* and the crowd, the individual and community, “in order to build up a constellation of interrelated dimensions of modernity” (Frisby 1996: 18). And if antinomies are dissolved yet also retained in dialectical images (or allegorical *Aufhebung*), the antropaic image also turns pessimism political with the eye on awakening: In order to “organize pessimism,” it is necessary “to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images” (Benjamin 1986: 191; qtd. in Abbas 1989: 53). The destruction of organic appearance through allegory lies at the heart of the “dialectical images”, and in the mechanical image turned political; this then the “antithetical” or antinomical contents of the following section.

Part Two

Theory and praxis: images

1. Dialectical images

Benjamin's thinking *in toto*, however much part of the "specifically Jewish tradition of privileging language over images" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 2), tended toward the image, the emblem, the figurative. His observation of Baudelaire "that he was ever prepared to 'place the image in the service of thought' - can be said about himself too" (Abbas 1989: 46). His early theological *Sprachtheorie* carried the idea of (the politics of) images implicit within itself, even though the defining concept of the "expressionless" had roots in the crucial Judaic *Bilderverbot* — "Du sollst dir kein Bildnis noch irgendein Gleichnis machen, weder von dem, was oben im Himmel, noch von dem, was unten auf Erden, noch von dem, was im Wasser unter der Erde ist" (2. Mose 20,4; qtd. in Stoessel 1983: 159). Menninghaus writes that:

Benjamin nun hat dieses Gebot in doppelter Weise aktualisiert: er hat es außer auf Gott und Moralität auch auf vieles andere, "was auf Erden ist", bezogen — insbesondere auf die Kunst, die Sprache, den menschlichen Körper sowie Phantasie und Farbe —, und er hat es als ein Gebot nicht nur des Respekts vor der Göttlichkeit, sondern ebenso der aktiven Herstellung von Bilderlosigkeit, ja als die Handlung der Unterbrechung ästhetischer Phenomenalität reformuliert (Menninghaus 1992: 170).

Bilderlosigkeit in this sense signifies a profound aversion from a human, phenomenological personification of things, of God (against, for example, Buber's earlier idea of Judaism as a personal experience, and his call for the political orientation of

language for propaganda). And yet the body, the *physis* is of central concern. As put forward in his Goethe essay, Benjamin's theory of the expressionless as the interruption of the false appearance of beauty results from an anti-subjective direction in which "beauty" is mortified in order to reveal the objective, eternal, inner life source or truth content immanent within or, perceived through, the phenomenon. Following, but fundamentally reorientating Kant and Hegel's transcendental aesthetic of the *Erhabenen*, Benjamin sought to reveal the ephemeral in the eternal idea or, the unsayable, the *Bilderlos*. In other words, Benjamin's "images" were of the imageless, saying the unsaid, expressing the expressionless, representing the non-representable (an idea recurring in variations in Levinas, Derrida, Barthes, de Man, and Lyotard¹⁰⁹).

And yet, the 1930's saw Benjamin highly critical "of the German bourgeois-intellectual evolution — namely, that in Germany 'the metaphysical and poetic upward valuation of the incommunicable' (a function of the antinomies of industrial capitalist society) had prepared the physical terrain favorable to the expansion of Nazism" (Klossowski 1988: 368). Benjamin's attempted move away from "esoterism" to a more exoteric strategy was rooted in a critique of a certain type of "pre-fascist aestheticism" which Benjamin had already noticed in, for instance, the Goethe cult in the George Circle. Moreover, crucial to Benjamin's figurational writing (and his theory of mimesis), although rooted in the traditional canon of language (Benjamin emphasised in the *Trauerspiel* book that traditional philosophical concepts had to be retained, but renewed, rediscovered, redeemed), and following the figurative Baroque, is the idea of words which have a

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Van Reijen 1992: 20 on the concept of the non-representable in Lyotard: "In the aspect of the non-representable Lyotard sees the indication that we cannot grasp the ultimate grounds of the world and language. But just as it remains the task of postmodern art to represent the unrepresentable, it remains the obligation of philosophy to refer to truth, even if its is only possible 'ex negativo' as 'listening to silence'". In this context one could also add Scholem's notion of the 'nothingness of revelation' in reference to Kafka who "represents the world of revelation seen from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness" (Scholem 1989: 126): "a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak" (Scholem 1982: 142). Of course, when he adds that "This is obviously a borderline case in the religious sense, and whether it can really come to pass is a very dubious point" the precariousness of Benjamin's notion of the mystical, magical, material revelation of the unsayable truth makes itself known, but also its validity. Benjamin wrote that stunningly "Kafka's Sirens are silent; they have an even more

“passion for the organic”¹¹⁰ — not, he explicated, of the external appearance of nature but its secret *intérieur*, “such words refer not so much to the external form of the organic as to its mysterious interior” (Benjamin 1972: 384; translated in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 121). Hence the recurrent dialectical image in Benjamin’s writing: the interior of the historical things as the face of the exterior, the body of language. The paradoxes of language and images — the seeming paradox of the initial incongruousness between early Benjamin’s fundamentally nonpolitical and esoteric orientation of language and the later political re-orientation of exoteric images (also signified by the ambiguity toward the concepts of “aura”, “magic”, and “mystery” in Benjamin’s work) — is tellingly dissolved but also retained in Stoessel’s observation “daß Benjamin, auch in den Reproduktionsthesen noch dem ‘Bilderverbot’ getreu, Atget’s menschenleere Bilder rühmt” (Stoessel 1983: 160).

For in true allegorical spirit¹¹¹ Benjamin sought to interrupt and extinguish the appearance of things with a non-appearance (*Scheinlosigkeit*), life with death, the organic with the inorganic, movement with rigor mortis (*Erstarren*), a thesis with an antithesis. In the same way that transient life comes to a standstill on the Baroque stage, Benjamin freezes the continuum of life as signified by the body with the image of the corpse — figuratively, dialectically: in order to make manifest all the more the body *through* the thing. If Benjamin wrote to Adorno that “I am interested not in people, but only in things” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 250)¹¹² he was speaking of the dialectical and allegorical turn-

terrible weapon than their song [...] their silence”. Silence can be deafening; and “He who listens hard doesn’t see” (Benjamin 1992a: 141 & 114).

¹¹⁰Benjamin quotes Schiebel who “[attributes] the reception of words, as it were, to the sense of taste” (Benjamin qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 120).

¹¹¹Geyer-Ryan argues, however, that Benjamin’s *Sprachtheorie* does not proceed “from the melancholic ‘allegorical intention’ which only reveals castration in every act of speech” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 121).

¹¹² An idea which some feminists, not without justification, have found disturbing — in the context of Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* where he seems to refer to prostitutes not as women but as things; however, as Buck-Morss (1986: 119) has pointed out, “It was not Benjamin’s politics to employ feminism as an analytical frame”, rather, the key lay in Benjamin being interested in *prostitution* as a capitalist phenomenon *in decline* like the disappearance of the flaneur; Benjamin fixed his attention on the reified thing that was the appearance of the whore on the city street, “as a dialectical image she is ‘seller and commodity in one’”, “the modern advertisement demonstrates [...] how much the attraction of woman and commodity can fuse together”; that prostitution is according to Benjamin “coupled with ‘gambling’ as a manifestation of the alienation of erotic desire (in the man) when it surrenders itself to fate”. The whore *as dialectical image*, being both commodity and seller is, of course, image of “all wage-labourers under capital” (Buck-Morss 1986: 121). Benjamin’s inspiration lies in showing the thing-like appearance of these phenomena, the one in the other, to show its reified second-nature with the aim of turning the reification around, inside-out, in this way hoping to introduce a broad critique of the chthonic “appeal of

about, in the sense of a restorative negation as Adorno noted, by which reified life may be redeemed through its *Abbild*¹¹³ in the repetition or doubling of the “dialectical image” (in the *Zweideutigkeit* of the singular) the mournful transience of historical continuum, the false totality of appearance, is interrupted *momentarily* in an image of a fulfilled present, through a remembering strongly opposed to the oblivion of forgetting. Geyer-Ryan (1994: 121) writes astutely that “This is no remembrance (*Er-‘innerung’*) of things, but rather remembrance (*‘Erinnerung’*) through things”. In this way conflicts, contradictions and opposites work wonders, so to speak.

Benjamin sought to illuminate the fluctuations between myth and modernity, abstraction and materiality, the noumena and the phenomena, the soma and the phantasm, the esoteric and the exoteric, the new and the always-the-same (*Immergleiche*) — in “search for the moulds of objects which have shaped people in the same way that a baking tin forms cakes”. “The inner space, this dimension between soma and phantasm, is firstly created by objects in the same way as the sense of space in a room is first evoked by its furniture” — dialectically, *historically* speaking. For although “Benjamin states explicitly that his cultural theories are resummptions of his childhood experiences” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 121 & 122), these experiences, as Buck-Morss (1986: 134) has shown, have a historical index redolent of a collective unconsciousness. Through the way of the smells and sounds

the commodity” per se, its “look”. For Benjamin the hooker was a cipher, a *representation* of a culture dominated by power and the market; in this way we are all prostitutes, “things and objects before culture” (Benjamin qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 110). In following Baudelaire’s allegorisation of the prostitute (though Baudelaire identified with the whore, an *Einführung* Benjamin had little time for), however, Benjamin also in the end succumbed to a limited male point of view, even if he hailed revolutionary female figures such as Clarie Démar. Writes Buck-Morss (1986: 124) wryly: “Ultimately, perhaps, in the eyes of men whose erotic desire is distorted by commodity reification, potentially castrating women (like reptiles and other threats of nature) are safest under glass”. Still, following Adorno’s suggestion that “Kierkegaard’s errors were expressions of ‘unintentional’ historical truth” (Buck-Morss 1977: 116), and following Benjamin’s own idea of a fragmentary and incomplete historical text which is to be renewed in terms of its immanent truth in the re-reading, it is precisely this “failure” or limitation of Benjamin’s which reveals, dialectically, a patriarchal fetishistic tendency immanent in the culture industry and (bourgeois) modernism proper - as a historical “truth”, so to speak. Writes Geyer-Ryan (1994: 111): “All people are ultimately commodities on the market, but for women this is double so: they are commodities on the labour market and on the sexual market. The very existence of a pictorial space in which the female body is made the object of commodity allegorization is itself a sign of patriarchal power”.

¹¹³Benjamin precursored Guy Debord’s formulation of the image as the “final form of commodity reification” (qtd. in Jameson 1995: 236), Benjamin saw it fundamentally in (the look of) advertising, foreseeing the state of the media in late capitalism, both in its negative and positive implications, as a

of childhood, as evoked by objects, a cultural “unity” is brought to the surface. As Benjamin put it in his “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede”: “As the salvation of phenomena takes place by means of idea, so too does the presentation of ideas through the medium of empirical means. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively by adjoining concrete elements to the concepts: as the configuration of these elements”. As mentioned before, through the conceptualisation of the critical intellect, which brings the phenomena to the ideas, two things are brought about at a single stroke: “the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas” (Benjamin 1977b: 34; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 122). A determining feature, neither ascetical, nor positivistically magical as Adorno thought, of Benjamin’s dialectic between image and word, idea and body, and the unwritten version of the written history text.

Partly because of his hesitation to resolve extreme positions in any final way — closed down in a false consciousness or bad Hegelian synthesis, wrapped up in the conceptual generalisation of rationalist system-building, the construction of which means a false and abstract totality — and with the aim of “avoiding ‘vulgar’ Marxist reductionism on the one hand and pseudo-Marxist idealism on the other hand” (Buck-Morss 1977: 102), insisting instead, like Kracauer, “that only from its extremes can reality be grasped” (Frisby 1992: 15). These are the reasons for the elusive ambiguities in Benjamin’s work (and in his life). It is from such ambiguities, seen as extreme topoi in a constellation, that Benjamin himself thought a work — an enshrouded text, a crypticism — may be illumined by way of an engineered inner tension. Proceeding from this tension (*Spannung*) Benjamin devised his concept of “dialectical images”, also known as *Dialektik im Stillstand*, a method (reaching its apotheosis in the prismatic fragmentary *Passagenwerk*) geared toward juxtaposing the familiar objects or phenomena of the everyday¹¹⁴ in uncanny¹¹⁵ constellations, in order to re-discover (in the sense of allegorical redemption) the repressed in the everyday, in the oblivion that is the continuum of history, the always-the same, to set sails in another direction. Buck-Morss (1977: 106) writes:

development, nevertheless, which could not be avoided, only critically transformed (as in Brecht’s notion of *Umwalzung*, for example), re-utilised, seen through, so to speak.

¹¹⁴The minutae; *Singularität* contra false aesthetical totality (Menninghaus 1992: 172-173).

In 1930 Benjamin wrote that what distinguished the Enlightenment thinker from the dialectical materialist was that the latter not only pointed out contradictions (as Kant had), but was also able to show the point at which thesis and antithesis converged. “Dialectical images” were meant to illuminate that point. Benjamin’s images functioned like switches, arresting the fleeting phenomena and starting thought in motion or, alternately, shocking thought to a standstill and setting the reified objects in motion by causing them to lose their second-nature familiarity.

The things of the everyday life as dialectical images, like Adorno’s “historical images” (*geschichtliche Bilder*) are constructed out of contradictions like puzzles, parables, *Vexierbilder*: they need to be deciphered. That is, in the historical dialectical images or picture puzzles “the contradictions are unravelled; they are not resolved” (Buck-Morss 1977: 101). The riddle of the dialectical image has a dual function to disturb and analyse: in the process of its becoming apparent as one thing it turns into its opposite, thereby forestalling closure, intervening the risk of being detained by the human being who makes the dialectical image in the first place. Adorno notes in his “Die Aktualität der Philosophie”:

These images are not simply self-given. They do not lie organically ready in history; no gaze [*Schau*] and no intuition [both Husserlian terms, GTS] are required to become aware of them; they are not magically sent by the gods to be taken in and venerated. Rather, they must be produced by human beings (qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 102-103).

Dialectical images are human made and yet they are *essentially* objective, they actually existed (Buck-Morss 1977: 102). In the constellation of the dialectical image, however, the phenomena turn into hieroglyphs, the phenomena are mimetically transformed into names, making the dialectical image itself an idea: “riddles whose qualitative elements, juxtaposed, were the concepts translated into picture form” (Buck-Morss 1977: 102). However, re-reading his own earlier epistemological theory of ideas, and in the vein of the paradoxical allegorical interruption of the false claim to totality in the symbol, as personified in Goethe’s idea of the symbol as a *Göttersymbol* united in self-possession and

¹¹⁵*Unheimlich* - and writes Freud, “*unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, home-like, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ is the mark of repression” (qtd. in Hansen 1987: 214).

self-completion, in Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image the idea is *ironically* and *subversively* turned around into the minute thing, the detail¹¹⁶ — by way of the rebus (or *Umkehrbild*) where word and figure confront each other in a dialectical tension field, a double helix attaining pregnancy in a configuration (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 122).

Benjamin (1977, 5: 3) writes with irony, "daß das Ewige jedenfalls eher eine Rüsche am Kleid ist als eine Idee" (qtd. in Tiedemann 1973: 159) and that irony is "the most European of all accomplishments" (Benjamin 1986: 73). Irony is viewed as "the supreme theoretical concept and value of traditional modernism and the very locus of the notion of self-consciousness and the reflexive" (Jameson 1995: 258-259)¹¹⁷ and "that words can be used to signify their opposites is in itself a fundamentally allegorical perception" (Owens 1996: 1057); when the things turn allegorical, they can mean absolutely anything else. The irony of mortifying the false claim of truth in the benign symbol with allegory as a way to the essence, the idea, toward sublime redemption; seeing the whole through the fragment.

The dialectical rebus, like the allegorical text within a text, Baroque play within a play, emblematic image within an image, turns on a plurality of tales, a double displacement, underlined and unified in the multiplicity of view-points that is the "truth" of history (Mehlman 1993: 11). In the form of dialectical images it is found in language in two ways: "the same concept can describe two socially remote realities; or, the same reality can be described by the most antithetical linguistic terms" (Buck-Morss 1977: 108). Turning the idea into an image or emblem¹¹⁸ of a phenomenon dialectically, allegorically, linguistically, means interrupting the traditional approach toward both: in the sense of a philosophy of logic in the former which is also symptom and cause of the "always-the-same" characteristic of the latter. Perpetually forestalling closure or self-completion the rebuses remain unfinished, in need of an informed critical reading and interpretation to the extent that they "ring in the Ash Wednesday of the scripturo-verbal carnival". Mehlman

¹¹⁶And Aby Warburg noted that "der Liebe Gott im Detail wohnt" (Scholem 1968: 137); and Roland Barthes notes that "There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practises enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean" (Barthes 1992: 3).

¹¹⁷And, of course, irony can be said to be the divining rod of postmodernism.

¹¹⁸Seeing the large in the small, "im kleinsten Niederschriften ein Ganzes zu geben" (Scholem 1968: 138).

astutely notes that Benjamin (as did Adorno with him) was following Freud's behest "that it was the dreamwork, rather than any latent meaning, which constituted the dream's 'essence'" (Mehlman 1993: 6); as in Kafka it is the *gestus* that counts,¹¹⁹ the object, the image, the text, the riddle.

The dialectical image, then, as rebus, is explosively situated in and of the everyday, the common, the un-seen: its dialectical aim being the sudden surprises (*Überraschungen*) experienced when the common turns foreign. For "Benjamin was counting on the explosive force of dialectical images to jolt people out of their dreaming state" (Buck-Morss 1977: 109). The surprise, unintentional discovery or unravelling of the rebus or *Vexierbild* occurred in a split-second (but, claims Benjamin and Adorno, not intuitively, intentionally, immediately).¹²⁰ The dialectical illumination appeared in an instant, only to disappear again — like the non-sensuous similarities discussed in the context of astrology and the reading of interstellar constellations, in Benjamin's essay on mimesis. He writes:

Die Wahrnehmung von Ähnlichkeiten nämlich ist an ein Aufblitzen gebunden. Sie huscht vorbei, ist vielleicht wiederzugewinnen, aber kann nicht eigentlich wie andere Wahrnehmungen festgehalten werden (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 206; Opitz 1992: 175).

¹¹⁹ See Benjamin 1992: 117-118.

¹²⁰ In this context one may make an interesting comparison between the *Vexierbild* and the contemporary *Magic Eye 3D* optical illusion cards, on which are written these directions to the "user": "Hold this postcard *right up to your nose* and *very very slowly* pull the postcard away from your face. Look *through* the image. Try not to blink and a 3D illusion will magically appear". Benjamin (1986: 40) himself wrote that picture postcards are like maps through which one could see one's whole life, concentrated, that looking at a picture postcard of a foreign destination, more than filling the (child) viewer with that peculiar longing which determines an outward image, actually transports the person to that other place (Benjamin 1986: 40-41); and he wrote in *Einbahnstraße* that poststamps "sind die Visitenkarten, die die großen Straaten in der Kinderstube abgeben": "Als Gulliver bereist das Kind Land und Volk seiner Briefmarken. Erdkunde und Geschichte der Liliputaner, die ganze Wissenschaft des kleinen Volks mit allen ihren zahlen und Namen wird ihm Schläfe eingegeben. Es nimmt an ihren Geschäften teil, wohnt ihren purpurnen Volksversammlungen bei, sieht dem Stapellauf ihrer Schiffchen zu und feiert mit ihren gekrönten Häuptern, die hinter Hecke thronen, Jubiläen" (Benjamin 1969: 78). See also Mehlman's brilliant dissection of Benjamin's radiocript *Briefmarkenschwindel* (1993: 15-22). He makes note of Benjamin's comparison of the collector of postmarks to a Kabbalist: "The pursuer of postmarks must possess like a detective information on the most notorious post offices, like an archeologist the art of reconstructing the torsos of the most foreign place-names, and like a kabbalist an inventory of dates for an entire century" (Benjamin 1979: 92; qtd. in Mehlman 1993: 27). Again the idea of the arranging and re-arranging of the letters of the alphabet into patterns closely related to the magical idea of picture puzzles.

From which follows:

Das dialektische Bild ist ein aufblitzendes. So, als ein im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit aufblitzendes Bild, ist das des gewesenen [...] festzuhalten (Benjamin 1977, 1.2: 682; Opitz 1992: 174).

The dialectical image is a flash of ball lightning (*ein Kugelblitz*) that traverses the whole horizon of the past (Benjamin qtd. in Mehlman 1993: 104).

And:

It is not the case that the past sheds its light on the present or the present its light on the past, but the image is that in which, what has been, enters into a constellation with the 'Now' [*Jetzt*] in a sudden flash. In other words: the image is dialectics at a standstill [...] The image read, i.e. the image in the 'Now' of the potential realization, is most clearly marked by that critical and dangerous moment, the basis of all reading (Benjamin 1977, 5: 571; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 13).

This serves to emphasise Benjamin's idea of the critical historical grounding of the dialectical images. That is, in their affinity with Freud's conception of the dreamwork read in the context of the collective unconscious, and in their role as collective wish-symbols (*Wunschbilder*) which refer dialectically to an *Urgeschichte*, the mythic nature and history underlying the modern, they nevertheless retain within their collective *Bildphantasie* (Adorno's "exact fantasy" as opposed to Husserl's fantasy of the intentional imagination) a crucial historical index, a *Zeitkern* as opposed to the ahistorical nature of Jung's archetypal images rooted in a theory of intuitive immediacy. There is a specificity to the former lacking in the latter: "Nur dialektische Bilder sind echt geschichtliche, d. h. nicht archaische Bilder" (Benjamin 1982, 5.1: 578; Opitz 1992: 174). Benjamin writes:

der historische Index der Bilder sagt [...] nicht nur, daß sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem, daß sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen. Und zwar ist dieses zur Lesbarkeit Gelangen ein bestimmter kritischer Punkt in ihrem Innern. Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmter Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen (Benjamin 1977, 5: 3; qtd. in Tiedemann 1973: 158-158).

In this sense Benjamin develops a critical theory of reading and writing history, a dialectic between the realisation on the one hand that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 1992: 247; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 5), and on the other hand, the deft observation “that our capacity to recognize these proleptic images is itself historically conditioned, that it is the changing horizon of the present which allows hitherto mute works from the past to speak, previously cryptic texts to become legible, for the first time” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 5). In other words, images anticipate the present which can understand them; and yet, it is an ethically informed question whether this present does so or not. Dialectical images capture this dichotomy.

The dialectical images are represented in a tension field between the past and the present, history and utopia, dream and awakening, they are (particularly in Benjamin’s re-presentation of them in the *Passagenwerk*) ambiguous: “Zweideutigkeit ist die bildliche Erscheinung der Dialektik, das Gesetz der Dialektik im Stillstand. Dieser Stillstand ist Utopie und das dialektische Bild also Traumbild” (Benjamin 1955: 418; qtd. in Tiedemann 1973” 158). As dreams, the dialectical images “become the repositories of the utopian visions of mankind” (Wolin 1982: 127).¹²¹ Furthermore, as Benjamin states, It is a critical moment in which the cross-current dialectical image is read, a time of crisis (which the 1930s were in fact, a time in which Benjamin not only contemplated suicide but also laid down some key climactic thoughts on the philosophy of history), a moment of danger (*gefährliche Moments*) which in fact underlies all reading (Benjamin 1982, 5.2: 578; Opitz 1992: 174). Benjamin writes in his *Thesen* that to articulate the past “means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin 1992: 147). And it is in the critical moment of threat or danger when the “naked” actuality of the dialectical image is revealed to “the attentive observer” (Goethe qtd. in Buck-Morss 1986: 104), the vigilant and critically informed reader who knows that “the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 1992: 247)¹²² in a flash of recognition which renews or rejuvenates both the

¹²¹ The dream as dialectical image refers to awakening in reality.

¹²² Benjamin also makes reference somewhere to the person who in the moment of death sees his entire life flash by in an instant, in an image.

image and its receivers — the way the phenomena were to be renewed in the representation of the idea as put forward in the earlier “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede”. In this way, in the terms of Benjamin’s earlier *Sprachtheorie*, the original would be renewed time and again through the revelation of the pure word or name (Moses 1992: 184). Not a return to an *Ursprung*, or its Kantian and Husserlian immediate intuitive possession; but, as laid out in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book, the “truth” of history made present in its dialectical material becoming and disappearance (*Untergang*). As Benjamin (1992a: 207) wrote in the context of Proust: “letting the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration in which things that normally just fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash called rejuvenation”. Rejuvenation here is Blanqui orientated, read also in the gnostic and antinomian tradition of destruction or transgression as procreative, liberating, redemptive.

That the dialectical images are wish-images, dream-images, does not indicate a psychological reading of history, to the contrary:

the dialectical image was meant objectively, not psychologically: the representation of the modern as the new, the already past, and the ever-identical [*Immergleiche*] in one, was to be the central philosophical theme and the central dialectical image (Adorno qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 107).

Benjamin insisted on the historical index of dream-images, an integral historical moment dense with meaning (Hansen 1987: 194-195). The dream-image is to be analysed in order to release its inner historical *Zeitkern*. Benjamin (1977, 5: 577) writes that “the historical index of the images not only tells us that they belong to a certain time, above all it tells us that only at a certain time do they become readable” (qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 13). The informed present is to decipher the proleptic image in order to reveal the dream the modern city is in, a mythological dream, the *Urlandschaft* underlying twentieth-century capitalism and mass psychology (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 13); to show the archaic immanent in the present; and to reveal through the dream-image as *Zauberwort* the mystery underlying the everyday — dialectically. Writes Geyer-Ryan (1994: 12):

Dream is the juncture of the imagery of physical concreteness and exuberant materialism with the structures of desire. But this dream-world is

furnished by objects which in capitalism are necessarily commodities, and consequently the structures of desire are made up of desire and fear (*Angst*) at once. In contrast, awakening is the moment where the spell or illusion of reconciling a desire for fulfillment with a structure of exploitation and alienation can be broken. In this dream, under the spell of capitalism, desire and objects of fulfillment are authentic and distorted at the same time.

The dream-image or wish-symbol is to be “magically”¹²³ unravelled like a *Vexierbild* and its inner historical content released sharply into the immediate objective present; in a sudden flash of profane illumination — that is, a collective, not merely subjective; a sensual, not merely abstract - awakening in and of the present. Writes Buck-Morss (1986: 100): “This method created ‘dialectical images’ in which the old-fashioned, undesirable, suddenly appeared current, or the new, desired, appeared as a repetition of the same”. There was, writes Buck-Morss, revolutionary potential in this double vision: “The double exposure of past and present is presented here as a riddle, in which knowledge of the past doesn’t historicize present truth, but crystalizes it. The unravelling of this riddle would place Benjamin’s readers within an image-sphere where revolutionary ‘awakening’ was possible” (Buck-Morss 1986: 109). The reading as deciphering of the picture puzzle was therefore a consciousness-raising process.¹²⁴

“The dialectical image...is the *Urphänomen* of history” (Benjamin 1982, 5.1: 592; Buck-Morss 1977: 104).¹²⁵ It is a Goethian archetype except fundamentally infused with a (Judaic) historical index (Buck-Morss 1977: 104); “Against the compensatory, ahistorical ‘archaic’ images of Jung or Klages, he [Benjamin] treated the fragmentary perceptions which bombarded the city-dweller as historical clues” (Buck-Morss 1986: 132). Furthermore, it is precisely this crucial aspect of its historical “being”, its historical *Sache* that distinguishes it from the phenomenological “essences”. Benjamin writes that “Heidegger searches in vain to save history for phenomenology abstractly, through

¹²³ Adorno was to complain that the dialectical images of Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* were situated “on the crossroads of magic and positivism”; but as Buck-Morss (1986: 109) notes, this was because they were meant to be only half the text, the other half being the reader: “The reader of Benjamin’s generation was to provide the other half from the fleeting images that appeared, isolated from history, in his or her lived experience”. In the reading, a historical *Erfahrung* would be triggered in the spirit of a *montage*, through which the past is made present.

¹²⁴ See Habermas’ (1988: 91-128) essay on consciousness-raising or rescuing critique.

¹²⁵ *Urphänomen*: “specimen of a corpus whose theory it seems already to be” (Mehlman 1993: 108, note no. 227).

historicity” (Benjamin 1982, 5.1: 578; Buck-Morss 1977: 105). Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image, then, that which is negated and preserved at the same time (Buck-Morss 1977: 104), refers to the material *Ur*-forms of modern society, the debris or waste-products of history — and the forgotten losers and victims of history of whom Benjamin wrote in the context of Kafka’s assistants: “It is for them and their kind, the unfinished and the bunglers, that there is hope” (Benjamin 1992: 113) — through which an historical awakening, an interruption of the ultimately oppressive illusion of life, can be initiated.

In the forgotten or outdated, which the historian like the ragpicker collects, lies the desire for “an alternative, counterfactual history” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 20-21), dialectically in terms of engrammatic images or traces. That is how the allegorist/collector/historian reads these things:¹²⁶ for the historian in Benjamin’s sense of the word, like the allegorical collector “reassembles his fragments¹²⁷ and creates a new meaning” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 21). In these “new images”, the present connects with a past hitherto thought to be obsolete. Moreover, as true experience or *Erfahrung* for Benjamin is a traditional structure (albeit in the subversive sense), he underlines the historical index of such personal experience: “For Benjamin biographical memory and historical memory are analogous procedures, and one cannot exist without the other” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 16). It is a fragile epistemological (dis-)connection which links that aura of the past to the present, myth in the new, the everyday in the symbolic; and the recognition of such disparate linking which Benjamin labels as “profane illumination” is often fleeting. As such it may be superlatively achieved by children: “The task of childhood: to bring the new world into the realm of the symbolic. The child can do what an adult is totally incapable of doing: recognize the new once again” (Benjamin 1977, 5: 493; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 16). Nevertheless, in terms of “profane illumination” such new images for reactivating memory crucial to true experience may be generated unintentionally artificially through different ways of seeing and reading — a disorientated or estranged vision akin to getting

¹²⁶Geyer-Ryan notes: “If we recall that the German word for ‘to read’ is *lesen*, which is directly related to the Latin word *legere*, meaning ‘to collect’, we can see the close connection between textual reception/production and the collecting of vanishing items”.

¹²⁷Geyer-Ryan (1994: 23) writes: “on the one hand, the relics of an objectively scattered totality; and on the other, the fragments which the historian blasts out of what appears to be a coherent totality of historical meaning”.

lost in the city, in the text, in thinking, getting lost in altered states of consciousness for which drugs may serve as introduction, but which may best be epistemologically developed and expanded through profane practise. Geyer-Ryan (1994: 17) elucidates:

In the epistemological process correspondences are discovered between objects which hitherto had appeared unconnected. Benjamin's key witnesses on this point are Baudelaire, Proust, Aragon and Breton's *Nadja*. We develop these faculties only because nature itself is full of correspondences. Therefore the Surrealists, for instance, gave accounts of everyday life in the confidence that its aesthetic character made any artistic procedure superfluous. *Le hasard objectif* ('objectified chance') is an aesthetic feature of reality. It is only because correspondences exist between past and present that we can bring the two together, both on the personal biographical level and on the communal plane of history. Only in this way can true experience, that is, the investment of otherwise inert and isolated fragments with meaning, be achieved. It is precisely at this stage that Benjamin brings the philogenetic and the ontogenetic to the point of conflation. For authentic experience is always the salvaging of something in danger of being forgotten or repressed: the ever-vanishing traces of the historically defeated who did not write his[-]tory, or the engrams of the unconscious described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and by Proust as the content of the *memoire involontaire*; especially when the chances of finding the right mimetic object for reactivating those fading traces are so slight and fleeting.

Benjamin saw such traces in the dialectical images of the past and the everyday, in "the coincidence of private and collective experience" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 19). In the dialectical image, as in Baroque drama, "the temporal motion of events is caught up in a 3-dimensional picture and analysed" (Buck-Morss 1977: 102). The dialectical images are "the distracting chains of the images which constitute urban perception" functioning "as dream images" (Buck-Morss 1986: 132). "A temporal map is imposed upon the spatial one" whereby a social experience triggers an individual experience, and vice versa: not comingling but rather the filling out of one setting the other in sharper relief (Buck-Morss 1986: 132 & 136). But also a reading which *spatialises* time and history, the temporal concept transformed into a spatial one (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 13). An avant-gardist reading contra a classical (shorthand for the artist creating as if organically or symbolically) reading: "The classicist tries to cover the fact that his product is constructed, and wants to create a second nature. The avant-gardist exposes the materiality and technicality of his

work [putting the work's viscera, as it were, on display; turning the inside out, GTS], thus stressing its character as artefact" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 22). An avant-gardist reading in the tradition of allegory which brings an end to the *bourgeois* notion of the linearity of time, of history as progress. Geyer-Ryan (1994: 22) writes:

Marx's analysis of capitalism had established on a theoretical level the proposition that capitalism necessarily produces the forces of its own destruction. But what he did not say was whether those counter-forces would inevitably triumph before capitalism had the chance to turn its own particular collapse into a universal catastrophe. It was on just such an assumption of inevitable triumph, however, that the social-democratic theory rested: the unconsidered supposition that the decline of capitalism would mean the ineluctable progress of socialism. This in turn made it possible to evolve the theory of the peaceful, because automatic, transformation of capitalism into socialism; a theory designed (not necessarily consciously) to still the desire to fight actively against bourgeois imperialism.

This, then, as in his theory of allegory, is Benjamin's avant-gardist reading of history as catastrophe, as decay, in need of explosion and salvation. True history — and Benjamin said that "history is a text of images" (qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 23) — needed a revolutionary and dialectical reading, one which had the hitherto suppressed collective body in mind. In this way, the temporal map imposed upon the spatial or topographical one pivots on a redemptive dialectic through which the individual dream attains historical significance in the collective sense of the word: "They [the dialectical images] become the means through which the isolation of both individuals and generations is overcome" (Buck-Morss 1986: 133). The interpretation of the isolated images¹²⁸ therefore, constitute a historical remembering. They have frozen within them the potential actualisation — in the sensual or physical specification or spacialisation — of the unconscious images of the individual in the collective consciousness, in the collective reading.¹²⁹ This remembering, contra collective amnesia, lies at the heart of authentic experience, locked up or frozen in

¹²⁸Besides its antagonism toward the "appearance" of "lebendiger" beauty, Benjamin's (allegorical) theory of the "Erhabene" as a critique of "beauty", also has the further meaning of "Vereinzelnung": isolation, particularity, singularity, difference and extremity against the ideological myth or false appearance of "totality" (Menninghaus 1992: 172).

¹²⁹"Images enter the psyche of the individual, but they are collectively perceived by the mass of passers-by" (Buck-Morss 1986: 133).

the particular, the engramatic, in the monadic material, the fragments at hand; in the individual work of art which like a monad “has no window, but which embodies in itself the miniature of the whole” (Benjamin 1977, 3: 51; qtd. in Frisby 1986: 215). Formally in the (allegorical) plan of the artwork’s conception, lies a historical “truth”, a powerful insight:

that the power of historical awakening, its political strength as a motivation for present action, is the same, whether one is remembering one’s own life or a collective life never experienced directly. [Benjamin] conceived of the past on both levels as a “dream-state,” and historical recollection which allowed for its interpretation as “awakening” (Frisby 1996: 215).

This historical awakening triggered through the juxtaposition of dialectical images in a new constellation, of course recalls Benjamin’s earlier theory of “ideas” and “monads”. However, as Wolin (1982:126) points out:

both versions of the theory prove to be authentically materialistic, insofar as each displays, above all, a healthy philosophical respect for the concrete specificity of the phenomenon under investigation. The major difference between the two renditions of the theory is that the later form abjures reference to the traditions of Western metaphysics and instead draws its inspiration from concrete aspects of contemporary social life. Nevertheless, the fundamental intention of both “idealist” and “materialist” versions of the theory is identical: both attempt to deduce an image of transcendence while remaining wholly *within* the boundaries of the empirical world of experience. The ultimate concern of both approaches is the *redemption* of phenomena from the profane continuum of historical existence and their transformation into images of fulfillment or *now-time*.

From the early Kabbalah-inspired, theological *Sprachtheorie* to the theory of philosophical constellations of ideas and monads in Benjamin’s theory of allegory to the later constellations of dialectical images: Benjamin’s notion of the reading of a historical truth as a reading of fragmentary *Vexierbilder* retains its vexatiousness. The rebus as representative of Benjamin’s philosophy, as the appropriate model for Benjamin’s thinking (following Adorno; Abbas 1987: 46) is unified, however, because of “its centrifugal direction, its effort to gain itself by relinquishing itself to the manifold” (Adorno: 1988: 5). In the historical context allegory, the rebus or the picture puzzle as monad takes on the

formal principle of a montage in which seemingly disparate parts or fragments are juxtaposed together in uncanny combinations. The reason being a formal construction which by virtue of its dialectical tension will jolt the reader awake, profanely illuminating the construction's inner truth, its unified historical content in a flash; "The montage-like approach to theory of knowledge, a theoretically informed crystallization of 'material elements', was the conceptual strategy that would overcome the pitfalls of the traditional discursive, correspondence theory of truth — *adequatio intellectus et rei*" (Wolin 1993: 173).¹³⁰ The textual montage allegorically reconfigures the modern city: analogous to the way that Paris is a miniature of the world to the surrealists, the montage is a miniature of the city. And if "lesen nun ist der Versuch, hinter den verborgenen Sinn des Geschriebenen zu gelangen" (Opitz 1992: 167), "Geschriebenes ist wie ein Stadt, zu der die Worte tausend Tore sind" (Benjamin qtd. in Opitz 1992: 181). Benjamin develops a new hermeneutics of reading and writing history which, though rooted in the avant-garde disruptive historiography, is in stark opposition to "the tendentially ahistorical mythologization of Paris in avant-garde writing" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 12): the idea of montage for Benjamin is, as Bloch (1988: 341) notes, "a *Realmontage*, that is, a bringing together — but a *real* bringing together — of things that were far removed from each other superficially".

Regarding reality in history: Benjamin's intention, as elucidated in the *Passagenwerk*, and as lucidly pointed out by Helga Geyer-Ryan, was to inject the sensually concrete into the abstract (language of Marxism), "Benjamin's fundamental violation of taboos consists of reintroducing images, both as object-representation and as tropes into the very territory of the logos: the written language. It is the infusion of what has been added to the masculine, with the feminine" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 119); infusing history with sensual images¹³¹ of mythology (*Bilderschrift*): "to carry the montage principle over into history. That is, to build up the large structures out of the smallest,

¹³⁰The theory of knowledge as represented in a montage of "citations" links Benjamin's earlier *Trauerspiel* book to his later Arcades project. Writes Benjamin to Scholem (1989: 159) in 1935: "Whereas the Baroque book mobilized its own theory of knowledge, this will be the case for 'Arcades' at least to the same extent, though," he continues "I can foresee neither whether it will find a form of representation of its own, nor to what extent I may succeed in such a representation".

precisely fashioned structural elements. Indeed to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small individual moment” (Benjamin 1977, 5: 575; qtd. in Frisby 1986: 215). Infusing abstract Marxist theory with sensory mythological images, in so doing the one turning the other on its head. Furthermore, the montage’s power to shock, to reveal truth in a flash, lies in its parts being historical fragments *cited out of context*, in the process renewing (in the vein of Proust’s consumptive involuntary remembrance as a process of *Verjungung*)¹³² the merely familiar by dis-placing it, re-membering it in a de-familiarised present context:

by wrenching elements of everyday life from their original contexts and rearranging them in a new constellation, Benjamin hoped to divert them of their familiarity and thereby stir the reader from a state of passivity into an active and critical posture (Wolin 1982: 124).

Displacement, of course, finds its *sui generis* theorisation in allegory, in the idea that the allegorist bestows new meaning onto meaningless things; hence its historical appropriateness.

This dialectical historical construction composed of historical images may be said to be *politically* sur-real in its un-consciousness raising; but it is a surreality initiated toward an awakening, a recognition of the phantasm of myth present in the modern, or better, a re-discovery (in the sense of anamnesis) of what lies hidden in the given. That is to say, by way of Benjamin’s idea of things (*Dinge*) which have the auratic power to look back at the viewer or reader¹³³ although in terms of allegory these things have lost “the capacity to communicate meaning” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 21), or, as in Ludwig Klages’s theory, the detritus of history carry the traces of their past-life like an aura (except that Benjamin’s topographically knowledgeable reading of this aura, as has been shown in the section on his critical theory of knowledge, is more historically specific, more in the tradition of Aby Warburg’s engrams than C. G. Jung’s archetypes, in opposition to regressive mythology). In the theory of allegory underlining the dialectical rebus, in “the

¹³¹As in “a sensuousness which was banished from theory and religion under the domination of Greek and Jewish thought” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 120).

¹³² See Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 320.

destruction of the organic artwork and its replacement by a form of art based on the montage principle” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 21), the montage constructed out of a re-orientation of Marxism and Surrealism, ruptures any linear reading, showing the irrationality underneath that which seems to be the real.¹³⁴

As Benjamin would have it, the Marxist re-orientated surreal montage of history¹³⁵ triggers a deeper understanding of the ideological illusion or appearance of the everyday, of the un-written history or Urhistory below the continuum of traditional historicism. E.T.A. Hoffmann’s dictum “to read what was never written” is the adage under which the dialectical images are joined together. Reading them now no longer means a subjective interpretation, but an objective political decipherment: it is a critical reading with a responsibility toward the past and present, an ethical idea which resurfaces in Adorno’s notion of the suffering body behind the (historical) text, and in Levinas’s situation of “the self in an attitude of obligation to the other” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 2).

Because in allegoresis these dialectical images (having a janus-face of thing and image, word and picture, a double text as in the emblem) are *mnemonic* in essence, the revolutionary or emancipatory potential for a utopian redemption of the oblivious or suppressed is made manifest. Benjamin introduces a double reading of history as a text of (linguistic) images. On the one hand “those images can be products of the imagination and they can be concrete objects, both not written in the strict sense of the word”. And on the other hand “there is the endeavour to read in a way which destroys the text in question as a written document of its own time” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 23). The past thus seen is filled

¹³³“To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (Benjamin 1992: 184).

¹³⁴ Geyer-Ryan (1994: 22) writes that the montage principle is characteristic of modernist texts in general. Moreover, “the montage principle as a mode of alternative historiography exactly reflects the decline of bourgeois history. Historicism and the theory of progress are both organic concepts of history. The different epochs, which ‘are all equal before God’, as the historicist Ranke put it, are seen as mature, fully developed totalities closed off against each other. The notion of progress underlies the concept of evolution, which is likewise based on the image of an organic body still developing towards its final mature state. But after the First World War the function of these concepts is concentrated exclusively on the affirmative aspect of ideological constructs. Objectively the history of the bourgeoisie has fallen apart into isolated fragments. The once totalizing force its signification as progressive, humane and ascendant over feudal society has turned openly into mechanisms of domination and exploitation at all costs. A whole mode of history has come to an end, and this is widely reflected in cultural production during the opening decades of the twentieth century.”

with emancipatory now-time (*Jetztzeit*), a crucial time, according to Benjamin, for the attainment of a non-arbitrary, non-relativist, non-totalitarian *Erfahrung* — a politically conscious experience theological in its redemptive implications.

2. Surrealism. A dialectic of intoxication

Wolin (1977: 126), following Adorno's and Tiedemann's findings (Cf. Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1018), notes that Benjamin's interest in Surrealism goes back to 1924, the year of Breton's first "Manifesto of Surrealism", and that Benjamin wrote his essay "Surrealism" in 1928, the same year his *Einbahnstraße* was published. Wolin writes that "the surrealist fascination with dream life was fully endorsed by Benjamin, and in his 1935 outline of the Arcades Project, he would raise this obsession with the emancipatory potential embodied in dreams to the level of a methodological canon" (Wolin 1977: 126). Furthermore, writings such as his avant-garde *Einbahnstraße* (1962) and the recollections in the shape of thought-images (*Denkbilder*), in *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (1970) are rich with dream references, including recordings of Benjamin's own dreams.¹³⁶ These works can be placed in the literary tradition — to be sure, Benjamin was more interested in the surrealist writers like Breton, Aragon, Soupault, Desons, Eluard, than in, for example, painters like Max Ernst and de Chirico. Yet, ultimately, besides noting the surreality of photography, it was the *surreal image* proper he was interested in — of

¹³⁵And vice versa, the surreal Marxist montage, the two factions enriching and transforming each other (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 12).

¹³⁶ Benjamin, in fact, kept a diary of his dreams, a project closely related to his experiments with hashish which were strictly regulated by Dr. Fritz Fränkel and Dr. Ernst Joël (a childhood friend), and which often saw the presence of "Ernst Bloch and a lady friend who later took her life" (Scholem 1982: 177); experiments probably prepared for by his encounter with surrealism, and on which he planned to compile a book, a project never completed though. A much neglected essay, "Hashish in Marseilles" has survived and some terrific notes have been published under the heading *Über Haschisch* - Scholem (1982: 177), however, writes: "Naturally he did not want to content himself with the notes and descriptions that have been preserved but wished to probe the philosophical relevance of such perceptions from an altered state

Valéry's *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*, on whose flip-side lay the work of the surrealists, works such as Breton's *Nadja* and Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* (1926), the latter work being a decisive impetus for his projected study of the Paris Arcades (Scholem 1982: 135).¹³⁷ Benjamin wrote to Adorno in 1935 that his initial encounter with Aragon's text had been so intense that he could only read two or three pages at a sitting.¹³⁸ Scholem (1982: 134-5) writes:

What he [Benjamin] sought to penetrate and master in intellectual discipline he found noteworthy precisely in the antithetical forms of an untrammelled surrender to the explosions of the unconscious, and it stimulated his own imagination. The immoderation of the [French] Surrealists attracted him more profoundly than the studied pretentiousness of [German] literary Expressionism, in which he discerned elements of insincerity and bluff. To him Surrealism was something like the first bridge to a more positive assessment of psychoanalysis, but he was under no illusions about the weaknesses in the procedures of both schools.

Benjamin, of the (often gnostic) tradition opposed to the stale logic of the rationalist school of thinking, had a burning interest in the aberrated, the marginal, the strange, the uncanny, the extreme. The fever and intoxication (*Rausch*) of the early Surrealists was an experience that corresponded with his own childhood and adult experiences;¹³⁹ the intoxication of the dream was a source of rich imagery, food for his brand of dialectical thinking. Again, the early-Romantics and the Symbolists come to mind, Schlegel and Novalis, Mallarmé's unfathomable poetry existing on the outskirts and crossroads of childhood and adulthood,¹⁴⁰ the idea of a pre-Oedipal body of language¹⁴¹ before meaning,

of consciousness, which he regarded as more than mere hallucination. This was still wholly in keeping with his conception of the scope of genuine experience".

¹³⁷ And Benjamin wrote Scholem that his essay "Surrealism" was "ein Paravent vor den "Pariser Passagen" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 1019).

¹³⁸ See Buck-Morss 1977: 125.

¹³⁹The dialectic between which was the impetus for much of his thought and work: Mehlman writes of Benjamin's intentions for the Arcades Project: 'what is at stake is a reactivation of (childhood) dreams, with all the aura of the "kitsch" informing them, in order to effect a decisive awakening. The Project, like the *flâneur*, was to be informed by an "intoxication of anamnesis"' (Mehlman 1993: 3).

¹⁴⁰ See Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle" (1986: 35): "These words that exist on the frontier between two linguistic regions, of children and of adults, are comparable to those Mallarmé poems, which the conflict between the poetic and the profane word has as it were consumed and made evanescent."

¹⁴¹ Benjamin emphasises a pre-Oedipal space over an Oedipal time in his work (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 120). Geyer-Ryan (1994: 120) notes further that "we shall have to consider whether the banishment of the

or pre-cognition, a language where “sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called ‘meaning’”,¹⁴² through the experience of glossolalia, the linguistic ecstatical mysteries of the Kabbalists,¹⁴³ the whistles, cries, ejaculations of the gnostics which also recalls Antonin Artaud’s cries,¹⁴⁴ the visions of ascetic hallucinogenic seers, hallucinating prophets and poets, the schizophrenic world of the insane, intoxicating world of the outsider, the displaced and peripheral. Such intoxications crystallised in the dream becomes for Benjamin a chthonic map to the modern, “an autonomous source of experience and knowledge, a hidden key [*Schlüsselwort* or *Zauberwort*, GTS] to the secrets and mysteries of waking life” (Wolin 1982: 127). As Adorno noted, “the dream becomes a medium of unregimented experience, a source of knowledge opposed to the superficiality of thinking” (qtd. in Wolin 1982: 127).

Benjamin, like the Surrealists, saw revolutionary (artistic, social, political) potential in the dream, in the sense of being shocked into the realm of the dream, the hallucination (*Droge*) or intoxication: shocked into the dream in order to be shocked awake. Benjamin writes: “In the world’s structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication” (Benjamin 1986: 179). But this is also precisely where the crucial difference between Benjamin and the Surrealist project reveals itself. For in his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin did not fail to point out the serious deficiencies in the Surrealists’ rebellions (against Catholicism) and their subversions (against society in general).

Benjamin wrote that Surrealist writing is not literature, “the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms” (Benjamin 1986: 179). And yet these Surrealist texts also exhibit a deficiency:

physis from theories of signification, the binary, critical opposition of spoken and written language in deconstruction, are similar techniques for repressing the pre-Oedipal space”.

¹⁴² See Benjamin on the language of the early Surrealists (Benjamin 1986: 178-179).

¹⁴³ Breton himself was also inspired by the Kabbalah. Cf. Buck-Morss 1977: 125.

¹⁴⁴ See Octavio Paz 1987: 7.

And these experiences are by no means limited to dreams, hours of hashish eating, or opium smoking. It is a cardinal error to believe that, of "Surrealist experiences," we know only the religious ecstasies or the ecstasies of drugs. [...] the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson. (But a dangerous one; and the religious lesson is stricter.) This profane illumination did not always find the surrealists equal to it, or to themselves, and the very writings that proclaim it most powerfully, Aragon's incomparable *Paysan de Paris* and Breton's *Nadja*, show very disturbing symptoms of deficiency (Benjamin 1986: 179).

Deficiency means actually remaining in the realm of the dream, the mythological intoxication. Instead of realising its "disturbing" revolutionary potential of actual change of the bourgeois world, often at the most crucial times the Surrealist intoxication remained in the realm of poetry, assuming a Romantic attitude and writing adolescent poetry in Romantic figures of speech. Although intended to marry anarchism to a genuinely organised Communist revolt, Breton's universal call "Snobs of the world, unite", his daydream "mit einem Revolver in der Hand auf die straÙe zu gehen und ungezielt so oft man kann in die Menge zu schieÙen — totale sabotage!" (qtd. in Tiedemann 1973: 149) — an idea later appropriated by Sartre in an existential story also in the vein of Hoffmann and Poe, "Erostratus", about the man who burnt down the museum of Alexandria becoming more famous in the process of destruction than the person who built the museum¹⁴⁵ — failed in the end as a collective project by virtue of too much egotistical scandal, too much self-involvement and too little genuine transformation.

¹⁴⁵ Compare also the figure of the man alone in the crowd, the lone "terrorist" in Paul Schrader's *Taxidriver*, "Travis", whose alienation Schrader has said was inspired by Sartre's *Nausea*: the artistic theme of the lone person in the crowd turning to sabotage as a way of consciously or unconsciously bringing attention to an existential predicament. The differences and similarities between Surrealism and Existentialism could be instructive by way of a comparison between an intentional act of societal sabotage and the nonintentional act *à la* Adorno. Benjamin's "destructive character" also has terrorist characteristics, yet his sabotage is re-orientated toward the way through the rubble he leaves in his wake. The question, of course, is whether the destructive character, the existential terrorist, or his surrealist counterpart, are capable of illuminating a broader societal tendency — de-constructively, if you will — or whether the intoxication of subjectivity, and the luxury of aesthetics, is merely confused with the real world and vice versa. Speaking art historically though, both tendencies — objective and subjective — sheds light on a particular spiritual climate, which if one were follow Benjamin's anti-subjectivist reasoning, truly holds revolutionary epistemological potential.

In this regard, Henri Lefebvre delivered a bitterly caustic critique of the Rimbaud (*Saison en enfer*) and Lautréamont (of *Songs of Maldoror* fame) inspired Surrealist notion of the Marvellous and the Bizarre, which as opposed to Baudelaire's literature,¹⁴⁶ merely resorts to "cerebralism and hyper-intellectuality" (Lefebvre 1992: 106). Lefebvre writes that "Revolt, protest against an insufferable reality, refusal to accept that reality, despair, hope that human redemption was immediately possible, ever-repeated departures in search of the marvellous, an imminent world of images and love, all this was mingled in a confusion from which lucid analysis was permanently absent" (Lefebvre 1992: 111-112). To be sure, Lefebvre wrote later in an autocritique that he got carried away in his polemic against surrealism:

The errors of Surrealism as a doctrine (pseudo-philosophical, with a pseudo-dialectic of the real and the dream, the physical and the image, the everyday and the marvellous) notwithstanding, it did express some of the aspirations of its time. As a doctrine, Surrealism ended up with some particular forms of alienation: with the *image-thing*, magic and the occult, semi-morbid states of mind. However, its scorn for the prosaic bourgeois world, its radical rebellion, did mean something. And the hypothesis that only the *excessive* image can come to grips with the profundity of the real world — a hypothesis which one can identify just as much with Picasso, Eluard and Tzara as with André Breton — needs to be taken seriously (Lefebvre 1992: 261; note no. 49).

Benjamin noted the potential for "profane illumination" in the Surrealist excessive image. He noted that Breton called *Nadja* "a book with a banging door" (Benjamin 1986: 180) an idea with several implications, for example, the loud slap whose echo reverberated through the isles and halls of academia; the shock to the system which jolts the reader wide awake; Lautréamont's poetic idea of shock when he said: "Beautiful like the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table"; the crassness of Baudelaire which Benjamin thought preferable to being sonorous (Abbas 1987: 45). Furthermore, the loud bang (a pistol fired in the night) brings attention to the need to live

¹⁴⁶ Lefebvre (1992: 106) writes that "with him alone, the marvellous takes on a life and intensity which were totally original: this is because he abandons the metaphysical and moral plane to immerse himself in the everyday, which from that moment on he will deprecate, corrode and attack, but on its own level and as if from within" .

out in the open, contra petty-bourgeois discretion and interiority. Benjamin (1982: 180) writes:

To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need. Discretion concerning one's own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petit-bourgeois parvenus.

This is an important point in understanding the “changes” in Benjamin's thinking: what once was aristocratic now merely shows its petty-bourgeois face, a face of which the Surrealists exchanged the features “for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds” (Benjamin 1986: 192), a face which, as the Democritus saying goes, is the only place to spit when one is in a rich man's house. Furthermore, the bourgeois clock proper ticking to a small happiness (Nietzsche) is to be shattered: Against conformism, in strict revolt against bourgeois complacency (instead of change, the bourgeois renovates his apartment), Benjamin's “profane illumination” as represented in Surrealism is therefore fundamentally geared toward change, interruption of the always-the-same logic. One could say his was a philosophy which in principle was always on the side of the avant-garde, at least in terms of adopting “being young” as “an attitude of consciousness” (Adorno 1988: 334). Hence the irony: “one negates naiveté by adopting it as a standpoint” — a contradiction Benjamin took with equanimity.

Eros or love too could be a source of “profane illumination”, at least in the idea of the mystical beloved. As Buck-Morss notes, Aragon in his *Le Paysan de Paris*, for example, “used sacred language to portray sensuous love, and glorified the profane as the source of revealed truth, combining elements of the extremes of mysticism and materialism which now formed the poles of Benjamin's thinking” (Buck-Morss 1977: 125). Here Lefebvre for one allows his prejudice for so-called “classical” reality to get in the way of his critique of surreality. For he writes “The strange and the weird were never more than a cheap and contaminated substitute for mystery. Of what value is the bizarreness of *The Songs of Maldoror* when compared with the mystery which animates *The Divine Comedy*”? (Lefebvre 1992: 122). This is a valid question to be sure, but then Lefebvre goes on to compare the bewitched adolescent who has his roots in Baudelaire — “Did he

long for a mysterious woman, absolute love, ‘ideal’ beauty? Real love, real women, real beauty will never be his” (Lefebvre 1992: 122) — to the “healthy” loves of Dante. He writes:

Dante, in love with Beatrice, was a healthy, social, political man; there was nothing morbid about Petrarch and his Laura. But Baudelaire, the man who dominates our culture poetically, who was a dandy, a little buffoon, a Second Empire bourgeois ham — who at the same time denounced the forms his class was imposing upon life — is an important dealer in narcotics; hence his success, for our day-to-day makes us vulnerable to the thirst for drugs and intoxicants (Lefebvre 1992: 122).

Benjamin, however, points out that Breton’s idea of the mystical love was inspired precisely by the epoch of Louis VII, Dante’s epoch, an epoch whose Provençal love poetry comes close to the surrealist conception of love. Benjamin refers to Erich Auerbach’s book *Dante: Poet of the secular world* where Auerbach writes:

All the poets of the ‘new style’ possess a mystical beloved, they all have approximately the same very curious experience of love; to them all Amor bestows or withholds gifts that resemble an illumination more than sensual pleasure; all are subject to a kind of secret bond that determines their inner and perhaps also their outer lives (Auerbach qtd. in Benjamin 1986: 181).

Dante’s mystical love echoes Breton’s which echoes Baudelaire’s in turn. The question of whether the one was a healthier person than the other must remain a moot point for the time being, even if it does echo the actuality of the ancient and modern question of whether the fact that artists in general feed off the abject should be celebrated or not.¹⁴⁷ In the current context, however, it is the profane form mystical love takes that is of concern, in the sense of Benjamin’s idea of the liberating physical and sensual underlying the textual mystical love.

Benjamin points out that “The lady, in esoteric love, matters least. So, too, for Breton. He is closer to the things that Nadja is close to than to her” (Benjamin 1986: 181). Here lies the key to the dialectical “profane illumination” summoned in a mystical love,

¹⁴⁷Also tied to this, then, the other question of the dialectic between theory and praxis, society and art, abjection and redemption, ethics and aesthetics, dialectical questions constructed throughout this thesis, albeit immanently.

which, as should be quite clear, also serves to illumine Benjamin's overall fascination with the *desire of things*: that here in the inanimate object, as in the text, the continuum of life has come to a standstill, and like a text can be deciphered with a patience excruciatingly difficult to muster when it comes to animate human beings, in more ways than one. This dialectic at a standstill, as represented in the idea of the extreme thing as a Baroque stage on which life comes to be frozen, reduces the continuum of life to a series of compressed moments, crystallised fragments — *Bruchstück* which “embody” the world in miniature. In the desire that comes with the things of the mystical love, a “profane illumination” is triggered. Moreover, it is because the things have been ripped out of context, displaced and configured by way of extremes, that Benjamin, and the Surrealists with him, tie revolutionary potential to the chance orchestrated patterns or constellations of meaning generated in the process. In this way — the “trick” rather than method “by which this world of things is mastered” (Benjamin 1986: 182), politics turns historical. Esoteric love becomes a vehicle through which paradoxically the dated past is restored or renewed counterfactually, explosively — that is, *through* the disjoined things of the mystical beloved (reading the profane world in this spirit). The esoteric becomes exoteric, theory or poetry turns into praxis, into “the *light of the image*” (Breton qtd, in Buck-Morss 1977: 125) — dialectically. Writes Breton in a manner prototypical of Benjamin's dialectical images: “To compare two objects as remote as possible from each other or, by any other method, to place them together in an abrupt and startling manner, remains the highest task to which poetry can aspire” (Breton qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 125). That which masquerades as the given is re-orientated, startlingly turned inside out. Benjamin writes that Breton

was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded,” in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution — no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution — not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects — can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism (Benjamin 1986: 181-182).

The Surrealists revealed the strange surreal face of the city of Paris (Benjamin wrote somewhere that “no face is more surrealist than the true face of the city”), miniature of the universe: “that is to say, in the larger one, the cosmos, things look no different [again Blanque comes to mind, GTS]. There, too, are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day” (Benjamin 1986: 183). And in the strange intervention of the photograph which by virtue of its power to capture and record the everyday literally, in a “decisive moment” (Cartier-Bresson), a sur-reality all of its own is established. Writes Benjamin (1986: 183) lucidly:

It makes the streets, gates, squares of the city into illustrations of a trashy novel, draws off the banal obviousness of this ancient architecture to inject it with the most pristine intensity toward the events described, to which, as in old chambermaids’ books, word-for-word quotations with page numbers refer. And all the parts of Paris that appear here are places where what is between these people turns like a revolving door.

In the photograph, in the waste products of history, in the now outmoded and defunct things, the true surreal and strange face of the city can be read and experienced — an authentic “poetic” but “real” *Erfahrung* of alterity and transgression. Geyer-Ryan (1994: 109) writes that

Under ultimately contingent circumstances, objects normally categorized as rubbish can be elevated into positivity, and are thus ‘sublimated’ into a collector’s item, for example, or any other value of distinction. The zero-position of garbage within the realm of real and symbolic objects is analogous to the position of the abject in the psychic domain. To this extent transgression is both a reactivation of psychic *Angstlust* [the pleasure and fear of revulsion], and a breach in the symbolic order of culture.

For Benjamin reading Baudelaire reading the image of the poet in the image of the *chiffonier*, the Surrealists imagining desire in the space of the street, this duality of *Angst* and *Lust* in the refuse of the modern city had revolutionary potential. In the cipher of trash

the new image corresponding to the old one could be found by way of contingency, only now known to have emancipatory potential.¹⁴⁸

But although the Surrealists were the first to liberate waste from bourgeois society, in the end the surrealist renewal and mastery of the things resorted to cheap trickery. Benjamin suggests that regardless of Surrealism's initial dialectical politicisation, the surreal and erotic transformation of everyday things¹⁴⁹ lacked in the end a true dialectic of intoxication, one in which the mediating antagonism between the elements would be illuminated. As Lefebvre (1992) acutely points out, the surrealist tension between the waking and dream work regressed into a bad Hegelianism whereby the tension would be resolved. Foregoing in this way the dialectic — which even or precisely at a standstill generates movement from one level to another, a complementary level, the generation of a world in resemblance¹⁵⁰ — the surrealists succumbed to a kind of “pseudo-renewal”. They remained, in this respect, impotently in the realm of dream, on might say in the paternal sphere of the symbolic. The surrealist “dialectic”, according to Adorno¹⁵¹ in its attempt to fuse subject and object remained passive, fetishistic: “Surrealism ‘regrouped’ the dream elements without liquidating them, and thus, claimed Adorno, its images were ‘fetishes — commodity fetishes — in which at one time subjective libido became fixed,’ and for which the true model was pornography. Insofar as efforts at interpretation were made, then they were attempted only by imposing ready-made categories, like the Oedipus complex, mechanically from the outside” (Buck-Morss 1977: 128). According to this immanent criticism Surrealism succumbed to mere subjectivity coupled with a lack of *interpretation* — precisely the thing Freud, on whose theory of free associations the Surrealists based their idea of automatic writing, insisted; and as Brecht said of surrealist objects that they

¹⁴⁸Or as Geyer-Ryan (1994: 108-9) puts it: “By retrieving images, not in opposition to language, but rather *into* language, and above all the language of epistemology, as well as by means of figurative speech, the maternal sphere (the imaginary) turns up as an effect in the paternal sphere (the symbolic order). The effect is the presence of the body in the realm of signs”.

¹⁴⁹By way of “hysteria” (Baudelaire), “disorder” (Rimbaud) and “paranoia”.

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin (1986: 181) writes: “The dialectics of intoxication are indeed curious. Is not perhaps all ecstasy in one world humiliating sobriety in that complimentary to it?”

¹⁵¹Who was far more critical of surrealism than Benjamin was, at least by 1934, and who was for that reason critical of Benjamin's “surreal montage” *Passagen* project. Cf., for example, Buck-Morss 1977: 129.

“do not return back again from estrangement” (qtd, in Buck-Morss 1977: 128). Writes Menninghaus (1988: 297):

surrealist mythology, according to Benjamin, puts things at a distance, transports them to the realm of dream, and leaves them there; by contrast, a materialistic mythology illuminates the realm of dreams — the collective *Bildphantasie* or image-making capacity — in order to bring us to the verge (*Schwelle*) of awakening. Its aim is to sharpen our eye for “the Next,” for the time and space of each present history.

Benjamin (Frisby 1986: 189) himself wrote in his *Passagenwerk* regarding Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* that

Whereas Aragon stands firmly in the realm of the dream, here the constellation of awakening is to be found. Whereas in Aragon’s case an impressionistic element remains — ‘mythology’ — [...] the aim here is the destruction of ‘mythology’ in the historical realm. Of course, this can only take place by means of the awakening of a still unconscious knowledge of what has taken place.

The mythology Benjamin sets out to destroy with his version of dialectical materialism, is the kind which fuels domination and exploitation. Moreover, it is the kind which “aestheticises” life, foregoing the crucial difference between art and life, dream and reality. As mentioned before, Benjamin made short notice of the kind of “pre-fascist aesthetics” eminent in the German obsession with the “incommunicable”. He saw it in the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and, later in France, “disconcerted with the ambiguity of the ‘Acéphalian’ atheology”, Benjamin tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the Frenchmen Bataille and Klossowski that their situation was inherently similar to the German one. Benjamin also detected a too impetuous aestheticisation of modern life in the Surrealist project, which failed ultimately in taking stock of its potential in transforming its anarchic and revolutionary nihilistic beginnings into a disciplined political dialectic, thus falling prey to fascist appropriation.¹⁵² Whilst Benjamin lauded the Surrealist experimentation with the mystical possibilities of language, he was critical, as he was critical of a similar tendency in the Futurists too, of their mystification of machinery. He wrote:

¹⁵² The surreal painter De Chirico, for example, as is well known, became sympathetic toward Italian fascism.

And it is as magical experiments with words, not as artistic dabbling, that we must understand the passionate phonetic and graphical transformational games that have run through the whole literature of the avant-garde for the past fifteen years, whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism. [...] If, however, Apollinaire and Breton advance even more energetically in the same direction and complete the linkage of Surrealism to the outside world with the declaration, "The conquests of science rest far more on a surrealist than on a logical thinking" — if, in other words, they make mystification, the culmination of which Breton sees in poetry (which is defensible), the foundation of scientific and technical development, too — then such integration is too impetuous. It is very instructive to compare the movement's overprecipitous embrace of the uncomprehended miracle of machines — "the old fables have for the most part been realized, now it is the turn of the poets to create new ones that the inventors on their side can then again make real" (Apollinaire) — to compare these overheated fantasies with the well-ventilated utopias of a Scheerbart (Benjamin 1986: 184-185).

What interested Benjamin in the neo-Romantic, libertarian and religious style of writing of Paul Scheerbart, as exemplified by his bizarre and fantastic cosmotheistic novel *Lesabendio* (1913), was the *Leitmotif* of "the spiritual overcoming of technology" (Benjamin qtd. in Löwy 1985: 48). In this way, in spiritual kinship with Scheerbart, Benjamin would postulate a dual political attitude pivoting on the one hand, anarchism, and on the other Communism. For Benjamin "anarchist methods are useless and the Communist 'goals' nonsense and non-existent" (Löwy 1985: 49); and yet, because no genuine political strategy existed, Communist action, correctional of its own goals, remained valuable. Writes Löwy (1985: 49), "Anarchist goals, it would seem, are significant because they are not political *aims*, yet the best method to achieve them is provided by Communist action".¹⁵³ Löwy seconds Wolin's reading that for Benjamin the ultimate goals remain in essence Messianic, but he adds that this is so because for Benjamin anarchist and Messianic goals spell a similar or even the same thing. For Benjamin politics has a religious dimension (in the sense of modern Judaism or Messianism), the one converting the other in observance, "[showing] itself only in the paradoxical conversion (*Umschlagen*) of the one into the other (in any direction

¹⁵³ See also, for example, Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence" on the problematical notion of violence as a means to an end.

whatsoever)" (Benjamin qtd. in Löwy 1985: 49). This paradoxical and transgressive *Umschlagen*, then, also determines Benjamin's dialectical reading of political potential in surrealist mystical anarchism.

Benjamin's reading of politics and religion is transgressive as is his reading of the Surrealist project of "freedom". He hailed their explosion of petty-bourgeois sentiment and morality, "the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom" (Benjamin 1986: 189). Turning his back on his own earlier notion of philosophical contemplation, which he now saw to be detrimentally bourgeois tied as it was to "das Elend der Interieurs" (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1024), Benjamin wrote that the early Surrealist revolutionary opposition in its independence was pushed to the left by, on the one hand, bourgeois hostility toward radical intellectual freedom, and on the other, political events such as the Moroccan War. But, on the left, among the well-meaning bourgeois intelligentsia surrealism forewent its revolutionary potential. Benjamin (1986: 186) writes: "It is typical of these left-wing French intellectuals — exactly as it is of their Russian counterparts, too — that their positive function derives entirely from a feeling of obligation, not to the Revolution, but to traditional culture. [...] Characteristic of this whole left-wing bourgeois position is its irremediable coupling of idealistic morality with political practice. Only in contrast to the helpless compromises of 'sentiment' are certain central features of Surrealism, indeed of the Surrealist tradition, to be understood".

Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Lautrémont's satanism, was defanged, read as it was by the bourgeois left-wing in terms of *l'art pour l'art*. "If, however", writes Benjamin (1986: 187), "one resolves to open up this romantic dummy, one finds something usable inside. One finds the cult of evil as political device" — satanism thus as a strategy against all Romantic moralising. Benjamin recalls the praise the Surrealists bestowed upon the Marquis de Sade, a praise for rebellious cruelty also found in the work of Georges Bataille, albeit perhaps of better quality than most of the erratic Surrealist texts. Benjamin, in true subversive spirit, in opposition to the bourgeois philistine, rehabilitates the satanism, the vileness and cruelty at the heart of Surrealism, the feeling for the dark side of life culminating in the work of Edgar Allen Poe, for example. Benjamin includes Dostoyevsky in the satanic company of Rimbaud and Lautréamont. For, he writes, such

vices as those of Dostoyevsky's Stavrogin are "eternally new, 'as on the first day,' separated by an infinity from the clichés through which sin is perceived by the Philistine" (Benjamin 1986: 188). Cruelty, strangeness, baseness, vileness: strategic qualities against religious sentimentalism and triteness. One can say that the energies from these vices are to be channeled against the (mythological) guilt experienced under Catholicism, an institution Rimbaud, a Catholic himself, denounced throughout his life.¹⁵⁴ Freedom from petty morality through excess is a determining and recurring idea in Benjamin's oeuvre. The question he repeatedly asked, intellectually, in his own work and in his reviews of the work of others was how this excess could be brought about, what form it would take and what catalyst it would need. For him the deciding factor would be a non-Hegelian dialectic.

He writes that "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution — this is the project about which surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises" (Benjamin 1986: 189). This means not naive anarchism and chaos, but responsible and disciplined political rupture. The project has to turn on a dialectic, an optical dialectic, a dialectic of intoxication. Only in sobriety may *Rausch* become truly revolutionary — not mere ecstasy which would be politically, in the larger sense of the word, inadequate, but "profane illumination". Perhaps one may use the image of Faust's descent into the void of the Mothers seen as a visionary descent which must be methodically regulated with wit, acumen, intellect, irony, through the things of the everyday. As Benjamin (1986: 189-90) puts it:

Any serious exploration of occult, surrealist, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process), as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena. And the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Bataille's subversion of what he sees as the petty morality of Catholicism in his lyrically "pornographic" novel *Story of the Eye*.

will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention that most terrible drug — ourselves — which we take in solitude.

In this sense, an ambiguity presents itself in Benjamin's reading of intoxication, which once again turns on the problem of "aura". For according to Buck-Morss, "The drug experience was especially significant for Benjamin's secularised theory of the 'aura' of objects. Emanating from the surface of the phenomena and revealing their inner essence, this aura becomes visible within the 'image-zone' of drugs, and could be reproduced on the artist's canvas" (Buck-Morss 1977: 127). Benjamin writes in his essay on hashish that the paintings of Van Gogh look as if the artist painted the aura which surrounds things. Buck-Morss argues: "The goal of Benjamin's writing as a series of dialectical images was to capture this aura in the written word as well" (Buck-Morss 1977: 127). But Norbert Bolz 1985: 196), for example, understands Benjamin's notion of "profane illumination" as having an "auraless materialistic inspiration". This seeming paradox, however, unravels itself dialectically, retaining its much needed tension, when Bolz goes on to point out that intoxication to Benjamin does not mean intoxicating politics but rather the politics of intoxication; Benjamin does not aestheticise technology which dons fascist colours but rather calls for a technologising of aesthetics (Bolz 1985: 195). If intoxication means the *Ursprungsphänomen* of authentic experience, perpetually radical and extreme (Bolz 1985: 192), sobriety is its epistemological regulator. For Benjamin getting high does not mean falling under the sway of the aura of things permanently, on the contrary; "the ecstasies of revolutionary utopias and the surrealist immersion in the unconscious were to him, so to speak, keys for the opening of his own world, for which he was seeking altogether different, strict, and disciplined forms of expression" (Scholem 1982: 135). If the "aura" of intoxication was to serve as an "introductory course" for "profane illumination" so also the "aura" of Benjamin's writing itself. He was convinced of procuring a personal and a political awakening through this double technique.

If Benjamin based his theories of experience on his own childhood experiences, intoxication serves a similar purpose as a model. From the 'high' must come

not naiveté but disciplined, adult action; the child's immersion in and command of the things serves as prototype for the mature adult not as a sentimental yearning or excuse for childishness.

Politically speaking, for Benjamin the call of the hour means not the complacent and innocent optimism of social-democracy, but rather the "organization of pessimism". Surrealism, says Benjamin, had been steadily moving toward the Communist principle of mistrust and pessimism all the way — mistrust in bourgeois ideology and progress and in bourgeois rationalism, mistrust in the fallacious idea of the unity of the mind and of conformism, mistrust in the petty morality underlying the above. And, according to Benjamin, the disposal of the moral political metaphor: "For to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images" (Benjamin 1986: 190 & 191).

Again, besides Benjamin's programmatic anarchism — in the sense of a dialectical annihilation — he introduces a dialectic of images which have a "theological" revolutionary potential dormant in their historical index. With this in mind, hallucination and (hashish) intoxication serve as *Vorschule* to the profane illumination at the heart of dialectical images (Bolz 1985: 196). The enemy of profane illumination is not hallucination nor theology, but the all-knowing Idealism which excludes the potential for revolutionary action. Norbert Bolz (1985: 197) writes that "der Drogenesser springt aus dem fahrenden Zug der Zeit, der Revolutionär zieht die Notbremse". The contemplative characteristic of the intoxicated, in the dissociation of consciousness, must be dialectically transformed through sobriety into sensual bodily activity. The liberating potential in the *Rausch* to interrupt bourgeois rationality must be rehabilitated for the collective experience but crucially in sharp opposition to the fascist mass spectacle which blurs the division between art and life. Through the narcotised and narcissistic individual must come a collective bodily awakening — gleaned from a Dionysian frenzy an Apollonian destruction and rejuvenation. Writes Bolz (1985: 198):

Nur greift Benjamin nicht nur als Genießer sondern als Experimentator zur Droge und steigert die orgiastischen Erfahrungen des Rauschs durch die

Askese der Erkenntnisorientierung: Ekstase und Askese zugleich sollen den Philosophen Bildern annähern, die das vorstellende Denken nicht antizipieren kann. Hinter dem Drogenexperiment steht der Wunsch, die Kräfte des Rauschs verfügbar zu machen. Er deckt sich mit der surrealistischen Aufgabe: "die Kräfte des Rausches (die an sich isolierend, abspaltend wirken) für die Revolution brauchbar zu machen." Der Rausch hält die dialektische Mitte zwischen zwei Aufhebungen, die Theorie und Revolution miteinander vermitteln: "Überwindung des rationalen Individuums im Rausch — des motorischen und affektiven Individuums aber in der kollektiven Aktion".

According to Benjamin, the surreal images discovered in the individual, contemplative intoxication must serve as dialectical images through which a collective *physis*¹⁵⁵ may be illuminated — in the light of a dialectical rupture that is needed in order to transform metaphysical materialism into anthropological materialism.¹⁵⁶ The process set into action by the Surrealists must be taken further, and not without dialectical annihilation or transgression. "For", writes Benjamin (1986: 192), "it must in the end be admitted: metaphysical materialism, of the brand of Vogt and Bukharin, as is attested by the experience of the Surrealists, and earlier of Hebel, Georg Büchner, Nietzsche, and Rimbaud, cannot lead without rupture to anthropological materialism". Ultimately it is the collective suffering body behind the text or the image which needs to be emancipated — through the paradox of ecstasy and sobriety, violent rupture and dialectical discipline. He writes, foreseeing his Artwork essay in the process: "Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*" (Benjamin 1986: 192).

Benjamin like Adorno was assured of the notion of the aesthetic experience as the route to an authentic philosophical understanding, and where Benjamin earlier on looked toward the Baroque stage for a philosophical theory of allegory and redemption,

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin (1986: 192) writes that "the collective is a body too".

¹⁵⁶ This revolutionary, perhaps messianic rupture is a key concern of Benjamin's, especially in his thinking on history where the explosive interruption of the historical continuum seems for Benjamin finally to be the only redemptive solution to a world gone mad. And then there are the smaller scale eruptions all geared against one or another given "institution" of thinking. Again, Benjamin's subversive nature will be remembered.

he moves from the Surrealist experience and the surreal image, toward another form of theater, the collective body orientated “epic theater” of Brecht, a political form of public “entertainment” intimately connected to the technological “shock” image and theater of cinema.

3. Epic theatre

Benjamin's friendship with Brecht was peculiar; it was a friendship, moreover, which vexed not a few of Benjamin's friends. After all, their personalities not to mention their thinking seemed to be diametrical opposites. Benjamin's grounding in the esoteric and the mystical, together with his proclivity for “poetic” literature certainly went against the grain of Brecht's “crude thinking” (*plumpes Denken*) in a picaresque or carnivalesque tradition. Brecht, as Benjamin reports, had painted the words “the truth is concrete” on a beam supporting the ceiling which was set off by a sign hung around a wooden donkey next to Brecht's writing table which said “Even I must understand it” (Wolin 1982: 139). Hannah Arendt notes interestingly, that Brecht's *plumpe Denken* signalled in a rejection of dialectical subtleties, precisely the thing which irritated Adorno most; on the other hand, Benjamin saw in it “niet zozeer een verwijzing naar de praktijk als wel naar de werkelijkheid en voor hem manifesteerde deze werkelijkheid zich het meest direct in de spreekwoorden en het idioom van de alledaagse taal” (qtd. in Jay 1977: 239). For Benjamin, Brecht's “crude thinking”, therefore, holds potential precisely in the sense of a dialectic charging the everyday dialectical images of his “profane illumination”.

If it is true, as Arendt claims, that in the relationship between Brecht and Benjamin “the greatest living poet met the most important critic of the time, a fact both were fully aware of”, certainly, only Benjamin from his side made his respect known almost to the masochistic degree of reverence for a master (Kracauer described Benjamin's attitude to Brecht as one of “slavish-masochism”), as attested to by

Benjamin's faithful recording of his and Brecht's conversations at Brecht's exile residence in Skovbostrand. Furthermore, Benjamin's writings on Brecht's poetry and epic theatre see him go against his own current, his usual method of literary criticism, to the degree that "the interpretations which [Benjamin] devoted to individual works by Brecht sound as if their author strove for the position of authorized exegete" (Tiedemann qtd. in Wolin 1982: 141). Wolin observes: "This extremely literal fidelity to the intentions of an author stands in sharp contrast to Benjamin's usual method of criticism, in which literary works served both as self-contained monads as well as springboards for the imaginative-creative capabilities of the critic himself" (Wolin 1982: 141). Brecht for his part took scant notice of Benjamin in his own writing, and then often not of a very complimentary nature.

The elemental influence Brecht had on Benjamin's work is not contestable; Brecht, and the temporary affections of Asja Lacis, played a decisive role in Benjamin's sometime problematical "conversion" to a dialectical materialism which set out to extinguish magic from the truth.¹⁵⁷

The influence of Brecht on Benjamin, furthermore, should also be taken in its socio-historical context. Wolin (1982: 142-143) sums up:

For Benjamin, whose interest in "radical communism" as an obligatory form of moral [or better, non-ethical, GTS] conduct had left him searching for an authentic vehicle for the realization of the still vaguely defined ideal of an "effective" literary praxis, the encounter with Brecht must have seemed a godsend. Yet, this search for a nonaffirmative, politically relevant form of literary engagement must be set within the more general context of the "crisis of criticism" which manifested itself increasingly as what little stability Weimar had possessed in the mid-twenties collapsed with the onset of the Great Depression of 1929 — a situation which was further aggravated by the growing threat, at the polls and in the streets, posed by the fascist right. In light of these events confidence in the ability of the liberal-democratic literary public sphere to meet the threat posed by the

¹⁵⁷ See Scholem on his and Benjamin's argument regarding Brecht's kinship with Scheerbart: Benjamin arguing that Brecht was completing what Scheerbart had started out doing so well, "namely the writing of a totally unmagical language, a language cleansed of all magic" (Scholem 1982: 208), and that if Scholem had been delighted with the prose of *Lesabéndio*, he should by that same rationale appreciate Brecht's *Versuche*; Scholem replying that Brecht lacked the delight in infinity, in Brecht "everything boils down to only the revolutionary manipulation in the infinite" (Scholem 1982: 208). Benjamin rejoined that "What matters is not infinity but the elimination of magic" (Scholem 1982: 208), a very seductive but debatable point particularly from the perspective of Benjamin's own work, a point Scholem and he could not agree on.

budding alliance between forces of fascism and big industry — which had been curiously prophesied by the composite gangster-businessmen types of Brecht plays such as *Threepenny Opera* — had been completely eroded; and it was specifically as a polemical counterbalance to the seeming nonchalance and unresponsiveness of traditional literary forms vis-à-vis the impending social crisis that Brecht's attempt to formulate a “non-Aristotelian” theory of drama had originated.

Again Benjamin directed his polemical pen against the left-wing intelligentsia, this time against the failure of nerve in the left-wing writers of Weimar such as Mehring and Kästner who, so writes Benjamin in a review called “Linke Melancholie” of a collection of poems by Kästner's, a review closely related in content and style to the later “The Author as Producer”, “are the proletarian mimicry of a decaying bourgeois class” (Benjamin qtd. in Wolin 1982: 143):

Their function is, from a political point of view, to produce cliques rather than parties, from a literary point of view, to produce fashions rather than schools, from an economic point of view, to produce agents rather than producers. Indeed, for fifteen years this left intelligentsia has continuously been the agent of all intellectual market trends, from Activism, to Expressionism, to the New Objectivity. [...] In brief, this left radicalism is precisely that attitude which in general no longer corresponds to any political action.

More, as Bernd Witte points out, the crisis of criticism also had its causes in the fast changing technological means of production. It became clear that even though the media was to democratically supply printed information on a mass basis, the bourgeois employment of the medium channelled the literary material to a small knot of privileged intellectual readers. Witte writes: “The technical and social possibilities of the medium unavoidably recall to mind the original claim to universality of the literary public sphere, a recollection facilitated by historical reflection” (Witte qtd. in Wolin 1982: 143).

Although one would do well to recall Benjamin's affinity with people like Hoffmansthal who proclaimed the need for a strictly esoteric means of publication,

facilitated by a small select group of adept readers, there was also the other side of him which sought to find a genuinely active literary form. Before his encounter with Brecht, Benjamin turned from the “mystical” innovations of Surrealism to the experimental discourses current then in Russia. For “whereas the surrealists were compelled to resort to ‘shock tactics’ in an effort to stir the bourgeois consciousness from its state of enforced passivity, literary production in Russia was already based on urgent practical and organizational questions” (Wolin 1982: 144). It would also be precisely on this issue — pedagogical politics and art production in the Soviet — which introduced problematical notions into Benjamin’s well-meant theory of art not as an elitist bourgeois plaything, but as tool for the education of people, the masses. With the gift of hindsight, a statement like the following makes the problem manifest: “the chief task is to approach the masses. This public will only recoil from refinements in psychology, word choice, and formulation. What it needs are not formulations but information, not variations but repetitions, not works of virtuosity but stirring reports” (Benjamin qtd. in Wolin 1982: 144). When does pedagogy turn into idealist propaganda? When does *Umfunktionierung* of sophistication merely result in bad form? When are the so-called masses of history educated enough and would this mean that only then the possibility arises for the re-introduction and re-invention of the poetic imagination? When is the negation of variation the death of the other?

In search of an art that would be the constitutive component of a truly democratic society, Benjamin turned his back on affirmative bourgeois culture, and looked to the Soviet notion of literature as political rather than aesthetical in playing its part in the construction of socialism. Although he was under no illusion that conditions in Russia were the same as in Europe, he thought conditions in Germany favourable to France, because in good Marxist terms, as Wolin (1982: 145) points out, “the German economic situation was deteriorating at a more rapid rate”. Wolin writes that in this context of deterioration and political rife-ness that was unrevolutionary Germany Benjamin saw Brecht’s theatre as the most suitable form of literary praxis linking the more autonomous art of the surrealists to the manifestly political art of Russia (Wolin 1982: 145). What

linked the volatile Brecht and the acedian Benjamin further was their joint penchant for subversion, sabotage, going against the current.

Wolin contends quite rightly that this notion of subversion linked Benjamin's non-affirmative work of the twenties and thirties to a book like *Trauerspiel*, in which he develops a theory of allegory destructive of the organic self-enclosed totality of the sublime symbolic work. Benjamin has a persevering concern for, what Wolin terms "*the anti-aesthetic forces within art* — a concern which received its consummate treatment in the *Trauerspiel* study and has become the defining feature of all twentieth-century modernism" (Wolin 1982: 145). Adorno, with characteristic dexterity, says of this modernist anti-aesthetic that it works something like fireworks: "the only form of art which would not want to endure, but rather to radiate for a moment and then disappear in smoke" (Adorno qtd. in Wolin 1982: 146) — imagery which, of course, recalls Benjamin's Talmudic angels who after having sung their hymns of praise before the throne of God disappear into the naught in order to make way for new angels.¹⁵⁸ Adorno goes on: "If all art is the secularization of transcendence, then every work participates in the dialectic of enlightenment. Art has given itself over to this dialectic with the conception of anti-art; no conception of art is conceivable without this moment. That means nothing less than the fact that art must pass beyond its own concept in order to remain faithful to it" (Wolin 1982: 146). In Benjamin's case the notion of anti-art had Sabbatian undertones fuelling its transgressive path toward dialectical self-annihilation. However, at this point in his career he "would insist that the promise of transcendence traditionally ensconced in autonomous works of art must be redeemed *exoterically* — for the public sphere in general — rather than *esoterically* — for a small coetery of initiates" (Wolin 1982: 145). This, then, would be the point of conflict between him, Scholem and Adorno, the latter two insisting to various degrees on a certain kind of autonomousness in "redemptive" art. And in terms of the Sabbatian and Satanic impulse underlying Benjamin's Messianic transgressions and violations (of the Law), when it is carried over into the public sphere of self-destruction, it comes dangerously close to the pre-fascist aestheticism Benjamin

¹⁵⁸Hence, also the aptness in the name *Angelus Novus* for a projected ephemeral newspaper edited by Benjamin, which unfortunately never saw the light of day.

himself so vehemently criticised.¹⁵⁹ It is a certain type of Jewish fascism Benjamin was very aware of being prevalent in France at the time of his exile, and as mentioned before, a type of fascism which could have close affinities with a certain type of Jewish self-hatred, which Mehlman has observed in people like Karl Kraus for instance. Brecht himself in true thick-skinned style accused Benjamin of promoting Jewish fascism with his Kafka essay (Benjamin 1992b: 110).

In any event, Benjamin's non-affirmative move found its *sui generis* form in Brecht, who, as Wolin (1982: 146) writes, represented

a genuinely unique figure in the annals of modern aesthetics insofar as his conception of epic theatre managed to bring to fruition an artistic technique which combined in equal measure the more advanced tendencies of the twentieth-century avant-garde and pronounced concern for political content usually associated with the name of *l'art engagé*. In many respects, Brecht consummates an anti-aesthetic trend in modern art which commenced with the dadaist movement of World War I and was renewed by surrealism: a trend which rejected the traditional self-enclosed, autonomous self-definition of high art — i.e., the “work-character” of art — and instead sought to bridge the gap separating art from life.

Brecht's persona as plagiariser, saboteur, educator, organiser appealed to Benjamin; Benjamin found a kinship in Brecht's idea of his theatre as a “laboratory”, his dramas as unfinished experiments, works-in-progress. However, ultimately it would be the *dialectical tension* running through Brecht's epic theatre — for example in terms of the problematical relation between the education of the actors and the enlightenment of the audience — that would bear the most fruit for Benjamin: in terms of clarifying but restricting his own style of writing in the process of clarifying the style or technique of Brecht.

According to Brecht, the artist in a bourgeois and fascist age had a didactic and a political function above all. Brecht's program, although he was under no illusion as to who attended his plays (by and large the middle-class, of course), initially set out to

¹⁵⁹ One can find a similarly precarious tendency in the early apocalyptic anti-war writings of Bloch which sound as if they glorify destruction, as for example in Bloch's 1918 *Geist der Utopie*, where he writes: “There can be no image of that which lies above without first brushing against death; it makes us blanche and removes the weightiness from our words” (qtd. in Rabinbach 1985: 110). Modern Messianic thinkers in general have this procreative-destructiveness in common.

transform or demystify (bourgeois) art. As Wolin puts it: "What he desired was for art to become part of a large-scale process of social demystification, portraying social relations as the soulless and rigid second nature which they have become in fact, so as to hasten the advent of their transformation". Wolin writes that this view of the educative power of art lay in a "fundamentalist faith in man as an infinitely malleable and indomitable creature, a point of view conveyed most unflinchingly in his portrayal of Galy Gay in *Man is Man*, but also evident in the later 'Stories from Herr Kreuer'" (Wolin 1982: 147).¹⁶⁰ Brecht in such work fixed his attention on the vile base of society, common man in the shape of the ruffian and criminal (*Gauner*), not merely as aberrations or negative phenomena, writes Benjamin, but as future revolutionary types through which social change may be enacted. This idea of the anti-social underground types, then, in variations, was also a recurring theme in Benjamin's work (and to a certain degree, in Scholem's work too for that matter). It was another form of "profane illumination"; and taking a wide berth, of antinomian Sabbatianism with its notion of fighting evil from within, too.

In any event, Brecht's drama was "to develop the revolutionary in the alembic of baseness and vulgarity" (Benjamin 1977, 2.2: 665; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 147) — a political program, communist in its dialectic. And as Wolin (1982: 148) writes, developed into the form of epic theatre it "went far forward fulfilling Benjamin's desire for a de-aestheticised, effective successor to bourgeois autonomous art". By taking vulgarity and baseness as his starting point, Brecht contrasts strongly to what he thought to be traditional contemporary bourgeois theatre, a form of theatre which took its cue specifically from nineteenth-century theatre. As Richard Sennett (1974) points out in his brilliant *The fall of public man* points out, nineteenth-century theatre, contra eighteenth-century theatre, was in essence illusionistic. The eighteenth-century theatre saw the public "interrupting" the actors, for example, if they thought a particular performance to be unconvincing, and where the public often sat up on the stage with the actors, taking cues, applauding or crying vociferously at a moving scene, in reflection of a society which

¹⁶⁰ Scholem also makes this interesting comparison between Brecht's dramas and the dramas of Max Grube: "I sometimes wondered whether Benjamin might have acquainted Brecht with this wonderful volume [Grube's *Chinesische Schattenspiele*, GTS], for Grube's dramas, which range from a waiter's

Fielding believed did not take the appearance for the person, the actor. The appearance was distant from the self, “ought therefore to accustom us to praising or blaming the appearance, the act, and not the actor” (Sennett 1974: 11). The eighteenth-century is the age of enlightenment, of rationality, which had its roots in Leibniz’s *Nihil est sine ratione* (Kundera 1990: 161), as represented by Rousseau, Voltaire and Holbach, but also by Fielding, Sterne, Goethe, Laclos. The nineteenth-century, on the other hand, as represented by Balzac, for instance, believed that the mask *is* the face. Appearance, the clothes and manner of a person, was an intimate route to the person itself. Theatre in the nineteenth-century reflected this “physiognomical” dictum, as in Wagner’s Bayreuth Opera House begun 1872-1876 and its notion of the “mysterious Abgrund” of which Wagner himself wrote: “It makes the spectator imagine the stage is quite far away, though he sees it in all the clearness of its actual proximity; and this in turn gives rise to the illusion that the persons appearing on it are of larger, superhuman stature” (Sennett 1974: 208). In this nineteenth-century conception of theatre, the stage and the spectacle was everything, the actors were gods, geniuses whose superhuman talents could only be experienced and appreciated only through the passivity of “silent awe”. Sennett mentions as prototype of this hero-worship, Paganini the romantic musician whose enigmatic “personality” mesmerised musicians (like List) and listeners alike. Where the audience in the eighteenth-century participated histrionically and in the end, argues Sennett, self-ironically, the recipient of the nineteenth-century spectacle become passive in order to be aroused (Sennett 1974: 209), takes not only the actors very seriously, but also him- or herself. The actors of the eighteenth-century were the public’s servants, those of the nineteenth-century, superstars.

It would be against this nineteenth-century notion of passive consumption, art as spectacle created for the consolation of the bourgeoisie, that Brecht developed epic theatre.¹⁶¹ Rather than providing harmless entertainment for the bourgeois, “theatre as a

monologue to mystery plays deeply rooted in the Buddhist tradition, are closely related to Brecht’s artistic philosophy” (Scholem 1982: 47).

¹⁶¹Incidentally, it will be remembered that Adorno, albeit following different methods, also directed a hefty critique against the Wagnerian total spectacle where the bourgeoisie give themselves over to their hypertrophic feelings. An interesting comparison could be made between the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk and Philip Glass’ sumptuous, all-encompassing, postmodern spectacles.

harmless evening of cultural diversion” (Wolin 1982: 148), epic theatre was designed to destroy the illusionistic facade of well-being. Against the notion of *l’art pour l’art* which does not concern itself with the reception of art, seeing as it does, the artwork as a pure form within itself, Brecht called for a form of theatre which would place the emphasis on the *effect* on the viewer. Wolin points out an interesting turn-about here in Benjamin’s thinking, when earlier on, in his essay on the translator, he wrote that “no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (Benjamin 1992a: 69; qtd. in Wolin 1982: 148), he now wholeheartedly supports Brecht’s program. Again, from the esoteric cluster of adepts Benjamin shifts his attention to the exoteric collective body. What joins the two programs, however, is the notion of rupture, revelation, redemption, shift.

Brecht’s focus on the effect of the play on the audience finds its reason in the attempt to stir the usually complacent and apathetic audience into a critical awareness — on the one hand, an awareness vis-à-vis the artwork, and on the other, that things need not remain the way they are now. By way of this dialectic the artwork shows itself to be just that, a construction, and the audience see themselves to be an audience. The aim is not the fusion of the object and the subject as in Surrealism but the differentiation between the two necessary for a critical distance; in other words, not a passive immersion in the pure work, but the active analysis of, and participation in what is on display. This is achieved by de-constructing or interrupting the elements of the play.

Epic theatre is dialectical, and it is gestural (“*Gestus*” has the double meaning of “gist” and “gesture”). In the first version of “What is epic theatre” Benjamin (1992b: 12), using a familiar vernacular, writes:

His [the actor’s] gesture demonstrates the social significance and applicability of dialectics. It tests conditions on men. The difficulties which a producer meets in rehearsing a play cannot be resolved without concrete understanding of the body of society. But the dialectic which epic theatre sets out to present is not dependent on a sequence of scenes in time; rather, it declares itself in those gestural elements that form the basis of each sequence in time. (These gestural elements are not elemental in the strict sense of the word but only inasmuch as they are simpler than the sequences based upon them.) The thing that is revealed as though by lightning in the

'condition' represented on the stage — as a copy of human gestures, actions and words — is an immanently dialectical attitude.

Epic theatre displays the dialectic at a standstill. It is born not of contradiction but of the gesture itself⁶² And the gesture pertains to the interruption, the caesura of time and action: "the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain". Interruption of action is what makes gestural theatre epic: "It is the retarding quality of these interruptions and the episodic quality of this framing of action which allows gestural theatre to become epic theatre" (Benjamin 1992b: 3 & 4). In this sense, Brecht makes reference to Alfred Döblin's distinction between a dramatic and an epic work: "when he said that with an epic work, as opposed to a dramatic, one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life" (Brecht qtd. in Wolin 1982: 152).

What epic theatre does is interrupt the development of action in order to release more gestures, gestures which *reveal* living conditions in a flash, conditions which should *astonish* the audience. The important thing in this constant dialectic between audience and actor, audience and action, "between the action which is shown on the stage and the attitude of showing an action on the stage" (Benjamin 1992b: 11), is that both the audience and the actors are interrupted, they are both *shown*. Both actors and audience are jolted into astonishment as opposed to the contemplation which the bourgeois theatre of old called for. Importantly, then, astonishment here — as opposed to the radical transformation declared in the gnostic, dark individualistic "madness" of Artaud's unpolitical, absolute "Cruel Theatre" — means the sobering trigger for "cool" social (proletarian) transformation. Gerhard Fischer notes that there is a difference also in Benjamin's model for a proletarian children theatre and epic theatre, although the two are intricately connected: "Brecht's notion of an 'epic theatre', with its claim to represent a 'theatre of the scientific age', underlines the difference'. The attitude of *Verfremden*, or 'distancing', of 'cool' detachment and critical observation in a theatre that functions as a controlled sociological experiment, stands in striking contrast to Benjamin's carnival stage, where the children 'free themselves', a theatre of 'fire', in which 'play and reality

melt into each other', a theatre of *danger*, likely to frighten the bourgeois pedagogues out of their wits" (Fischer 1996: 209). Also in this vein Lehmann (1996) observes that "Benjamin [in his surrealism essay] interpreted 'meanness, revenge, cruelty', in short, the 'cult of evil as a somehow or other Romantic disinfection and isolation technique of politics against any moralising dilettantism'. [...] It was precisely in the anti-moral and amoral phenomena such as cruelty, the desire to destroy, treachery and mendacity that he sought the mental picture of the revolution". Benjamin, in close proximity with his idea on revolution, "emphasizes that the 'uncivilized, inhuman', indeed the 'cannibalistic' side of children must not be overlooked" (Lehmann 1996: 192). Furthermore, astonishment in epic theatre is also not the same as shock in romantic nineteenth-century theatre, which was used to make the moment of performing all-important, bringing its shock closer to the shock in Surrealism in the end. Epic theatre astonishes with reason, calculated chance.

The epic theatre sets out not so much to develop actions, but rather to establish situations, to reveal conditions. It is theatre for the masses with reflections in Benjamin's program for a proletarian theatre for children, a non-ideological theatre for those between four and fourteen, against the "theatre of today's bourgeoisie" which Benjamin derides for its "sensationalism" in front and behind the scenes (Lehmann 1996: 186). A proletarian¹⁶³ theatre will function dialectically as a playroom and a classroom; although the performance is defined as a "prank" and a "carnival", and although Benjamin, almost in an inversion of the schooling process at the heart of epic theatre, fundamentally rejects "any attempt by educators to have a direct effect as 'moral personalities'" (Lehmann 1996: 183), the emphasis falls on "study". In his essay "Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters" (1929) written for Asja Lacis, and at a crucial time of crisis,¹⁶⁴ Benjamin (1970: 80) writes:

¹⁶²Much like the "gesture" of the dialectical image, and Kafka's "gesture" which does not have a fixed symbolic meaning from the start but rather lets them develop into puzzles (Lehman 1996: 194).

¹⁶³A word which Lehmann notes derives from the Latin *proles* meaning offspring, something Benjamin would have been quite aware of.

¹⁶⁴ Gerhard Fischer (1996: 201) notes that Benjamin wrote the *Programm* at a time of crisis both in his personal life with his wife Dora, whom he asked for a divorce due to the arrival of Asja Lacis in 1928; and a crisis due to the taunting question of his life "as an intellectual, 'free-floating' author of bourgeois origin *vis-à-vis* the Communist Party".

Weil nun das ganze Leben in seiner unabsehbaren Fülle gerahmt und als Gebiet einzig und allein auf dem Theater erscheint, darum ist das proletarische Kindertheater für das proletarische Kind der dialektisch bestimmte Ort der Erziehung.

In the programme for a proletarian theater for children it is not the adults who take the children to the theater, it is the children who take the adults to the theatre. It is those in the audience who teach those on the stage, by continually interchanging positions and roles, from actor to audience member and back again, continually being interrupted, and beginning again from another standpoint, with more gestures at hand. What joins Benjamin's *Programm*, for all its "anarchic" improvisation and spontaneity, and Communist epic theatre (as opposed to Brecht's early "anarchistic" plays)¹⁶⁵ is their "implicit critique of bourgeois art, education, aesthetics" (Fischer 1996: 202), albeit from different angles.¹⁶⁶ Of course, the criticism Brecht directed at the bourgeoisie through epic theatre was meant to be much more overt¹⁶⁷ than the criticism implicit in the design of the anarchic "boarding school for young people" (Fischer 1996: 202). This probably also had something to do with the *Programm* remaining a text, never getting the chance to be "tested", so to speak.

Epic theater, as opposed to Benjamin's "anarchic" proletarian theatre, is Marxist in its design: it is founded on an educational dialectic between the base and the superstructure, the worker and the product, the image and the thing. In the dialectic tension between the audience and the play, epic theatre presents its "programme". It does so via a series of interruptions which are designed to make the adult audience aware of its present conditions. The program of epic theatre is designed to initiate the audience into

¹⁶⁵ Wolin (1982: 149) notes that it is important to distinguish between Brecht's earlier "anarchistic" plays, where "the effect was one which merely emphasised provocation or a heightening of social awareness on the part of the audience" and Brecht's later *Lehrstücke*, such as *Der Flug der Lindberghs* and his adaptation of Gorky's *Die Mutter*, where "the social content of the drama became much more explicit — if not didactic".

¹⁶⁶ Lehmann records that Benjamin's *Programm*, for example, in sharp contrast to epic theatre, never had a genuine chance of being performed (Lehmann 1996: 180).

¹⁶⁷ Scholem (1982: 176), for example, makes this dark comment on attending a performance of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* in Berlin in 1932: "I was astonished when I saw that a middle-class audience that had lost all sense of its own situation was here cheering a play in which it was gibed and spat at with a vengeance. Three months before Hitler's assumption of power, for anyone who watched such a spectacle with detachment this was a true prelude of what was to come".

making use of *reason* to question their own circumstances.¹⁶⁸ Brecht called this conscious-making process a process of *alienation*, a *Verfremdungseffekt*, in sharp opposition to the *identification* of the viewer with the work and its characters or superheroes in bourgeois theatre: “statt in den Helden sich einzufühlen, soll das Publikum vielmehr das Staunen über die Verhältnisse lernen, in denen er sich bewegt” (Benjamin 1977, 2.2: 535). In this respect Benjamin’s antipathy toward subjective *Einführung* finds its formal counterpart. Writes Wolin (1982: 149):

By alienating the viewer Brecht sought to forestall an illusory, merely aesthetic resolution of the conflicts that have arisen in the drama and spur the viewer to rational, independent judgment — not just judgment about art, but judgment about crucial facets of life itself which serve as the drama’s content. In epic theatre reason was meant to triumph over emotion.

Against *catharsis*, Brecht saw epic theatre as being non-Aristotelian drama.

In epic theatre the mimetic faculty is called upon in the form of schooling, not in the sense of mere superficial copying, but rather of critical de-construction. The audience learns to be take part at the same time as the actors learn to play at acting — by mimicking the gestures, quoting them out of context, interrupting the context of the actor and the recipient in the process. It is not the actor who is a mime, but rather the mime who is acted (played); and theatre is shown to be theatre. That is to say, there is a heightening of artifice against the illusionistic, aesthetical “aura” of bourgeois traditional theatre; Wolin (1982: 150) writes:

Brecht’s dramas constantly seek to point to their own artificiality, to the fact they are distinct from reality, something merely constructed.

¹⁶⁸If Brecht takes his cue from eighteenth-century rationalism, others argue that this rationality is the cause of Russian totalitarianism. Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the rationality of the Enlightenment as the underlying cause of twentieth-century instrument reason also comes to mind, and one should also not forget Benjamin’s aversion to the reductionism of rationality. Where on the one hand, Benjamin also talks of using reason to clear away the mythology of the nineteenth-century, on the other hand he is profoundly influenced by the mystical text, the irrationality of hermetic poem, the surreality of Aragon. Benjamin’s “anarchism” is disciplined, dialectical. If one remembers the eighteenth-century work of Fielding, Sterne, Goethe and Laclos, as Kundera (1990: 160) does, mentioning Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* as a prime example, than the other side of reason, the without reason, the *sine ratione* opposite of Leibniz’s *Nihil est sine ratione* becomes apparent. Poetry and reason together, but separate.

As artifice, in the *difference* between art and life, the *relevancy* of the play is introduced — through the dialectic of astonishment, critical awareness, and transmutation. By putting its production process out in the open it mimics the Communist program of revealing the dialectic between the base and superstructure of society, in the process demystifying commodity fetishism, the second nature of society. Creating critical awareness of this demystification process through schooling is the reason behind epic theatre; the students are to become experts at experimenting with the various parts in the theatre, but also in the broader society — in order to transform the various elements. This transformation is what Brecht calls *Umfunktionierung*.

Umfunktionierung also denotes a “literarisation”¹⁶⁹ — the incorporation of titles, footnotes, signs, “short commentaries which serve to punctuate and complement the action” (Wolin 1982: 151). By way of the captions, the passive enjoyment experienced in the bourgeois theatre is interrupted. The captions signal (in more ways than one) the critical consciousness of the audience contra the illusionism of traditional theatre — says Brecht: “once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre’s social function” (qtd. in Wolin 1982: 151). Literarisation basically means making the audience socially and politically literate and literally productive.

The gesture, the quote, signs, the montage principle: these are elements introduced into the play for effect, to stimulate critical questioning. Action is interrupted so that gestures can become quotable, and the quotation of gestures interrupts contexts the way quoted texts do. According to Benjamin (1995: 571) quotations act like delays, like shocks to the system, like “robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions”. Quotations, that is, quoting out of context, interrupt a scene, freezing the moment, spatialising the action, pictorialising the scene, causing the actors to both show and be shown, forcing, in this start-stop way, the actors and the audience to take inventory of now estranged conditions revealed in a flash: “es kann so

¹⁶⁹ A concept dear to Benjamin in, for example, his reading of photography and film. See his essay “The Author as Producer” on the need to use of captions in photography (Benjamin 1992b: 95); and also on the need for a broader “literarisation of all living conditions” (96).

kommen, aber es kann auch ganz anders kommen" (Benjamin 1977, 2.2: 525). In other words, the quote freezes the normal continuum of life and of things "in order to subject them to an intensive process of critical scrutiny" (Wolin 1982: 152). Hence the connection between epic theatre and the dialectic at a standstill: in both cases the "gesture" is quoted out of context in order to estrange the things, "in the hope that [the recipient or viewer] would cease to regard them as natural and acceptable" (Wolin 1982: 152). Coupled to this would be the flash of (revolutionary) recognition underlying both principles, the dialectical signal for awakening recurring in Benjamin's work throughout.

The shock in the transformation of the old into the new, as mentioned before in the perspective of Benjamin's dialectical images — generated from the method of Surrealism which sees the liberating new novelty in kitsch, transformed into the socially more fruitful epic theatre — has its artistic model ultimately in the editing room of film or cinematic art: that is, in the conception of *montage*. Wolin (1982: 152) writes:

The essential characteristic of montage-construction is the autonomy of the individual parts versus the work of art as a whole. In this respect it is a procedure which proves fundamentally inimical to the afore-mentioned "work-character" of art [as in the total, organic, autonomous artwork, GTS]; and it also proves antithetical to one of the mandatory prerequisites of drama as defined by Aristotle's Poetics: the unity of time and place.

With montage, and the technical advances made in the medium of film, Brecht's idea of interruption and alienation against the bourgeois notion of empathy, the total work of art, and the unity of mind, finds fruition. That several disparate fragments or moments (as in Benjamin's allegorical reading of *Bruchstücke* contra the unity of symbol) may co-exist *separately* forces the audience to make decisions, to take stock of the scene, to assume the distance essential for a critical attitude. That is, instead of an overall picture into which the viewer immerses him- or herself, instead of Wagner's "mystische Abgrund", Brecht does away with the "abyss" of bourgeois theatre [as conceptualised in "the filling-in of the orchestra pit" (Benjamin 1992b: 1)]. The fragment, the estranged object, the isolated moment in the interrupted scene necessitates the audience's participation. Passive absorption or consumption is negated in this way with a bodily commitment to make sense of the scene, to test its validity. Writes Benjamin (qtd. in Wolin 1982: 153) of epic theatre:

Epic theatre proceeds from fits and starts, in a manner comparable to the images on a film strip. Its basic form is that of the forceful impact on one another of separate sharply distinct situations of the play. The songs, the captions, the gestural conventions, differentiate the scenes. As a result intervals tend to occur which destroy illusion. These intervals paralyse the audience's capacity for empathy.

What is presented and enacted is not mere subjectivity, but rather an objective scrutiny at what is uncovered: again, not the representation of reality but its uncovering. Epic theater is developed with the view to reveal and demystify the capitalist conditions inherent in illusionist bourgeois theatre. By its rationale in the society — that is, much in the manner of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism contemporaneous — it questions the idea that theatre must be entertaining. Epic theatre questions the elitist principles of bourgeois theatre, where the few go to be entertained; Brecht desires to give the theatre and its content back to the workers. Hence the "crudeness" of its street language, its bare essentials, as spoken by the workers, ruffians and criminals which populate his plays. Moreover, as Benjamin has pointed out, following his principle of dialectical "profane illumination" which sees redemption or transmutation through the waste of the everyday, Brecht sees a revolutionary potential latent in these crude people. The base makes an actual transformation of the current living condition possible. Or said differently, with an eye on technique: by exposing the way theatre works in the play itself, current living conditions which mirror such a process are exposed.¹⁷⁰

As epic theatre is theatre about theatre, it is an experience about experience, or better, against it. As Benjamin will have it, the epic play reveals through the artificial performance the subjective *Erlebnis* of bourgeois theatre, in so doing opening the door for a true *Erfahrung*, that of the proletarian collective: "das Spectrum des 'Erlebnisse' zu zerlegen, um ihm die Farben der 'Erfahrung' abzugewinnen" (Benjamin 1977, 2.2: 537). And it does so by letting the audience interchange with the actors, so that they play themselves. Furthermore, the actors act acting. This freedom and spontaneity to be able to change all the time (recalling the notion of allegory meaning absolutely anything else) is a

¹⁷⁰To be sure, Adorno would argue that in the autonomous work such an exposure occurs dialectically, *immanently*; Brecht detests such subtlety, for better and worse.

lesson that is learned through the performance or play by everyone, experienced by actors and audience alike. It is this which, according to Brecht and Benjamin, enables real change in the form of praxis distinct from the theatre.¹⁷¹

In other words, within the framing or parameters of the theatre, within the limitations of the theatre as dramatic laboratory contra the illusion or aestheticisation of life, through the interruption of life, so to speak, inventory is taken, conditions are divulged, tested. This critical experience is communal, it is shared by everyone. In fact, says Brecht, the testing experience turns every person into an expert — an idea which will return in Benjamin's Artwork essay. Brecht (Wolin 1982: 151) writes rather idealistically: "By these means [the various techniques of epic theatre, GTS] one would soon have a theatre full of experts, just as one has sporting arenas full of experts". One need only think of the mass hysteria; the blind cheering for "one's team"; the barbaric jeering of one side at another, of one person at the next, both believing, of course, that they *know best*; the drunken switch to violence which is the flip-side of the coin of the apparent brotherhood and expertise experienced at the sports spectacle;¹⁷² the fine line between patriotism and the ugly face of nationalism, to note the worrisome aspect of Brecht's theory. This, then, also points to a tendency of "crude" undialectical positivism in Brecht's philosophy of art, which Adorno on numerous occasions pointed out to Benjamin.

Laughter would be another stimulant for communality. Benjamin wrote in "Erfahrung und Armut" that laughter is the binding force of the collective, and he writes in "Der Autor als Produzent": "insbesondere bietet die Erschütterung des Zerfalls dem Gedanken gewöhnlich bessere Chancen dar als die der Seele. Das epische Theater ist üppig nur in Anlässen des Gelächters" (Benjamin 1977, 2.2: 699). Laughing at oneself has emancipatory and even revolutionary potential: laughing releases nervous energy, frees one from constraint, be that the constraint of a bourgeois petty morality or an anal-retentive insistence on good manners, the restraints of any system for that matter. Of course, laughter at others has its barbaric undertones, as in the image of a jeering mob joining in, laughing and shouting at a shaven woman being run out of town.

¹⁷¹Fielding's belief that the actor was not the person, comes to mind again.

¹⁷²Although, to be sure, watching and talking sport with a stranger is often an immediate and wonderful link with them, contra Umberto Eco's entertaining critique of sports chatter. Cf. Eco 1986: 159-165.

In the epic play the mimetic faculty is called upon once more in the form of schooling — but not mere superficial copying, rather critical de-construction. The audience learns to be astonished at the same time as the actors learn to play at acting — by mimicking the gestures, quoting them out of context, interrupting the context of the actor and the recipient. It is not the actor who is a mime, but rather the mime who is acted (played); the play is shown to be a play (perhaps in a similar way in which the Baroque allegory functions as a play-within-a-play, although Brecht would probably reject its irony and subtlety). The play *cut up* as a play takes on sociological and political significance in the sense of extinguishing the illusion of the appearance of things.

The de-construction of the play — putting the process out in the open by crudely appointing the subtext as the main text, and/or adopting a sophisticated attitude of reading in-between the lines as in the allegory of *Trauerspiel*, for example — means aiming at the interruption, disruption, and destruction of the illusion of reality. This implies not the representation of aestheticisation, but its uncovering. In theory, and for a limited time in practise, the uncovering of the internal workings of the play on stage shocks¹⁷³ the audience into realising a similar process in society: one of fragmentation, disparity, disconnectedness, mechanisation, technologisation, alienation, a politics of bourgeois suppression. Benjamin, following Brecht, argued that in a time which aestheticised the poverty of experience, what was needed was a political consciousness to go against the current (the question of the *form* it will take remains a matter of contention). Benjamin thought he saw a social model for this consciousness of “poverty” in the “new barbarians”.

¹⁷³ Again, the shock here would not be the one used by the actors of the Romantic nineteenth-century theatre, who were perceived to be powerful persons by their ability to arouse shock.

4. The poverty of experience

The historical period in which Benjamin was writing, mainly between the 1920s and the 1930s, was *fragmentary* to a fundamental degree: fragments were what was left behind after the First World War; audio fragments after the radio and the improvisations of Jazz; voice fragments after the telephone; fragments of time and site after the train and the photograph; *Umwelt* fragments after the automobile; fragments of movement, space and sight after the cinema; fragments of social intercourse after the electric light; fragments of nature after mechanical reproduction; phantasmagoric and fetished fragments after the capitalist mass production; temporal and currency fragments after the World Fairs; fragments of speech after recording devices in general; literary or text fragments after the newspaper; musical fragments after the phonograph — the paradoxes in the *Zersplitterung* of twentieth-century society have their root-cause in the nineteenth-century. Margaret Morse (1991: 164) writes illuminatingly on *discontinuity* as a result of the invention of the locomotive:

The railroad, feature of the first wave of industrialisation, united distant places along a track sequentially — but at the cost of making space discontinuous. What is in-between stations loses meaning as real space and becomes visually-appreciated landscape. It was the railroad which also brought to consciousness the separate nature of sight and sound; at the speed of train travel, the image of the train is separate from the sound of the whistle. (And the discovery of the Doppler effect is attributed to observation of the changing pitch of a train whistle.) The automobile has an effect similar to a train on space, except that one has more points of departure and destination in its traces. The telegraph and telephone also separate the interlocutors of discourse from the limits of spatial continuity — except that of a wire. The electric light freed human activity from its temporal regulations by daylight; energy freed the sphere of labor from private life even further. The phonograph frees sound from its place, time and subjectivity of origin; the camera abolishes time by fixing the image, and abolishes spatial continuity by bringing life-like images of distant places to the viewer. Eyes and ears of nineteenth-century spectators were displaced along wires, tracks, roads, and filaments of diverging places and times.

Temporally and spatially speaking technology breaks things into parts, into mechanical fragments. Modernism might quite adequately be, and often is, represented by the machine. It is both celebrated and condemned by representatives of modernism. Some celebrated the new technological fragmentariness for various didactic, ceremonial, or theistic reasons; others mourned the human losses it caused. In modernist thought and art some criticised the insidious alienating properties of the machine,¹⁷⁴ others sought to utilise it to create a new contemporary consciousness. The futurists, under Marinetti, celebrated war and machines as beautiful; the fascists celebrated the machine through the militia; the surrealists inquired into the phantasmagoric and fetishistic undertones of the motor; the dadaists cracked jokes at the machine in its various ironic forms.¹⁷⁵

The space and traffic of the modern nineteenth-century city was fundamentally a mechanised one, and this spilled over into the early twentieth-century.¹⁷⁶ Immanently read, the space defined by the machine becomes the fragmentary industrial modern (cyberspace “is” the post-structural imagistic post-modern). The early modernist city was a mechanical metropolis, running on mechanical parts, and the unseen workers were the stokers that kept the capitalist and the socialist flame burning.¹⁷⁷ It is in this industrial context, in the vein of Georg Simmel and Aby Warburg, Benjamin focused on the politics of aesthetics, the experience of the fragmented image. In the modern fragment Benjamin saw the need for a political philosophy of art and history.

In terms of German party politics in-between the first and second World Wars there consisted mainly three factions: Communism or Bolshevism, Social Democracy and Fascism or Nazism.¹⁷⁸ Benjamin believed the Communist program to be the only viable

¹⁷⁴Georg Simmel and expressionism come to mind.

¹⁷⁵Marcel Duchamp claimed that painting was dead, and occupied himself with the gadget; later he claimed art was dead and occupied himself entirely with the plasticity of the game of chess.

¹⁷⁶Late twentieth-century sees a virtual, network space, a cyberspace, a world of appearance and simulation where the “techno” look of the “machine” becomes “futuristic”.

¹⁷⁷Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* is a cult classic focusing on the stooped figures of the workers as cogs in the machine.

¹⁷⁸It will be remembered that there was a difference between the Communism of Germany and the rest of Europe (German Bolshevism as illustrated by the German Dadaists was strikingly fundamentalist, a little like the Italian Futurists with their fascist undertones), whilst for Benjamin French Communism or anarchism seemed the more viable political option — at least in the early years of his exile in France. It must also be noted that Benjamin seldom had any misconceptions about the long-term durability of party politics in general.

political program for revolutionary change — in stark opposition to what he thought to be the petty-bourgeois complacency of the Social-Democratic programme against Fascism. Though he toyed with the idea of joining the party, he never did. Communism appealed to Benjamin as an idea, not as a school or dogma. He thought that only the viewer — the intellectual writer and artist — on the outskirts could form an objective, revolutionary picture, albeit a fragmentary, temporary one. He wrote to Scholem (Scholem 1989: 109-110):

I believe that my image in you is not that of a man who easily and needlessly commits himself to a “credo.” You know that my writings have certainly always conformed to my convictions, but that I have only seldom made the attempt — and then only in conversation — to express the whole contradictory grounds from which those convictions arise in the individual manifestations they have taken.

Arendt (1992: 36) notes:

what strikes one as indecision in [Benjamin’s] letters, as though he were vacillating between Zionism and Marxism, in truth was probably due to the bitter insight that all solutions were not only objectively false and inappropriate to reality, but would lead him personally to a false salvation, no matter whether that salvation was labelled Moscow or Jerusalem.

His friend Adorno, a neo-Marxist at best, criticized him for his vulgar Brechtian Marxism; Martin Jay (1973: 239) notes that “Zij [Scholem, Adorno, the Frankfurter Schule] waren het er allen over eens dat vooral het overnemen van Brecht’s botte, zelfs vulgaire, materialisme noodlottig voor Benjamin was. Bijna even ongelukkig, ten minste in Adorno’s ogen, was dat Benjamin de al te optimistische houding van zijn vriend tegenover het revolutionair potentiaal van de massakunst en van de technologische vernieuwing overnam”. Paul Johnson (1988: 188) in true belligerent fashion reports that “One of the reasons why Adorno and his friends disliked Brecht so much was that they resented his identification with the ‘workers’, which they rightly saw as humbug. Of course their own claim to understand what ‘the workers’ really wanted, felt and believed was equally without foundation; they led entirely middle-class lives too and, like Marx himself, never met the sons of toil. But at least they did not dress up as proles, in clothes carefully

designed by expensive tailors". Benjamin's most intimate friend, Gershom Scholem, a self-proclaimed Zionist, criticised him for maintaining a political posture that had a detrimental effect on him and his work. He wrote critically, in a letter, of Benjamin's Marxist method in his Fuchs essay: "Marxist insights always remain mired in methodology and never reach the realm of the factual (in the ideological domain — as goes without saying). Where the factual appears, it explodes the limits of the so-called method. Your feeling for art agrees only in the most dialectical fashion with the apparatus you serve up so admirably. I would feel better without it, and I am sadly convinced: you would as well. There is too damned much self-denial in this manner of writing" (Scholem 1989: 206-207).

At any rate, Benjamin's position on political matters takes its departure from his own experiences: "That, among all the possible forms and means of expression, a credo is the last thing my communism resorts to; that — even at the cost of its orthodoxy — my communism is absolutely nothing other than the expression of certain experiences I have undergone in my thinking and in my life; that it is a drastic, not infertile expression of the fact that the present intellectual industry finds it impossible to make room for my thinking" (Scholem 1989: 110). Benjamin's personal experience was one of exile, diaspora, impecuniousness, impermanence, precariousness, general instability. But rather than remain impotent in this personal way, Benjamin insisted that through the personal he could illuminate a particular social and historical context.

Following an argument pivoting on Brecht's marking of "a point at which certain works are not so much intended to represent individual experiences (i.e. to have the character of finished works) as they are aimed at using (transforming) certain existing institutes and institutions.' It is not [writes Benjamin] spiritual renewal, as the fascists proclaim it, that is desirable; what is proposed is technical innovation" (Benjamin 1992b: 93). Benjamin's own experience lends him the power to shed light on a broader experience, giving his sometime uneasily contradictory criticism — through their technical innovation — a sociological significance. Whether immanently or committed to the theory of *l'art engage*, dialectically speaking, Benjamin's writing in a contemporary reading shows significant social factors in terms of his theory for transforming the means of production, *in the writing itself*. The matter of change and revolution, Benjamin argues,

may also be helped along through change in actual writing technique, which doubly reflects a need for social transmutation. In other words, and in a somewhat subversive reading of the communist program, in avant-gardist fashion Benjamin thought that change in the form art takes may further the revolutionary change needed in the world or society it reflects (one may talk here of the notion of creating a critical consciousness in both didactic and eminent artworks). The *performative dimension* Eva Geulen notices in Benjamin's criticism with regards his concept of "aura" may refer to Benjamin's overall method in principle.¹⁷⁹

Benjamin did not think art for its own sake was viable in a time of crisis. Whether one spoke out as Brecht did, remained silent like Benjamin initially did, or adopted an anarchic attitude — the artist of intellectual was making a "political" stand.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, it is not a contradiction that where Benjamin's philosophical method would necessitate intense scrutiny,¹⁸¹ he derided the "comfortable contemplation" of the bourgeois. Benjamin maintains that during a time of social change, a different political and social situation demands a different attitude. He writes: "we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance"(Benjamin 1992b: 89). Like Nietzsche, Benjamin derided the tradition and luxury of bourgeois thinking: "We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it", Nietzsche wrote, and Benjamin attached it as an adage to point XII of his *Theses on the Philosophy of history*. The transition from contemplation through a change in "style" as a reflection of the means of production is to be read as a political move against bourgeois passivity which in its interioristic phantasmagoria reflect a fascist aestheticisation of reality. What needed to be done, Benjamin believed, was a subversive rehabilitation¹⁸² of bourgeois thinking in order to prevent the passive acceptance of phantasmagoria or "fascist-magoria" in general. Benjamin (1992b: 102)

¹⁷⁹ See Gashé 1994: 202.

¹⁸⁰In the end, and perhaps only with the gift of hindsight again, the esoteric text has its own political and historical validity and significance, not to be denied by the need for an exoteric text or epic play.

¹⁸¹In his *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin spoke of the need for philosophical contemplation.

¹⁸²Perhaps in the way of the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" in which Benjamin calls for a re-newal of traditional philosophical terminology.

commends Aragon for this insight: "The revolutionary intellectual appears first of all and above everything else as a traitor to his class and origin". Against his bourgeois class (and against factions in general) the revolutionary redemption, so to speak, occurs in the actual writing process, as in the functional transformation of its form of production signals this turn-about — both Benjamin and Adorno, for example, turned to the essay as a means to "interrupt" the arduous bourgeois tome; Benjamin's rehabilitation of allegory denotes in essence a subversion of the traditional notion of symbol; Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book is in fact a subversion of traditional academic procedure. Redemption is here signalled through the *Bruchstück*, the small, the incomplete: uncovering the objective truth behind the subjective appearance of things; redeeming the broken forgotten behind an aesthetic air of completion, wholeness, progress; salvaging reality behind the illusion; revealing the poverty behind the facade of wealth and luxury.

The fragmentary world of fascism and capitalism — known in the dialectical relationship between the modern industrial environment and the mythical original or primordial catastrophic landscape, the abyss between the commodification and fetishisation of reality — denotes a poverty of experience. Being under the spell of the capitalist and fascist aestheticisation of reality means being under the sway of the mythical thing.¹⁸³ In this case the commodity is merely illusionary: it turns the "recipient" into a passive and ignorant consumer of his and her own poverty, by which "the struggle against misery" is turned "into an object of consumption" (Benjamin 1992b: 96). Benjamin's revolutionary intellectual would write fundamentally against this illusionism, against "Agents or hacks who make a great display of their poverty and turn the gaping void into a feast" (Benjamin 1992b: 97). In Benjamin's programme, following Brecht's programme for epic theatre, the consumer is to be transformed into a collaborator, ignorance into critical consciousness, mere consumption into awareness — instead of the anaesthetisation of the senses, their sharpening.

¹⁸³ Benjamin (1992b: 99) writes: "the theatre of culture or that of entertainment ... is the theatre of a saturated stratum for which anything that comes its way is a stimulant".

Redemption or liberation is signalled in through the interruption of the bourgeois and fascist aestheticisation processes.¹⁸⁴ One may again refer to this interruption as a consciousness-making process. Being critically aware of one's (fragmentary) environment gives one control over it. Knowledge in this sense means not the idle knowledge of the bourgeois philistine but the power to change the environment. Thoughtful action must now takes precedence over contemplation. Benjamin (1992b: 101) writes in his essay "The Author as Producer" — an essay he delivered in true subversive fashion, going against the grain, against fashionable cliques, to a an audience of Party members, who needless to say, were not impressed by Benjamin's insistence on avant-gardist notions of revolutionising artistic form. For Benjamin one critical demand is made on the revolutionary intellectual, the writer, the artist:

the demand to *think*, to reflect upon his position in the production process. We can be sure that such thinking, *in the writers who matter* — that is to say the best technicians in their particular branches of the trade — will sooner or later lead them to confirm very soberly their solidarity with the proletariat.

This solidarity also means a betrayal of the intellectual's own class, "an attitude which transforms him, from a supplier of the production apparatus, into an engineer who sees his task in adapting the apparatus to the ends of the proletarian revolution". Benjamin (1992b: 102 & 86) writes: "this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly included in every correct political tendency, this and nothing else makes up the quality of the work. It is because of this that the correct political tendency of a work extends also to its literary quality: because a political tendency which is correct comprises a literary tendency which is correct". The writing and its politics gets a dialectical treatment in terms of the quality (as opposed to Benjamin's earlier philosophical conception of *Ursprunglichkeit*, authenticity) of its form and content: the way in which the text re-functions its own textuality performs the validity and quality of its political position. Even here, or precisely here, in his Communist transformation, Benjamin retains a trace of aristocracy: crucially there is mediocre and hack art which needs to be criticised. Neither revolutionary art, nor

¹⁸⁴ For Benjamin both the bourgeois and the fascist system suffer from bad ideology — in fact, Benjamin sees the former as portending the latter.

the revolutionary intellectual, merely toes the Party line. In the tradition of going against the tradition, the cliché is subverted.

In Benjamin's theories, a modern world on the brink of disaster played the determining moves. As mentioned before, Benjamin's philosophy of history pivots on a notion of catastrophe and crisis. The crisis of criticism is closely linked to a crisis of perception, and of experience. This is where Benjamin's 1933 essay, "Erfahrung und Armut", an essay which like much of Benjamin's work, concerns itself with the dialectic between the old and the new, nature and culture, the organic and the mechanical, experience and mimesis, language and expression, the ephemeral and the eternal. The *modern* expression and experience, the modern, according to Benjamin, implies a decay in experience, a development which, however, has positive potential in its more negative manifestations. As in his earlier essay "Erfahrung", Benjamin under the inspiration of youth, writes of a certain type of "experience" which can be done without, the type of experience which the bourgeois pedagogue thinks to be a "prize possession", a commodity owned like a status symbol, an idea also implicit in the bourgeois philosophy of progress: "solche Erfahrungen hat man uns, drohend oder begütigend, solange wir heranwachsen entgegengehalten: 'Grüner Junge, er wil schon mitreden.' 'Du wirst's schon noch erfahren'" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 214). Whereas Benjamin with a metaphysical conception of *Geist* earlier on argued against the bourgeois adult claim to have had experienced (thus authorising their claim to know what life is about, as opposed to the inexperienced youth), in his later essay he takes a materialist standpoint. The latter he thinks with Brecht, being the only adequate model for the particular spirit of the times. It is a period where the possibility of experience has degenerated, that is, with regards the oral tradition of handing down wisdom, telling stories, actually sharing death, living at a time, as in the generation of 1914-1918, where war silences people: "...die Leute kamen verstummt aus die Felde? Nicht reicher, ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfahrung" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 213). Benjamin (1977, 2.1: 215) talks of the poverty of experience in the age of the technology of war, resulting in a galvanisation which has broader allegorical significance:

Eine ganz neue Armseligkeit ist mit dieser ungeheuren Entfaltung der Technik über die Menschen gekommen. Und von dieser Armseligkeit ist der beklemmende Ideenreichtum, der mit der Wiederbelebung von Astrologie und Yogaweisheit, Christian science und Chiromantie, Vegetarianismus und Gnosis, Scholastik und Spiritismus unter — oder vielmehr über — die Leute kam, die Kehrseite. Denn nicht echte Wiederbelebung findet hier statt, sondern eine Galvanisierung. Man muß an die großartigen Gemälde von Ensor denken, auf denen ein Spuk die Straßen großer Städte erfüllt: karnevalistisch verummte Speißbürger, mehlbetäubte verzernte Masken Flitterkronen über die Stirne, wälzen sich unabsehbar die Gassen entlang. die Gemälde sind vielleicht nichts so sehr als Abbild der schauerlichen und chaotischen Renaissance, auf die so viele ihre Hoffnungen stellen. Aber hier zeigt sich am deutlichsten: unsere Erfahrungsarmut ist nur Teil der großen Armut, die wieder ein Gesicht — von solcher Schärfe und Genauigkeit wie das der Bettler im Mittelalter — bekommen hat. Denn was ist das ganze Bildungsgut wert, wenn uns nicht eben Erfahrung mit ihm verbindet?

With this poverty of experience, which is not private but “nur ein Teil der großen Armut”, comes the need for the construction of a new language, a language free from the authority of the *Sprichwörtern* of the elders, but replaced by the mottoes of new emblems: “Neue Denksprüche (wohl alle aus Brecht) feiern die Entkräftung der ältesten Erfahrungen” (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1105). A language that reflects the new, in the manner of the new, a “Neue Barbarentum”.

The model for this new language is the industrial/technological language of the new barbarians, *Konstrukteure*, whom Benjamin cites to be people like Descartes and Einstein: Paul Klee, Brecht, Loos, Scheerbart. “Die neuen Barbaren sind Konstrukteure: Brecht: Das Geschriebene ist ihm nicht Werk, sondern Apparat, Instrument” (Benjamin 1977, 2,2: 666). Through a positive re-definition of barbarism, it will be the avant-gardist language of the “new barbarians”. Benjamin (1977, 2.1: 215) writes:

Wir sagen es, um einen neuen, positiven Begriff des Barbarentums einzuführen. Denn wohin bringt die Armut an Erfahrung den Barbaren? Sie bringt ihn dahin, von vorn zu beginnen; von Neuen anzufangen; mit Wenigen auszukommen; aus Wenigen herauszukonstruieren und dabei weder rechts noch links zu blicken.

The new language of these “anarchic” but “constructive” engineers, who do not look left or right, who do not pay lip service to any one system except its own sovereignty, is one

of perpetual subversion and transformation, of frugality in terms of technique, poverty in terms of organisation (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1105), akin in spirit to allegory and *Trauerspiel*, in having as its determining factor tyrannical arbitrary construction (*willkürlichen Konstruktiven*) opposed to the organic, the humanities. In a landscape strewn with ruins, “der winzige gebrechliche Menschenkörper”, warfields electric under unchanged skies, “einem Kraftfeld zersertörender Ströme and Explosionen” (Benjamin 1977, 2.1 : 214), only the inorganic and brutal language can adequately point the way through the inhuman rubble — an organic language would merely signify impotence, the picturesque, sentimentality. A dehumanised (“*entmenschte*”), mechanised, industrialised language is crucial as found in the Russian names signifying revolutionary praxis: “sie nennen sie Oktober nach dem Revolutionsmonat oder ‘Pjatiletka’, nach dem Fünfjahrplan, oder ‘Awiachim’ nach einer Gesellschaft für Luftfahrt. Keine technische Erneuerung der Sprache, sondern ihre Mobilisierung im Dienste des Kampfes oder der Arbeit; jedenfalls der Veränderung der Wirklichkeit, nicht ihrer Beschreibung (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 217). This, of course, is mechanical mobilisation in the schooling of Marx.

The change of reality by innovation is the revolt against the plush bourgeois *Intérieur* (“das Elend der Interieurs”), of secretiveness (*Geheimnis*),¹⁸⁵ and the aura of possessions; the task of the new barbarians is the “Abschaffung des Möbels” (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1105). Benjamin hails Loos and Le Corbusier’s glass architecture as the prototype of this changing attitude. He writes:

Glas ist nicht umsonst ein so hartes und glattes Material, an dem sich nichts festsetzt. Auch ein kaltes und nüchternes. Die Dinge aus Glas haben keine “Aura”. Das Glas ist überhaupt der Feind des Geheimnisses. Es ist auch der Feind des Besitzes (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 217).

This glasmilieu is aimed at the effacing of traces (Brecht’s “Verwische die Spuren”), to clarify or enlighten contra concealment, to achieve transparency with regard to personal relations, and the relations between the social and the economic. Benjamin (1977, 2.2: 217-218) writes:

¹⁸⁵ This idea does not fit well with Benjamin as a person who was infamous for his secretiveness, a trait Adorno referred to as “mystery mongering”.

Das haben nun Scheerbart mit seinem Glas und das Bauhaus mit seinem Stahl zuwege gebracht: sie haben räum geschaffen in denen es schwer ist, Spuren zu hinterlassen. "Nach dem Gesagten", erklärt Scheerbart vor nun zwanzig Jahren, "können wir wohl von einer 'Glaskultur' sprechen. Das neue Glas-Milieu wird den Menschen vollkommen umwandeln. Und es ist nun nur zu wünschen, daß die neue Glaskultur nichts allzu viele Gegner findet".

Gide once wrote that "Jedes Ding, das ich besitzen will, wird mir undurchsichtig" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 217), an idea which has implications on several levels. Glass represents living out in the open, as with epic theatre, putting or ex-pressing the process up front.¹⁸⁶ Glass houses are a model for a Scheerbartian utopian space, a light society which has no skeletons in the cupboard, no imperviousness, no Rosicrucian secrets. The glasmilieu means awakening and alertness as opposed to the obfuscation of gossip and idle chatter. But tellingly, glass turns into mirror, the glass city into a city of mirrors which Benjamin describes lucently in his *Passagenwerk*, having no illusions on this point: "When two mirrors reflect each other, Satan plays his favourite trick and (like his partner in the gaze of lovers) opens a perspective onto infinity. Whether out of divine or Satanic inspiration, Paris has a passion for mirrored perspectives" (Benjamin 1982: 1050). The mirror architecture of late capitalism shows a return of the repressed: the penchant to look at ourselves and others whilst being concealed from the gaze of others (that dangerous Sartrean look which fixates us, makes us self-conscious), which to be sure, has both satanic and divine undertones. More, with the domination of narcissism one may talk with Benjamin of a "Bagatellisierung der Erotik" (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1105).¹⁸⁷

The poverty of experience, however, is a positive phenomena for the new barbarians, it enables them to break free from the confines of traditional language and the "soiled" language of culture:

¹⁸⁶ Benjamin commends Paul Klee for his "barbaric" vision of the inner in crucial distinction from the inward: "Dem Innern mehr als der Innerlichkeit: das macht sie barbarisch" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 216). Klee's "Figures" (marking a semiotic sign), as in the work of mathematicians or the cubists, show their raw plan in the product, drawn into the faces: "Denn Klees Figuren sind gleichsam auf dem Reißbrett entworfen und gehorchen, wie ein gutes Auto auch in der Karosserie vor allem den Notwendigkeiten des Motors, so im Ausdruck ihrer Mienen vor allem dem Innern" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 215-216).

¹⁸⁷ Of course, this living out in the open recalls the totalitarian society where no one is allowed any secrets. If the glasmilieu in practise might mean the loss of privacy as in the totalitarian society where everyone informs on everyone else, utopian ideology needs to be rethought.

Erfahrungsarmut, das heißt also reinen Tisch machen zu können, den Verheißungen des Humanismus, 'des Menschen' und 'der Kultur' zu mißtrauen und der Realitäten der Masse und der Technik ins Auge zu sehen. Erfahrungsarmut, das heißt zuallererst: Verzicht auf den kulturgeschichtlichen Reichtum, der in den Händen der Bourgeoisie faulig geworden ist (Lindner 1978: 184).

As opposed to bourgeois culture and politics, the new barbarians desire to divulge the contemporary situation, through the technical speech of the present. Their task is to purify "architecture", cleaning away bourgeois secrecy and possessiveness, by airing out the museum- and mausoleum-like quality of the interieur (or "inner terror"). Le Corbusier's 1927 Weissenhof Housing project and the now famous 1928-1930 Villa Savoye represent the technicality of the new barbaric vision: the house as a machine made for living. The Russian architect Lissitzky wrote that "Raum ist nicht für die Augen da, ist kein Bild: man will darin leben"; and "Der Raum ist für die Menschen da — nicht der Mensch für den Raum" (qtd. in Müller 1978: 308). What is desired is useful minimalism as opposed to the useless cluttering of furniture; the sober articulation of open space as opposed to the obstruction of antiques. Against the exorbitant decorations of Art Nouveau, the new architecture is a language of minimal units.¹⁸⁸

The new barbarians despise a culture dressed in frills, aesthetical twirls, the ornament. In the words of Adolf Loos whose motto is "Ornament ist Verbrechen" and too feminine:¹⁸⁹ "Ich schreibe nur für Menschen, die modernes Empfinden besitzen [...] Für Menschen, die sich in Sehnsucht nach der Renaissance oder dem Rokoko verzehren,

¹⁸⁸ Fredric Jameson (1995: 105) with familiar eloquence writes: "As in film, the first questions are those of minimal units: the words built space, or at least its substantives, would seem to be rooms, categories which are syntactically or syncategorematically related and articulated by the various spatial verbs and adverbs — corridors, doorways, and staircases, for example — modified in turn by adjectives in the form of paint and furnishings, decoration and ornament (whose puritanical denunciation by Adolf Loos offers some interesting parallels). Meanwhile, these 'sentences' — if that indeed is what building can be said to 'be' — are read by readers whose bodies fill the various shifter-slots and subject positions; while the larger text into which such units are inserted can be assigned to the text-grammar of the urban as such (or perhaps, in a world system, to even vaster geographies and their syntactic laws)". One could say that Le Corbusier's *Unite d'Habitation* in fact looks like a text, carefully spatialised, like a De Stijl abstract. In this way, Benjamin's commendation of the cleaning up and airing out program of the new city space builders is well-nigh allegorically self-referential of his cutting down of bourgeois language proper. The structure of a lighter space is the question of both.

¹⁸⁹ In postmodern architecture one finds a "feminist" return to ornament against the puritanical, male-centered, constructions of Adolf Loos.

schreibe ich nicht" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 216). Incidentally, Benjamin had always been critical of the façades of *Jugendstil*, its nebulous ornamentalism,¹⁹⁰ but his intended project on them never reached fruition. When he writes, "The climber of facades must make the best use of every ornament" (Abbas 1987: 48), he suggests being critically aware of the physiognomy of this style, in order to go beyond it, to transform it. Which would mean a dialectic between Benjamin's and Kraus's criticism of the ornamentalism of newspapers and on the other hand, Benjamin's idea that "the place where the word is most debased — that is to say, the newspaper — becomes the very place where the rescue operation can be mounted" (Benjamin 1992b: 90). In other words, the new forms, the new technology, are the only things with which to reach the masses, these are the things they are familiar with. In order to change a situation, one must use the language of the situation critically. In this case, the ability of getting along with little becomes visionary.

The present is to be revealed through its poverty, paraphrasing Brecht: "Kommunismus sei nicht die gerechte Verteilung des Reichtums sondern der Armut" (Benjamin 1977, 2.1: 216). A world in danger (of fascist spiritualism as in a Wagnerian hypertrophy of the soul, of aesthetification of war, illustrated by a complacent bourgeois world in decline) needs change rather than a feigning of ignorance — not romantic escapism, the representation of reality hiding behind the sentimental veil of capitalist entertainment, but intelligent exposure. According to Benjamin, the masses need a collective dream which prompt them into revolutionary action rather than passive consumption. Furthermore, Benjamin argues that the individual should be inhumane in order to inject a new type of humanity into the masses:¹⁹¹ "vielleicht muß der Einzelne etwas Unmenschliches an sich haben, damit die Gesamtheit, die bisher so oft unmenschlich war, menschlich werde". The new man and woman needs to have something of the cannibal in their attitude, having a different kind of experience, that of *Einverleibung* in

¹⁹⁰ In his 1931 essay "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie", Benjamin (1988: 138) writes critically: "So wurde, zumal im Jugendstil, ein schummeriger Ton, von künstlichen Reflexen unterbrochen, Mode; dem Zwielficht zum Trotz aber zeichnete immer klarer eine Pose sich ab, deren Starrheit die Ohnmacht jener Generation im Angesicht des technischen Fortschritts verriet".

¹⁹¹ The destructive new barbarian is, in other words, free from petty sentiments and party morality.

common (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 963: 1105).¹⁹² *Grausamkeit* is preferred rather than saccharine morality. Benjamin's imagined new barbarian clearly follows its own form of cruelty, of sovereignty, a sober transformative one. Cruelty here is a form of purification — as in allegory which has the sovereign allegorist cruelly stripping things naked, and as in Benjamin's conception of the dictatorial playing child. Cruelty cuts through coyness to reveal the essence of things. Once more the connection is made between Benjamin, Brecht, and Batailles, between Baudelaire, de Sade, Fourier, J.G. Ballard and William Burroughs.

As in epic theatre, laughter plays a determining role in the organising of a new collective. Benjamin proffers the figure of a barbaric and eccentric Micky Mouse, who signals in a collective vision for the tired masses, the vision or dream being collective has the potential to awaken the people (*Leute*) from the burdens of a selfish, lone dream, dreamt (as in Huysman's *A Rebours* and Susan Sontag's *The Benefactor*) by the inward turned individual: solidarity as opposed to withdrawal. Laughter tends to open up space, it places the body in the world, throws off ingrown excrescence, creates a free-flow. Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994: 114) writes that "The energy associated with maintaining difference is liberated in the pleasure derived from the destruction of the body and meaning. The free outflow of this energy is expressed in orgasm or laughter". Laughter may also be cruel, as in anarchic children: "rarely if ever has speculative aesthetics considered the affinity between the strict joke and cruelty. Who has not seen children laugh where adults are shocked" (Benjamin 1977b: 126; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 114). Geyer-Ryan (1994: 114) writes that "Benjamin suggests that this childlikeness which laughs, and this adulthood which is horrified, alternates in the sadist". Black humour is cruel to the petty-bourgeoisie, petty morality and prudery.¹⁹³ People join up in laughing at black comedy, it is an experience that can be shared, wholeheartedly, spontaneously (but comedy, or better, satire is also about timing, control, construction: improvisation and composition,

¹⁹² Cf. Freud's conception of *Projektion* and *Einverleibung* whereby the former means a purification of the inner, getting rid of that which is not desired by "throwing" it onto the outside; the latter the incorporation from the outside of what is desired into the body.

¹⁹³ An anti-bourgeois figure like the film-maker Bunuel comes to mind.

disciplined freedom).¹⁹⁴ Benjamin proffers the black comedy of Mickey Mouse, critically, self-critically, non-seriously serious. Writes Benjamin (1977, 2.1: 218-219):

Auf Müdigkeit folgt Schlaf, und da ist es denn gar nichts Seltenes, daß der Traum für die traurigkeit und Mutlosigkeit des Tages entschädigt und das ganz einfache aber ganz großartige Dasein, zu dem im Wachen die Kraft fehlt, verwirklicht zeigt. Das Dasein von Micky-Maus ist ein solcher Traum der heutigen Menschen. Dieses Dasein ist voller Wunder, die nicht nur die technischen überbieten, sondern sich über sie lustig machen. [...] Natur und Technik, Primitivität und Komfort sind hier vollkommen eins geworden und vor den Augen der Leute, die an den endlosen Komplikationen des Alltags müde geworden sind und denen der Zweck des Lebens nur als fernster Fluchtpunkt in einer unendlichen Perspektive von Mitteln auftaucht, erscheint erlösend ein Dasein, das in jeder Wendung auf die einfachste und zugleich komfortabelste Art sich selbst genügt, in dem ein Auto nicht schwere wiegt als ein Strohhut und die Frucht am Baum so schnell sich rundet wie die Gondel eines Luftballons.

Through the ephemeral animated figure of Micky Mouse, reality is lit up and lightened up. The masses who have become tired of the complications of the everyday experience (weight of the world experienced in the Persian carpet adorned apartment; the slog of the production line) find relief in this figure, in the anarchic solidarity of laughing at him the masses find temporary emancipation: for a moment, but long enough to shake off the weight of traditionalist high art and uninhabitable architecture, not to mention the prudeness of the bourgeois dinner conversation. Mickey Mouse, of course, is an idea for Benjamin, a dialectical *Dadaist* idea or allegory through which he represents the new vision. Also, “little” figures recur in Benjamin’s work, as in the *bucklicht Männlein* (from “Des Knaben Wunderhorn” anthology), the Turkish puppet who houses a theological dwarf (as in the *Thesen*), Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, the conman Shuvalkin (in Benjamin’s Kafka essay), the conman Rastelli’s dwarf accomplish (from Benjamin’s Kafkain story “Rastelli erzählt...”), little things within things, Don Quixote’s companion Sancho Panza, Gulliver and the Liliputaner, “Lesendes Kind” and “Verstecktes Kind” (in *One-Way*

¹⁹⁴Black humour: The way in which the surrealists make use of the joke (we might recall Magritte’s painted warning “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”, and Meret Oppenheim’s furry 1936 “Object”), Freud analyses the *Witz*, coupled with the way in which Duchamp casts his (“non-sense”) “self-portrait with my tongue in my cheek”.

Street), his penchant for *Märchen* (for dialecticians) and subversive children's puppets and toys, Ensor's devilish masked figurines, and the dolls of Baroque *Trauerspiel*.¹⁹⁵

In short, according to Benjamin, the new barbarians *create images which are also ideas*,¹⁹⁶ utilitarian ideas, Apollonian "schematical" buildings and figures which relieve the masses from the individualistic oppressiveness of the everyday, by virtue of effacing bourgeois "cultural" traces (*Spuren*) left through-out the apartment whose "soulless luxuriance [...] becomes true comfort only in the presence of a dead body" (Benjamin 1986: 65).¹⁹⁷ The construction of a new Utopian space against the degraded and fallen city fabric: buildings designed in a new spatial language to stand out from the rest of the modern environment, a gesture both symbolic and intellectual. Through the "abstract" to clear the way for the transparent new, extinguish the cult of personality in favour of that which can be of use. Benjamin writes:

Being done with experience here, as Benjamin diascopically represents it, means being done with the poverty that comes with the phony "experience" of bourgeois modernity: the desire for ownership spells myopia, paranoia, ennui, and reification (a subject Benjamin elucidates and objectifies in the section called "Telephon", regarding the shady business deals of his father, in his *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*). It means outliving the crisis and poverty of a culture owned by the few (although here it would be important to remember that the "few" here are not the aristocratic few of the 1600s and 1700s, for example, but rather the larger number of socially aspiring bourgeoisie who began to appear around the 1800s and particularly in the 1900s), who, Benjamin writes, are not more godly than the many, but actually barbaric, although not in the good sense. Benjamin (1977, 2.1: 219) writes:

¹⁹⁵The contentious little figure of Micky Mouse will arise again in Benjamin's first version of the Artwork essay, together with the little satirical figure of Chaplin and a positive conception of the American horror film.

¹⁹⁶A later conception of Charles Eames who made films for people to live and solve their problems in.

¹⁹⁷Conan Doyle's and Poe's detectives, incidentally, will solve the crime by following the traces; and if it is true that being alive means leaving traces, then effacement may have ethical consequences as in Levinas and Derrida, or political repercussions as in the life and art of Andy Warhol or the career of a corrupt politician, in which case effacement might be highly dubious, although still not entirely without merit, to the contrary. Effacement, however, in the context of avant-garde architecture, would mean the *distillation* and *clarification* of bourgeois interioristic clutter, a defensible enough proposition — the key word here being sobriety (*Nüchternheit*).

Die anderen aber haben sich einzurichten, neu und mit Wenigem. Sie halten es mit den Männern, die das von Grund auf Neue zu ihrer Sache gemacht und aus Einsicht und Verzicht begründet haben. In deren Bauten, Bildern und Geschichten bereitet die Menschheit sich darauf vor, die Kultur, wenn es sein muß, zu überleben. Und was die Hauptsache ist, sie tut es lachend. Vielleicht klingt dieses Lachen hie und da barbarisch. Gut. Mag doch der Einzelne bisweilen ein wenig Menschlichkeit an jene Masse abgeben, die sie eines Tages ihm mit Zins und Zinseszinsen wiedergibt.

Benjamin's "new barbarism" program has the designers and engineers simplifying the world, stripping down to the bare essential, the fundamental, the simple. Purification contra possession. Re-defining living space as in Le Corbusier's "free plan".¹⁹⁸

More, the modern man and woman mimic their surroundings, positively or negatively: it is the task of the new barbarians to provide for them, as collective with technical requirements, with a positive-negative figure or inner (not inward) image that through a new mimesis, is transformative not illusionary.¹⁹⁹ Their language is technical and barbaric.²⁰⁰ The threatening undercurrent of the modern *Umwelt*, the shadow of war

¹⁹⁸Where the modernist International Style stands separate from the waste of the surroundings, even transforming it; Postmodern architecture often makes do with whatever comes to hand, as for instance personified in the Frank Gehry house. The one is often puritanical in its procedure of montage, the other garishly eclectic. The former defines a new Utopian space, the latter presents "a mutation in built space itself", a "new hyperspace" (Jameson 1995: 38).

¹⁹⁹A crucial point for criticism of postmodern simulacra and "cool" virtual realities, incidentally.

²⁰⁰ Interestingly, Benjamin did not find appeal in jazz music (it is said that Benjamin did not have a musical ear per se), certainly a prototypical barbaric language, although apparently he spent many evenings working on his *Trauerspiel* book in a café where jazz was played loudly and enthusiastically; in his essay on hashish he calls the music in the background "the rush switches of Jazz" and states with self-deprecation "I have forgotten on what grounds I permitted myself to mark the beat with my foot. This is against my education, and it did not happen without inner disputation" (Benjamin 1986: 144). Adorno's criticism of jazz (seconded by Milan Kundera), on the other hand, seems to concentrate solely on its popular form, its smooth Dixie swing form and beat, ignoring its "underground" or avant-garde form, as much as he ignores its roots in the improvisations of Southern Blues from Mississippi and Kansas. If "high" modern music has Schönberg, Mahler, and Webern, precursors to the asymmetries of postmodern John Cage, Morton Feldman, John Adams, Alfred Schnittke, and the events of Philip Glass, Cathy Berberian; the "lower" modern form of rhythmic blues and jazz has its "higher" representatives such as Hooker and Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Harry James and Artie Shaw, Bix Beiderbecke, Count Basie's Big Swing Machine, powered by soloists like Lester "Prez" Young, Herschel Evans, Harry "Sweets" Edison, Buck Clayton, and Dicky Wells, not to mention more well-known musicians like Charlie "Bird" Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk. From rhythmic swing to harsh asymmetrical compositions built around continuously shifting accents, jazz may be called a barbaric language which, however, is tightly disciplined as in fractally built space. Furthermore, as Dr. Ibrahim Abdul has recently said in a radio interview, contemporary jazz is fundamentally more *historical* than contemporary classical music, a determining factor when it comes to a certain artform's after-life. One may also point to another new

hanging over the horizon, the modern experience which consists of shocks and jolts to the synaesthetic system, the disturbing audio-visual mechanics of erecting and demolishing buildings, may be reversed if mechanically exposed: the darkroom and projection room is transformed into a community housing project in the vein of Brecht's organisational epic theatre. The broader program of technical education, one of iteration and reiteration, means preparing people for their new environment, much like the Freudian method of bringing the subconscious into consciousness: in a reversal of a process of (primitive) projection, reading the hidden correspondances as engrams to be deciphered, but also to be used, developed, experimented with. Benjamin re-reads this Freudian, essentially bourgeois, method of individual therapy and psychoanalysis, into a program for a collective "awakening", a collective utopian coming into consciousness.

Benjamin, like early Freud, focuses on the idea of an emancipation from myth — the existential and Urmyth underlying the modern, the archaic always present in a commodified new creating illusions of experience. Benjamin reads the contemporary crisis as being, in part, the result of a clinging to, and immersion in, the mythical, specifically seen from the perspective of the capitalist and fascist aestheticisation of life, the culture of entertainment glorifying life in a phantasmagoric spectacle.

Furthermore, the cult of personality, as personified in the phenomenon of hero-worship in the military, desire for the uniformed figure of authority, the godly superstar²⁰¹ may be said to find fruition in part in a central (Feuerbachian) idea in Freud's thinking: that because of humankind's essential helplessness, a need for superior and all-protective (omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient) father figures and gods arises, gods which are projected and also killed (the relation between the Oedipus myth and

barbarism, one which has roots in Dadaism, the new avant-garde music, which has much in common with video art, music like that of Laurie Anderson, Psychic TV, Einstürzenden Neubauten, Test Dpt., and Live Jimmy Presley — often much neglected barbaric avant-garde music in sharp need of critical and historical appraisal, music which if one were to follow Adorno's idea of the work of high art, "registers the logic of social development, production and contradiction in ways usefully more precise than are available elsewhere" (Jameson 1995: 152). If modernist theory often to its detriment forgets and reduces lower art forms, in a postmodern time what is generally regarded as high art and low art gels together, often for the worse. Avant-garde or marginal music in both cases needs to be re-evaluated, perhaps only through this differentiation of the extreme may the contradictions of a history and a society become most apparent.

²⁰¹Leni Riefenstahl's figure comes to mind, an interesting combination between military nationalism and the glory of the star.

Vatermortssehnsucht), gods which in the images of heroes still up to the present day serve as alleviations for the inadequacies and pains of the maternal bodily everyday. Freud (1948: 339) formulated it thus:

So wird ein Schatz von Vorstellungen geschaffen, geboren aus dem Bedürfnis, die menschliche Hilflosigkeit erträglich zu machen, erbaut aus dem Material der Erinnerungen an die Hilflosigkeit der eignen und der Kindheit des Menschengeschlechts. Es ist deutlich erkennbar, daß dieser Besitz den Menschen nach zwei Richtungen beschützt, gegen die Gefahren der Natur und des Schicksals und gegen die Schädigungen aus der menschlichen Gesellschaft selbst. Im Zusammenhang lautet es: das Leben in dieser Welt dient einem höheren Zweck, der zwar nicht leicht zu erraten ist, aber gewiß eine Vervollkommnung des menschlichen Wesens bedeutet. Wahrscheinlich soll das geistige des Menschen, die Seele, die sich im Lauf der Zeiten so langsam und widerstrebend vom Körper getrennt hat, das Objekt dieser Erhebung und Erhöhung sein.

Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image and the enlightening (in the sense of illuminating, lightening up, and sending up) figure-type of Mickey Mouse, is precisely intended to be the opposite of *Erhebung* and *Erhöhung*. Benjamin, in Sabbatian anarchic and materialist vein, combing the irony of allegory, the fantasia of Scheerbart and the political acumen of Brecht, sees spiritual elevation as being tied to the fascist and capitalist aestheticization of life, the auratic cult of the beautiful; in crucial need of technical interruption, grounding, "profane illumination". In this case being serious means not taking yourself seriously. If Benjamin's dialectical images, the surreal image, and the image of Mickey Mouse have a shock to the system in common — necessitating alertness, laughter but also a sobering up, the epistemological development of a critical consciousness — then the mechanical image, the photograph, paradoxically through its dual character of being both prosaic and sublime, of nature and the mechanical, specific and historical, of the present and the past, as being both auratic and aura destroying, so to speak, becomes a highly incisive sur-real modern prototype and artefact of consciousness-making through pictures.

5. Some notes on photography

In 1931 Benjamin wrote another prolegomena to the *Passagenwerk*, an essay titled “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie”. Benjamin also saw his essay on surrealism as a prolegomenon to the *Passagenwerk*, as essay in which the photograph also features.²⁰² Benjamin furthermore thought of “hashish, opium or whatever else” as being able to provide a propaedeutics to that “materialist, anthropological inspiration” (Benjamin qtd. in Schweppenhäuser 1988: 37) which Benjamin called “profane illumination”. Benjamin himself considered the *Passagenwerk* as the projected *culmination* of such a dialectical method. It thus seems reasonable to say that the surrealism essay, the fragment on photography, and the later Artwork essay, provide incisive programmatic “preparation” toward this larger *historical project*²⁰³ and Benjamin’s oeuvre as a whole.

For in all three the propaedeutics the problem of *history* features strongly, as developed in Benjamin’s recondite philosophy of history which pivots on a dialectic of *development* and *disappearance*.²⁰⁴ The phenomenon²⁰⁵ of photography, purely by way of its *essential* ability to fixate an appearance in time, but also, on the other hand, to record the site of a particular place or event, provides in crystallised form the essential “arc” of Benjamin’s thinking, stretching between a “metaphysical” reading of history and a “materialistic” reading. In Benjamin’s reading, furthermore, the two determining tendencies in photography are seen as, historically speaking, ultimately antipathetic (although here too an ambiguity makes itself manifest). Yet, in the light of a given political situation, and because Benjamin (and Adorno with him, although for different reasons) thought of the history of art and the history of humankind, politically speaking, a

²⁰²Tellingly he sub-headed the essay, “The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”.

²⁰³A project which in material form had to remain largely unfinished because of political reasons (leading up to Benjamin taking his own life); further, its philosophical “metaphysical” elements remained half finished because, as Buck-Morss for example has noticed, the other half lay within the reader’s own experience, the reader had to complete the project; but it also lay in what Benjamin thought to be a coming “revolution”, a revolution Scholem and Adorno to various degrees had trouble believing in, thus one reason for the essentially problematic aspect of Benjamin’s project for them.

²⁰⁴As in Benjamin’s idea of *Ursprung* meaning not origin but rather the ongoing process of development and disappearance.

contrasting of *parallel* developments which are not necessarily linear. Not only does art exhibit a similar technological development to society, but art at a time of crisis also has to utilise this development within itself in order to authenticate its precarious role in society.

With a changing society, by way of a parallel reflection or dialectic, an independent change in the *production* of art takes place, a change which may be positive or negative. In Benjamin's reading, photography, by the "inner logic" of its historical development, must be rehabilitated, reactivated *politically*: The photogram²⁰⁶ is to be assigned the task of allegorical "sign".

Art historically speaking, the advent of photography or, more precisely, technical reproduction of pictures fundamentally disturbed the "atmospheric" foundations, the value or authenticity of art, the "cult value" of works as Benjamin will call it in his Artwork essay, but also the "exhibition value" of autonomous works of art. A major transformation regarding the reception of great artworks took place with the invention of photography. As discussed earlier on in the section on Brecht's epic theater, for Brecht the notion of an autonomous artwork had to be liquidated: art was no longer valid as an object of contemplation — it had to be technically transformed into a means with which to organise the masses. In order to give art a societal validity or authenticity, it had to be redefined as a critical tool. Art could no longer afford to be wholly autonomous. Its means of production had to reflect the broader system of production, as social commentary. For Benjamin photography (in the vein Dadaist art against art) offered a valid program for such a dialectical transformation.

Benjamin outlines the historical development of photography from the early (1830-1840s) daguerreotype with its light-images (*Lichtbilder*) to the early "anonymous" portraiture of, for example, David Octavius Hill; the "auratic" bourgeois portraiture of the middle to late nineteen-hundreds, which replaced the place of miniature portrait painting; the peopleless and auraless photograms of early twentieth-century Eugene Atget precursor of Surrealist photography; the physiognomical photography of August Sander which Benjamin relates to the early auraless, portraitless Russian films; right up to twentieth-

²⁰⁵Or phenomenology, if one were to follow Roland Barthes.

²⁰⁶As in Roland Barthes.

century “art” photography which, in Benjamin’s view, falls prey to a trite beautification of reality. Benjamin notes the appearance and disappearance of the human figure; the human face as an anonymous image but also as a portrait representing a social ranking; and in particular the phenomenon of an “aura”, which in Benjamin’s analysis is intimately joined to portraiture, an essentially bourgeois activity.

Benjamin notes the early photographs of Hill and Dauthendey, which by their technical exactness have the power — a power paintings no longer have — to illuminate a particular, fleeting and contingent “here and now”, giving it a magical quality in the process of “illumination”. It is a sociological and anthropological discovery and recovery because instead of the usual “consciousness” saturated space, these are images of an “unconscious” space. Writes Benjamin (1988: 232) about the phenomenon of the *punctum* (Roland Barthes):

Aller Kunstfertigkeit des Photographen und aller Planmäßigkeit in der Haltung seines Modells zum Trotz fühlt der Beschauer unwiderstehlich den Zwang, in solchem Bild das winzige Fünkchen Zufall, Hier und Jetzt, zu suchen, mit dem die Wirklichkeit den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat, die unscheinbare Stelle zu finden, in welcher, im Sosein jener längstvergangenen Minute das Künftige noch heut und so beredt nistet, daß wir, rückblickend, es entdecken können. Es ist ja ein andere Natur, welche zur Kamera als welche zum Auge spricht; anders vor allem so, daß an die Stelle eines vom Menschen mit bewußtsein durchwirkten Raums ein unbewußt durchwirkter tritt.

Benjamin goes on to use an example he will return to in the Artwork essay:

Ist es schon üblich, daß einer beispielweise, vom Gang der Leute, sei es auch nur im groben, sich Rechenschaft gibt, so weiß er bestimmt nichts mehr von ihrer Haltung im Sekundenbruchteil des *Ausschreitens*. Die Photographie mit ihren Hilfsmitteln: Zeitlupen, Vergrößerungen erschließt sie ihm. Von diesem Optisch-Unbewußten erfährt er erst durch sie, wie von dem Triebhaft-Unbewußten durch die Psychoanalyse.

Furthermore, photography, through its technological precision, is linked by Benjamin to medical surgery as opposed to atmospheric landscape painting or soulful portraiture, which as in the Artwork essay, he relates to magic:

Strukturbeschaffenheiten, Zellgewebe, mit diesen Technik, Medizin zu rechnen pflegen — all dieses ist der Kamera ursprünglich verwandter als die stimmungsvolle Landschaft oder das seelenvolle Porträt. zugleich aber eröffnet die Photographie in diesem Material die physiognomische Aspekte von Bildwelten, welche im Kleinsten wohnen, deutbar und verborgen, um in Wachträumen Unterschlupf gefunden zu haben, nun aber, groß und formulierbar wie sie geworden sind, die Differenz von Technik und Magic als durch und durch historische Variable ersichtlich zu machen (Benjamin 1988: 232-233).

The seeming paradox between the magic of that which is portrayed through technology at this early stage, and the magic of the atmospheric painting may be dialectically unravelled; At this primitive stage of discovery and development, a period when Bloßfeld took his astonishing photographs of plants in which he illuminated the large in the small, Hill's models still exhibit a shyness toward the camera, photography is still "ein geheimnisvolles Erlebnis" to them, "vor einem Apparat zu stehen, der in kürzester Zeit ein Bild der sichtbaren Umwelt erzeugen konnte, das so lebendig und wahrhaft wirkte wie die Natur selbst" (Hill qtd. in Benjamin 1988: 233). It is still a wonder to see a "copy" of reality or nature with this degree of precision.

But this is just it: these early photographs are more than copies, they expose and enlarge an inner reality, an unseen reality which lies hidden in the surface of consciously seen things. The photograph illuminates in greater detail. It fixes a reality which is not embroidered with colour or elaborate composition. Devoid of subjective emotion, by virtue of its absolute objective clarity, this creates a shyness, a modesty, a soberness in that which is photographed. It is not a medium which clothes the mundane in magic; to the contrary, it is a medium which "truthfully" (at least at this "innocent" stage) reveals the hitherto unseen "magic" in the everyday.²⁰⁷ Reality is penetrated or uncovered

²⁰⁷Benjamin also makes note that Hill, a portrait painter at the time, like other artists, made use of photographs to paint their portraits - Benjamin mentions Hill's fresco of the first Generalsynode of the schottisch church in 1843, a series of heads painted after photographs. Painting after pictures as opposed to nature is of course common practise, as much as it is common knowledge that this practise fundamentally altered not only the art of painting, but also the art of seeing. Living in changing social and political environments brings forth a change in the practise and production of art, a key premise of historical materialism. In this way, the dialectical critique of a specific artwork or art phenomenon may illuminate a particular historical, social and political means of artistic but also social production. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1987) comes to mind, a book and television series influenced by Benjamin, and of course Adorno's method of negative dialectics.

as opposed to the “romantic” veiling or beautification which often occurs with landscape painting and portraiture of the time.²⁰⁸

More, it is because at this stage the prints appear without descriptions of any kind, *unbeschriftet*, that Benjamin detects a *silence* surrounding the photographed faces. He writes: “alle Möglichkeiten dieser Porträtkunst beruhen darauf, daß noch die Berührung zwischen Aktualität und Photo nicht eingetreten ist” (Benjamin 1988: 234). The portrait photographs of this period stand as spatial images removed from the so-called “personality” of the posed sitter (“personality” here being — as maybe in all instances — a predominantly Romantic institution); the “portrait” photograph of the 1850s remain on a par with the *instrument*, “zum ersten — und für lange zum letztenmal” (Benjamin 1988: 235). From here onward the exactness of the photograph is used, even more than for capturing the landscape (at the moment that the camera could “copy” nature more exactly than the painter could, the two part ways once and for all), for capturing the sitter, the *Bürger* to wit, a development which, according to Benjamin also signals in the “aura”.²⁰⁹

For now the photographer of the middle to late nineteenth-century begins to embroider his sitter with an elaborate *mise-en-scène*, opulent settings, atmospheric surroundings consisting of drapery and palm trees, easels and tapestries. In other words, fantasy and illusion — not to mention prestige — enters the scene. Benjamin (1988: 236-237) describes the paradoxical exotic settings, which seem to vacillate between execution and representation, “torture chamber and a throne room”, making reference to a photograph of the young Kafka:

Da steht in einem engen, gleichsam demütigenden, mit Postamenten überladenen Kinderanzug der ungefähr sechsjährige Knabe in einer Art von Wintergartenlandschaft. Palmenwedel starren im Hintergrund. Und als gelte es, diese gepolsterten Torpen noch stickiger und schwülger zu machen, trägt das Modell in der Linken einen unmaßig großen Hut mit breiter Krempe, wie ihn Spanier haben. Gewiß, daß es in diesem

²⁰⁸ One only has to think of the “romantic” early nineteenth-century paintings of Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault, and the romantic realism of middle nineteenth-century Francis Millet, to verify this point; although the stark paintings of Francisco Goya, also of this time, and the astonishingly clear portrait drawings of Jean-Auguste Ingres, are a kettle of a different fish.

²⁰⁹ Benjamin (Benjamin 1988: 235) also notes that circa 1840 most of the miniature portrait painters turned to photography to earn their living.

Arrangement verschwände, wenn nicht die unermeßlich traurigen augen diese ihnen vorbestimmte Landschaft beherrschen würden.

Benjamin writes that the endless melancholy of this image becomes a pendant for the earlier photography, “auf welcher die Menschen noch nicht abgesprengt und gottverloren in die Welt sahen wie hier der Knabe” (Benjamin 1988: 237). The image of a sad boy, absurdly situated in sumptuous surroundings, makes his loneliness all the more manifest. And yet there is clarity in this darkness. Benjamin (1988: 237) writes:

Er war eine Aura um sie, ein Medium, das ihrem Blick, indem er es durchdringt, die Fülle und die Sicherheit gibt.

The boy’s gaze penetrates the aura of darkness which surrounds him; in fact, it is precisely from this darkness that he finds clarity. Benjamin uses the duality crystallised in this photograph as an allegory for its equivalent in the technical field: for technical clarity has its roots in a dark predecessor, in magical aura; or vice versa, a darker predecessor manifests within itself a forthcoming translucence or transparency. Writes Benjamin (1988: 237):

es [a new technical equivalent of an older technique, GTS] besteht in dem absoluten Kontinuum von hellstem Licht zu dunkelsten Schatten. Auch hier bewährt sich im übrigen das Gesetz der Vorverkündung neuerer Errungenschaften in älterer Technik....

This conception of *Vorverkündung* is a central feature in Benjamin’s philosophy of art history. In the case of photography, Benjamin traces its clarity back to mezzotint (*Schabkunst*). He writes that the decline of portrait painting, resulted in a fruitful turn to mezzotint, a method of engraving in tone, from dark to light in the way of scratching, used predominantly for the *reproduction* of paintings (the early mezzotinters, however, around the seventeenth-century, worked from light to dark). Benjamin (1988: 237) writes that “Wie auch Schabkunstblättern ringt sich bei einem Hill mühsam das Licht aus dem Dunkel”. In other words, if the technique of photography, its immense clarity, its way of penetrating or scratching into the hitherto darkness of reality, has a dialectical kinship with the earlier scratching technique of mezzotint, it would mean that “aura” here, as an

appearance of darkness, is the allegorical *Ursprung* of the non-auratic, that is, the obscure has immanent within itself the gift of light. In more ways than one.

Firstly, in Benjamin's *performative* reading lightness may be found through darkness. Secondly, if darkness relates to mythology,²¹⁰ than a sociological or art historical illumination may be had through it. Thirdly, illumination through darkness or the auratic means the extinguishing or destruction of the auratic, purely by virtue of the allegory of scratching into a plate which basically means taking away dark areas. Fourthly, in the context of Benjamin's reading of the history of photography, he ties the auratic to portraiture, which in turn is tied to bourgeois tradition, which by virtue of its well-nigh decline gives rise to a further illumination: the portraitless photograph as exhibited in the early Russian films and as personified in the work of Atget. And fifthly, in the context of Benjamin's broader program, it should be clear that the above dialectic between light and dark, points to the dialectical images underlying Benjamin's reading of history: the tension between the new and always-the-same, the modern and the archaic, destruction and redemption.

Thus we return to the portrait: the bourgeois appropriation of photography means, in fact, the *fastening* of aura to the photograph of the sitter. Benjamin (1988: 238) writes:

Die Photographen jedoch sahen in der Zeit nach 1880 ihre Aufgabe vielmehr darin, die Aura, die von Hause aus mit der Verdrängung des Dunkels durch lichterere Objektive aus dem Bilde genau so verdrängt wurde wie durch die zunehmende Entartung des imperialistischen Bürgertums aus der Wirklichkeit — sie sahen es als ihre Aufgabe an, diese Aura durch alle Künste der Retusche, insbesondere jedoch durch sogenannte Gummidrucke vorzutäuschen.

Aura was added *post festum*, signifying a re-mythologising, a cover-up of a world in decline. Aura as mood was added to lend prestige, personality, distance. Again, aura here has a close affinity with illusionist bourgeois theatre, and the fascist tendency toward the "aestheticisation" of reality by way of the spectacle. Instead of recognising the potential in the decline of aura, its immanent liquidation, the bourgeois obstinately attempts to hold on

²¹⁰ As in an Ur-forest, an ancestral swamp underlying the modern city of light.

to the illusion that he is still protected by its veil: reality once more is hidden behind the *appearance*.

In other words, aura was not diffused completely; instead, it sought refuge in the bourgeois faces of the photographed portrait. Here, peering out at the viewer, is the aura of a cult of personality, a cult of remembrance. The faces are bathed and suffused in an aura of sentiment, the now well-known mood (*Stimmung*) of the bourgeois family tradition. What strikes the viewer first, in hindsight, is this sense of dressing up, but believing it to be true. Here there is not the inherent wit of the eighteenth-century lady posing in her extravagant dress and knowing it to be but an act; the posers here are taking themselves seriously: the mask *is* the face. The figures pose stiffly, uneasily, as if scared their true identity might peak through any minute. In these auratic portraits, posing for eternity means posing under a dark authority (the stern authority of the father or the mother). Sadness mixes with absurdity in these almost tragically “beautiful” pictures. The faces in these portraits seem death-like, ghost-like, imprisoned like corpses in the luxury *intérieur*.²¹¹

But the unconventional photography of Eugène Atget dissolved this fixed aura, purely by eliminating any human form or figure or corpus from his pictures. Benjamin (1977: 485) writes in his Artwork essay: “Wo aber die Mensch aus der Photograph sich zurückzieht, da tritt erstmals der Ausstellungswert dem Kultwert überlegen entgegen”, which in this context refers to the cult of personality, the cult of remembrance, the cult aspect inherent in aura, ritual, and myth. In the case of Atget, who

²¹¹ An interesting comparison may be made here between these “ghosts” and Roland Barthes’ (1982: 9) “positive” conception of the “eidolon”: “And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to “spectacle” and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead”. “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent...the photograph of the missing being, as [Susan] Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star” (Barthes 1982: 80-81). This sounds quite close to Benjamin’s Klagesian conception of aura in general; the idea that things have an aura which emits historical star-like traces, and that the aura of things means they can look at us in return. This points to a duality in Benjamin’s critical reading which he is not unaware of: the aura emanating from some (earlier) photographs, as in a return of the elusive dead, is a sad one; with its decay, however, with the advent of photography that is moodless, without atmosphere and distance, sadness makes way for a critical stirring. Moreover, in Benjamin’s reading it is, allegorically speaking, precisely through the former that the latter is made manifest — much in the same way that redemption is dialectically referred to through death in *Trauerspiel*.

around 1900 took pictures of deserted Paris street scenes, the cult value disappears from the picture, in favour of exhibition value. In other words, a first difference between his images and those of conventional bourgeois portraiture lies in the displacement of the hitherto private image into the public sphere (although, ironically, Atget failed to do this himself during his lifetime, remaining impecunious and unknown until his death). A second difference lies in the precision, the architectonic starkness, the immense clarity of Atget's photograms. Here there are no ornamental accessories, not a trace of personality, no faces peering back at the viewer. The images are *menschenleer*.

Further, Benjamin notes astutely that Atget's images look forward to surrealist photography. Benjamin (1988: 239) writes:

Als erster desinfiziert er die stickige Atmosphäre, die konventionelle Porträtphotographie der Verfallsepoche verbreitet hat. Er reinigt diese Atmosphäre, ja bereinigt sie: er leitet die Befreiung des Objekts von der Aura ein, die das unbezweifelbarste Verdienst der jüngsten Photographenschule ist.

Atget, much like the new barbarians, purifies the sultry and humid atmosphere of the bourgeois interiority. The human traces are effaced making room for living space; ornament makes way for the "open plan". What was concealed behind mood and the distance of aura is now brought closer. For "Was ist eigentlich Aura? Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: Einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie Sein mag" (Benjamin 1988: 239). Atget, writes Benjamin (1988: 239),

suchte das Verschollene und Verschlagene, und so wenden auch solche Bilder sich gegen den exotischen, prunkenden, romantischen Klang des Stadtnamen; sie saugen die Aura aus der Wirklichkeit wie Wasser aus einem sinkenden Schiff.

Atget removes the auratic shell from the objects and from space. Instead of creating distance he brings the things closer up. This has political, sociological implications:

Nun ist, die Dinge sich vielmehr den Massen *näherzubringen*, eine genau so leidenschaftliche Neigung der Heutigen wie die Überwindung des Einmaligen in jeder Lage durch deren Reproduzierung. [...] Die Entschälung des Gegenstands aus seiner Hülle, die Zerstrümmerung der

Aura ist die Signatur einer Wahrnehmung, deren Sinn für alles Gleichartige auf der Welt so gewachsen ist, daß sie es mittels der Reproduktion auch dem einmaligen abgewinnt (Benjamin 1988: 240).

By bringing the things closer, by liquidating the appearance of aura through reproduction, the faculty for seeing *correspondences* through mimesis is underlined in the masses. It is the allegorical faculty of reading one thing through another. A faculty for seeing (non-sensuous) similarity, which in the individual is, as discussed earlier, heightened under (hashish) intoxication; but via “profane illumination” such an individual gift is transformed into a collective experience. Again, the move from the interiority of *Erlebnis* must be made to the collective *Erfahrung*: an experience, *latent in the masses*, through which the things configure historically, and *bodily*, in a flash. It is this configuration of “profane illumination” which Benjamin has in mind when he speaks of the collective possibilities in mass reproduction; being politically educated or awakened into seeing or reading the (dis-)similarities in the *Urwelt* hidden in the *Umwelt*.

Moreover, Atget’s city scenes are without mood or atmosphere; they are devoid of the nebulous, focusing on the detail instead:

die Stadt auf diesen Bildern ist aufgeräumt wie eine Wohnung, die noch keinen neuen Mieter gefunden hat. Diese Leistungen sind es, in denen die surrealistische Photographie eine heilsame Entfremdung zwischen Umwelt und Mensch vorbereitet. Sie macht dem politischen geschulten Blick das Feld frei, dem alle Intimitäten zugunsten der Erhellung des Details fallen (benjamin 1988: 240).

Benjamin, in Marxist political vein, goes on to compare Atget’s *menschenleere* images with the early Russian films, in which the faces appear namelessly (*namenlose Erscheinung*).²¹² For a Russian generation which is not addicted to entering into the

²¹²Hansen writes: ‘Having thus initiated “the emancipation of the object” from a deteriorated auratic context, Atget inspired the more programmatic efforts of Surrealist photography to promote a “therapeutic alienation between environment and human beings” — therapeutic again in the sense of a “distortion of a distortion,” the dialectics of defamiliarization and similarity. Only a break with the personality-centred, commercial tradition of representation, Benjamin concludes, will restore a physiognomic sensibility towards the human body and the world of things’ (Hansen 1987: 207). It should in this case become clear that the “appearance” of nameless faces signifies the therapeutic double distortion: the appearance of an appearance which would promote the dissolution of auratic appearance, a disruption or fissure in the illusion of reality. As in the optical unconscious, the nameless appearance points to that which is generally

hereafter by having its portrait taken, but who would rather withdraw shyly into its living space in the face of such arrogance, this generation, writes Benjamin, has not left its rectitude to the next generation (Benjamin 1988: 241).

Da gab zum erstenmal seit Jahrzehnten der Spielfilm der Russen Gelegenheit, Menschen vor der Kamera erscheinen zu lassen, die für ihr Photo keine Verwendung haben. Und augenblicklich trat das menschliche Gesicht mit neuer, unermesslicher Bedeutung auf die Platte. Aber es war kein Porträt mehr.

Benjamin reasons through the physiognomical images of August Sander that these new images of human faces are scientific, sociological.²¹³ Sander photographs people from all wakes of life (to use a cliché), the lower class as much as the middle and higher classes. In this way people are revealed in their historical and anthropological-material actuality. Again, no aura but rather that which lies hidden behind the aura of appearance. Sander's work is the opposite of illusionism: "mehr als ein Bildbuch: ein Übungsatlas" (Benjamin 1988: 242). The photograph here becomes an allegory for the necessity of critical mortification in the face of the (auratic) text, the (surreal) face of the city, ideological and mythological society. In other words, critical consciousness is to be awakened through these auraless photographs, through the revolutionary application of photography proper.

With this critical development comes the taunting question of the relation between photography and aesthetics. Benjamin attempts to unravel the problem by, avoiding the coagulating question of whether photography functions as art, stressing, rather, the disruption that occurred in traditional aesthetics with the advent of photographic reproduction. He writes:

Und doch ist die Wirkung der photographischen Reproduktion von Kunstwerken für die Funktion der Kunst von sehr viel größeren Wichtigkeit als die mehr oder minder künstlerische Gestaltung einer Photographie, der das Erlebnis zur *Kamerabeute* wird. In der Tat ist der heimkehrende Amateur mit seiner Unzahl künstlerischer Originalaufnahmen nicht erfreulicher als ein Jäger, der vom Anstand mit Massen von Wild

not seen, covered as it is in a false appearance. Once readable, once enlarged by way of camera techniques (but also miniaturised with regards mass assimilation), these details lose their aura.

²¹³Incidentally, as Roland Barthes points out, "The Nazis censored Sander because his 'faces of the period' did not correspond to the aesthetic of the 'Nazi race'" (Barthes 1982: 37).

zurückkommt, die nur für den Händler verwertbar ist. Und wirklich scheint der Tag vor der Tür zu stehen, da es mehr illustrierte Blätter als Wild- und Geflügelhandlungen geben wird. Soviel vom *Knipsen*. Doch die Akzente springen völlig um, wendet man sich von der Photographie als Kunst zur Kunst als Photographie. Jeder wird die Beobachtung haben machen können, wieviel leichter ein Bild, vor allem aber eine Plastik, und nun gar Architektur, im Photo sich erfassen lassen als in der Wirklichkeit. Die Versuchung liegt nahe genug, das schlechterdings auf den Verfall des Kunstsinns, auf ein Versagen der Zeitgenossen zu schieben. Dem aber stellt sich die Erkenntnis in den Weg, wie ungefähr zu gleicher Zeit mit der Ausbildung reproduktiver Techniken die Auffassung von großen Werken sich gewandelt hat. Man kann sie nicht mehr als Hervorbringungen Einzelner aussehen; sie sind kollektive Gebilde geworden, so mächtig, daß, sie zu assimilieren, geradezu an die Bedingung geknüpft ist, sie zu verkleinern. Im Endeffekt sind die mechanischen Reproduktionsmethoden eine Verkleinerungstechnik und verhelfen dem Menschen zu jenem Grad von Herrschaft über die Werke, ohne welchen sie gar nicht mehr zur Verwendung kommen (Benjamin 1988: 242-243).

It should be clear that for Benjamin the emphasis falls on making sense out of one's living space, giving meaning through art functioning as a critical expression and analysis of contemporary life. Photography must, therefore, stay clear of aesthetics and creativity, in fact it must destroy aesthetical appearances where it can. If the scientific and political basis of the new imagery is negated, photography turns creative (*schöpferisch*). Benjamin writes that the more the contemporary crisis of society spreads, the more things stand isolated and opposed to each other, and creativity and aesthetical photography becomes fetishistic.²¹⁴

And Benjamin says elsewhere that fetishism is the "vital nerve of fashion". Benjamin (1988: 245) writes that "Das Schöpferische am Photographieren ist dessen Überantwortung an die Mode. *Die Welt ist schön* - genau das ist ihre Devise." He writes, furthermore, that this fashionable photography cannot grasp human relations in their bodily unity but is more an example of their commodification (*Verkäuflichkeit*) than their

²¹⁴Perhaps in the way that Barthes makes a distinction between erotic photography and pornography: "the erotic is a pornographic that has been disturbed, fissured." "Nothing more homogenous than a pornographic photograph. It is always a naïve photograph, without intention and without calculation. Like a shop window which shows only one illuminated piece of jewellery, it is completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing: sex: no secondary, untimely object ever manages to half conceal, delay, or distract". According to Barthes erotic desire is blissful and "light", pornographic desire ungenerous and "heavy" (Barthes 1982: 41 & 59).

ability to be known (*Erkenntnis*). In “The Author as Producer” Benjamin (1992b: 95) writes:

The World Is Beautiful — that is the title of the well-known picture book by Renger-Patzsch in which we see the New Objectivity photography at its peak. It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment.

This kind of photography perpetuates the economic and political structure of consumer contemporaneity, instead of critically and epistemologically changing it. It uses fashionable techniques instead of revolutionary ones. Writes Benjamin (1988: 245):

Weil aber das wahre Gesicht dieses photographischen Schöpfertums die Reklame oder die Assoziation ist, darum ist ihr rechtmäßiger Gegenwart die Entlarvung oder die Konstruktion.

As in his essay on the new barbarians, *functionality* is the key word. Technical development necessitates technical *Umfunktionierung*. Not merely copying the word, commodifying and aestheticising it; but revolutionising the medium, transforming the art of seeing and knowing in the reproduction process; in other words, transforming the reproduction process itself. Photographic construction, made possible by the surrealist experiments with photography, is akin to the new architecture which is also inspired by the Russian experimentations both in film and in building living space. Benjamin writes that the achievements of the Russian film directors, like Eisenstein and Pudovkin, would only have been possible in a society “wo die Photographie nicht auf Reiz und Suggestion, sondern auf Experiment und Belehrung ausgeht” (Benjamin 1988: 245).

For Benjamin construction means, against the banal reproduction or superficial mimesis of reality (as in the media and hack photographic reportage) “the emancipation of the object” from a deteriorated auratic space (Hansen 1987: 207). In “The Author as Producer” Benjamin makes a case for the subversions of Dadaism, that its revolutionary validity “lay in testing art for its authenticity”. Once more Benjamin introduces the montage technique as a revolutionary model, albeit now the photomontage, and the citation of fragments of everyday life *out of context* as its subversive material. He writes:

You made still-lives out of tickets, spools of cotton, cigarette stubs, and mixed them with pictorial elements. You put a frame round the whole thing. And in this way you said to the public: look, your picture frame destroys time; the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as a murderer's bloody fingerprint on a page says more than the words printed on it. Much of this revolutionary attitude passed into photomontage. You need only think of the works of John Heartfield, whose technique made the book jacket into a political instrument (Benjamin 1992b: 94).

The revolutionary strength latent in the everyday, in the forgotten, the refuse of consumer society. Photography of the everyday becoming an educative tool, a responsibility the artist has toward the changing society he or she lives in. Hansen notes that Benjamin's program has affinities with "Kracauer's reflections on photography [which] locate the radical function of the medium (intercut with an analysis of its ideological, mythological function) in the arbitrary moment of exposure, the moment of chance that might capture an aspect of nature at once alienated and released from the tyranny of human intention — the 'dregs of humanity'" (Hansen 1987: 208). This, then, the sudden flash or profane illumination generated through the (photo-)montage.

More, Benjamin situates the new radical transformation of the photographic medium in the transformation of photographs into signposts (*Wegweiser*). Rey Chow (1989: 72) writes that "What interests Benjamin in the photographic image is the effect of a removal: something is missing. Hence 'captions have become obligatory'". The use of captions beneath the (*menschenleere*) photographs signals their turn away from fashionable techniques to a revolutionary use value (Benjamin 1992b: 95). Again, a literarisation of all human relations and living conditions is the issue. As in the essay on photography, he writes in the Artwork essay that Atget photographed scenes "wie einen Tatort":

The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. At the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for him, right ones or wrong ones, no matter. For the first time, captions have

become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different function than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones (Benjamin 1992a: 220).

The use of captions, finally, the turning of photographs into signposts, points to the allegorical potential in photography. For allegory signifies a removal, “Any image, however full, signifies for the allegorist not the presence but the removal of something; the allegorist’s eye is therefore one that sees images as the signs or sites of an emptying[...].” (Chow 1989: 80). This removal is both cruel and purifying. Benjamin writes in his *Trauerspiel* book: “It is indeed characteristic of the sadist that he humiliates his object and then — or thereby — satisfies it. And that is what the allegorist does in this age drunk with acts of cruelty both lived and imagined.” Determiningly, “the function of baroque iconography is not so much to unveil material objects as to strip them naked [...] As writing, as a caption, which in emblem-books forms an intimate part of what is depicted he drags the essence of the depicted before the image” (Benjamin 1972: 360-1; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 115). Benjamin transposes the allegorical emblem-book form for the photograph.

Moreover, if photography causes the fissure in the perception of art most violently in its reproduction of artworks, and if this in turn points to the transience of works of art, historically speaking, “the ephemerality of all phenomena”, then Benjamin’s dictum that “an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory” reassumes its exigency in the photographic medium. Writes Craig Owens (1996: 1054): “as an allegorical art, then, photography would represent our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image. In the photographs of Atget and Walker Evans, insofar as they self-consciously preserve that which threatens to disappear, that desire becomes the *subject* of the image. If their photographs are allegorical, however, it is because what they offer is only a fragment, and thus affirms its own arbitrariness and contingency”. Owens goes on to connect allegory with the technique of photomontage: “We should therefore also be prepared to encounter an allegorical motive in photomontage, for it is the ‘common

practise' of allegory 'to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal'".

Photography as allegorical, in other words, means reading one image through another, reading a positive through a negative, so to speak, dis-figuring one figure for another, mortifying one (historical) text through another text. Again the affinity between Benjamin's rehabilitation of allegory and the historical task introduced by the dialectical images becomes apparent. It is an affinity bridged by his interest in the anti-conformist radicality of surrealism; but also the ethical politics of the new photography. In this way one can say that Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book looks forward to the *Passagenwerk* via the allegorical impulse which finds social and political significance through the photograph, surrealism, and film.

Allegory in Benjamin's analyses, it will be remembered, is aggressively geared against the illusion or appearance of the totality, completion, organic fullness of authority. It is a negative category, a destructive principle which dialectically, however, turns around into its opposite: salvation. It would be a rejuvenative critical impulse which cruelly disturbs in order to lay bare that which is unconscious, forgotten, illusionary. It cruelly strips naked (as the new barbarians do with the bourgeois interior) and satisfies. And lastly, allegory would interrupt the auratic organic, with the inorganic emblem, such as the material thing, empty space, the human corpse, but also the image. Allegory, in Benjamin's conception, signifies a bodily redemption through the dead thing (Barthes' auratic eidolon if you will), or the removal of this thing (the non-auratic empty space of the new architecture). In emblematic style, the "scene of the crime" turns into an allegory, a double disfigurement: Atget's photographic image removes extravagance, in order to strip spaces naked to the essence; and the writing which accompanies it, repeats and transgresses it into a sign other than itself: "all kinds of intimacy with objects is alien to the allegorical intention. to touch it means, for allegory, to rape it. To recognize it means to see through it" (Benjamin 1982, 5: 423; qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 114).

In terms of Benjamin's philosophy of art history, the introduction of the concept of "aura" and its (un-intentional) decline, may also have an allegorical basis, so to speak. For

Benjamin does not deny the auratic work, instead he analyses aura in certain historical works as precursing by *necessity* the new auraless art. Benjamin (1988: 247), in fact, ends his essay on photography by referring to the early photographs as being "beautiful and unapproachable" in their stepping out of the darkness of the olden days — a paradox not without dialectical and allegorical force. For in allegory melancholy and pleasure go hand in hand: "The reduction of the individual to a creature, a doll, an automaton, a machine, a dismembered body, the disembowelment of inner space — all are deeply enjoyed and just as deeply mourned" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 113). In this spirit, Benjamin is both fascinated with the decay of aura and he also mourns its loss; Benjamin derives immense pleasure from *transgression*; but he also mourns the resulting scene of *dissecta membra*.

Furthermore, the "original" work may be displaced or, better, destroyed by its "reproduction"; but this does not mean it loses its historical validity, its future revolutionary potential — to the contrary. As discussed before, Benjamin reads the light through the dark, he reads the new through the mythological old, the modern through the primordial, the revolutionary through the forgotten: one could say he both destructively and romantically reads the future through the past.²¹⁵ In Benjamin's allegorical and dialectical reading, that which is no longer sustainable provides a vision of the yet to come. Aura, in other words, may have negative implications in one context, whilst in another context its positive potential is the major force.

In the context of the essay on photography aura is defined as that which is atmospheric and distant; and the non-atmospheric, "close-up" works of Atget are illuminated by virtue of this nebulous distance. That is, Benjamin *performs* a dialectic whereby two opposites illuminate each other by being decontextualised, the one "in front" of the other, re-read antipathetically and antinomically. The one does not negate the other without historical ground or physically; to the contrary, it needs its opposite, its other, in order to establish its own bodily and conceptual significance (one may think of the events on a stage unfolding against a changing backdrop). Therefore when Benjamin, on the one hand, calls for the liquidation of aura and mood from the new imagery he means this

²¹⁵ An idea personified in Benjamin's appropriated image, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which appears (to disappear) strategically in his *Thesen*.

specifically in a new context wherein what was previously legitimate in another historical context, is this no longer. More specifically, where once the auratic work had its own validity in intimating “desire and mortality,”²¹⁶ with the decline of the bourgeoisie and of society in general this aura can no longer take the foreground.²¹⁷ for the bourgeois programme of (consciously or unconsciously) covering up the fragility and broken state of reality with an auratic illusion of well-being, as personified in the illusionism of traditional bourgeois theatre and Wagner’s total artwork, as exhibited in its “masquerade of social identity against the backdrop of bourgeois interiors” in its photographic portraiture (Hansen 1986: 206), this auratic aestheticisation is in urgent and critical need of interruption.²¹⁸ The phony fantasy that is now obviously symptom of a more general decay must be interrupted by a new form of re-production, a new take on reality, in all its starkness.

Once more, according to Benjamin, in a critical period of total aestheticisation, the appearance of aura must be disturbed, fissured, wounded through the sober or purifying photography of the new. And in this context only *initially* (for Benjamin repeatedly through-out his writings insists on the ephemerality of the avant-garde project), the destruction of aura attains political sociological efficacy. Furthermore, criticism of Benjamin’s notion of a radical photography which would transgress any “philistine twaddle about creative genius and beauty”, as a failure to foresee that it would be precisely “traditional notions of aesthetics, with all their attendant claims about craftsmanship, formal subtlety, and semantic complexity, that have sustained the case for the artistic status of photography” (Mitchell qtd. in Mattick 1993: 127), may have some validity; and yet, it in turn fails to note that Benjamin’s program is meant to be radical in *transience*. The sociological importance of the new photography lay in its *hic et nunc*, in spite of Benjamin’s utopianism. Of course, this does not mean that such photography and its philosophy is now defunct, quite the contrary. Besides the fact that much of it has become cult commodities, in the face of new developments both in the technology of

²¹⁶For instance in the work of Nadar, his 1859 portrait of Sarah Berhardt comes to mind, a classical auratic portrait of the star which foresees Hollywood.

²¹⁷As accomplished in Atget’s work, for example, his 1924 *Pool, Versailles*.

society and in its art, the clarity of the old avant-garde (an oxymoron to be sure) is quite literally a darkness anticipating a new lightness — in terms of *technique*. Keeping this in mind, then, would give Benjamin's theses on the need for an auraless film its historical contextuality, a contextuality crucial in any understanding of the polemical program of de-contextuality, double disturbance, and revolutionary awakening. If read (or disturbed) in this way, the underlying, often tantalising ambiguities and oversights in his criticism of aura, technology and modernity attains an art philosophical significance for the postmodern. That is, decontextualised (or deconstructed) in perspective of the current problem: the one playing off against the other.

6. "The blue flower in the land of technology"

Tiedemann records that apparently Benjamin told Adorno that he wished to outdo Brecht with his Artwork essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"²¹⁹ "whom he feared in radicalism" (Tiedemann 1979: 112). If this is indeed the case, it provides a splendid pivot for a discussion centralising around notions of ephemerality, radicality, and authenticity.

Benjamin introduces a number of provocative theses in his Artwork essay, theses which have been chewed over by Benjamin's modernist peers as much as by so-called postmodern intellectuals. Whether, as Benjamin himself claimed, these thoughts on a new theory of art were intended simply to shock or not, makes little difference to the "contents" of the essay. What the question of "shock" does denote, however, is the polemical nature of Benjamin's work — the fact that in general he wrote *against*

²¹⁸And interruption here would follow the allegorical impulse at the heart of the montage principle as presented in the dialectical images, surrealism, and organised in Brecht's epic theatre.

²¹⁹Of which two versions were written: the first in 1935; the second, which — as is the case here to a large degree — is also the one most commonly used, written around 1937/8).

something,²²⁰ or against a particular author.²²¹ Such is the nature of his Artwork essay: it was written as a general polemic directly against bourgeois tradition and fascist aestheticisation (the former, so argues Benjamin, in fact making way for the latter).

Going against the grain then: Benjamin, first of all, centres his arguments around the (contentious) historical-philosophical notion that photographic reproduction radically alters the perception of art, that it challenges the notion of “authenticity”. This idea of the aesthetical consequences of photography is, moreover, closely linked to “nature”; that is, in a re-orientation of nature based on the concepts “aura”, and “myth”, and seen in light of Benjamin’s “subversive” modernist reading of traditional or premodern mimesis which has the “original” based in nature.²²² As David Roberts (1996: 55) points out: “It is a reminder that an aesthetics of nature underlies the aesthetics of art, a connection which is particularly important for Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*”, and which for Roberts has ecological consequences.

Benjamin develops his idea of the aura of a work of art or the historical object in terms of nature. He writes:

We define the aura [of a natural object, GTS] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin 1992a: 216).

And, as Roberts notes, Benjamin elaborates on this conception in his 1939 essay, “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, where he writes:

Experience of the aura [...] rests on the transposition of a response to human relationships, to the relationships between inanimate or natural objects and man. The person we look at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in turn (Benjamin 1992a: 184; Roberts 1996: 59).

²²⁰Against the reductionist rationalism of the Enlightenment, the dogmatic reductions of the Party, against the complacency of the bourgeoisie.

²²¹For example, Benjamin wrote against Gundolf on Goethe, Max Brod on Kafka. Cf. Hans Meyer 1988: 195-196.

²²²As discussed previously in the section on Romantic art criticism.

The link between aura and nature, aura and history, between aura and the authentic origin (*Ursprünglichkeit*), as delineated and problematised in the Artwork essay, needs to be traced back to the theological, the Romantic and allegorical impulse in Benjamin's thinking. As discussed in the section on Romantic art criticism and allegory, nature for Benjamin has "connotations of fallenness, estrangement and fate" (Gashé 1994: 188). It is fraught with guilt, *mythical* guilt. Furthermore, modern man's alienation from nature as experienced in the *Verdinglichung* of life in modern industrial society, is intimately connected to a reading of nature which has its origins in the theological notion of man's Fall from grace, his shameful expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In this fallen state nature shows a *facies hippocratica*: the deathmask of *Trauerspiel*. The eternal cycle of nature leaves behind as debris ruins and fragments of decay, as in a wasteland. But decay dialectically turns into its opposite, that is, salvation. We recall that in Benjamin's reading of allegory death is a sign of eternal life, and sorrow a way to happiness. In Benjaminian allegory all fallen things have emblematically the hope of being redeemed; the dead things or inorganic things of nature are paradoxically pregnant with not-yet completion. Although it is a hope which is perpetually out of reach (Kafka said that there is plenty of hope, but not for us), the turn-about of salvation remains the only true meaning beneath the decay.²²³

Being allegorical, this view of nature as destructive, mournful, unredeemed is, of course, the polar opposite of the symbolic view of nature as complete, fulfilled, sublime. In the symbolic view of nature, death is already part of a sublime wholeness, it is therefore already redeemed. The symbolic view of nature has all things partake in rejuvenation, that of the goodness of God. Here there is no need for hope: all things are symbols of the eternity and omnipotence of God by virtue that He made them. The modern paintings of Constable and Turner come to mind, both of whom, it must be added, represent the two

²²³The modern paintings of Friedrich (although his German romanticism, inspired by the Anglo-Saxon William Turner, has some categorise his paintings as symbolic) and postmodern Anselm Kiefer are prime allegories of allegorical decay of history and nature.

sides of the sublime view of nature: on the one hand, nature is sublime in its silent grandeur; but on the other hand, it may also be awesome and catastrophic.²²⁴

Moreover, both poles of the modern view of nature, allegorical and symbolic, have *myth* in common, in the sense that the presence of God, be that in terms of his absence as signified in the *deus absconditus* or as (mystical) revelation signified in the *deus revelatus*, is behind or in all appearances of reality. One might say that the myth of nature²²⁵ is part of a long Western tradition, stretching back into pre- or early modern times. In any case, the “spirituality” or “holiness” hidden in nature, whether it be a promising force, an ecstatic one or a forlorn one, recurs in the history of Western art, both in so-called pagan and christian art.

David Roberts (1996: 56) argues that the decisive figure in determining the modern attitude toward nature is Hegel who:

breaks with the premodern conception of art as mimesis, the imitation of nature, for which natural beauty is the model of artistic beauty and in which artistic production is thought of as the continuation of nature or as the work of nature itself. For Hegel, natural beauty is only a lower, imperfect stage of beauty, since it lacks consciousness or spirit. Nature is spirit in the stage of alienation; natural beauty is not beautiful in itself, but only for us when it is raised to the level of artistic representation. Hegel's definition of beauty is the sensuous appearance of the idea, the union of the sensuous and the spiritual.

Roberts goes on to point out that Adorno stands at the end of a tradition starting with this idea of the spirit; Adorno criticises Hegel's idealistic arrogance and posits a view of nature as non-intentional, non-instrumental other in its place. Nature in Adorno's view is precisely the stuff of beauty, and yet it can never be attained, it can only be referred to through the “aura” of modern autonomous art. For Adorno the other of nature becomes a sign of man's alienation at the hands of a domination by the mythical fate of natural history. The only hope for reconciliation — a perpetually self-negatory one at that — is locked-up in hermetic modern art. In other words, for Adorno, nature may only be experienced through its mimetic transformation in art.

²²⁴ Geyer-Ryan (1994: 117) also points out that for Kant the sublime means too much nature; for Burke the sublime means the withdrawal of nature.

Adorno's negative Utopia "was a projection of his suffering in relation to *society*", writes Roberts; and he follows Gernot Böhme in reading this vision of nature to be representative of "the last and most extreme expression of alienation from nature" (Roberts 1996: 57 & 56). For Roberts and Böhme, the present interest in nature lies in the fact that instead of suffering in relation to society, we suffer in relation to nature. He writes that "the essence of the environmental problem lies in the fact that we have now begun to experience the effects in and on our own bodies of what we have done to nature. An aesthetics of nature is thus necessarily an ecological aesthetics" (Roberts 1996: 57). Be that as it may, the ecological concern in this context may be only latent or immanent for the time being. For the question here is precisely how Benjamin ties up with this negative Utopian modern paradigm of the dichotomy between the object and the subject and more precise, nature and society.

Firstly, a general conception of "nature" has to be established. Roberts' distinction between wild nature, humanised nature and industrialised nature seems a suitable model:

Wild nature is natural beauty under the aspect of the sublime. Humanised nature is the transformation of natural beauty into the pastoral mode, for which the garden offers the perennial image of harmony between man and nature. Industrialized nature is the destruction of natural beauty. It is characterized by the monotony of monoculture and the loss of human and natural contexts. It thus defies aesthetic experience, it is an aesthetic wasteland (Roberts 1996: 58).

In this regard, Benjamin vacillates between the first and third *extremes*, not taking the middle road, as it were, of a humanised nature (a road Roberts claims to be the solution to contemporary man's alienation from nature). Benjamin's negative Utopianism has no vision of a moderate humane harmony.

Furthermore, Geyer-Ryan, following Kristeva, argues that Benjamin's journey to the Mothers (following Faust) or the void of abject nature is linked to the experience of the sublime. She points out that there is a full and an empty sublimity:

²²⁵Not necessarily of the landscape, which, to be sure, as a thing in itself is not an old phenomenon.

Of course, in Kant's conception of the dynamic sublime, the subject seems to be overwhelmed by too much nature — lightning and thunder, water, wild animals, ravines. For Burke, on the other hand, it is precisely a lack of nature that horrifies the human being: a 'universe of death', as he calls the horror of emptiness. This horror is arrived at through the withdrawal of nature, 'privation of light: terror of darkness; privation of others: terror of solitude; privation of language: terror of silence; privation of objects: terror of emptiness; privation of life: terror of death'. This is the horror of object emptiness (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 117).

It is precisely through this horror of emptiness²²⁶ that Benjamin finds salvation, just as the melancholic allegorist turns the object things into redeemed objects. Geyer-Ryan (1994: 117) writes: "However, just as, in experiencing the sublime, the [narcissistic] subject saves itself from being destroyed in a-morphous nature through a new impulse of reason, so the allegorist 'wakes up' in 'God's world'". Kant's reason is redemption in *Trauerspiel*. Writes Benjamin (1972: 406; qtd. and translated in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 118):

For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins which reveal not so much the ideal quality of allegorical contemplation, but rather its limit [...] In the death-signs of the baroque, allegorical reflection finally veers around, in a backward movement of redemption ... The spell of utter fragmentation, death and dispersion is broken [...] After all, this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself *that which is object*, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but leaps forward into resurrection.

Moreover, in order to pinpoint a *general* modernist attitude in Benjamin's thinking, one could look to the three aspects of the classical modern tradition singled out by Böhme (Roberts 1996: 57), namely "Adorno's concept of *mimesis* as the alternative to appropriation: that is, the recognition of the other in its own right, the preservation of the

²²⁶One recalls the "emptiness" of the new architecture, where furniture and ornament has been removed, leaving the "object" space of a scene of the crime.

concrete and the individual”; “The idea of nature as subject (Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch), which rejects the modern scientific argument of nature as cognitive object and mere material for practical manipulation”; and “Ernst Bloch’s concept of an alliance with nature” (Roberts 1996:57). Although Benjamin in true ambiguous style does not take a specific place in this set-up, one could say that, besides the fact that nature seems an other in his thinking too, the aversion to scientific domination akin to all three positions is a determining factor in his thinking. The important thing here would be to recognise, as Böhme and Roberts do, the underlying *romanticism* of these positions, the idea that a reconciliation between object and subject were possible through art.

In Benjamin’s thinking, nature being messianic²²⁷ means it is tied to an *Ursprünglichkeit* which pivots on an idea of becoming, destruction, and disappearance. And if the romantics, and the idealists after them, see art as following but also completing nature, that art continues nature by virtue of its self-completing *Geist* or idea²²⁸ Benjamin, and Adorno after him, would subvert this idea of *Geist* as being merely an *appearance* of beauty, in need of transformation (yet again) for its “truth” to be revealed.

In other words, Benjamin re-orientated the Romantic notion of mimesis — creating a double mimesis so to speak — in order to reveal what he thought to be the messianic truth concealed beneath their symbolic artworks, a truth which could be revealed *through* nature or the material itself. The original model for the Romantics was organic nature in its sublime or full appearance of beauty (from which followed the eternal *Geist* of nature and of their art). Although the model would also be nature, for Benjamin the physical original would find its true form in the eternal Idea beneath the artwork, “not so much [in] the external form of the organic as [in] its mysterious interiors” (Benjamin 1972: 384; qtd. and translated in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 121). In sharp opposition to what may be called pictorialism or kitsch, Benjamin focused on the jagged, extreme, unsavoury work of art — the void of the object.

It must be added that Benjamin, like the Romantic Schlegel, ultimately saw the object of art, a particular poem or text, to be the “original” — in the spirit of the

²²⁷“Denn messianisch ist die Natur auf ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis” (Benjamin 1969: 282).

²²⁸Whereas, as Roberts would have it, the premodernists merely followed nature as a model for natural beauty, they did not inquire after its spirit.

Romantics both Benjamin and Adorno saw art to be the vehicle for “redemption”, however impossible this might be. Authenticity for the Romantics meant the object’s harmonious self-completion, an inevitable self-completion at that. For Benjamin authenticity meant the revelation of the violently self-destructive allegory beneath the harmonious symbol. If the original would be the particular historical text, its authenticity would lie in its testimony of decay, not the illusion of progress or beauty.

Hence the return of the problem of “beauty” in nature and history, the natural object and the art object. Beauty for Benjamin is, in opposition to the Romantic notion of beauty, something forlorn, dejected, frozen: it foregoes any harmony of features, of movement, of anything human, to reveal instead a death’s head. It is not the “natural beauty” which depicts or mimics the beauty of nature, but rather the “natural beauty” that is the destruction of the appearance of beauty, as in *nature morte*. Roberts (1996: 61) writes on Adorno’s notion of “natural beauty”:

If art was traditionally defined as the imitation of nature, Adorno proposes that modern art be understood as the imitation of natural beauty. Natural beauty thus has a double reference: to the beauty of nature and to the beauty of art, while the concept itself (like natural history), partaking as it does of both nature and art, is expressive of the mimetic (subject/object) relationship itself. The beauty of nature is closely tied to the beauty of art, since the aesthetic experience they call forth is, in Kantian terms, disinterested. Freed from the interest of material exploitation or of scientific knowledge, nature can appear as natural beauty. The suspension of the interest in domination awakens the memory of a domination-free state of nature — which probably never existed, Adorno hastens to add, since the surrender to the beauty of nature also carries with it the danger of regression. Natural beauty masks the terror of nature’s mythical spell. The Medusa head of the sublime lurks behind the beauty of nature. Within the dialectic of enlightenment we discern the dialectic of Romanticism’s ambivalent fascination with nature. When Adorno says of art that ‘origin is the goal’, this Romantic motif (borrowed from Karl Kraus) means the redemption of nature, *not* the return to nature, and the path to the redemption of nature is through the natural beauty of art. It is thus hardly surprising that, for Adorno, the natural beauty of art excludes the imitation of the beauty of nature. Natural beauty is undepictable, as kitsch shows. The only authentic depictions of nature are the landscape paintings of the past which present nature as *nature morte*: that is, as natural history, as the allegorical cipher of historical transience.

Said differently, Benjamin judged *Ursprünglichkeit* or authenticity to be that natural and historical object which like the Talmudic angels both becomes and disappears. The original lies in the abject or death, in other words, which allegorically spells salvation; emptiness or absence also means the possibility for presence. In the “demonic” pale half-lit emptiness of the abject “is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (Kristeva qtd. in Geyer-Ryan 1994: 117).

Where the Romantics conceive of the artist to be a genius who works in the self-completing spirit of nature, Benjamin thinks of the artist, the critic and the allegorist as mimicking the self-destructive idea behind nature. The former see their works as symbolic, that is, personifying the wonder of God; the latter is continuously self-subversive in order to sublimate the phenomenal and decaying thing of nature and of history in the noumenal idea. Any notion of physicality here would start with excess (as in Baroque *Trauerspiel*) and end with the stripped down form of a *Vexierbild*. Art for the Romantics, as for the idealists, would be the sensuous representation of spirit (the idea or spirit would be personified in the work). For Benjamin art meant cutting *through* the sensuous thing, to turn the symbol into an allegory as it were, in order to catch a glimpse of the eternal or infinite: for Benjamin, contra Kant’s notion of the unknowable thing-in-itself, the idea could only be represented and known through the phenomenal abject body, and vice versa, the abject body would only be redeemed or eternalised in the idea. To sum up, originality in Benjamin’s case means the fragmentary or abject text, the broken object, the empty thing — as opposed to the whole and complete romantic poem — which through its positing of absence points to a deeper presence: as authentic but melancholic *disjecta membra* it would say the unsayable.

And yet, Benjamin, like Adorno, criticised the idealism of Hegel for its arrogance against that which was not spirit in nature. The truth was not merely an ideal of a complete spiritual being, but also the suffering body behind the text, the oppressed physis behind written history, behind the material itself. As Roberts points out, however, Adorno’s conception of a suffering body or, the other of nature and nature as other, always remains irreconcilable, perpetually out of reach. Even if Adorno spoke of reconciliation in his later years, his philosophy remained fundamentally a negative utopian

one — as was Benjamin's. For even behind Benjamin's more harmonious thoughts on sensuality lies a pessimistic, subversive idea of rupture, of destruction which, to be sure, is then turned around yet again through the messianic impetus, or as Lyotard calls it somewhere, the "Marxist-Sublime". Benjamin's pessimism has a dual nature, unlike Adorno's: it takes pleasure in the destruction which it also mourns. The violence of Benjamin's "Sabbatianism", finds its foil in the mournful and melancholic Messianism which in the end has the scourger pick up the pieces and invest a new meaning into them.

Nature, then, in Benjamin's thinking appears as allegorically self-destructive and in need of messianic salvation.²²⁹ As soon as something becomes allegorical it stands for something else completely. Geyer-Ryan writes that "As a signifying theory, allegory conceives the language of literature — and in its radicalised form, every act of speech — as an exceptional linguistic state of emergency. Interpretations can therefore no longer be grounded in procedural rules or coherent reasons. They can now only be posited by decision" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 202). And this allegorical form of *sovereignty*, of course, means both a liberation from physical bondage and rationalist reductionism; but also the possible negation of the essential physical in itself, the recognition of a body reconciled with nature. Given that, Benjamin attempts philosophically and historically to find a way of both making sense of a fundamentally precarious situation — by declaring a "state of emergency" — and of finding a way to a meaningful sensual bodily experience. He introduces a theory of dialectical images to oppose his own theory of the absolute sovereignty of the allegorist, to counter the "semantics of violence [which] plays around the figure of allegory" in the fact that "allegory is the scene in which the body — especially the female body — is dismembered", to introduce a certain ethics of reading, "a political aesthetics which presupposes a subject that not only speaks and writes, but feels and acts too" (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 112 & 202). Moreover, it is no contradiction that his thinking is fundamentally modernist and yet vehemently opposed to the mechanical positivism, the patriarchal historicism, and reductionism latent in the modern. It is

²²⁹ In Benjamin's reading allegory and the messianic determine each other.

symptom of his profoundly ambivalent attitude toward redemption in general, and toward the image and body of nature in the face of the modern.²³⁰

Given, then, that nature for Benjamin is a combination of messianic, romantic, and allegorical impulses, that the aura of the historical object or work of art finds its echo in nature, and that Benjamin always reads a primordial history behind history, a mythical Urlandscape concealed behind nature, a corpse behind the body, it seems clear that in the age of mechanical reproduction and the large-scale industrial exploitation of nature, “aura”, as Benjamin sees it, of both historical and natural objects would undergo a change. The question of how drastic this change would be runs parallel with the question of the “authentic” or “original” thing. In the Artwork essay aura is linked to the original, which for Benjamin (1992a: 214) is “the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity”, and which by being mechanically reproduced suffers a crucial transformation. Writes Benjamin (1992a: 214):

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.

The actual presence of the original object in its specific space is for Benjamin the sign of its authenticity. The actual thing or object marked by wear and tear stands witness to its own history. This history and tradition from which it stems, however, is destroyed by technical or mechanical reproduction — as opposed to manual reproduction, which according to Benjamin, allowed the original to preserve its authority. The reproduced object strips the original of its authority.

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when

²³⁰ The dialectic between nature and the modern city would be a physiognomical concern or image to Benjamin.

the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object (Benjamin 1992a: 215).

Benjamin continues by subsuming the loss of historical authority in the concept of “aura”, a Klagesian move to be sure. He writes:

that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind (Benjamin 1992a: 215).

The contemporary crisis lies in both the destruction of tradition and the renewal of mankind, two themes which recur in Benjamin’s modern work. As Geyer-Ryan as shown, he takes pleasure in the destruction, and he mourns the loss which is the result. Benjamin re-enacts the abject state of destruction and renewal in his own texts. He himself rips objects from their context, draining the given meaning from them, and in allegorical fashion invest them with new meaning. Benjamin’s method of mortifying criticism leaves the texts and objects he focuses on broken and disjointed, but unlike Paul de Man, he does not merely rest “faithfully in the contemplation of bones”, he “leaps forward completely into resurrection”. For de Man the violent allegorical destruction of texts and figuration is essential in exposing the existential emptiness of the linguistic sign. But for him, at the end of the twentieth century, “it is no longer possible to reassemble the shattered figures under a new light of meaning, or to lend them fresh significance. Instead, he perseveres heroically in the limbo of emptiness and undecidability”. Benjamin, on the other hand, “is concerned to redeem corporeality, materiality, sensuality” in salvaging images from the existential emptiness smoothed over by the linguistic sign — his concern lies with “real presence” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 201). What this means, in fact, is that the dialectic between taking pleasure in, and mourning over destruction, results in the redemptive turn: the corpse turns into a sensual corpus. Together, pleasure and melancholy, or *Lust* and *Angst*,

bring forth the dialectical turn. The destruction of the body of history behind the linguistic sign,²³¹ the text, and the image, leaves behind a world of ruins and fragments in diaspora. Its linguistic and dialectical repetition, then, is also a way to understand the duality or ambiguity inscribed into the loss of the authenticity and authority of the original as outlined above.

In other words, for Benjamin the loss of the original has redemptive possibility in the same way that the allegorical destruction of a *false* totality turns toward true salvation. In the way that the loss of the pure language or *Ursprache* (the loss of the holy writ, the innocence and unity of Eden, the auratic beauty of the symbol, the auratic beauty of the early photograph, the loss of aura, of *mémoire involontaire*, of childhood and primeval mimetic talent, the loss of divine meaning proper) allegorically and dialectically implies the discovery of a new meaning, a deeper connection, the redemptive possibility of a more *physical* and *sensual* reality beneath the sign — the loss of the original also means the discovery of a new language, a new physical beginning. In fact, *only* through loss may salvation be had. Said in less theological terminology: for Benjamin the loss of the authority of the original means the freedom to give new meaning to that which is left behind after the destruction. In the language of the new barbarians, it means finding ways through the rubble. In the case of the Artwork essay, new meaning means bringing the traditionally authoritarian and unapproachable sacred object closer to the masses, by way of multifarious copies. The destruction of the aura is inevitable - the question though is what social benefit one can derive from the loss.

For, as Benjamin (1992a: 216-217) writes, the masses assume increasing importance in the modern, a development which rests on two circumstances:

Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the images seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an

²³¹ Adorno speaks of the suppressed body behind history.

object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose sense of the universal equality of things has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.

Furthermore, for Benjamin the unique object in this case has religious and ritual grounds, a point which has earned him not a little criticism. For Benjamin writes that “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritual basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty” (Benjamin 1992a: 217). Or said differently, the original use value of the authentic work lay in its being placed in a sacred space like in a church; and with its secularisation it moved from the church to the museum and the private home. The traditional ritual use value of the work was converted into its exhibition value, which retained the original, auratic dependence on the ritual. According to Benjamin, the removal of the unique object from the “sacred” place, by means of mechanical as opposed to manual copy making, means robbing it of its ritualistic authority, it means divesting the object’s unapproachability, shrinking its intimidating distance. This destruction of “authenticity”, argues Benjamin, means giving a new meaning to the object of art, one based on revolutionary politics.

Paul Mattick (1993), for one, not always convincingly when it comes to Benjamin’s oeuvre of which Mattick seems quite oblivious, contests Benjamin’s premises as they are delineated in the Artwork essay. Firstly, following Nelson Goodman, concerning the question of originality, he makes a distinction between copies and multiples, “autographic” and “allographic” works, “for it defines a contrast between works which can and which cannot be copied”. Mattick (1993: 129) writes:

Autographic works are those of which even the most exact duplications do not count as genuine, while ‘allographic’ covers works, like musical symphonies, for which the distinction between copy and original is meaningless: a musical performance is either of a given work or its is not, just as any copy of a novel is as genuine an instance of that novel as any other.

Goodman notes that in the case of the autographic work which have no notation, as in for example the musical score, one can only ascertain whether a painting is genuine or not by

establishing its history in time and space. The same for the multiple work such as an etching, in which case one would have to establish whether the print was made from a particular plate. But Goodman points out that “genuine“ in the case of the autographic work is not the same as artistic “originality”. He writes: “Authenticity in an autographic art always depends upon the object’s having the requisite, sometimes rather complicated, history of production, but that history does not always include ultimate execution by the original ‘artist’” (qtd. in Mattick 1993: 130). For there may be various “authentic” prints of an etching plate, for example, those made after the artist’s death, those issued just past the official limited edition number, and those printed by another person(s) whilst the artist is still alive.²³² Here original would basically mean the artist’s autograph, or stamp of approval. In short:

in the case of allographic works, every example is an original; while in the case of autographic works we can define ‘originality’ generally in terms of a standard process of production of the final object (photographic prints, etchings, sculptures) from the relevant original (negative, plate, plaster model), and then introduce additional categories as necessary to make whatever distinctions seem important, such as ‘printed by the artist’, ‘printed under the artist’s supervision’, ‘made under license’, etc. (Mattick 1993: 130).

Enter the problem of quantity and quality, of commercial value determining the appreciation of certain works of art. In pointing out the limited prices photographs, as opposed to painting and sculpture, can command, whence limited editions, Mattick notes that “We must at least ask whether it is not ‘aura’ but commercial value which is associated with uniqueness”. Further, besides the commercial side, the actual surface of the photographic prints “reads” differently than the painted surface, because, as Tillim (Mattick 1993: 132) observes, “the photographic surface does not ‘signify’ the way paint does”.

²³²Regarding the last point, one need only recall the fact that Picasso had a potter make plates and pots for him to paint on; Giacometti’s brother often made casts of Giacometti’s “unfinished” sculptures before the artist had the chance to destroy them in the next session, which, incidentally, resulted in complications after the artist’s death when the authenticity of some of these “new” works was questioned, Alberto’s brother being a sculptor of some repute too; Warhol hired assistants to make “Warhol” prints; and Mapplethorpe never printed his own negatives, only issued strict instructions on how they should be printed.

Painting, except for wilfully designed exceptions, proclaim themselves to be hand-crafted items. In contrast, photographs — both in their most common forms, returned to us by the corner Fotomat or reproduced in magazines and advertising posters, and in the form of the exhibition print — carry the signs of their origin in mechanical processes. While photographs can have the attribute of originality without uniqueness, their mode of production differentiates them from the traditional artwork (Mattick 1993: 132).

In other words, the actual physical look and feel of the original painting as opposed to its mezzotint, and its photographed reproduction is quite different. In this case Benjamin's notion of the loss of "presence" seems to hold true. But although the actuality of the "original" photograph is different to the "original" painting, they both retain "authenticity". In fact, the painting and its various prints are original, as are the various photographic prints, although, of course, the quality of one print may be subtly or vastly different than the next which leads to further complications in terms of the history of a work's production.

And then there is the equivocability between the sculpture, painting, or print as work, object, text, or image — with *textuality* being a key concern in current debates on discourse proper. Van den Berg (1996: 9) also observes that

The order of picture surfaces, pictorial imagery and imaginary semblance should be distinguished from the order of optical fields, retinal images and visual illusions. Analogies — differences in similarities — between these separate orders of iconicity are nonetheless undeniable. Ultimately the analogies stem from the subliminal presence of metaphorical processes in both visual and pictorial perception. Thus no qualities of visual perception can be said to be inherently pictorial or particularly prone to pictorial mimesis. Under certain conditions these sensory qualities, nevertheless, do furnish the art of painting with a unique window of opportunity for the culture of crafted acts of imagining, a structure determining the type of textuality found in paintings.

The textuality of images offers a means ("imaginary", "ritualistic", "rhetorical", or "playful") to read the "original" in a constellation or interrelationship with prints and copies; but the object itself, its "presence" as in the "original" before the text, has a tendency to disappear or be lost behind pictorial textuality the way things disappear behind

linguistic signs that have no referent except other signs. In this sense the title of George Steiner's (1989) book, *Real presences: Is there anything in what we say?* invokes the essential problem.²³³

The difference and similarity between the thing and its sign is, furthermore, a problem central to Benjamin's notion of aura. For Benjamin specifically talks about the loss of the *physical object* surrounded by an aura, natural and/or historical.²³⁴ This is the dual aspect of pleasure and melancholy found in looking at a photograph for instance, where a perpetual "return of the dead" is enacted. For the body beneath the broken limbs of the allegorised text or textualised image is ultimately what is in need of restoration: not the way it was, not a nostalgic and regressive return to nature or childhood or the Garden of Eden, but a transfigured, re-sensualised, redeemed re-presentation of the essence of the body, actualised. Through the disfigurement necessary to reveal the abject emptiness at the heart of the sign the turn-around to a re-figurement with a new significance is established. For Benjamin the destruction of the unique and auratic, therefore, means a necessary loss or sacrifice, but one which ultimately signals the arrival of a puissant new. Once more, in true Sabbatian and Kabbalistic visionary spirit, we have redemption through transgression; salvation through sin; seeing the eminent arrival of the light in the murky. With the forlorn rupture of tradition and the authentic a new communal textuality is brought to the surface: one which is released from ritual.

This is another point Mattick contests. In the same way that he questions the link between uniqueness and authenticity, between uniqueness and aura as attested by the prints by Rembrandt or Dürer, he questions Benjamin's claim that the unique object is a necessity for ritual. Writes Mattick (1993: 134):

²³³ Cf. Geyer-Ryan 1994: 193-194.

²³⁴ One should also note that Benjamin had a ritualistic propensity for first editions and special editions of hermetic and other books; and collecting such "auratic" books means both the continuation of a tradition, but also its subversion — that is, by taking rare editions out of circulation, one disrupts the process of exchange. Furthermore, as Benjamin (1992a: 68) writes in his allegorical essay on collecting, "Unpacking my Library", the collector is a dying species, and in the way that Hegel's owl of Minerva only begins its flight when it is dark: "Only in extinction is the collector comprehended". Again, the loss of something, the critical moment of danger, eminent oblivion — such moments spell the dialectical turn to salvation. In the moment of loss or disappearance something new may be born.

Leaving aside the evidence from contemporary non-Western peoples, not to mention cult statuettes mass produced in archaic Europe, one need only to remember the rows of hardly differentiated Madonnas in the Pinacoteca at Siena to doubt Benjamin's claim (although this is not the deny that particular images may, in various traditions, acquire special reputations for efficacy).²³⁵

Mattick suggests that Benjamin's claim lies in a fallacious projection back into the past of a relatively new phenomenon — that the work of art is a unique object created by the sole hand of a genius or master. He goes on to argue that although the conception of aura could be applied to unique works before modern times, "it does not seem to be true in general that it was diminished by reproduction". Mattick argues that the classical status or aura of certain works such as by Raphael and Rubens, were *created* by the print trade through which an artist achieved fame and world-wide recognition. He continues: "The 'aura' of these originals could be so powerful as to pervade their copies" (Mattick 1993: 135). Photographic reproductions, like Thurston Thompson's mid-nineteenth century photographs of the Raphael cartoons, became as valuable as the originals. Through photographic reproduction unique images achieved not only universality, but also immortality, as did the "original" artist. Aura, argues Mattick, is increased through the spread of its reproductions, perhaps in the way in which a stars are made in Hollywood, or the way in which the Mona Lisa is more holy today than it was two hundred years ago, because of the influx of prints which hide the original behind a veil of almost holy secrecy. Benjamin's definition of aura as a distance however close it might be, would then be a classical example of "mystical" attraction through secrecy, a secrecy not depleted by the creation of a wider audience, but rather encouraged.

Furthermore, argues Mattick, "the mechanical reproduction of artworks played a considerable role in the creation of the prerequisites for the experience of aesthetic 'aura'" (Mattick 1993: 136). Aesthetic theorists, like Winckelmann on Greek art and Lessing on the Laocoon, made use of prints to define aesthetical premises. Mattick

²³⁵ Nevertheless, one could argue that Mattick ignores the holy site, the sacred place, the sacrosanct space of church or temple. In this sense Benjamin's argument that the removal of sacred objects from their sacred space means a loss of "religious" aura seems to hold true. For even though images of the virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, for example, abound, nothing carries the stunning weight of silence as much as a traditional and unique holy site.

(1993: 139) quotes Ivens: “the photograph made it possible for the first time in history to get a visual record of an object or work of art that it could be used as a means to study many of the qualities of the particular object or work of art itself”. Mattick (1993: 139) writes that “photographic reproduction became essential to the development of modern connoisseurship and the discipline of art history, hardly loci of the desacralization of art”. Reproductions served as educational models, “essential to the way in which the production of ‘originals’ developed” (Mattick 1993: 137).²³⁶ This is, of course, a central argument of Benjamin’s, both in his essay on photography and in his artwork essay.

Haskell writes that on the one hand:

Collections of reproductions constituted (to use Malraux’s phrase) a museum without walls, ‘transforming paintings specifically designed for a wide variety of specific purposes — religious contemplation, moral instruction, sexual arousal — into objects whose pure aesthetic enjoyment is disturbed only by occasional doubts as to the name of the creators’ (Haskell qtd. in Mattick 1993: 137).

And on the other hand, “it is possible that the promiscuous familiarity encouraged by these techniques may have unintentionally diminished the glamour of the statues reproduced” (Haskell and Penny qtd. in Mattick 1993: 137). In the end, however, Mattick’s argument pivots around the suggestion that aura, far from being diminished by countless reproductions, is in fact, sustained by it. Although this argument has validity, it falters not a little when it comes to the question of the commercialisation of faith. He writes:

It is obviously true that photographic reproductions decreases our distance from artworks by removing them, in image form, from the special settings (museums, palaces, etc.) in which the originals sit, and by even placing them at our disposal for use as mementoes, greeting cards and wrapping paper. But it is hardly clear that this has spelled the withering of the ‘aura’ of the work of art, any more than the commercial distribution of religious chromos implied a decline in faith. It has even been plausibly argued that the circulation of reproductions has enhanced the ‘auratic’ presence of the originals, by preparing the viewer for the experience of the artwork, by embodying the limits of reproduction and so the uniqueness and

²³⁶A point Benjamin, in fact, already made in his photography essay; and in terms of the clarity of the photographic image, its ability to unlock an optical unconscious, serving as aesthetical and educational model.

unreproducible properties of the original, and — last but not least — by being the basis of ‘a new form of class distinction’, the difference between ‘those who own originals as opposed to those who own only reproductions’ (Mattick 1993: 140).

If for Benjamin the destruction of tradition by mechanical reproduction means prying the historical aura or shell from the object, this also means, quite crucially, the destruction of aestheticism, both bourgeois and fascist (the former, in fact, aiding the latter). Although Benjamin may mourn the loss of the authentic original, in the light of the loss of divine meaning, the “fading of divine transcendence from the Reformation to the Enlightenment” (Geyer-Ryan 1994: 199), he believes this loss has revolutionary potential, as signified by Brecht’s epic theatre, the new architectonic language of the new barbarians, the new auraless photography, and the montage of film. Keeping in mind Mattick’s position regarding the enhancement of aura through the circulation of reproductions, Benjamin’s idea is, to be sure, problematic. David Roberts, for one, agrees with Benjamin’s hostility toward the sublime as “represented by the fascist aestheticisation of politics” but he does not share “his revolutionary illusions about the emancipatory effects of the destruction of aura”. For Roberts aura could “constitute the central element of a new aesthetic education of man” (Roberts 1996: 59 & 60). And yet, as with Brecht’s epic theatre which is aimed against the autonomous artwork, Benjamin’s criticism of bourgeois contemplation of the “cult” object retains a certain programmatic efficacy, leaving a residue in its *transience*. For example, one could read the destruction of nature, the original, and aura in this way: if aura is both a natural and a historical phenomenon, then the *loss* which it denotes — as in the decline of the bourgeois attitude, the loss of autonomy, the loss of meaning, the loss of authenticity, the loss of distance, the loss of a cult of beauty, the loss of nature and the loss of totality — assumes an allegorical dialectic whereby it both creates itself and destroys itself in order to ascertain a clear image and locality of that which comes after it. Aura in this way paradoxically creates and destroys itself,²³⁷ losing itself and marking itself as in a ruin, *localising itself in Benjamin’s essay itself*. Aura, the original, and nature is *sublated* in the text turning the broken remains into allegorical ruins or pictograms through which a

²³⁷ In terms of a critical reading of the destruction and the creation of aura see also Rey Chow 1989: 69-72.

significant sensual beneath the text²³⁸ may be espied. The (textual, counter-paralyptic,²³⁹ apotropaic) destruction marks its own future (physical, sensual, utopian) redemption. As Eva Geulen (qtd. in Gasché 1994: 202) observes not with a little acumen:

The theory of aura is the attempt to describe history not only in practical terms, but theoretically as well from a position for which no factual ground exists as yet. In other words, the concept of aura must mark out and localise itself in the essay itself. Aura belongs to the vocabulary of a possible, futural historiography. As anticipation of the future, the aura achieves intervention in history, stating, in this manner, what is now. That the specificity of traditional art consisted of its aura, can show itself only, when, and in so far as it has lost this character. The perception of aura arises from its loss.

This self-destructive self-referentiality means that Benjamin's essay, like so much of his work, delineates programmatically how it wants to be read. Which means that it determines itself through a dialectic of opposites: nature and society, nature and history, myth and reality, the authentic and the mass produced, the individual and the masses, aura and the auraless, appearance and disappearance, destruction and procreation, theory and praxis, word and image, the whole and the fragmented, the seen and the unseen, the mechanic and the bodily, the sensual and the technological. In other words, Benjamin marks the failure of his own programme through loss as determined by a crucial moment of crisis, a historical moment of danger which lies beneath the text, and whose salvation lies somewhere in its future. Benjamin, in transgressive allegorical fashion, reads a new significance in the abject (his own texts concern themselves with the abject, and they are abject themselves). Such a programme ties him briefly but essentially to Marx and

²³⁸ A "real presence" which also, however, as Geyer-Ryan (1994: 201) observes, "extends into the very physis of the written signifier".

²³⁹ See Barthes (1982) on Fourier's rhetoric as *counter-paralyse*, where *paralyse* "is the rhetorical figure that consists in stating what one is not going to say and thus stating what one pretends not to say" (347); whereas Fourier's counter-march "points out the vacuum in language", the emptiness or abjectness beneath the linguistic sign, as in Benjamin and de Man (for various reasons): "its signified is dilatory, incessantly withdrawn further away: only the signifier remains, stretching out of sight, *in the book's future*" (348). Of course, Fourier, whose anti-bourgeois doctrinarism was a great influence on Benjamin, was "passionately" apolitical — Barthes (also apolitical) writes that Fourier vomits politics up (345) — whilst Benjamin in the time of the *Artwork* essay, specifically called for a political program, one free of bourgeois rhetoric. The apparent paradox between praxis and rhetoric signifies itself in Benjamin's negative utopia, which is perpetually out of reach, but not out of sight: because Benjamin's utopia, in the spirit of Fourier, turns on opposites, melancholy and the abject turns around sensual happiness.

Freud,²⁴⁰ both of whom read in-between the lines, reading the substructure in the structure itself, reading “fetishism” and “neuroses” in order to invoke an awakening which is already implicit within it.

7. Marx’s and Freud’s “awakening”

Marx and Freud are key figures in the development of not only Benjamin’s thinking, but of a major part of twentieth-century thinking (in particular of the Frankfurter Schule where a dialectical combination of Marx and Freud appears in several thinkers with different outlooks in different fields, e.g. Horkheimer, Adorno, Erich Fromm, Marcuse, and Habermas). These two key players have received acrimonious criticism, underlined by atrocities and fiascos committed in the name of both this does, or at least, should not detract from the programmatic codes still present (consciously and unconsciously) in much thought today (for better or worse). For Benjamin at least, both thinkers provided crucial historical²⁴¹ models through which to set his own model of thinking into relief: a dialectical critique or “demystification” of the modern ethos. That Benjamin was no Marxist or Freudian in the strict sense of the terms, should be quite clear: he derided psychological readings of texts, of his own life and texts in particular, and he short-circuited the technical “functionality” of his own materialist texts with anarchic and poetic inferences. Codification and decodification in Marx’s and Freud’s terms, nevertheless, provides valuable access to Benjamin’s work.

²⁴⁰ Briefly, for Marx and Freud, although both are critical of systems as being repressive in various ways, tend to construct systems themselves — Benjamin does not.

²⁴¹ Marx and Freud provided an intellectual model for Benjamin, in the face of the critical times, actuality, and experience of a present, intimately related to his philosophy of history. For Benjamin, Marx and Freud provided a historical platform, a key to unlock a particular modern historical mindset.

The relationship between reification (*Verdinglichung*) and ideological mystification is a central theme in Marx's thinking; according to Marx, reification and its mystification results in inhuman relationships, as denoted with the now famous concept of alienation (*Entfremdung*).²⁴² In the market process of exchange (*Tausch*), objects acquire use value (*Wert*) only by virtue of being consumer goods (*Ware*). The objects of exchange only account for something by virtue of being part of this exchange process. They do not stand either for themselves (as a bowl made out of wood does — it is a bowl and yet at the same time it is wood²⁴³); nor do they show the work or production that created the product. This is a mystery of which Marx (1973: 86) writes:

Das Geheimnisvolle der Warenform besteht also einfach darin, daß sie den Menschen die gesellschaftlichen Charaktere ihrer eignen Arbeit als gegenständliche Charaktere der Arbeitsprodukte selbst, als gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften dieser Dinge zurückspiegelt, daher auch das gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Produzenten zur Gesamtarbeit als ein außer ihnen existierendes gesellschaftliches Verhältnis von Gegenständen. Durch dies Quidproquo [this exchange] werden die Arbeitsprodukte Ware, sinnlich übersinnliche oder gesellschaftliche Dinge.

A society that is based upon the production of goods must by necessity produce a set of inhuman relationships by which people appear only as a means (*Sache*) and not as people. The alienation of the individual, the mystification and *fetishisation* (that is to say, the "geheimnisvollen Charakter eines zur Ware gewordenen Dinges") of the consumer goods, and the character of money and its rule over people (this character as something which arises from the products themselves, which the things, but also the workers, have become), is the result of a process of *Verdinglichung*.²⁴⁴ Writes Marx (1973: 86-87):

Es ist nur das bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Menschen selbst, welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt. Um daher eine Analogie zu finden, müssen wir in die

²⁴²See Pedrag Vranicki 1973: 174.

²⁴³See "Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis", Marx (1973: 85): "Es ist sinnenklar, daß der Mensch durch seine Tätigkeit die Formen der Naturstoffe in einer ihm nützlichen Weise verändert. Die Form des Holzes z.B. wird verändert, wenn man aus ihm einen Tisch macht, Nichtsdestoweniger bleibt der Tisch Holz, ein ordinäres sinnliches Ding. Aber sobald er als Ware auftritt, verwandelt er sich in ein sinnlich übersinnlich Ding".

²⁴⁴See Vranicki 1973:174 & 176.

Nebelregion der religiösen Welt flüchten. Hier scheinen die Produkte des menschlichen Kopfes mit eigenem Leben begabte, untereinander und mit den Menschen in Verhältnis stehende selbständige Gestalten. So in der Warenwelt die Produkte der menschlichen Hand. Dies nenne ich den Fetischismus, der den Arbeitsprodukten anklebt, sobald sie als Waren produziert werden, und daher von der Warenproduktion unzertrennlich ist.

In other words, only in the relationship between the products that are created through the process of exchange do the things acquire value; and likewise, only in this production process do the people acquire value, that is, as a means to produce the products, and not as individual or free human beings. Vranicki (1973: 175) writes that it is a capitalistic process functioning on two antagonistic levels: firstly, the worker, "der frei über seine Arbeitskraft verfügt"; secondly, the capitalist, "der über die Geldmittel und Produktionsmittel verfügt, um diese Arbeitskraft kaufen und beschäftigen zu können". So that the he, the capitalist, can set a certain value, or price (*Wert*) in order to set an even surplus value (*Mehrwert*). Furthermore, continues Vranicki (1973: 177):

Der geldliche Ausdruck der Wertes der Waren — anstatt zu entlarven — verschleiert nur noch mehr den gesellschaftlichen Charakter der Privatarbeiten. Wenn ein Produzent also seine Ware für ein ganzlich andere austauscht, so erscheint den Austauschenden die Beziehung ihrer privaten Arbeiten zur gesellschaftlichen Gesamtarbeit gerade in dieser mystifizierten Form.

The main thing for Marx here is to demystify, unveil, expose and transform this process of alienation — through critical analysis based on a material dialectic, contra the idealism of Christianity and, although initially influenced by him, the pseudo-rationalism religiosity of Feuerbach; and through a revolution already implicit within the capitalist system.²⁴⁵ What needs to be unmasked is the unseen base, the suppressed *Unterbau* on which the superstructure, the ideological *Überbau* is built, and by which it is maintained.

The workers caught up in a process of producing goods are hidden by the end result of the production process: the "attractive" consumer goods on display. By virtue of

²⁴⁵Marx wrote incisively that the workers of the commune "have no ideals to realize but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant" (qt. in Jameson 1995: 206) — a theme recurring in Benjamin, of course, as in reading a utopian vision of the future through the monuments of the bourgeoisie, which have already turned into ruins — reading the future light in the dark.

this hiding of the production process behind the “beautiful” and “enticing” facade of the goods, the process perpetuates itself, mass producing more goods, more profit. In other words: the base which keeps the superstructure up, is hidden so that the attractive sight of the displayed consumer objects, can maintain its distant mystery, precisely the mysterious and aloof attractiveness selling the products. Though Marx did not live to see the extent of the “imagological” development of this production process, Guy Debord’s (Jameson 1995: 236) acute observation that the image is “the final form of commodity reification” is implicit in Marx’s analyses. For Marx also notes that the “look” of things in capitalist society dominates actual materiality. The thing as commodity means a fetishism of the thing, but also of the person, through which a “dead” part comes to stand “fetishistically” for something else (we recall Benjamin’s “double” take on this fetishism, enacting it allegorically in order to un-do it). The “fetishistic” *image of freedom* masks true freedom; the *facade of happiness* hides the face of misery, of poverty, abjection. Reification robs people of sensuality, the *pleasure* of work.²⁴⁶

The only way the goods can maintain their mystery and beauty is to hide the machine that churns them out. In Marx’s analysis the truth of the production process behind the fantasmagorical facade must therefore be revealed. Marx’s program pivots around an emphatic but logical emancipation from the concealment and reification that makes the commodity fetish. A human being that is capable of looking through the fog of mythical commodification and oppression, would be a free human being. The worker who understands his own oppression will revolt against it.

Concealed beneath the superstructure — of profit and wealth — the workers are as much useless things, *in their own right*, as are the goods they produce; the workers do not exist apart from the capitalist process of consumer exchange. *The workers are as much a commodity as the commodities they produce.* Moreover, argues Marx, the *abstract* realm of consumer “value” must be unravelled; the materiality and physicality of value must be uncovered. The “real, concrete individuals” are the problem, one to be solved through a material reversal and demystification.

²⁴⁶ See Charles Fourier.

It is thus, once again, about the emancipation of the subject and the group from the dark locus of mythic and false appearance. The fetishisation of the commodity, and the mystery of the equality of disparate things, must be interrupted, defamiliarised, “estranged”. The mythical mystery perpetuated in the consumer process, commodity production, must be critically and dialectically unmasked, in order for the reification and alienation which is the very logic of capital itself, and inherent in cultural production to cease. Fredric Jameson (1995: 358-9) writes:

Marx’s operation, however, as its immediate context (but also its conceptual shape and thrust) testifies, is directed against the idealisms of the various traditions (not the “history of ideas” or ideology or the sciences, etc. — the great Hegelian continuities of forms and thoughts — but rather individual people in their swarming, far more synchronous, history). The materialist reversal inherent in demography also flips over the rug of this still anthropomorphic history, but substitutes for it not so much statistical aggregates as the sheer being of natural history itself. It is not the content of the historical vision or paradigm thus substituted (itself always a representation and thus susceptible again to the framing and the domestication of the various ideologies, as is the reversal effect itself that confronts us starkly for the moment with a nonanthropomorphic, indeed a well-nigh in- or non-human, reality that we cannot conceptually assimilate. Demography, conceived as a dimension of materialism, would indeed go a long way toward stripping from this last its own representational and idealizable features (specifically those thematized around a “notion” of matter itself).

How is this to be brought about with regards the sphere of art? Marx is ultimately not forthcoming on this issue, although he does say that the work of art must be a reflection of the work process. Art, in an ultimately decaying bourgeois society, instead of maintaining an “aura” of mystery, must unveil the *Unterbau* of society. Art must therefore have a function in and for society as a whole, not as part of an elitist and theoretical minority, which would perpetuate the mystery, the fantasy which clouds the eyes not only of the oppressed many, but also of the elite few. The production of a “supernatural”, a godly, a sublime, an illusion, must therefore be done away with, for this, as with the creation of mythical gods and religions, merely serves in Freudian terminology as “wish-images”: as a false alleviation of reality by fantasy, by a fetish that deludes rather than critically

illuminates. Of course, the question as to whether art would at all be applicable in a “free” society, must remain open.²⁴⁷

Be that as it may, a crucial code for Marx — which reappears dialectically in Benjamin — in his conception of the path to emancipation, is an awakening from the capitalist dream. Benjamin (1982: 583 & 570) quotes Marx as follows:

Our motto must [...] be: Reform of consciousness not by means of dogmas but by analysing the mystical consciousness unclear to itself, whether it appears religiously or politically. It will then become clear that the world has long possessed in the form of a dream something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in reality.

The reform of consciousness consists only therein, that one wakes the world [...] out of its dream of itself (Marx qtd. in Benjamin 1982: 583 & 570).

Freud too, desires an awakening. For him, however, it is not political issue, but a psychological one. Marx’s consciousness-raising dialectic for the masses returns in Freud, only here it is based on a principle of therapy for the individual. According to Freud, the modern individual experiences the world as a network, or stream of threatening forces, much like primitive man did. In order to counter, or defend him- or herself against these forces, the human being devises conscious and unconscious strategies whereby the outside ceases to be a threat or shock. Freud focuses his attention particularly on the realm of the unconscious, or the subconscious which he sees as the well in which “impulses” (*Reizen*) are collected; impulses which act both to the benefit and detriment of the individual.

In his relationship in and with the external world (*Außenwelt*), the modern individual experiences impulses. These impulses stem both from the inner and the outer perceptions, and they may result in a feeling of *Angst*, as when an individual feels incapable of dealing with a task or fears the external; and *Angstneurose*, when the individual feels unable to deal with an inner originated (sexual) impulse. This is where Freud’s conception of *projection* comes in. He writes in *Totem und Tabu* (1912):

²⁴⁷One need think only of the “reified” phenomenon of Soviet art for the Party under Lenin and Stalin to recognise the essential problematic subordination of art, of any thinking for that matter, under a moralist dogma: propaganda is a sure sign of an unfree system: be it in the USSR, Nazi Germany, or the USA in

Die Projektion innerer Wahrnehmungen nach außen ist ein primitiver Mechanismus, dem z. B. auch unsere Sinneswahrnehmungen unterliegen, der also an der Gestaltung unserer Außenwelt normalerweise den größten Anteil hat. Unter noch nicht genügend festgestellten Bedingungen werden innere Wahrnehmungen auch von Gefühls- und Denkvorgängen wie die Sinneswahrnehmungen nach außen projiziert, zur Ausgestaltung der Außenwelt verwendet, während sie der Innenwelt verbleiben sollten. Es hängt dies vielleicht genetisch damit zusammen, daß die Funktion der Aufmerksamkeit ursprünglich nicht der Innenwelt, sondern den von der Außenwelt zuströmenden Reizen zu gewendet war, und von den endopsychischen Vorgängen nur die Nachrichten über Lust- und Unlustentwicklungen empfing. Erst mit der Ausbildung einer abstrakten Denksprache, durch die Verknüpfung der sinnlichen Reste der Wortvorstellungen mit inneren Vorgängen, wurden diese selbst allmählich wahrnehmungsfähig.²⁴⁸ Bis dahin hatten die primitiven Menschen durch Projektion innerer Wahrnehmungen nach Außen ein Bild der Außenwelt entwickelt, welches wir nun mit erstarkter Bewußtseinswahrnehmung in Psychologie zurückübersetzen müssen[...] (Freud 1948: 81).

According to Freud, projection occurs in an individual as a buffer, this being typical of a person who suffers from self-reproach (*Gewissensvorwurf*) and ultimately paranoia: "de verwijten die men zichzelf maakt, worden omgezet in wantrouwen en argwaan tegenover anderen, omdat men niet kan toegeven dat men bepaalde ongewenste gevoelens en strevingen heeft" (Fortmann 1974: 35). Repressed desires therefore may result, or be the result of, projection, for the individual is unable or unwilling to deal with the inner wishes, the impulses which he or she experienced or experiences. This projection exhibits heterogeneous forms and characteristics, one example being the turn-about of "I hate her" into "she hates me"; another being "eine innere Wahrnehmung (d. i. ik bemijn hem) wird unterdrückt und zum Ersatz für sie kommt der Inhalt, nachdem er eine gewisse Entstellung erfahren hat (nl. de omvorming van liefde tot haat), als Wahrnehmung von auszen zum Bewußtsein (d. i. hij haat mij)[...] Was als Liebe innen hätte verspürt werden sollen, wird als Haß von Außen wahrgenommen" (Freud qtd, in Fortmann 1974). Projection means displacing feelings or perceptions experienced inwardly to the outside.

the 1920s or the 1990s, the sententious sentimentality of nationalism remains a sign of mindless repression.

²⁴⁸See Benjamin's thesis on the mimetic faculty as having disappeared into language without a trace.

Projection acts as a protective device whereby a particular desire experienced as hateful is denounced as stemming not from the person itself, but from somewhere outside (provoked by another person for example). Furthermore, according to Freud, *dreams* are also a form of projection. He writes:

An Stelle des inneren Anspruches, der ihn beschäftigen wollte, ist ein äußeres Erlebnis getreten, dessen Anspruch erledigt worden ist. Ein Traum ist also auch eine Projektion, eine Veräußerung eines inneren Vorganges (qtd. in Fortmann 1974: 36).

Desire and the undesirable are thus principles which instigate projection, and the individual who feels haunted by the one or the other, feels compelled to rid him- or herself of the unwanted impulses by the various forms of negation that projection may take. The undesirable is thus, once again, pushed from the inside to the outside, as a way of defusing neurosis.

According to Freud, as delineated in *Totem und Tabu*, demons and spirits, are also projections, stemming from an ambivalence of feelings coupled with self-reproach. Fortmann (1974: 40) writes: “De mens die een taboe onderhoudt, word aangetrokken door een sterke drift. Omdat de drift zo sterk en gevaarlijk is, moest er een verbod daartegen worden ingesteld. Maar in de onbewuste leeft het verlangen naar bevredigen der drift voort”. This ambivalence of feeling results in, amongst other things, self-reproach, as, for example, when a person close to us dies we take it upon ourselves to suffer for their death, because we feel we wished for them to die (an unfortunate cliché recurring in television pilots and Hollywood tear-jerkers). Because, after all, the depth of passion experienced in love is closely related to one of hate (one need only think of unrequited love where the unloved turns — like milk perhaps — on the beloved); desire often results in said or unsaid disgust. Like neurosis, this ambivalence of feeling has a dual nature: we mourn a death, and yet, secretly, we feel delighted. Together with this arises an element of self-castigation and punishment: I wished for them to die; I must pay for my unspoken desire.

According to Freud, this ambivalence of reproach expresses itself differently in primitive people. Whereas a modern person reproaches him- or herself, primitive persons

believe that the dead person has become an evil spirit out for revenge. Thus, where in the modern case the conflict of ambivalence is appeased by way of *self*-reproach, in the primitive case ambivalence is assuaged by projecting one's own malevolence onto the dead. Hence Freud's dictum that demons are projections, holds true for both. He writes of primitive man:

Die Geister und Dämonen sind nichts als die Projektionen seiner Gefühlsregungen; er macht seine Affekbesetzungen zu Personen, bevölkert mit ihnen die Welt, und findet nun seine inneren seelischen Vorgänge außer seiner wieder (qtd. in Fortmann 1974: 41).

Contrary to this is the phenomenon of *psychogenesis*: the notion that modern people don't project their self-reproach outwards onto physical things such as trees, animals, stones, but commits demons or devils to the realm of the soul or the mind. The modern person's neuroses releases apparitions, demons and the like, "intellectually", inwardly, abstractly. In other words, reflecting their fears, wants, repressed desires, back onto him- and herself, in haunting (eidetic) images. But there are also projections which assume the form of a benevolent or desirous "deity", as in narcissism and the *Doppelgänger*, the undying double. Such apparitions appear as a protest against one's own mortality, but also immortality. The *Doppelgänger*, to be sure, also has a malignant and life-threatening face, a recurring theme in Vladimir Nabokov's novels: Freud's pleasure principle (lucidly taken over by Herbert Marcuse in his analysis of America, and capitalist society)²⁴⁹ pivots around Eros and Thanatos. Psychogenetic ambivalence consists of both "evil" spirits and "good" spirits on the other side.

In his *Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (1941), however, Freud writes that the mythological superstitions of primitive man correspond to that of the parananoic: both need their *anthropomorphic* projections in order to deal with the conflicts (ambivalences) they experience, in order to create sense from an external world perceived as life-threatening. Freud (1941, 1970: 216-217) writes:

Ich glaube in der Tat, daß ein großes Stück der mythologische Weltauffassung, die weit bis in die modernsten Religionen hinein reicht,

²⁴⁹ See, for example, *One Dimensional Man* (1964).

nichts anderes ist als in die Außenwelt projizierte Psychologie. Die dunkle Erkenntnis (sozusagen endopsychische Wahrnehmung) psychischer Faktoren und verhältnisse des Unbewußten spiegelt sich — es ist schwer, es anders zu sagen, die Analogie mit der Paranoia muß hier zu Hilfe genommen werden — in der Konstruktion einer übersinnlichen Realität, welche von der Wissenschaft in Psychologie des Unbewußten zurückverwandelt soll. Man könnte sich getrauen, die Mythen vom Paradies und Sündenfall, von Gott, vom Guten und Bösen, von der Unsterblichkeit u. dgl. in solcher Weise aufzulösen, die Metaphysik in Metapsychologie umzusetzen. Die Kluft zwischen der Verschiebung des Paranoikers und der des Abergläubischen ist minder groß, als sie auf den ersten Blick erscheint.

The paranoiac like the primitive projects unconscious impulses onto the outside, which take on character and personality in the shape of demons and spirits, mirror images of these unconscious impulses. The key issue here is that these phenomena also occur, perhaps latently, in modern or “healthy” persons. Modern people, regardless of psychogenesis, also have a tendency to project anthropomorphically — as the *totemisms* of Christianity stands witness to. For as Lyotard (1993: 71) writes: “In Freud’s work, religions are classified as obsessional neuroses, primarily because of the importance they accord to ritual, in which Freud sees an analogue to the compulsive ceremonials of the obsessive”. That which is present exists parallel with that which is latent; that which is conscious exists parallel with that which is unconscious. The two interconnect, sometimes porously, in dreams or paranoid delusions, in the hallucinations of a neurotic schizophrenic or obsessive, or during a hashish trance; but ultimately we remain oblivious (but not necessarily impune) from the unconscious stirrings, perhaps because we fear what we may find there, or perhaps we are not aware of the underground (in Marxist terms, the *Unterbau*). For Freud, then, the task lies in becoming conscious of the primitive, ritualistic, and paranoid impulses latent within us, in order to be done with it. For Melanie Klein, a follower of Freud, all sane people are cured psychotics.²⁵⁰

For Freud the issue lies in undoing the illusion or appearance which is the result of primitive and mythical impulses. The psyche projects *unwanted stimuli* onto the external world, stimuli which take on various personified guises: evil demons or

²⁵⁰ See Geyer-Ryan 1994: 157.

benevolent gods. According to Freud, this is largely where magic, animism, and myth *überhaupt* stems from: “mythical projection”. An *illusion* is thus created, an illusion based on the human self.²⁵¹

In short, without going too deeply into Freud’s thinking, and at the risk of over-simplification, the point is that Freud’s idea of myth, illusion and the projections or mirror images (or correspondences in the sense of Warburg but also Baudelaire) which the mind creates, by virtue of its duality — the underground and the aboveground, and their porous but impervious relationship with each other — appears in Benjamin’s work in various forms. Freud’s conceptions of the ambivalence of feelings, superstition, self-reproach, the *Tabu*, *Vatersehnsucht*, *Vatertötung*, the guilt complex of consciousness, incest and the Oedipus complex, are key “unsaid” themes in most myths, be they oral, written, or painted. Freud’s interest in these myths has this in common with, for example, Benjamin’s and the Frankfurter Schule’s reading: it signals a re-reading which sees unconscious impulses projected onto gods whose wrath and fury result in the nebulous fates overcoming mythical heroes and anti-heroes — as a means of emancipation from such trappings.²⁵²

²⁵¹This illusionist projection that is a replica of the (unconscious) self, recalls the writings of Feuerbach, who, in this regard, was also a direct influence on Marx. Feuerbach writes in *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1969: 52-55): “der Gegenstand des Menschen ist nichts anderes als sein *gegenständliche* Wesen selbst. Wie der Mensch denkt, wie er gesinnt ist, so ist sein Gott: so viel Wert der Mensch hat, so viel Wert und nicht mehr hat sein Gott. *Das Bewußtsein Gottes ist das Selbstbewußtsein des Menschen, die Erkenntnis Gottes die Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen.* Aus seinem Gotte erkennst du den Menschen, und wiederum aus dem Menschen seinen Gott; beides ist eins. Was dem Menschen *Gott* ist, das ist *sein Geist, seine Seele*, und was des *Menschen Geist, seine Seele, sein Herz*, das ist *sein Gott*: Gott ist *offenbare Innere*, das *ausgesprochene* Selbst des Menschen; die Religion die feierliche Enthüllung der verborgenen Schätze des Menschen, das Eingeständnis seiner innersten Gedanken, das *öffentliche Bekenntnis seiner Liebesgeheimnisse*. [...] Der Mensch verlegt sein Wesen zuerst außer sich, ehe er es in sich findet. Das eigne Wesen ist ihm zuerst als ein anderes Wesen Gegenstand, Die Religion ist das kindliche Wesen der Menschheit; aber das Kind sieht sein Wesen, den Menschen außer sich - als Kind ist der Mensch sich als ein anderer Mensch Gegenstand. [...] *Das göttliche Wesen ist nichts anderes als das menschliche Wesen* oder besser: *das Wesen des Menschen* abge sondert von den Schranken des individuellen, d. h. wirklichen, leiblichen Menschen, vergegenständlicht, d. h. *angeschaut* und *verehrt als ein anderes, von ihm unterschiedenes, eignes Wesen* — alle *Bestimmungen* des göttlichen Wesens sind darum Bestimmungen des menschlichen Wesens” (Feuerbach’s italics). It should also be remembered, however, as Lyotard (1993: 70) points out, that Freud (knowingly or not) appears to adopt Marx’s criticism of Feuerbach — that his philosophy “was falsely rational and effectively religious”. Lyotard (1993: 71) writes: “The Marxist critique of religious alienation was not directed against Hegel, but against Feuerbach; similarly, Freud does not merely attack Christianity [...] but also primitive Judaism, which takes at least as radical a view of idolatry (meditations) as Feuerbach does of the Hegelian dialectic”.

²⁵² Cf. Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion.

Freud's concern is to liberate the modern individual from the trappings of his unconscious. If the resemblances, or the "codes" that exist within the psyche are not decoded and illuminated, modern humanity may fall prey to the abject horror of the paranoid. The process of liberating the individual from his or her fears is what his psychoanalysis is about — at least that is what it would pertain to (Freud's psychoanalysis, like Marx's socialism, has become somewhat of a pariah in recent years). In the final analysis, his ideas, like Marx's ideas, stem from the enlightenment belief that the individual is held bondage by infantile enslavement to mythical projections of demons and gods. Again, the question is one of consciousness-raising, release from repression, awakening from the childish dream.

One should also note the development of Freud's thoughts on projections and mirror images in writers like Jacques Lacan, who through reflections on "paranoic knowledge"²⁵³ sees the *unconscious as a text*, a language to be read or deciphered — which, of course, has several Benjaminian implications, not least of which is the textual and imagological allegorical impulse. Where Freud sees the unconscious projecting as a primitive means for protection, Lacan traces a similar idea to the pre-Oedipal "mirror stage" of the baby, of which Geyer-Ryan (1994: 156) writes:

The mirror-stage, providing the baby with the illusion of fullness and presence by imaging the self as a unified body, still belongs to the pre-Oedipal phase. It is the transitory condition for the entry into the Oedipal phase and the symbolic order which are integral to the laws of patriarchy. The narratives of the symbolic order, always structured in time and therefore tilted towards difference and death, offer the child sexual, cultural, historical and political identifications. These narratives will eventually be anchored more or less rigidly in positions of identity, propelled by the unifying impact of the mirror-stage.

But this ideal ego, pretending to be autonomous and coherent in the pseudo-security of its space and under the gaze of maternal love, is beset with difficulties. Identity, being constructed by way of a mirror-image, always coexists with its alienation from that image of the self as other. The basic unreliability of identity crops up as emotional ambiguity towards any

²⁵³ See Payne 1993: 28-9 on the influence of Dali's "paranoia criticism" on Lacan's 1932 doctoral dissertation. Freud in his turn was sufficiently impressed by Dali to modify his initially negative assessment of surrealism.

other, a constant oscillation between affirmative identification and hostile repulsion.

One may also make an interesting comparison between Lacan's "mirror stage" and Benjamin's conception of Baroque dismemberment and the fragmentary body. Lacan (qtd. in Payne 1993: 32) writes:

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lustre of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality I shall call orthopaedic — and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.

Furthermore, notes Geyer-Ryan (1994: 161), a writer like Julia Kristeva, in her study *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, reminds us that

from the very beginning of our subjectivity and individuality, which is based on our splitting into unconscious and consciousness, we are always already strangers to ourselves. Only the life-long, cathartic experience and reliving of that division through art or other imaginative practises can prevent or mitigate the petrification of the imaginary self. In spatial terms, this means developing a capacity for mobility, transitory states, nomadism and voyaging; the occupation of places in different narratives, or the renaming of the old places and spaces would likewise be involved in rituals of mobility.

Leaving aside for now Geyer-Ryan's argument that women are doubly strangers in patriarchal society, a question, according to her, neither Kristeva, nor Mazzoleni, nor Burgin, nor Bachelard deals with adequately²⁵⁴ — Lyotard (1993: 69) observes that Freud's awakening from myth has Judaic consequences, that "Freud, but also and with different intentions, Bultmann and the demythologizing school, understand Judaism to be an effort to escape from myth, to emancipate an interpretative discourse from the prestidigium exercised by phantasmatic narratives and ceremonial". Lyotard (1993: 70) writes:

The Jewish religion is not of the totemic, the Egyptian or the Christian type; in a sense it is closer to science than any other type; but insofar as it is a religion, and a religion exclusively centred on the father, it is an obstacle to the full development of rationality. Judaism is contrasted with totemism on the one hand and the Hellenism of science on the other. The former contrast is central to Freud's reflection; the latter appears to be marginal.

It should be quite clear what the implications of this observation would be in terms of Benjamin, whose "figurations" are in this sense profoundly subversive of Judaism, old and new. For if Freud retains a conflict between "discourse" (which would be patriarchal) and "figuration" (maternal), Benjamin would mesh the two (albeit not without a "rigid" dialectic, as in the Baroque petrified face of nature). And yet for both Freud and Benjamin, in the true Judaic father-obsessed spirit of what Harold Bloom has called "text-centeredness", "text-obsessiveness", the "text" or word holds out in the end (or in Lyotard's reading, the overestimation of the father remains, only displaced). Lyotard (1993: 106-7) writes:

Freud departs from Judaism in that the word (the truth) is for him no longer an object to be listened to, but an object to be produced (constructed): writing the book, knowing. He remains loyal to Judaism in that what he wants to construct is still a word, in that for him the truth can be sought only in the manifestation of a text, can only be heard in words.

This, to be sure, may be true of Benjamin also, except that his "texts" are precisely *image* orientated — albeit more teratological than anthropomorphic inclined — picture puzzles, engrams, emblems, allegories, immanently imago-logical. Benjamin's words have a *physis*, a sensual, pictorial dialectic absent in Freud.

Furthermore, in terms of the task of art in the Freudian program, Arnold Hauser (1959: 43) writes:

Freud is concerned, above all, with a way of redemption - the way from mere fantasy to the work of art as vehicle of social integration. The artist

²⁵⁴ Geyer-Ryan (1994: 161) writes: "So, what women might need in order to encounter strangers in a non-traumatic way might be not so much rituals of mobility as conditions to stabilize their bodies in their environment, taking up a place beyond men's spatial and interpretative control".

creates a world of fulfillment which is more than a private domain of his own mind, one in which others also may participate and find enjoyment.

For Freud, art has to serve not as a means to enhance or fabricate beauty, for that would only sublimate the real, but rather as a way to face up to reality. Writes Hauser (1959: 43):

Form and beauty are but by-products in a scheme directed to objectives that have little to do with disinterested pleasure or with art for its own sake. Beauty is not among the artist's direct aims: what he is concerned with is, above all, problems of life; beauty is only a weapon, a means of defence, or an evasive device in his wrestling with reality.

In this Freud certainly echoes Marx's "reality" impulse, the struggle to overcome illusion and fantasy, to reach maturity and consciousness. Art, dream, and theory would then become mere social vehicles against *l'art pour l'art* and for the emphatic awakening from the mythical and repressive dream. However, where Marx believes that change is to be brought about via political revolution, the economic as the only thing that determines human relations and situations, Freud looks to science for the answers religion did not, and cannot give humankind. Freud reproaches Marxism for what he believes is its repetition of the thought-limit (*Denkverbot*) which creates another religion in which the works of Marx are the source of enlightenment and all those who do not agree are branded as heretics.²⁵⁵ Moreover, as Lyotard (1993: 105) elucidates: "Unlike that of Leonardo, Freud's word was not to find an artistic expression or to be a word of reconciliation. On the contrary, Freud always looked on art, and on Italy, as something that was forbidden him". The return of the *Bilderverbot* in Freud also manifests itself in Benjamin: except that in the latter, the image (of the mother) transgresses the patriarchal text — whether because of an Oedipus complex or not is another question.

As in other instances, Benjamin appropriated the thoughts and illuminations of others transgressively, aggressively, subversively; turning things and thoughts against themselves, in so doing hoping to underscore a negative utopia. This "free appropriation", however, understood in terms of an anarchic self-undoing, which, moreover, claims material and

²⁵⁵See Fortmann 1974: 49.

political justification (marking its own failure as a future success), unfortunately often results in the kind of remystification and vulgar materialism Benjamin was highly critical of himself. As can be seen in the schools of thinking after Benjamin, schools of various predispositions claiming Benjamin as their own particularly at the time of the student revolutions of the 1960s. The question, nevertheless, as to the validity of these transgressions philosophically and historically speaking, retains its exigency: the contemporary obsession with the body of the text finds its precursor after all in Benjamin's writing (not without some argumentation it is true). Thus we return to the practicality of the societal significance of Benjamin's filmic²⁵⁶ program, one of mass awakening and bodily redemption, continuing now in a tacit reading keeping the demythologising programmes of Marx and Freud in mind.

²⁵⁶ See Barthes (1993: 328-9) on the difference between the film and the filmic, the filmic being related to Barthes' notion of the "third meaning". Writes Barthes: "The filmic is that in the film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented. The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end. ... The filmic is not the same as the film, is as far removed from the film as the novelistic is from the novel (I can write in the novelistic without ever writing novels)".

8. Film, and the problem of Mickey Mouse

Benjamin's Artwork essay, besides its anti-bourgeois slant, was written specifically against the fascist aestheticisation of politics and violence. Aestheticisation²⁵⁷ for Benjamin means the totalisation of art — in the broader sense of culture and the production of art — and of the artwork merging it with reality, blurring the crucial dialectical distinction which would constitute a critical awareness. According to Benjamin, as soon as art stops criticising itself, exposing its own means of production²⁵⁸ it turns into a spectacle. When the artwork fails to show itself to be distinct from life it merges with life in the process giving up its position of critical commentator. This critical isolation from "reality", in the Brechtian vein in which the Artwork essay is written, does not mean that the artwork becomes autonomous, and self-fulfilling (a *l'art pour l'art* notion of art Benjamin deems defunct and bourgeois). Its critical distinction from life is a critical and sometime satirical one - it adopts the revolutionary position of subversively putting itself out in the open as art criticising art, criticising itself and the hidden production relations of life in the process.

In other words, against the aestheticisation of life which entails a beautification of that which is essentially corrupt, the new revolutionary art would mortify all superficial appearance, destroying the ephemerality of beauty, of emotion and empathy, and the hypertrophy of the soul experienced in both bourgeois and fascist spectacle. That is, it would destroy "beauty" *in art distinct from life* as a way of commenting on false notions of "beauty" in life — notions which tend to confuse art and life, foregoing the critical distance needed for any sober understanding of reality. The revolutionary art is "terroristic" of current conditions, current attitudes, the current mentality of traditionalist

²⁵⁷ See Wolfgang Iser 1966: 1-24 on various aestheticisation processes, Iser makes the distinction between "surface aestheticisation", meaning basically "a sugar-coating of the real with aesthetic flair"; and "deep-seated aestheticisation", where aesthetic process does not merely shroud the already given, but in actual fact "even determine their structure, effect not only the cover [superstructure], but even the core [base]" (Iser 1966: 2 & 4).

²⁵⁸ And this is not only a Brechtian motif, but runs throughout Benjamin's "self-destructive", "self-critical" writing.

notions of art and art reception.²⁵⁹ Importantly, however, as it determines itself as art, against art, it does not aestheticise itself or reality: there is a difference between the art saboteur and the terrorist who blows up a pub in Belfast.²⁶⁰ This turn away from art as relaxation, enjoyment, *self-contemplation* and *self-glorification* is a political turn, one which is given the weight of a specific historical moment. Benjamin (1992a: 235) writes:

Mankind which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for himself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicising art.

Benjamin's call for a politicisation of aesthetics is a sharp reply to the fascist propagandisation of newsreels, radio, and film — against the fascist “violation of the technical apparatus”, the effort to aestheticise politics, and maintain property relations.²⁶¹ Benjamin (1992a: 234) writes:

The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.

Susan Sontag (1996: 92) observes an utopian aestheticisation and idealisation at the heart of fascism, one which can be traced back to later romanticism (a point Benjamin himself made when discussing the cult of genius and Wagnerian *Sturm und Drang*). She writes:

What is interesting about the relation between politics and art under National Socialism is not that art was subordinated to political needs, for this is true of dictatorships both of the right and of the left, but that politics appropriated the rhetoric of art — art in its late romantic phase. (Politics is “the highest and most comprehensive art there is,” Goebbels said in 1933, “and we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists [...])

²⁵⁹ Be they left-wing or right-wing, bourgeois or fascist, communist or democratic.

²⁶⁰ The art saboteur refrains from hurting people physically, perhaps because he or she does not work under any ideological banner.

²⁶¹ According to Benjamin the fascist regime creates hysterical spectacles which sweeps up the masses without changing their living conditions. In this case one may compare the Hollywood spectacle which merely serves to entertain the people with special effects, little moral lessons, and sentimental happy endings whilst it avoids awakening critical thought.

the task of art and the artist [being] to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy.”) What is interesting about art under National Socialism are those features which make it a special variant of totalitarian art. The official art of countries of the Soviet Union and China aims to expound and reinforce a utopian morality. Fascist art displays a utopian aesthetics — that of physical perfection.

It is an effort, Benjamin states categorically, which culminates in one thing: war the beautification of war (Benjamin 1992a: 234). To underline the point Benjamin quotes Marinetti — spokesperson of the Futurists who just before World War I postulated “the cult of warfare as aesthetics” (Buck-Morss 1993: 123) — his manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war:

For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as antiaesthetic [...] Accordingly we state: [...] War is beautiful because it establishes man’s domination over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchards of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of big tanks, the geometrical information flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others [...] Poets and artists of Futurism! [...] remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art [...] may be illuminated by them (Marinetti qtd. in Benjamin 1992a: 234-5).

The crucial point in this aestheticisation of war and politics lies in the form it takes, the way in which the spectacle is designed on a mass scale. For there is a taunting link between the Futurists taking pleasure in mass destruction, and the allegorist taking pleasure in destruction and dismemberment. There is a crucial difference as well: the former celebrates destruction on a large scale on the war fields, turning life into art in the process; the latter makes a fundamental distinction between life and art, the text and the body. Benjamin’s destructive character, in other words, sabotages an attitude, a mentality, a traditional form which has fallen foul of totalitarianism. Militant annihilation of people and nature on a mass scale is the opposite of the annihilation of a model which consciously and unconsciously provides a springboard for the blind destruction in the first place. In this

sense Benjamin was highly critical of bourgeois autonomous art as held onto by left-wing intelligentsia, for what he thought to be a model vulnerable to fascist appropriation, and apathy. The attempted difference in form is crucially linked to the difference in content.

Susan Sontag (1996: 92) writes that the masses under fascism “are made to take form, be design. Hence mass athletic demonstrations, a choreographed display of bodies, are a valued activity in all totalitarian countries; and the art of the gymnast, so popular now in Eastern Europe, also evokes recurrent features of fascist aesthetics: the holding in or confining of force, military precision”. Susan Buck-Morss (1993: 143) also writes that the fascist aesthetic pivots on mass design, mass orchestration, militaristic mechanisation, the design of totality. She writes that

In Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film, *Triumph of the Will* (of which Benjamin, writing the Artwork essay, was surely aware), the mobilized masses fill the grounds of the Nuremberg stadium and the cinema screen, so that the surface patterns provide a pleasing design of the whole, letting the viewer forget the purpose of the display, the militarization of society for the teleology of making war. The aesthetics allows an *anaestheticisation* of reception, a viewing of the ‘scene’ with disinterested pleasure, even when that scene is the preparation through ritual of a whole society for unquestioning sacrifice and ultimately, destruction, murder, and death.

Now, Benjamin’s programme in the Artwork essay, in essence continuing a line of thinking which began twenty years prior, is ultimately geared against the totalisation of art and life into a false semblance of wholeness. Not political propaganda, but, writes Buck-Morss (1993: 124), demanding of art the task of undoing “the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation*, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through them*”. For Benjamin “Der Film ist Ubungsinstrument” (Lindner 1978: 196) against the *mythical* manipulation of film for fascist aesthetic purposes.

In other words, film must be mobilised against its own inherent potential for propagandist manipulation, through a political radicalisation of its form that will summon a critical social awareness. Film must invoke a social awakening, *contra anaestheticisation*.

Film must subvert and *shatter* the illusion of mass wholeness.²⁶² It will be an awakening anthropologic-materialistically structured around a self-referential, at times *allegorical* breaking down of film²⁶³ into its key elements or codes: the film apparatus, testing and the expert audience, distraction of the audience, tactile reception, Dadaist sedition, montage, shock reception, Chaplin, Mickey Mouse and laughter.

The first thing Benjamin attempts to do is to rehabilitate the properties of film from the initial fantasia-orientated theorists. Benjamin (1992a: 220-1) points out how early theoreticians relegated film to the realm of ritual and the fantastic. He quotes, for example, Abel Gance's comparison of film with hieroglyphics:²⁶⁴

Here, by a remarkable regression, we have come back to the level of expression of the Egyptians [...] Pictorial language has not yet matured because our eyes have not yet adjusted to it. There is as yet insufficient respect for, insufficient cult of, what it expresses.

Or Séverin-Mars:

What art has been granted a dream more poetical and more real at the same time! Approached in this fashion the film might represent an incomparable means of expression. Only the most high-minded persons, in the most perfect and mysterious moments of their lives, should be allowed to enter its ambience.

Benjamin, sensitive to anything remotely smacking of Fascist mythical phantasmagoria, criticises these theoreticians for relegating film into the realm of the sacrosanct and the supernatural. Benjamin's view is that their fantastical "reading" of films such as *L'Opinion publique*, *The Gold Rush* and Max Reinhardt's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* vilifies the "realistic" properties of film in general. The tendency to mystify film's "functional" essentials into the fantastical fails to grasp the radical and practical power film

²⁶²Cf. Barthes 1993: 409: the notion of a *subtle subversion* which is not directly concerned with destruction.

²⁶³ In the same way that Benjamin allegorised the photographic image so he also allegorised the cinematic image.

²⁶⁴ A notion, incidentally, gaining immense popularity with the influx of contemporary books such as James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (1994), Robert Bauval's and Adrian Gilbert's *The Orion Mystery* (1994), and Graham Hancock's (1995) *Fingerprints of the Gods* (it must be remembered that reading *through* hieroglyphics would be an allegorical attitude, whereas the symbolic form of the hieroglyph has fantastical, "auratic" properties.

has to transform traditional aesthetics into a semiotics of the political. Benjamin mentions Werfel's critique of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Werfel disregards the film as being a sterile copying of the ordinary in its shots of streets, interiors, railroad stations, restaurants, motorcars and beaches. Benjamin (1992a: 221) cites Werfel:

The film has not yet realized its true meaning, its real possibilities [...] these consist in its unique faculty to express by natural means and with incomparable persuasiveness all that is fairylike, marvellous, supernatural.

Benjamin specifically counters the fantastical view of art — the view of art as a supernatural dreamworld into which the individual immerses him- or herself. For he is interested in the unconscious only insofar as it can be displaced or transplanted into the realm of everyday consciousness, of materialist revolutionary politics. Only insofar as the ecstatic energies of intoxication (religious, psychotic, neurotic, and otherwise) are turned against the Fascist sublimation of the *l'art pour l'art* theory can it take on a revolutionary character. Against “the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders)” (Sontag 1996: 96). In this regard, film for Benjamin turns on his theory of dialectical images:

Der Fetischcharakter der Ware ist keine Tatsache des Bewußtseins sondern dialektisch in dem eminenten Sinne daß er Bewußtsein produziert. [...] Nicht also wäre [...] das dialektische Bild als Traum ins Bewußtseins zu verlegen, sondern durch die dialektische Konstruktion wäre der Traum zu entäußern und die Bewußtseinsimmanenz selber als eine Konstellation der Wirklichen zu verstehen (Adorno qtd. in Tiedemann 1973: 156).²⁶⁵

However, a historical perspective must be kept: for Benjamin argues that in an era of eminent aestheticisation, the danger of regressing into the nebulous terrain of the mythical supernatural, a tendency latent in much German but also French art and thinking, has to be

²⁶⁵To be sure, if one considers the fact that film has its origin in the “magic lantern”, and if one keeps in mind the debatably brilliant phantasmagoric and fetishistic fantasies of an early film-maker such as Méliès, it would be nugatory to deny the romantic and magical possibilities of film. One need also only think of splendid authors such as Ingmar Bergman, Kusturica, Kieslowski, and even someone like Woody Allen, to realise that film and fantasy are almost inseparable.

countered with a sober materialist vision.²⁶⁶ This is why Benjamin focuses his attention not only on the material in front of the camera, but also on the material apparatus itself: in order to liquidate any notion of fetishism. He writes:

The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera[...] (Benjamin 1992a: 222).

According to Benjamin, the substitution of a physical audience for a camera results in a film actor's subjection to a series of (optical) tests: firstly, because the camera interrupts the continuum of movement by changing position so readily, that is to say, because the camera, as in an experiment, combines a series of different shots, combined with special camera angles and lenses, numerous images are shot which are later cut and spliced together by an editor, to form a montage of disparate parts, filmed at different times, and thus the actor may be scrutinised, tested, perhaps like a cubist still-life, from different angles: in order to take stock of the usually unseen moments in-between movement; and secondly, because the audience is not burdened down or mesmerised by the physical presence or charm of the actor on stage, they can clinically study the various "parts" of the actor(s), to see the material "naked", the way an X-ray sees "behind" skin: to test the various facets of life as acted by an actor who is acting him- or herself, un uncovering usually not allowed in the illusionary cult object of beauty. Writes Benjamin (1992a: 222):

For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else.

What matters, writes Benjamin, is that the actor does not present himself to a human audience, but rather to a mechanical contrivance. This means that the actor acts in front of a machine, or "mirror", in order to record clear non-auratic pictures, which are then put

²⁶⁶Of course, one could argue that Benjamin himself succumbs to a quasi-mysticism in his Artwork essay, something Brecht for one found "dreadful". See diary entry qtd. in Wolin 1982: 141: "[Benjamin] proceeds from something he calls *aura*, which relates to dreams (to day-dreams). he says: if you feel a gaze directed at you, even behind your back, you return the gaze (!). the expectation that what one looks at looks at one in return, produces the aura. the latter has recently been in decline, along with the cultic. benjamin has discovered this through an analysis of film, where the aura disintegrates through the reproduction of the works of art. all mysticism, under the guise of anti-mysticism. this is the form in which the materialist conception of history is adapted! it is fairly dreadful".

through a test by an audience, and the actor himself, in order to study the parts the way a surgeon would. In short, the actor acts as little as possible in order to study him- or herself so much the better, that is, on screen, displaced, in another context, testing their mobile and transportable “mirror” images. The cinema actor is alienated from him- or herself, and in “exile” he or she performs the alienation which the audience studies and recognises, criticising it accordingly.

This brings to mind Lacan’s “mirror stage”, where the infant forms an illusionary “unified” picture of itself, a transitional and conditional stage for entry into the Oedipal phase and the symbolic order. But as the “mirror stage” is beset by “alienation from that image of the self as other”, resulting in emotional ambiguity towards the other carried over into the symbolic phase, so also the precariousness of “identity” experienced in front of the camera. However, one could suggest for argument’s sake, that the fact that the mirror images recorded by the film camera are *transportable* provides for an opportunity to study the various selves from a unpossessive distance, providing a kind of pseudo-maternal balance, that “flexibility of identity necessary to avoid the prison of a mortifying body-armour at one extreme and the loss of self in psychotic disintegration at the other” (Geyer-Ryan 1994:157 & 160).

Benjamin writes that the actor’s experience is uncanny and strange — the images on the screen are stark, foreign and yet familiar. Moreover, the multifarious parts spliced into a sequence of “running” images echoes the fragmented time that is the modern (production-line, mechanistic) experience. And this is one of the things Benjamin stresses: film can record the material mode of existence unlike any other medium: “The film is the first art form capable of demonstrating how matter plays tricks on man. Hence, films can be excellent means of materialistic representation” (Benjamin 1992a: 240).

The film camera is able to shoot temporal movement in space from a variety of perspectives that show events in their sequence of separate or disjointed parts (each time the eye blinks a moment is lost, displaced), in such a way that the illusion of everyday continuity is shattered. The absence of “live” persons is a physical absence that orchestrates the scene and its reception or testing.

The twofold absence of the live audience and the live actors is what Benjamin describes as the absence of aura: the uniqueness of presence is liquidated by a camera that has taken over the role of both the audience and the actors. Benjamin (1992a: 223) writes:

for the first time — and this is the effect of the film — man has to operate with his whole living person, yet foregoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes.

One might say, the camera is to the audience what an open keyhole is to the voyeur — it allows the person to view what is behind closed doors; and at the same time, and by the same rationale, this “eye” follows the different acts in all their “nakedness” without making a sound, without revealing anything of itself to that which is doing the showing.²⁶⁷ Benjamin reasons that with this procedure the actor is freed from the demanding presence of an audience that would also affect his performance to the extent that he would accommodate his live show to their live response (again, something not altogether worthless); and the audience is freed from the live presence of the actor, so that now, instead of feeling intimidated, they can venture calmly and collectively towards a critical judgment of the performance.

In this sense, it must be recalled that several modern painters made use of photographs in order to get a clearer and *stabilised* image to work from. In terms of the *semblance* of movement, with the eye on its analysis, Muybridge fixated in sequence the movement of animals and people, by way of his “zoopraxiscope”. Linda Williams (1991: 48) writes: “For Muybridge this truth [the body as pure object of truth, GTS] is scientific — a matter of isolating the essential. He strips the body of clothes to better reveal its musculature and movement. He isolates it against a bare background or grid to measure it, and he tailors his frame to accommodate the body’s full extension in size”.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷Although it might be added that in a Sartrian sequence, someone might happen upon the “peeper”, freezing them, tormenting them into an existential self-consciousness.

²⁶⁸Williams observes that Muybridge, albeit with his so-called scientific method, creates *erotic* iconised images of women, as opposed to his straightforward images of men. In this context the paradox of Benjamin’s valorisation of the film apparatus as being objective to the extent of being able to counter the

For Benjamin the prime task is the desire to record the human body in its materialist context free from aesthetic illusion. Benjamin suggests that film, because of its clinically, its “objectivity”, could reveal material not necessarily available to the naked eye (much movement remains “unconscious” to the optical nerve). Film, like the dialectical image, functions as awakener, consciousness-raising. Recalling Benjamin’s criticism of Aragon: “whereas Aragon persistently remains in the realm of dreams, here it is a question of finding the constellation of awakening”.

In a striking analogy, one which also appears in his photography essay, Benjamin (1992a: 226-227) compares the cameraman to the surgeon and the painter to the magician. He writes:

The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient’s body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician — who is still hidden in the medical practitioner — the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him.

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.²⁶⁹

Again Benjamin’s allegorical impulse becomes apparent. Benjamin posits an abject (sick) body, which is to be dismembered (penetrated) in order to truly uncover the underlying potential for salvation (healing). The natural *appearance* of distance, maintained by traditional authority, is liquidated by a mechanical criticism. The body of the text is “raped” or “violated” in order to reveal the “unified” body through the fragmented body

fetishisation of objects in the modern metropolitan world, and yet the camera holds inherent within itself precisely the possibility of becoming a fetish and of creating, through projecting, fetishistic wish-images.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Brecht’s (1972: 13-14) didactic short story, “The Writer”, with regards the positivistic doctor who merely studies the surface, promises speedy recovery, and prescribes expensive medicines without diagnosing the actual problem; and the critical doctor, or rather surgeon, who penetrates into the body to find and heal the problem. We might also recall Brecht’s dictum, “Don’t start with the good old things but the bad new ones” (Benjamin 1992b: 121).

parts. Focusing on the abject means liquidating the false appearance of sensuality and beauty, holding out for a deeper reaching healing of the sensual physis. The allegorist opts for technicality and functionality rather than illusion and ornamentation, that is, the allegorist doubles his own text, invoking a dialectical self-criticism. Once more, allegorical violation of the symbolic body is the reverse of Fascist violence which gets caught up in its own self-glorifying spectacle. Allegorical cruelty moves through excess in order to reach the sobriety underneath. To be sure, the latent patriarchal tendencies in allegorical “rape” and “violation” may end up negating its own redemptive desires, if the essential irony in the subversion is not fully realised.

According to Benjamin, the film apparatus, the camera, by virtue of its technical ubiquity and impersonal make-up, releases the audience from having to experience any personal contact with the actor, thus enabling them to take up the position of expert. Gertrud Koch (1994: 211) points out the dubiousness of this thesis with regards the latent voyeuristic-narcissistic mode of seeing that is set up by the camera:

this thesis appears dubious because it excludes the possibility that the apparatus itself might be perceived to be a naturalized fetish with which the audience identifies — less on the level of an instrument with which to test the actor than on the narcissistic level of an enormous extension of the perceptual apparatus.

Keeping in mind Sontag’s observation that “das Fotografieren hat eine chronisch voyeuristische Beziehung zur Welt geschaffen, die Bedeutung aller Ereignisse einebnet” (qtd. in Stoessel 1983: 157), Koch’s criticism of the latent sexual implications of the film and its camera correlates with Adorno’s criticism that Benjamin, in fear of the possible barbarism set free through the radicalisation of art, creates an inverse taboo on art and the film contrivance. It would be true to say that here lies one glaring inadequacy in Benjamin’s argument, that is, the problem of the fetishistic manipulation of both the camera as instrument, and the people who appear in front and behind it. This would form a crucial part of Adorno’s criticism of Benjamin’s “Brechtian” essay — as Wolin (1982: 193) sums up Adorno’s criticism: “Benjamin exhibited a Brechtian uncritical and immediate fetishisation of the powers of ‘technique,’ with fatal disregard for the manipulative social employment of that technique in reality”. Adorno’s criticism

culminates most brilliantly in his study of modern popular music, as in his 1938 essay, "On the fetish character of music and the regression of listening", where he writes that art under capitalism is rampantly commodified, and the traditional subject of aesthetic experience is effectively abolished. Wolin (1982: 195) writes:

In the case of music, examples of commodification abound. For example, there are the insidious hit tunes, all written according to formula and devoid of any intrinsic musical quality. They are composed for easy listening and do not attempt to place demands on the listener (thus, the "regression of listening"). For the sake of the largest possible sales, they attempt to appeal to as wide a spectrum of listeners as possible. This also means keeping all substance to a minimum, while perhaps allowing for the inclusion of a catchy phrase here or there, so that the consumer will remember *this* song when he or she goes to the marketplace.

In addition, there is the growing cult of musical "stars," the beneficiaries of a totally artificial and contrived build-up on this part of the industry. The result is that the specific quality of this or that individual song ceases to matter (not that it exists anyway), and it is purchased merely for the sake of the *name* of the artist. Art thereby regresses to *cult* in the full-fledged totemic sense of the word. It becomes nothing more than a *fetish*, part of the logic of commodification or the "fetishism of commodities" in Marx's sense. It is purchased for its *cult value* — the value it acquires by virtue of its commercial status of popularity, and no longer for its intrinsic merits as an aesthetic object.

Certainly if one considers the fetishisation of contemporary music on the radio and MTV orientated pop videos, where the "sexy" look of the "artist" becomes the largest asset of the record company and the "song", as the "look" constitutes what sells the "product" in the first place; where the video of a "hit" is constructed for the most part out of militant in synch dance movements choreographed to the beat of a tune which in turn ticks to an inane narcissistic wish-image of wanting to be beautiful and desirable (but ultimately unattainable); and that furthermore, this inward "rhythm", in fact, ultimately reflects the ticking of a late capitalist society which has its "workers" move up from the factory to the office, where everyone dresses to the same fantasy of wanting to be desirable (an old desire, it is true, except that its narcissism has reached new highest) — keeping this in mind, Adorno's criticism, for all its "high art" modernism, is still surprisingly valid.

Benjamin, in his haste perhaps to redeem the technical instrument for political emancipation, completely ignores an aspect of film which has quite obviously become a dominating factor: passive solipsistic consumption of fetishised products, as opposed to truly critical deconstruction, where, as Leo Bersani (1990: 43) puts it: "The self has solipsistically become its own source and object of pleasure". Nevertheless, it is precisely critical action,²⁷⁰ that is to say, the camera as a means to counter the technological and Marxistic, fetishistic break-down of modern experience, the establishment of collective *space* in which the critical consciousness of the audience is honed, that drives Benjamin's argument.

Adorno's criticism of fetishisation points precisely to the danger of an aestheticisation spectacle that Benjamin attempts to interrupt. Benjamin develops a theory of film whereby the potential psychotic intoxication is subverted through a double mimesis. That is, the shattering of experience in the modern world is repeated in film by way of a cut and splice technique that projects the body, violated by the apparatus but re-unified in motion, onto the screen. And the audience is given the opportunity to repeat this gesture themselves (perhaps as in a synthetic return to the "mirror stage", a double preparation of its loss), as a way of overcoming their own dismemberment. Buck-Morss (1993b: 323) writes:

Children instinctively mimic objects as a means of mastering their experiential world. Psychoanalytical theory tells us that the neurotic symptom similarly imitates a traumatic event in an (unsuccessful) attempt at psychic defence. Benjamin was suggesting that the new mimetic techniques [photography/film, GTS] could instruct the collective to employ this capacity effectively, not only as a defence against the trauma of industrialisation, but as a means of reconstructing the capacity for experience that had been shattered by the process.

²⁷⁰And in this sense it is crucial to remember Benjamin's call for a complete *literarisation* of all living conditions, whereby the masses become writers of their own stories.

Benjamin fundamentally constructs his theory of film *against* the creation of the auratic, commodified Hollywood “star”, the cult of personality, even if only implicitly, and in passing.²⁷¹ This is the roots of his theory of the liquidation of aura:

The film responds to the shrivelling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers’ capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art (Benjamin 1992a: 224).

Moreover, Benjamin’s un-traditional Marxist orientated theory of film is grounded in the idea that the masses who make up the audience can be instructed on how to become *experts*, as a collective, critical of any notion of falseness, of auratic commodity. Benjamin, following Brecht, compares this idea of a revolutionary audience to the sports audience, and to film practice in Russia, both contentious postulations, to be sure. Firstly, Benjamin (1992a: 225) offers another analogy:

It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert. This is obvious to anyone listening to a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race. It is not for nothing that newspaper publishers arrange races for their delivery boys. These arouse great interest among the participants, for the victor has an opportunity to rise from delivery boy to a professional races. Similarly, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to the movie extra [*Filmstatisten*].

It will be remembered that the precarious Brechtain sports analogy has already been discussed in the section on Brecht’s epic theatre, and that it certainly is not without serious questionability — as in the phenomenon of sentimentality blurring into violence, nationalism into hysteria. Understandably, Adorno for one, strict dialectician and insufferable critic of any form of ideology and barbarism that he was, wrote in the now famous letter of August 18, 1936 that as a theory it “ist mir im höchsten Maß zweifelhaft”

²⁷¹ What Benjamin (qtd. in Rabinbach 1979: 64) wrote of Freud, that Freud often constructs his most

(qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1003). Nevertheless, what Benjamin is suggesting here, albeit in quasi-Romantic fashion, in a short-lived longing for community, is that film is to be the property of the masses, in the same way as epic theatre is to be a theatre for the proletariat. Everyone has the right to get involved, have an opinion, to be filmed: “Jeder heutige Mensch kann einen Anspruch vorbringen, gefilmt zu werden” (Benjamin 1977, 1.2: 493). In the vein of Russian films, people are filmed in their own living circumstances, again as in epic theatre, uncovering the *process of production* itself.

Furthermore, film is to be collective property in the way that the press in Russia is the property of the people. Benjamin compares the contemporary situation of film production to the contemporary development of the production of literature. He writes that if one considers the increasing extension of the press since the end of the nineteenth-century, a development which resulted in an ever increasing number of readers turning to writing,²⁷² the present situation would by an “inner logic”²⁷³ do away with the basic distinction between author and public. Benjamin (1992a” 225) writes: “At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer”. The reader turns into an expert whose opinion counts enough to be written down: “In the Soviet Union work itself is given a voice. To present it verbally is part of a man’s ability to perform the work. Literary licence is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialised training and thus becomes common property”.

As Benjamin called for a literarisation of living conditions through the production of epic theatre, Benjamin calls for a literarisation of film. Literarisation means the legitimate ability to voice your opinion, the way traditionally only a small minority have done. Literarisation means also the legitimate claim *to be reproduced*. Benjamin proffers “der Testende Wahrnehmungseinstellung”, a critical “literary” attitude firmly grounded in the materiality of life as it is, which he likens to the experience of film in Russia. He writes:

Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray *themselves* — and primarily in their own

important thoughts in passing, may at least in this case, also be said of Benjamin.

²⁷²A development which has its beginning in the “letters to the editor”.

²⁷³To use Adorno’s term now read in socialist terms.

work process. In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations (Benjamin 1992a: 226).

According to Benjamin, the modern film must follow the example of the Russian films in which the actors are the workers (as in the epic theatre in which the "relaxed audience" checks the events of the theater against its own social experience), reproduced within their own surroundings, the working process itself; and in this way being given a voice, as opposed to the seductive, fantastical, illusionary special effects of the American films. For Benjamin the true audience of the new film would find themselves as much in front of the camera as behind it, that is, they would be as much writers as they were readers: *testing* the performances and production for validity, testing for falseness as in aura. Here Adorno would also take Benjamin to task, with some grounding, as he observes that "des Tests selber fast ontologisch geronnen und tabuistisch fungierend — während doch, wenn es einen auratischen charakter gibt, dieser den Filmen im höchsten und freilich gerade bedenklichste Maße eignet" (qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1004). And yet it would seem that Adorno misses the intended *ephemerality* or *propaedeutics* of the project: testing in film may have a powerful significance, preparationally speaking, in terms of the *Umfunktionierung* of the means of production itself, if one were to consider the "real presence" of an audience discussing a film that has immediate political effect on their lives.²⁷⁴

Adorno further criticises Benjamin's conception of the relationship of the intellectual to the proletariat as being too Brechtian in part — he writes: "Indeed I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us but rather, that it is my task to hold your arm steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters" (qtd. in Wolin 1982: 191) — and that it is, moreover, an ontologisation of Benjamin's own fear. Adorno (qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.2: 1005) writes:

²⁷⁴When Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* first played the Berlin circuits it created a buzz amongst the literati at least equal to the impact the film had on Russian "proletarian" viewers.

vor allem jeden Appells an die Unmittelbarkeit eines wie immer gearteten Wirkungszusammenhanges und an das tatsächliche Bewußtsein der tatsächliche Proletarier, die vor den Bürgern nichts aber auch gar nichts voraushaben außer dem Interesse an der Revolution, sonst aber alle Spuren der Verstümmelung des bürgerlichen Charakters tragen. Das schreibt uns unsere Funktion eindeutig genug vor — daß ich sie nicht im Sinne einer aktivistischen Konzeption der 'Geistigen' meine, davor weiß ich mich sicher. Aber sie kann auch nicht bedeuten, daß wir den alten Tabuierungen entrinnen können nur, indem wir in neue — in 'Tests', sozusagen — uns hineinbegeben. Der Zweck der Revolution ist die Abschaffung der Angst. Darum brauchen wir keine vor ihr zu haben und darum auch nicht unsere Angst zu ontologisieren. Es ist kein bürgerliche Idealismus, wenn man erkennend oder ohne Erkenntnisverbote dem Proletariat die Solidarität hält, anstatt das man, wie es immer wieder unsere Versuchung ist, aus der eigenen Not eine Tugend des Proletariats macht, das selber die gleiche Not hat und unser zur Erkenntnis so gut bedarf wie wir des Proletariats bedürfen, damit die Revolution gemacht werden kann.

Besides the interesting point about the revolution being aimed at the liquidation of Angst, interesting light is shed on Adorno's criticism of Benjamin's quasi-communist attempt to create an artform especially for the education of the proletariat when considering the differences in their respective social and economic positions. Adorno was an academic tied to the Frankfurter Institute, mentally and monetary wise, and his position or function was largely determined by this. Benjamin, on the other hand, found himself, most probably by choice, it is true, in the financial predicament of not being tied professionally to any institution (except for a minimal stipend from the Frankfurter Institute). Adorno's professional position, regardless of the situation in Nazi Germany and the Institute's traumatic emigration to America, was not a little more "secure" than Benjamin's situation. It is perhaps in this light, keeping Benjamin's perpetual impecuniousness in mind, that his meditations on the writer or intellectual's position in the contemporary milieu, the notion of the intellectual presenting his solidarity with the proletariat as producer receives its proper understanding.

The function of the intellectual writer, according to Benjamin, as determined by its close connection to the proletarian masses, and as aesthetical program per se, was

thus a combination of a historical reality,²⁷⁵ and also an economic reality.²⁷⁶ Benjamin's life-long criticism of institutions, all institutions, and that included the institution of the (bourgeois — his own) family, was part of a mental make-up, Romantic in part to be sure, which gave cause to an unremitting exile and outsidership. In other words, according to Benjamin the vigilant writer is anti-bourgeois, anti-conformist, a perpetual pessimist. The economic reality of this condition adds several nuances to the work of any indigent political "producer". As Benjamin (1977, 2.2: 688) delineates in "Der Autor als Produzent" (thoughts he reiterates in the Artwork essay):

die Unterscheidung zwischen Autor und Publikum, die bürgerliche Presse auf konventionelle Art aufrechterhält, in der Sowjetpresse zu verschwinden. Der Lesende ist dort jederzeit bereit, ein Schreibender zu werden, nämlich ein Beschreibender oder auch ein Vorschreibender zu werden. [...] Die Arbeit selbst kommt zu Wort. Und ihre Darstellung im Wort macht einen Teil des Kennens, das zu ihrer Ausübung erforderlich ist. Die literarische Befähigung wird nicht mehr in der spezialisierten, sondern in der polytechnischen Ausbildung begründet und so Gemeingut. Es ist mit einem Wort *die Literarisierung der Lebensverhältnisse, welche der sonst unlösbaren Antinomien Her wird* [emphasis added, GTS]....

Hence, in Brechtian fashion, the audience acts as actors; the proletarian masses act as experts; the writer acts as technician; the reader acts as writer; the work performs itself (as in work becoming pleasurable play, and the text being the physical writing itself, as its sensual body). The intellectual becomes *solidaire* with the proletariat through a radicalised or literarised form of production.

According to Adorno the technological *de-aestheticization* could be a sign of development provided a genuine new form would be created. Benjamin on the other hand took the abrupt step to completely do away with the "bourgeois" aesthetic form (which he thought to be prone to fascist manipulation) in favour of a socialist orientated form and content, one devoid of "aura" or any hint of illusion. Thus the debate between the

²⁷⁵The revolution was seen by Benjamin, both in the Marxist and Messianic tradition, to be immanently and eminently part of the historical make-up of the world.

²⁷⁶Benjamin as *homme d'lettres* wrote against a complacent bourgeois mentality, which included the specialised academic intellectual.

autonomous work of art vis-à-vis the politically committed work of art, a debate in which Adorno criticises Benjamin for not being dialectical enough. Wolin (1982: 193-4) argues:

To “dialecticize” the argument would mean in two important instances to furnish the absent moments [precisely, however, something Benjamin avoided *prima facie*, GTS]. In the case of de-auratized, mechanically reproduced art, it is the moment of “negativity” that is wanting: the fact that such art all too easily lends itself to manipulative rather than emancipatory ends, to the ideological co-option and integration of the masses within the framework of existing social relations, rather than their political enlightenment. In the instance of autonomous art, it is the “positive” moment that has been omitted: radically articulated autonomous art undergoes a process of *self*-rationalization, such that it divests itself of the aura and its accompanying retrograde attributes. Yet, Adorno failed to recognize at the time that for Benjamin, the “philosopher of redemption,” it was precisely those concrete, positive aspects of aesthetic rationalization that demanded emphasis, insofar as they exhibited, however, faintly, traces of the path to “salvation”²⁷⁷

Benjamin's study of Brecht's epic theater, with its central concern with a proletarian audience²⁷⁸ finds its way into his cogitation of the cinema. That is, the relaxed audience of epic theatre is also the *distracted* audience of the new film. It is an idea Scholem (1989: 257) finds highly dubious. He writes critically of Benjamin's essay on epic theatre in a letter of June 30, 1939:

The “relaxed audience,” which checks the events of this [epic, GTS] theater against its social significance, is a great idea, but just an idea, which doesn't correspond to anything in society. Such an audience doesn't exist, either in Russia or in America, and if it exists in Utopia, then the concept of

²⁷⁷For all Benjamin's “optimistic” anti-aesthetic constructiveness, it has become all too clear, for example, how little expertise the audience, be they bourgeois or proletarian (terminologies which in any case have become quite blurred), has derived from a consumer culture running in the guise of producing useful information. What should be quite obvious, with the advent of the “Internet”, for example, an “information highway” which is built and opened on the ideological premise that everyone will be able to have their say, and everyone else will be able to respond, although still in its beginning stages, and besides the fact that *interactive multimedia* does seem to provide for a viable interruption of passive consumption, is the incredible amount of *prattle* as opposed to “sophisticated” writing and thinking flowing through the system. Everyone has their say (theoretically speaking), and the little of value tends to become lost amongst the rest of the trash (until a later “redemption” perhaps?)

²⁷⁸An ambiguous audience as it is didactically “organised” by the director of epic theatre, and yet through Benjamin's reading of a proletarian children's theatre it also seems to have anarchic tendencies.

a theater orientated toward such an audience (which I could imagine, following your instructions) is itself lifted into the realm of the utopian, something it evidently wants to reject.

However, Benjamin, although sharply materialistic, is utopianist inclined *volens volens*; on the other hand he conceptualises the distracted audience by way of *tactile* experience, an idea very much in the vein of his essay on the architecture of the new barbarians — an utopian idea to be sure but one which is quite physically and sensually grounded:²⁷⁹ the audience's reception of film will be rooted in the tactile *apperception* and *appropriation* of buildings (and its definition of space). Benjamin (1992a: 233) writes:

Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception - or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion.

The film audience is to experience the new film physically and sensually in the spirit of the “distracted” nineteenth-century *flâneur* who has turned the city streets into his living-room, and who through carefree habit picks things from the modern city environment by chance, in the spirit of Proust's *mémoire involontaire* — contra Bergson's *mémoire pure* which is voluntary — whereby a string of memories are unearthed from the unconscious by a chance smell or taste.

But, as Benjamin (1992a: 157) observes in his 1939 essay “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, if according to Freud memory fragments are “often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness”, in Proustian terms this indicates that “only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*”. Furthermore, if Benjamin, like the

²⁷⁹ Benjamin in an earlier outline of his Arcades project notes that Fourier's imaginary constructions are still places to live in. See Hollington 1996: 125.

representatives of *Lebensphilosophie* for example, believe “experience”²⁸⁰ and memory to be intimately connected, the fact that experience is shattered in technological modernity, calls for “an attempt to produce experience synthetically” — for “there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally” (Benjamin 1992a: 154).

In this sense, continuing in the spirit of Bergson’s *Matière et mémoire*, where he postulates a theory of *durée*, an attempt to lay claim to “true” experience through poetry,²⁸¹ Proust’s “epic” *À la recherche du temps perdu* devised around a *mémoire involontaire* is such a synthetic attempt. But, writes Benjamin appreciatively, Proust’s approach is nevertheless an immanent critique of Bergson’s theory. Unlike Bergson, for Proust this “rescued” experience is not a matter of free will, but a matter of chance. It is not a question of a continuum, “that turning to the contemplative actualization of the stream of life is a matter of choice”. Rather, it is “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it” (Proust qtd, in Benjamin 1992a: 155). That the chance encounter occurs through a distracted state of mind is the first point here, and when Benjamin (1977, 2.3: 1057) makes a mnemonic note to “The image of Proust” essay, “über das Kinematographische seiner Arbeit”, the point is underscored. For the distraction experienced in film as a synthetic attempt to “rescue” experience through the chance unlocking of memories is certainly akin to Proust’s intoxicating *mémoire involontaire* triggered fortuitously by the taste of the *madeleine* pastry. That it is an intoxication (*Rausch*) dovetailing *awakening* is the second crucial point, which in turn goes hand in hand with the third point, that although the rescuing of memory may be fortuitous, although recollection may occur involuntarily, like all *reading* it firstly requires *practice*, schooling.²⁸² Hence the film theatre as a preparation or instruction site: a turning away

²⁸⁰It will be remembered that Benjamin opposes his theory of *Erfahrung* to the *Erlebnis* of *Lebensphilosophie*.

²⁸¹As discussed regarding Dilthey in the section on Benjamin’s critical theory of knowledge.

²⁸² Benjamin (1986: 8) writes in “Berlin Chronicle”: “Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance - nothing more. But to lose one’s way in a city — as one loses oneself in a forest — that calls for quite a different schooling”.

from intellectual contemplation to a collective “sensual”, “tactile” experience, but also film as an epistemological historical vehicle for awakening. As Benjamin (qtd. in Witte: 1986: 53) wrote in the *Passagenwerk*: “Much as Proust’s life story begins with a description of the process of waking up, every historical account must begin with awakening”.²⁸³

Benjamin (1992a: 233) writes that “the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation”. Film, then, would reveal the underground in the surface, in Marxist and Freudian terms. It reflects the routine experience above the “metro”, only now brought closer to the audience. As discussed earlier in Benjamin’s notion of the sublation of the abjectness and tiredness of the masses in the “barbaric” figure of Mickey Mouse, here the tiredness of the film audience is dissipated through the distraction experience, collectively in the film theatre. Through *filmic* distraction the unseen for Benjamin becomes soluble, collectively, involuntarily.

It must be remembered, however, that Adorno, in a similar vein as Scholem after him, criticised this idea of distraction, as Benjamin based it on an idealised and Romanticised idea of the communist Soviet experience. Adorno writes, not without some wry validity, “daß in der kommunistische Gesellschaft die Arbeit so organisiert sein wird, daß die Menschen nicht mehr so müde und nicht mehr so verdummt sein werden, um der Zerstreuung zu bedürfen” (qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1004). Once more the question of

²⁸³It must be remembered that although recollection of “unconscious” memories happens by chance, and that the writing of such “poetry” may also come about through chance, the actual book follows a “conscious” plan, a lucid construction. In other words, although the reader/viewer of the *mémoire involontaire* orientated film may experience an awakening unhampered by the intellect, the construction of the film certainly involves the intellect. And if one keeps in mind that for Benjamin the audience would also be the writer or director, this means that the process requires their critical consciousness as well - in the making that is. The Freudian point, of course, is that instruction to attain “consciousness”, is more readily invoked through the unconsciousness, as it is not hampered by a desire to protect against outside stimuli. Where the conscious intellect fails to trace the “true” pre-conscious experience, as dormant in a memory, distraction (an anamnesis to be sure) may unearth the memory with a jolt. Becoming conscious of this “forgotten” memory is of course an instruction toward a more *spacious* consciousness: where life lived without the jolt of recollection is an *Erlebnis*, according to Benjamin the sudden experience of the intrinsic, untraced contents of an incident is an *Erfahrung*. The contemplative and restrictive former consciousness is to be countered by the tactile latter.

whether art is at all applicable in a utopian socialist or communist society.²⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Benjamin's theory is aimed at a pre-utopian society, one which stood on the threshold of another war, not to mention the oppression of millions of people in commercial factories and armaments production lines. In this context a need for a heightened presence of mind as perchance experienced in distraction is not so very far of the mark.

Furthermore, film, historically speaking, transforms the abject into the sensual, *in allegorical fashion*. Benjamin writes in surrealist, Freudian therapeutic fashion:

Viele der Deformationen und Stereotypen, der Verwandlungen und Katastrophen, die der Welt der Gesichtswahrnehmung in den Filmen betreffen können, betreffen sie in der Tat in Psychosen, in Halluzinationen, in Träumen. Und so sind jene Verfahrungsweisen der Kamera ebensovielen Prozeduren, dank deren sich die Kollektivwahrnehmung des Publikums die individuellen Wahrnehmungsweisen des Psychotikers oder des Träumenden zu eigen zu machen vermag.²⁸⁵

Benjamin, contra Adorno's criticism that his conception of a collective dream would be ahistorical as in Klages and Jung, consigns a dialectical *historical index* to the psychotic hallucination, the experience of dream, the subconscious: to show that at the turn of the century, the end of an epoch, at a moment of danger, the ruins of the bourgeoisie, for example, become apparent in the development of the new. Following Marx's teleological premise that "all precapitalist economic formations could finally be understood only in light of the capitalist economy" (Wolin 1982: 186), the key to understanding the *past* art lies in understanding the *present* situation of art. Or read in the reverse: a dark plate already carries the traces of its future inscription or illumination — "Every epoch dreams its successor" (Michelet qtd. in Benjamin's 1935 *Passagen exposé* qtd. in Buck-Morss 1977: 145). As discussed previously in the context of Benjamin's theory of dialectical images, every past art looks forward to its eventual (epistemological and aesthetical) realisation in a future art form. Art historically speaking, "der historischen Index der Bilder sagt [...] nicht nur, daß sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem, daß sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen. Und zwar ist dieses zur Lesbarkeit

²⁸⁴ Although it must be said that in a Fourierian Utopia, art could be akin to Pleasure, and Harmony could be its patron saint.

²⁸⁵ See first draft of Artwork essay, Benjamin 1977, 1.2: 461-2.

Gelangen ein bestimmter kritischer Punkt in ihrem Innern. Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind". In other words, and this is a fundamental basis of Benjamin's historical thinking, there are particular art forms that are of such a nature that they can only be understood at some critical moment in the future. The present that understands such a past art — for example, Benjamin's present in understanding the seventeenth-century Baroque Trauerspiel — has the responsibility to illuminate this synchronous relationship written as a historical index within the particular art form. This critical illumination in the present of a past determined to it might take on the form of a *Jetztzeit* revelation — in which case the historian comes across as prophetic —but speaking less grandiosely, the revelation as Benjamin would have it, and in the context of his Artwork essay, basically refers to the realisation of a particular art form's full creative potential somewhere in a future equipped with the material to do so. It is this dialectical tension that, so argues Benjamin, will allow for the new to be seen in the old. Benjamin (1992a: 230) writes:

One of the most foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully realized only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form.

In the light of this dialectical and sometime messianic philosophy of history — in which the a past reaches forward to a point in the future, and a present reaches back to a particular point in the past — the backwards and forwards motion creating the friction of a revelation — one which Benjamin develops from the *Trauerspiel* book right through to the 1940 *Thesen*, Benjamin proffers that Dadaism looked toward its eventual political and creative completion in film, in the same vein as his claim that Surrealism looked toward to its political realisation in epic theatre. Benjamin writes that Dadaism, with its anti-art philosophy, its irony, its Duchampian cerebral plasticity and Picabian mechanics against painterly aestheticisation and bourgeois contemplation, with its satirical wit and astute self-irony, its sophisticated self-deprecatory recognition of reproducibility and the relativity of time and space, looks forward to film to complete its project. Writes Benjamin (1992a: 230-1):

Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial — and literary — means the effects which the public today seeks in film. [...] The Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its uselessness for contemplative immersion. [...] What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as reproductions with the very means of production. Before a painting of Arp or a poem by August Stramm it is impossible to take time for contemplation and evaluation as one would before a canvas of Derain's or a poem by Rilke. In the decline of middle-class society, contemplation became a school for asocial behaviour, it was countered by distraction as a variant of social conduct. Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the centre of scandal. [...] From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator. [...] The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene that it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. [...] The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. By means of its technical structure, the film has taken the physical shock effect out of the wrappers in which Dadaism has, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock effect.

It is not that the Surrealists and the Dadaists did not utilise film²⁸⁶ but that, at least for Benjamin, its collaborative political potential had to be realised in the new film modelled on the Russian films of Eisenstein in particular, and Pudovkin. Once more, the “strangeness” manifest in the everyday had to be transposed from the realm of aesthetics and cheap morality to the political arena.

This modern *avant-gardist* notion of shock signals a crucial part of Benjamin's epistemological theory — the idea that the historical reader and the critical viewer of art is shocked into awakening. This idea finds formation in the historical montage created in the Surrealism and Dadaism tradition of breaking up the illusion of the whole, and creating a

²⁸⁶ Leger's *Ballet mécanique*, Bunuel's and Dali's *Un Chien andalou*, and Robert Desnos's and Man Ray's *L'Etoile de mer*, come to mind.

shock sensation out of the re-constructed disparate parts; the disjointed, fragmentary nature of Benjaminian allegory would shock the symbol out of its false appearance of wholeness, so to speak; the disparate parts of the Surrealist inspired text aims to shock the reader into a new awareness; the political consciousness-raising *Verfremdungseffekt* in Brecht's epic theatre; the shock of the new barbaric language; the subversive shock-character of the Dadaist project; and now the shock-relation between the new film and its audience which is also essentially formatted according to the montage principle. In Benjamin's reading, shock is a positive barbaric and destructive principle, subversive and destructive with an eye on rejuvenation. Simulated shock is also projected against the shock experience of the modern as in the general modernist avant-garde theory of aesthetics.

When Benjamin calls for a new barbaric destruction of militant destruction, of war and of industry, he is also writing against the then predominantly bourgeois belief in the autonomous work of art. According to Benjamin, and in the spirit of the avant-garde, the new art must destroy the traditional autonomous aesthetic, in order to reveal the new through the abject — through *ein rettende Umschlag*.²⁸⁷ The new art must uncover or, better, strip naked its precursors following the redemptive allegorical impulse, as Benjamin deems its autonomousness susceptible to Fascist appropriation. This uncovering, this modification, transfiguration, *Umfunktionierung* — in a dangerous time — must be political, critical, and historical. That is to say, the theory of the new art, according to Benjamin,²⁸⁸ must be delineated according to the principles of historical materialism, which Benjamin thought the *only* valid “system” to reveal the destructive, mythical cult of beauty in the actual modern material itself. As Burkhardt Lindner (1978: 197-198) observes:

²⁸⁷See Benjamin (1992b: 35) on epic theater on turning theory into action in order to redefine theory and thought: “It is in the nature of epic theater to replace the undialectical opposition between the form and content of consciousness (which means that a character can only refer to his own actions by reflections) by the dialectical one between theory and praxis (which means that any action that makes a breakthrough opens up a clearer view of theory.) Epic theater therefore, is the theater of the hero who is beaten. A hero who is not beaten never makes a thinker”.

²⁸⁸If only implicitly in his Artwork essay, it was a work which Benjamin thought looked toward his *Passagenwerk* which was to have a fundamental historical materialist form, and which in turn found its overt prolegomenon in the *Thesen*.

Die neuen Wahrnehmungsformen und technischen Apparaturen sind barbarisch, sind primitiv. Anders gesagt: es bedarf gerade der Haltung des positiven Barbarentums, um die Ambivalenzen des Verfalls durchstoßen zu können. Nur so läßt sich aus der Verfallssituation die Idee des rettende Umschlags rekonstruieren: ein rettender Umschlag, der nun nicht bloß am Ort des Intellektuellen als monadologischen Kritiker stattfindet, sondern in einer politischen Konstellation von Masse, Technik und Intelligenz.

As in Benjamin's reading of the Kabbalah, redemption occurs through destruction, enlightenment through disruption: *Zerstörung als Erleuchtung*: "menschwürdig sei allein die zerstörende Arbeit", writes Benjamin in the context of his counterpart, Adolf Loos. "Der alte Zusammenhang von Zerstörung und Reinigung", is read in the language of the barbaric new modulated on the destruction-procreation powers of nature. Benjamin, once more following a principle of a double reading subverting itself, models his theory of the overcoming of myth — mythic fate, guilt, and shame — on the myth of nature. Benjamin (1977, 2.3: 1106) writes: "Diese materialistische Überwindung des mythischen Menschen — der Schuld — vollzieht sich durch die Solidarisierung der Kreatur mit der zerstörenden Natur. Sie ist es, die das neue Verhältnis zur Technik schafft". Nature here is not the harmonious totality of the Romantics but a destructive force; and nature is not to be exploited through a false picture but rather a force to model — self-subversively — the new barbaric language on.

Myth is to be *historically* overcome by a new technological humanity: mobilising technology against the *fetishistic* regression immanent within industrial technology, as formulated by Marx. The new barbarians, typified in Benjamin's "the destructive character", work according to what Benjamin sees to be the messianically destructive rhythm of nature — in order to find ways *through* the rubble. Moreover, according to Benjamin, the destructive character does the destruction in order to thwart nature from doing it *mythically*. Again the allegorical impulse works to destroy the mythical underbrush of the symbolic appearance of reality, the "inorganic" turning against the "organic", subverting the myth inherent in, or beneath the modern city and culture of exploitation. Writes Benjamin (1986: 301), "The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise she will take over the destruction herself". This is — speaking in the allegorical

vernacular — *mythical nature* which must be destroyed, *not* nature or the body itself. The *political* and *utopian* use of technology is to be reconciled with nature in order to forestall the myth within nature from determining and dominating the society of man. According to Benjamin, the new barbarians — the new critics — must mortify or rape a tendency within the bourgeois rationalist and late Romantic tradition²⁸⁹ which surreptitiously and overtly gives rise to that myth of nature rearing its ugly head in Fascism.

Crucial here is Benjamin's major critique of the "Mastery of Nature", a critique conceptualised in the spirit of the utopianism of Fourier — "in part, through his 'matriarchal' stress, that linking him back to chthonic roots and a primal 'Mother Nature'" (Hollington 1996: 123) — and Scheerbart "who imagines a union of the forces of technology and of nature, on two conditions — "That humanity must leave behind the low vulgar opinion that it is called upon to 'exploit' the forces of nature; that, on the contrary it remain convinced that technology, in liberating human beings, will at the same [time] conduct a fraternal liberation of the whole of creation" (Benjamin qtd. in Hollington 1996: 124). Working with the (matriarchal) forces of nature, then, against the (patriarchal) exploitation of nature by instrumental man, a move directed dialectically against the mythification of nature inherent, as Nietzsche observes critically, in an idea such as Descartes' that "intellectual discoveries" are "a series of battles fought against nature" (qtd. in Benjamin 1982: 467; qtd. in Hollington 1996: 124). Benjamin saw²⁹⁰ with Fourier and Scheerbart a matriarchal force within nature that could overcome the bad patriarchal instrumentality of modern society — not the mastery of nature by the rational intellect which leads to self-destruction, but the interruption of imposed rationality by the fraternal example and rhythm of nature rejuvenating the world — perhaps in the spirit of the

²⁸⁹Benjamin is thinking specifically of the Enlightenment underlying modernity and the mythical German *Urdrang* — an urge often brilliantly illustrated in the paintings of Anselm Kiefer, incidentally — but also the "bad" aestheticisation proclivity in much French culture, personified in a, Fascist, anti-Semite complex, as illustrated by, for example, the infamous Dreyfus Affair of 1894 (See Sennett 1974: 240) and Céline's *Bagatelles pour un massacre* published just before the genocide. Benjamin saw the cause of Fascism deeply ingrained in modern, bourgeois European society itself — the task was to illuminate the seeds and destroy it.

²⁹⁰Quite prophetically, it might be added, if one observes the feminist environmentalism, Gaia hypothesis, chaos math, graffiti and cultural insurgency, and magic and spirituality dominating current affairs.

goddess Kali — through destruction. In this utopian partnership there will be place for both technological humans and the natural environment.²⁹¹

The new monster or cannibal sets about constructing without obstructing, destroying a culture (or “civilisation” as in Fourier) of self-indulgent aestheticist creation and mythification, interrupting the complacent, contemplative bourgeois. The new barbarian subverts the “star” mentality, the cult of the personality, the myth of the artistic genius. Benjamin (1986: 302) writes that “The destructive does his work, the only work he avoids is being creative. Just as the creator seeks solitude, the destroyer must be constantly surrounded by people, witnesses to his efficacy”. He destroys — surrounded by people — the mythical within bourgeois European culture, as its tradition of aestheticisation is implicitly linked to the bad totalising aestheticism of Fascism, the militant, rationalist, instrumental domination of nature.

Benjamin writes that “Der Europäer hat sein Dasein mit der Technik nicht zu vereinigen vermocht, weil er am Fetisch der schöpferische, Aufbau-Arbeit festhält. Deshalb ist er unfähig, der technischen die Elemente eines neuen Menschentums abzugewinnen”. Instead of the fetishisation of technology humankind must wake up to its constructive use. Instead of reifying the technological product, the utopian, destructive character emphasises the process. Benjamin (1977, 2.3: 1106) writes that the destructive character, the new barbarian

solidarisiert sich nicht mit dem Metal sondern mit dem Schmelzvorgang,
nicht mit der Bergwand sondern mit dem Bohrer, nicht mit der Tanne
sondern mit dem Hobel.

It may be said that the Talmudic legend of the angel whose brief appearance before God results in a destruction which makes way for new angels to sing their praise before God is emblematised and actualised in the modern film — because in Benjamin’s avant-garde reading film does its de-constructive job briefly in order to make way for new processes. Benjamin was not interested in the long-term potential of film — some would argue that

²⁹¹Jody Radzik is one of a number of people advocating earth awareness in this dualistic fashion of destruction and rejuvenation. Radzik (Ruschhoff 1996: 297), following the Gaia hypothesis, also propagates the positive uses of technology: “Technology is an extension of nature, but people don’t see it that way”.

this was to the detriment of his theory — but rather its contemporary potential in the political arena of his own time. Furthermore, according to Benjamin, the avant-garde projects of Surrealism and Dadaism finds its realisation in the filmic politicisation of aesthetics — briefly, for full effect. And importantly, if Benjamin largely accepted Baudelaire's reading of modernity as "le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent", that "transitoriness and happiness are closely intertwined in Fourier" (Benjamin qtd. in Hollington 1996: 123), if Benjamin in this vein delineates the avant-gardist project as being essentially transitory and preparatory, then it would also refer to the propadeutic ephemerality of the politically constructive use of film. Benjamin's reading of modernity is one of *crisis*, its history one of *catastrophe*, his own time stood at the brink of a large-scale destruction of humankind blinded as it was by the Fascist spell. Benjamin's theory of the post-auratic political film was aimed at the precarious temptation of the aestheticised present, of Fascism helped along by a belief in history as progress through man's technological and rational domination of nature. It might therefore be said that anti-art art is a brief occurrence, its aesthetic potential lies in its anti-aesthetics and in its briefness.

Benjamin uses film as an *allegory* of the regressive and potentially fascistic consumer fetishism of modernity. For him the modern industrial *Großstadt* is the architectonic model for the modern film. If one were to say that architecture is the embodiment of the history of ideas, and modern art is for Benjamin, as it is for Adorno, a project toward the realisation of philosophical truth, then this is also the impetus toward a political realisation of a philosophical idea.²⁹²

Transposed into Benjamin's theory of film, it means that the audience must awaken sensually, physically, and politically in the film theatre. In the same way that for Benjamin the Surrealist experience, the hashish experience, and the dream experience means a *temporary* passage or transition to a further-encompassing materialist truth, so also is the unconscious made conscious *through* the new film. The myth latent within aesthetics as it is latent within notions of the sublimity of nature and of beauty, must be forestalled by an aesthetics which subverts itself, *dialectically*. The psychosis of film²⁹³ is

²⁹²Of course, Adorno and Benjamin differed on this point, the former holding out for autonomous art.

²⁹³Film may be seen as a totemic projection in the vein of Freud.

to be purified through the new barbaric language of awareness, the ornamental apparition must be liquidated through the material itself, the audience — which consists not only of the usual elite minority²⁹⁴ — must awaken from the dream.

The modern film serves for Benjamin the purpose of exposing the fragmented *Umwelt* of the masses. Montage, glass architecture, mapping, the scheme, Bauhaus diagram, allegory, the fragment, the allegorical torso are principles for uncovering modernity. And one may add to this series the anarchic (child)play as a dialectical principle for consciousness-raising. Benjamin²⁹⁵ (1988: 412) writes that “Verwandlung der erschütterndsten Erfahrung in Gewohnheit, das ist das Wesen des Spielens”. “Als Spiel tritt die Gewohnheit ins Leben, und in ihr, ihren starrsten Formen noch, überdauert ein Restchen Spiel bis ans Ende. Unkenntlich gewordene versteinerte Formen unseres ersten Glücks, unseres ersten Grauens, das sind die Gewohnheiten”. As the child mimics a disturbance in play, and overcomes it, so the adult may “therapeutically” experience a first happiness or sadness — disruptively — in the common everyday thing, and overcome it. As Susan Buck-Morss (1993a: 323) in typically concise fashion puts it:

Children instinctively mimic objects as a means of mastering their experiential world. Psychoanalytic theory tells us that the neurotic symptom similarly initiates a traumatic event in an (unsuccessful) attempt at psychic defence. Benjamin was suggesting that the new mimetic techniques could instruct the collective to employ this capacity effectively, not only as a defence against the trauma of industrialization, but as a means of reconstructing the capacity for experience that has been shattered by the process.

This double mimesis is, of course, a recurring theme in Benjamin, be that in his “Romantic” model of criticism, his theory of allegory or of epic theatre. The idea (Kabbalist and dialectical, but also precariously subversive in the antinomian tradition of Sabbatianism) is that disruption is a process of purification: “Der alte Zusammenhang von Zerstörung und Reinigung” (Benjamin 1977, 2.3: 1104). This brings about a new

²⁹⁴ In this context one may compare film to architecture and add that modern architecture as a whole is more people or mass orientated than say the architecture of the Renaissance — not in the sense of ownership, but in the sense of the tactile visuality of buildings as made available through the new plans for the city. Of course, the question as to the viability of certain industrial-orientated modernist ideas for living space must remain open for the time being.

relationship to technology, (re-)constructed theatrically according to certain notions of play and disturbance as experienced by people in the modern everyday.

The dialectic of disruption or *Erschütterung* and purification as personified in anarchic or didactically constructed in play takes its formal construction in *montage*. Stanley Mitchell (1992: xiii) writes:

Montage became for him [Benjamin] the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect dissimilars in such a way as to 'shock' people into new recognitions and understandings. [...] He considered Baudelaire and Proust, for example, sensitive reactors to the new 'shocks' of modern life, who at the same time used their art as a means of self-protection. Such self-protection, he argued, is no longer needed by the revolutionary artist who welcomes 'shock' with critical distance, with 'heightened presence of mind'. Thus Benjamin came to regard montage, i.e. the ability to capture the infinite, sudden or subterranean [submarine, chthonic,²⁹⁶ GTS] connections of dissimilars, as the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology.

Keeping in mind the fact that Benjamin did *not* lose his sense of "melancholy" when writing "positively" on the new technology, contra Mitchell, but rather building on his theory of melancholy in the *Trauerspiel* book where he utilised it "constructively", he also did so in his Brechtian mode. For Benjamin modernity necessitates, by an "inner logic" so to speak, a technique of montage in philosophy (in Benjamin's case this would also denote theory and history) and in art. As an epistemological theory²⁹⁷ pivoting on "shock", montage would have disparate elements or images jolt and disturb one another, triggering a sense for the foreign occurring in the modern everyday. In Benjamin's reading it is an epistemological technique mobilised for a collective education.

²⁹⁵ Who, according to Scholem, wrote his most beautiful prose on the subject of children.

²⁹⁶ Benjamin (1969: 195) writes of Baudelaire's Paris: "Es ist das Einmalige der Dichtung Baudelaire, daß die Bilder der des Weibs und des Todes sich in einem dritten durchdringen, dem von Paris. Das Paris seiner Gedichte ist eine versunkene Stadt und mehr unterseeisch als unterirdisch. Die chthonischen Elemente der Stadt — ihre topographische Formation, das alte verlassene Bett der Seine — haben wohl einen Abdruck bei ihm gefunden".

²⁹⁷ Epistemological in terms of gnosis and *Erfahrung*.

The cinematic recordings of the “fashions”²⁹⁸ of the time brings the once distant and foreign that much closer, close enough for inspection and critique, but also distant as in the critical distance between art and life: what was once fearfully other, *absconditus*, now through habitual and absent-minded inspection becomes *revelatus*. Montage is the critically structured *interplay* of seemingly unconnected dialectical images brought from the unconscious into the conscious by way of a shock reaction. Moreover, like the habitual strolling through the labyrinth of the modern city (as in the critic or historian strolling/paging through modernity per se),²⁹⁹ the images are revealed through an absent-minded somnambulism, *suddenly*. Again, Benjamin motions in the shock of *surréalisme* in the spirit of Lautréamont’s “chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table”.

It can also be said of montage that it places the blueprint of the “building” out in the open. Or better said, *montage is the process of a construction site*. And children — as Benjaminian types — love playing amongst the debris brought to the surface in construction. Benjamin (1986: 69) writes:

For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked upon. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship.

As in the image of proletarian children who lead their parents into the theatre, as opposed to the other way around, Benjamin’s image of children raggicking the city streets and building-sites for waste products to absorb and transform, signals his epistemological procedure, a modernist one of distortion and illumination.³⁰⁰ Writes Lindner (1978: 195):

²⁹⁸ And Benjamin relegated “fashion” to the mythical realm of the “eternal recurrence”. See Benjamin qtd. in Buck-Morss 1986: 140: “Fashion is the ‘eternal recurrence’ of the new in the (mass-produced) form of the ‘always-the-same’”.

²⁹⁹ See Michael Opi’s (1992: 163-181) illuminating essay, “Lesen und Flanieren”.

³⁰⁰ One may recall a conversation Gustav Janouch recorded between Kafka and himself, during a visit to a Picasso exhibition: “‘He [Picasso] is a wilful distortionist,’ I said. ‘I do not think so,’ said Kafka. ‘He only registers the deformities which have not yet penetrated our consciousness. Art is a mirror, which goes *fast*,

Benjamin bezeichnet den Film als Ort spielerische Übung, weil hier die Massen, die im Zuge der Technisierung des Großstadtlebens und des Produktionsbereichs eine Umstellung von intersubjektiven Handlungsschemata zu Reiz-Reaktionsschemata erwerben müssen, das alte "Bedürfnis" nach kultureller Zerstreuung verändert wieder aufnehmen können. Dass Massenpublikum ist ein zerstreuter Examinator: Zerstreut, insofern das Geschehene nicht länger ein Gegenstand kontemplativer Fascination ist, die Rezeption gefangen nimmt. Aufmerksam (Examination), insofern die dissoziierten Handlungsabläufe einer stereotypisierenden Begutachtung unterworfen werden, statt im internen Syntagma des Werks gefangen zu bleiben.

Depth is brought to the surface, defused of its repressive neurotic characteristics in the process; or said differently, the abject becomes the dialectical image through which a rejuvenative intersubjective transformation is brought about, as in a spark. Not contemplative absorption into the work of art, but rather, argues Benjamin, the audience absorbs the new film the way they "absorb" — in the demythologising, tactile sense of the word, contra being absorbed by film, or buildings — architecture. Once more, he has the "Menschenfresser" in mind whose devouring of mass culture recalls Freud's conception of "Einverleibung". A distinction must be made, however, between *annexation* and *identification*. The former appropriates and is rid of culture (it is a healthy process of destruction); the latter's empathy blurs difference and tends to beget neuroses (in an unhealthy process of detention).

Beth Sharon Ash (1989:37) notes in an otherwise belligerent essay on Benjamin:

Shock effect is a dialectical concept. On the one hand, Benjamin follows Freud's description of anxiety by viewing shock as a defensive manoeuvre, a mechanism created by the ego in order to deter unpredictable stimuli in an unceasingly intrusive environment. On the other hand, the formal rehearsal of this type of mental assault activates unconscious desire in such a way that it can be consciously recognized.³⁰¹

like a clock sometimes". In this sense the distortions of children is educative of a broader distortion process.

³⁰¹See Beth Sharon Ash 1989: 2-42. Ash makes use of a Freudian schema to argue that Benjamin's "psychomachia" is a "perpetual effort to fend off castration," and his "rejection of any compromise" "might be called the infinitization of desire, the desire to desire without impediment". She cites Freud's description of the archaic personality as appropriate to Benjamin: "he has a 'tenacity of fixation,' exhibits

The film audience, as Benjamin has it, is shocked out of its potential neuroses, its potential abject jarring by the shock-experience of modern society. Film “repeats” the shock of the modern, it repeats the disturbance through a displacement. And displacement in this sense is akin to quoting out of context which would, on the one hand, represent new epistemological possibilities; and on the other hand, educate with new efficacy. In the context of modernity it is times of crisis which is revealed as the truth and on the other hand it is the period’s potential danger to the masses which is brought to the surface. And in the context of film, Benjamin, in Freudian spirit, would have the masses expose themselves to the shock of the new barbarians as a way to adapt to the actual life-threatening shock of the *Umwelt* itself. Benjamin (1977, 1.2: 503) writes:

an ‘extraordinary propensity toward ambivalence,’ and maintains simultaneously ‘the most various and contradictory libidinal cathexes’”. According to Ash, Benjamin’s need to infinitise desire is at the heart of his call for “profane illumination, as defined in part by the dialectic of shock effect; and complete rapture with the past, or Messianic redemption” (Ash 1989: 37). That “Benjamin’s subjective need to fetishise desire and to delay (indefinitely, infinitely) fulfillment” constitutes “the narcissistic pursuit of perfection” (Ash 1989: 40). In much the same vein as Bersani, Benjamin is criticized for what she calls his “fear” of “fulfillment”: “that the artistic rehearsal of shock effect should produce our private longing for a desire that must be ‘spared’ fulfillment. In other words, the first aim of shock effect is to produce a large quantity of self-referential desire that cannot be fulfilled” (p. 39). Benjamin is stricken with a “desperate desire for an image that will return his gaze and communicate to him his own narcissistic wholeness” (pp. 39-40). His desire for unfulfilment is fuelled by sadism that is the death and unfulfilment of others: “Benjamin forthrightly (and with the sadism of a wilful righteousness) asks his readers to want with and for him, to nourish and protect the empty space that conceals the unconscious depth of his (and therefore our) narcissistic disappointment. Thus, we are made over into the masochistic recipients of this word, asked to give up our present relations with others, to relinquish realistic pleasure and pride in our own work, and to embrace our most archaic desires without benefit of critical mediation. We are asked continually to pulverize and sift through our own catastrophe until such time as the Messiah fulfils our increasingly incommensurate, untainted want. It is a valuable caution, however, to recall that Freud’s unconscious has no knowledge of time. When the infinitization of desire itself becomes an object of desire, it also becomes the unconscious goal of Benjamin’s desiring machine, the insistent apparatus of his willingness to sacrifice others in the name of a private need for redemption, killing as it saves” (pp. 41-42). Mrs. Ash unfortunately fails to *distinguish* between the, albeit intimately connected, body and the text, the image and the writer himself, injecting an *ad hominem* psychology, as Wohlfarth (1994: 182) has noted elsewhere in another context, precisely in the place where Benjamin himself sought to eliminate it. Be that as it may, a “psychological” reading of the body and the text can be surprisingly fruitful, as demonstrated by Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994), for example. Ash would do well to heed Geyer-Ryan’s lucid understanding of Benjamin’s attempt to read redemption through the abject text, as a *model* for reading his abject texts. However, although the text may be abject and distinct from the body, this does not mean that it is abstract. For Benjamin insists, against linguistic abstraction and idealism, on the concreteness of the word, its physicality and sensuality: it is precisely this “paradox” between the abject and the sensual in and of the text that, in fact, points dialectically to a crucial desire for redemption (Marxist, Messianic, Utopian...) besides the text. It is this *allegorical* impulse, which Ash humourlessly ignores, completely missing the point in the process.

Der Film ist die der gesteigerten Lebensgefahr, der die Heutigen ins Auge zu sehen haben, entsprechende Kunstform. Das Bedürfnis, sich Chockwirkungen auszusetzen, ist eine Anpassung der Menschen an die sie bedrohenden Gefahren. Der Film entspricht tiefgreifenden Veränderungen des Apperzeptionsapparates — Veränderungen, wie sie im Maßstab der Privatexistenz jeder Passant im Großstadtverkehr, wie sie im geschichtlichen Maßstab jeder heutige Staatsbürger erlebt.

The individual reception of pictures becomes a collective apperception of film images. The elitist and unreachable art of the contemplative minority is annexed by the many: “the movies are for the people” (Chaplin). This requisition means the destruction of aesthetical *Schein* and the becoming and disappearance of a material truth: “beauty” making way for the “crude” truth; Wagner’s intemperate *Tannhäuser* making way for Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* — art as jagged, humorous contemporary criticism.

According to Benjamin the new film destroys or shatters the world of appearance; film shocks the audience into recognising the truth beneath the facade, but also the way through the exposed rubble. By becoming experts they open up paths through the rubble, making way for redemption and enlightenment through the abject.

Writes Benjamin (1977, 1.2: 499-500):

Indem der Film durch Großaufnahmen aus ihrem Inventar, durch Betonung versteckter Details an den uns geläufigen Requisiten, durch Erforschung banaler Milieus unter der genialen Führung des Objektivs, auf der einen Seite die Einsicht in die Zwansläufigkeiten vermehrt, von denen unser Dasein regiert wird, kommt er auf der anderen Seite dazu, eines ungeheuren und ungeahnten Spielraums uns zu versichern! Unsere Kneipen und Großstadtstraßen, unsere Büros und möblierten Zimmer, unsere Bahnhöfe und Fabriken schienen uns hoffnungslos einzuschließen. Da kam der Film und hat diese Kerkerwelt mit dem Dynamit der Zehntelsekunden gesprengt, so daß wir nun zwischen ihren weitverstreuten Trümmern gelassen abenteuerliche Reisen unternehmen.

The film camera shatters the world in capitalist society as the masses and the bourgeoisie know it — through the close-up, slow motion, acceleration, zoom in or out, the cutaway, dissolve, fade, freeze, loop, pan, the reaction shot, the sting, stock shot, the wild sound. According to the montage principle seemingly disparate shots and sequences may be spliced together to form an image of a modernity hitherto covered up with the blandness

of appearances, continuity, linearity (notions of *progress* going back to the Enlightenment). Montage exposes the fragment through the inside. Eisenstein (qtd. in Barthes 1993: 332) wrote that with audio-visual montage:

this basic center of gravity [...] is transferred to *inside* the fragment, into the elements included in the image itself. *And the center of gravity is no longer the element 'between shots' — the shock — but the element 'inside the shot' — the accentuation within the fragment....*

That is to say, the shock “between shots” is crystallised within each image, or still, making each image doubly reflect the broader montage, dialectically, subversively, educatively as Benjamin would have it. Again in *allegorical* fashion the frozen fragment and the “still” are displaced quotation, dialectical cryptograms, brief picture-puzzles to be solved. Barthes (1993: 332) reads the *filmic* still as a *quotation*, “parodic and disseminatory”. He writes: “The still, then, is the fragment of a second text *whose existence exceeds the fragment*; film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is *on top* of the other or that one is *extracted* from the other”. The fragment, the still, as in the montage, then, is a palimpsest or wound which disturbs or shocks formally but also viscerally: its point of gravity lies allegorically in reality.

Following Benjamin’s avant-garde theory, montage subverts the linearity of time, subverting the homogeneity of modern space — at least as it is presented in traditional bourgeois art. Instead of idealised and aestheticised portraits (as in the Romanticism still latent in the fantasy of prestige and personality), the masses are now given the opportunity to see themselves reproduced (and refracted) — hence the politics of the post-aesthetic new technical functionality.³⁰² More, according to Benjamin, in a conception Adorno took with apprehension, the distortions of Picasso mentioned before

³⁰²Lindner (1978: 186): “Der ästhetizistischen Inszenierung der Massen durch den Fascismus setzt Benjamin die Forderung nach einer ‘postästhetischen’ Funktionalisierung von Wirklichkeitsreproduktionen im Dienste der Selbstwahrnehmung der Massen darstellt. Wenn für Kunst durch den Aurazerfall ‘der Schein ihrer Autonomie auf immer’ erlischt, dann sind die dieser Epoche entstammenden Begriffe aufzuheben; dann ist jeder Versuch unstatthaft, mit ihrer Hilfe eine große proletarische Kunst von Norm zu erheben. Zudem werden durch die Reproduktionstechnologie auch die überlieferten Werke entzaubert und ihrer kultischen Rezeptionsweise entzogen. Mit der Aurazertrümmerung findet eine ‘Liquidierung des Traditionswertes am Kulturerbe’ statt”.

becomes progressive in the figure of Charlie Chaplin.³⁰³ Film, in the spirit of Russian avant-gardist film, according to Benjamin, includes the “fragmentary” films of Chaplin — a notion Adorno in true “anti-pop” fashion denigrated as “Romantic”.³⁰⁴ For Benjamin Chaplin becomes a satirical figure of enlightenment, not in a contemplative sense of the word but in a collective sense. Chaplin stimulates the belly rather than the soul, “spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul” (Benjamin 1992b: 101).

It is in this context that Benjamin (1977, 2.3: 1106) returns to his conception of “das neue Lachen”. Once more he connects the figures of Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse by means of a conception of an emancipatory collective dream. Benjamin (1977, 1.2: 462) writes in the first draft of the Artwork essay a passage he deleted from the second and most widely published draft:

In die alte heraklitische Wahrheit — die Wachenden haben ihre Welt gemeinsam, die Schlafenden jeder eine für sich — hat der Film eine Bresche geschlagen. Und zwar viel weniger mit Darstellungen der Traumwelt als mit der schöpfung von Figuren des Kollektivtraums wie der erdumkreisenden Micky-Mouse. Wenn man sich davon Rechenschaft gibt, welche gefährliche Spannungen die Technisierung mit ihren Folgen in den großen Massen erzeugt hat — Spannungen, die in kritischen Stadien einen psychotischen Charakter annehmen — so wird man zu der Erkenntnis kommen, daß diese selbe Technisierung gegen solche Massenpsychosen sich die Möglichkeit psychischer Impfung durch gewisse Film geschaffen hat, in denen eine forzierte Entwicklung sadistischer Phantasien oder masochistischer Wahnvorstellungen deren natürliches und gefährliches Reifen in den Massen verhindern kann. Den vorzeitigen und heilsamen Ausbruch derartiger Massenpsychosen stellt das kollektiv Gelächter dar.

Collective laughter can disrupt the collective unconscious which stands the risk of erupting into mass psychoses — preparation before the attack; war and the mass atrocities committed in hysterical hate, fear, and paranoia, is to be countered with insight and knowing-how — tactically stimulated through propaedeutic and pedagogical

³⁰³ See Benjamin 1992a: 227.

³⁰⁴ See Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1004.

cinematography. The masses are not only to be shocked into a shift³⁰⁵ but also through collective laughter provoked by the healthy humour of critical satire (that of Kraus, Fourier, but also Chaplin and the early Mickey Mouse). Satire in this critical spirit evokes a joint means to counter, criticise and face dangers threatening everyday life.³⁰⁶ It might be added that this new barbaric laughter would be precisely the critical interruption of the tendency to *identify* with a character, hero or antihero. Laughter interrupts empathy, and the solipsistic reading of the world as being about yourself only. Of course, in the case of the psychotic paranoid, it would take more than jagged films to destroy the imaginably horrifying feeling that all signs point to you.

In the sense of illumination or lightening up, then, Mickey Mouse (at least the early prototype) is an allegorical figure, a “type of illuminati”, which emblematises a need for collective laughter (lightening up as in Scheerbartian glass architecture). For Benjamin the new laughter is a collective source of liberation: Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin *re-present* and *re-produce* in the adult arena the anarchic potential in the child’s play.³⁰⁷ Anarchic or barbaric laughter has liberating subversive potential — in terms of self-irony. Again the affinity between Bataille and Benjamin is made, although interestingly Barthes,³⁰⁸ certainly self-referentially in the light of *jouissance*, notes a “light” subversiveness in Bataille’s conception of laughter, one not directly linked to “destruction”, a “subtle subversiveness” which although perhaps foreign to Brecht, not so to Benjamin and his other counterpart, Fourier.

Laughter is subversive of technocratic and patriarchal domination, and in Benjamin’s “redemptive” or “rescuing” reading of the figures of Mickey Mouse and Chaplin, he gives it a contemporaneous form in the manner of his anti-authoritarian

³⁰⁵ Benjamin wrote somewhere in Freudian fashion that “man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him”.

³⁰⁶ Chaplin said somewhere that “Movies hightens our sense of survival and preserves our sanity”.

³⁰⁷ Contemporary versions of this satirical type may be found in “Bart Simpson”, “The Ren & Skimp Show”, and “Pee-wee Herman” — types that subtly subvert their adult audience through the guise of being kids’ television.

³⁰⁸ See Barthes 1993: 409: “By *subtle subversion* I mean, on the contrary, what is not directly concerned with destruction, evades the paradigm, and seeks some other term: a third term, which is not, however, a synthesising term but an eccentric, extraordinary term. An example? Perhaps Bataille, who eludes the idealist term by an unexpected materialism in which we find vice, devotion, play, impossible eroticism, etc. thus Bataille does not counter modesty with sexual freedom but ... with *laughter*”.

rereadings of fairy tales (for dialecticians). Buck-Morss (1993a: 323) notes that for Benjamin “Chaplin rescued the capacity for experience by mimicking the fragmentation that threatened it”.³⁰⁹ Buck-Morss (1993a: 323) cites Benjamin:

What is new in Chaplin’s gestures: He breaks apart human motions of expression into a series of the smallest innervations. Every single one of his movements is put together from a series of hacked-up pieces of motion. Whether one focuses on his walk, on the way [he] handles his cane, or tips his hat — it is always the same jerky sequence of the smallest motions which raises the law of the filmic sequence of images to that of human motor actions.

The reference is to epic theatre, with its interruptions (of contemplation and *Einführung*), “quotable gestures” and Kafka’s gestures, each of which is an event. Linking these gestures is their educative power, one of *interruption* and *transition*. The gestures are concrete examples — this is what gives them their pedagogical impact: they serve as examples. As Michael Hollington (1996: 126-127) notes, concrete gestures, “gestural examples”, links Fourier, Barthes, Brecht, and Benjamin, against “moralistic examples”. He observes that for Benjamin the emblematic and concrete gesture is often picked up from the gestures of children. He cites Benjamin: “Comparison with the child who learns how to grasp things by means of an attempt to hold the moon in his hands”. The light felicity of this image/gesture having distinct Chaplinesque undertones.

According to Benjamin and Fourier, civilisation’s repressions and barbarism may be expended by the temporary and habitual discharge of pent-up nervous energy as in the pleasure of play, or collective laughter. This is part of the reason why in Benjamin’s reading of Chaplin’s “parables”, the tramp’s rescue of the damsel, the boy, allegorically means rescuing the day. The workplace ceases to be the drudgery of routine and is transformed into habitual play, habitual self-irony. The tramp’s deft scuffles with imbecilic “cops” mimes the dream many have of getting back at the law for restricting life, spontaneity, childhood freedom. And yet this is not an identification with a glorified hero, to the contrary. Chaplin represents the beaten hero who can think. And in this way the

³⁰⁹To be sure, this is not the *Erlebnis* the new barbarian scoffs at, neither is it the experience of culture the masses are stuffed with; it is an *Erfahrung* light for its capacity for felicity.

audience may realise a similar thought process for themselves. Laughter, in this context, subverts restriction and rejuvenates, it simplifies things.³¹⁰

Chaplin and Mickey Mouse are further historical prototypes of Benjamin's positive reading of youth, whilst these types find their educative gestural voice in the anarchic, cruel, destructive character, of whom Benjamin (1986: 301) writes in Fourierian manner:

The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age; it cheers because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed eradication, of his own condition. But what contributes most of all to this Apollonian image of the destroyer is the realization of how immensely the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness. This is the great bond embracing all that exists. It is a sight that affords the destructive character a spectacle of deepest harmony.

For Benjamin, film allegorically absorbs the critical danger of civilisation into itself, and the audience in turn absorb the film: the shock of the outside explodes within the text of the play, therapeutically releasing the repressed collective unconscious perhaps through mimetic shock — through double mimesis — disruption or laughter, inciting an awakening, an opening up. Benjamin (1977, 1.2: 462) writes in the first draft of his artwork essay that both the Disney movies and the American horror movie have emancipatory potential:

Die ungeheuren Massen grotesken Geschehens, die zur Zeit im Film konsumiert werden, sind ein drastisches Anzeichen der Gefahren, die der Menschheit aus den Verdrängungen drohen, die Zivilisation mit sich bringt. Die amerikanischen Grotteskefilme und die Filme Disneys bewirken eine therapeutische Sprengung des Unbewußten. Ihr Vorgänger ist der Exentrik gewesen. In den neuen Spielräumen, die durch den Film entstanden, ist er als erster zu Hause gewesen; ihr Trockenbewohner. In diesen Zusammenhängen hat Chaplin als historischer Figur seinen Platz.

³¹⁰Although it would be true to say that the hermetic and arcane Benjamin did not reduce complexity without realising that as this would be a ruse, it would be so in a double sense. Kitaj said somewhere: "We lose our way in cities; we get lost in books, lost in thought; we are always looking for meaning in our lives as if we'd know what to do with it once we'd found it.... Nothing is straight forward. Reducing complexity is a ruse".

In Benjamin's reading American horror movies are revolutionary — only in the sense of being self-deprecatory and light-hearted. The usually repressive fear of the dark, for example, is lit up by the "silliness" of the B-grade "slasher" movie, and in Benjamin's reading this would be because of its being subversive of petty society, petty restrictions. In other words, through the double mimesis of "fear", genuine fear may be sublated, collectively (we think of pleasurable screams emitted in the dark). And yet, it must be remembered that film is extremely susceptible to being appropriated for "pornographic" violent purposes, whereby genuine "horror" is aestheticised and fetishised. For the sake of a political program however, Benjamin limited himself to a certain kind of film, but not without implicitly writing against any form of regressive "spectacle": it might be said that war and the "snuff" movie grow from a similar repression and poverty.

The seemingly innocent *Nar* is the dialectical spark with which to awaken critical acumen:³¹¹ what he shows without trying is that naïveté and fear makes way for healthy trickster cunning. The reactionary turns into the progressive; cinema introduces the masses to the constructive and rehabilitating possibilities of the new technology: "Die ungeheure technische Apparatur unserer Zeit zum Gegenstände der menschlichen Innervation zu machen — das ist die geschichtliche Aufgabe, in deren Dienst der Film seinen wahren Sinn hat" (Benjamin 1977, 1.2: 446). Vigilance is called for through distraction, laughter, and screaming, at least proceeding from an idea of a collective deflation of bad energy.

³¹¹An interesting comparison can be drawn between Chaplin's tramp and "Forest Gump". The former's seeming naïveté is in fact a spontaneity that is capable of criticising a system of appearances and delusions by way of an "innocence" that actually signifies getting wise through subversion; on the other hand, the latter actually perpetuates a petty morality, a truly Philistine and conformist belief in happiness through stupidity. Where Chaplin undermines authority of any kind; Gump promotes a blind love of the "authoritarian" system of America built on petty sitcom values, of innocence, simple-minded obedience, little lessons learned. Chaplin subverts the system with wit; Gump helps it along with simple-minded boyish charm. It should be clear that the *cunning* of Chaplin is entirely lacking in Gump who merely sells the nationalistic fallacy that being stupid and uncritical will have the best result in the end. There is a vast difference in being child-like (which would be quite brutal) and childish (which is moralistic and sentimental). One specific scene in the Gump movie may demonstrate the point. Gump is running across America, just running without any idea why, attracting followers on the way. Then one day he stops dead in his tracks. Asked by a follower why he stopped, the only reply he has is that he has run enough, leaving the poor fools who ran along with him with no idea what to do next. The huge Gump movie audience is left with little more.

Crucially, for all his contentious enthusiasm for these “commercial” characters — Chaplin and Mickey Mouse — Benjamin, essentially a pessimist, does not seem to be blind to the regressive potential in Disney. He writes in his notes of “die Verwendbarkeit der Disneyschen Methode für den Fascismus” (Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1045). This, however, was not a note Adorno was aware of when he reacted with vehemence to Benjamin’s “romantic” conception of the barbaric new laughter. Adorno, negating critic of ideology as opposed to Benjamin’s redemptive or rescuing methodology (as pointed out by Habermas 1988), argues that the barbaric laughter, instead of being revolutionary, is full of the “schlechtesten bürgerlichen Sadismus” (qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1003). This, of course, joins up with Scholem’s rueful observation of the bourgeois audience at Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* cheering and laughing whilst being spat and jeered at. In these two readings, plausibly enough, sadism and sado-masochism makes up the repressive face of the bourgeois; for Benjamin (qtd. in Hollington 1996: 117), writing between June 1935 and December 1937 in true utopian spirit, sadists and masochists might find harmonious contentment in Fourier’s utopia: “In his experiments the sadist might light upon a partner who is seeking precisely those sufferings and humiliations that his tormentor seeks to inflict upon him”.³¹²

It might be said that the difference in opinion — as to the negativity or positivity of cruelty — may be traced back, initially speaking, to a difference in temperament. Where Benjamin, for all his intellectual sobriety, has an affinity for the decadent, the cruel, the crude and dirty, the affinity is largely absent in writers like Adorno and Scholem. Firstly, this does not mean that Benjamin was a sadist or a rapist or that he was propagating one or the other, nor was he completely irresponsible in theorising

³¹²In his Artwork essay, Benjamin suggests that through the new film a collective *harmonisation* of negative sadistic and masochistic impulses may be initiated, politically speaking that is. Of course, one need think only of case studies of sadists who make use of film (specifically pornographic film) for stimulating hate and violence, to realise the essentially ephemerality, limited, and experimental nature of Benjamin’s theory. The irony of ironies here is that Chaplin and Mickey Mouse, if one were to regard them as avant-gardist, may be the popular exception to prove the rule: the avant-gardist project is limited to a few, even if made available to many. It is precisely this ephemerality that gives a particular avant-garde project its sense of “otherness”, its self-critical dexterity, its critical distance; and on the other hand, this “distance” points to its tendency to become part of the “cult” market, which in itself evolves into a popular mainstream. Eisenstein is a cult director today as much as Herschell Gordon Lewis (self-professed “Wizard of Gore”), which in yet another ironic twist perhaps says more about a certain society than any “committed” work of art.

positively on Sadian desires. It is true that Benjamin's anarchic impulse for profane destruction, taking pleasure in the prurient and the abject³¹³ is not without flaw.³¹⁴ But in context, however, Adorno's and Scholem's often sagacious criticism seems indicative of a camp of criticism which tends to become hot under the collar at the slightest moral provocation. Given that it has been argued that Benjamin would be a highly ethical writer and critical historian and that his writing is stained throughout with theology and redemption, it would not be a contradiction to argue further that even when in a profoundly critical historical or personal period, a period when Benjamin's quasi-Messianism was at its highest, he retained not only a subversive and otherwise attitude,³¹⁵ but he also, and perhaps most importantly, retained a sense of humour, of irony, and of *self-irony*. This is to say that critics in the "moralist" or "institutionalist" vein³¹⁶ at crucial times of reading the abject and self-referential texts of Benjamin, too often inject too much institutionalised pragmatism into their premises,³¹⁷ with the loss of the *impossibilia*³¹⁸ of black humour.

Furthermore, this humour or irony does not mean that Benjamin's call for politics was not a seriously considered affair; for all its idealist and romantic flaws, for all its "masochism", the ephemeralist program for a political film in a time of homogenous aestheticism seems acute enough to be of immediate importance today. However, the question of form and content is a distinctly modernist one, developing during a time of a world crisis of war and Fascism, which is what gave the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics its then volatile character to begin with.

³¹³As opposed to Scholem's more "devoted" belief in Lurianic messianic destruction, precisely as maintained in his major discovery and study of the transgressions and violations of the Sabbations.

³¹⁴Any theory of film which avoids its magical element tends to become restrictive, even when there are solid political reasons for the it being ignored; there is a tragi-comic irony in the intellectual wandering in solitude and penury through the library, the streets of Paris, devising theories for a collective; and, not forgetting its ephemeral potential, in hindsight the idea of a collective developing expertise on living through film, seems rather a sad case of wishful thinking.

³¹⁵To be sure, Benjamin's self-subversion is for better or worse — Sabbatianism, as Jeffrey Mehlman has shown with admirable understanding, finds its twin brother in Jewish self-hatred, an alarming enough trait when one notes its close ties to Fascism.

³¹⁶At the risk of vulgar over-simplification, writers such as John Milfull 1996, Leo Bersani 1990, O K Werckmeister 1996, Beth Sharon Ash 1989, for varying reasons, exhibit problematic institutionalisation thinking.

³¹⁷Too much system, too little systematising, following Roland Barthes.

Koepnick points out that Richard Wolin and Karl Heinz Bohrer have observed that Carl Schmitt (whose theory on sovereignty had influenced Benjamin when writing the *Trauerspiel* book) exhibited modern aesthetic tendencies, aligned with the avant-gardist sensibility of the 1920s — discontinuity, shock, rupture, and suddenness - in his philosophy which was purportedly anti-aesthetic, anti-romantic thinking. Wolin (qtd. in Koepnick 1996: 286) writes that like Heidegger's conservative revolutionism of the 1920s, Schmitt exhibits

a general fascination with 'limit-situations' (*Grenzsituationen*) and extremes; an interest in transposing the fundamental experiences of aesthetic modernity — shock, disruption, experiential immediacy; an infatuation with the sinister and forbidden, with the 'flowers of evil' — to the plane of everyday life, thereby injecting an element of enthusiasm and vitality in what had otherwise become a rigid and lifeless mechanism.

In this way Schmitt's decisionism falls prey to exactly the kind of aestheticism it sought to eliminate, "even to conflate political action with principles of modern aesthetic experience" (Koepnick 1996: 286). Now, although Koepnick, with much informed insight, points out that in an indirect and sophisticated way, it is precisely this problematic element in Schmitt's political thinking that Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book uncovers, it should be quite clear that Benjamin's thinking is as much composed of these modernist avant-gardist principles of aesthetic experience as Schmitt's is. The question, however, is to what extent did this mar his political, but also his historical and critical thinking, which was aimed, often brilliantly it might be added, directly against the aestheticisation of reality fashionable in the Europe of modernity. In other words, the question must be asked to what extent a philosophy of redemption pivoting on destruction and subversion, a philosophy of self-negation, of the double negation of history — to what extent this double subversiveness is truly functional, and to what extent it falls prey to aestheticism. This is the crucial question of Benjamin's philosophy of history, driving his politics of aesthetics through a curious and often contentious blend of Marxism and Messianism, a dialectic between destruction and redemption.

³¹⁸ See Barthes 1993: 374-5 on *impossibilia* or the *adunaton* where "two naturally opposite, enemy elements ... were presented as peacefully living together..."

Curious as it may be, once again Benjamin introduces this program with a propadeutic, opening his decisive 1940 *Theses on the philosophy of history* with a striking emblem, a *dialectical image* or *allegory*, an image of a Trojan Horse of sorts written in the vein of Benjamin's enigmatic short story, "Rastelli erzählt...". It is offered here as a device, a method within a method, the one *immanently* insinuating but also interrupting the other — ending — without closing — this section on the problem of film in the light of a cruel and anarchic Mickey-Mouse pivoting on modernist sensibilities, avant-garde destruction and disruption, and most importantly, *self-irony* as the most notable Benjaminian cue which must serve without illusions as an open inauguration — as allegory within an allegory, as allegory of Benjamin's method — to the final section of this thesis. As such the attempt is made to place Benjamin's "overall" dialectical philosophy and self-critical methodology in a nutshell.

The story could be told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it inlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is ugly and has to keep out of sight.³¹⁹

³¹⁹ Benjamin 1992a: 255, translation altered.

Part Three

Modernism and Messianism: Ruins

1. Remembrance and forgetting

Wie Proust seine Lebensgeschichte mit dem Erwachen beginnt, so muß jede Geschichtsdarstellung mit dem Erwachen beginnen, ja sie darf eigentlich von nichts anders handeln.

Benjamin 1982: 4, *Passagenwerk*

Benjamin's last text, the *Thesen*, is again written in the form of a polemic — against “historicism” on the one hand, and on the other, against a “theory of progress” prevalent in Europe prior the Second World War.³²⁰ It is the intimate relation between the former and the latter that gives the text its exigent political structure, its bitter-sweet melancholy, its self-proclaimed visionary status. The text vacillates between Marxism and Messianism in a way that sustains and overcomes both traditions. It is this, together with its enigmatic vision of doom and deliverance, that has made the text not only an apotheosis of Benjamin's oeuvre, but also a mouthpiece for visions of the present and the future. That is to say, as a personal fragment the text may be read as an allegory of a self-negating modernity elusively appearing and disappearing in a postmodernity too pragmatic by far to realise the premises of its own irony in the melancholy of those days gone by. And yet it is precisely in this era of posthistoire, post-pathos, post-literature, at the time of a *fin-de-*

³²⁰ For the gist of Benjamin's overall philosophy of history programme see Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* fragment, “Re: the basic theory of historical materialism”, as cited in Buck-Morss 1993a: 313: “(1)The historical object is that for which the act of knowledge is carried out as its “rescue.” (2) History decomposes into images, not into narratives. (3) Wherever a dialectical process is effected, we are dealing with a monad. (4) The materialist representation of history entails an immanent critique of the concept of progress. (5) Historical materialism supports its procedure of the foundation of experience, common sense, presence of mind, and the dialectic”.

siècle, a time of hope and despair, optimism and cynicism, blind faith and faithlessness, that the prophetic janus-face of apocalypse and redemption reappears with fresh enigma and Nostradamusian (im-)plausibility. Reading Benjamin's flawed little text — hopeful as it is of a revolution, a divine and violent interruption — at such a time provides surprising footholds to get beyond the work, but more importantly, to get beyond partisan reasoning.

Benjamin (1992a: 245-246) opens his "Strauß flüsternder Graser"³²¹ in traditional Judaic manner on a key historical and theological principle: remembrance. For Benjamin remembrance and the past, happiness and redemption are indissolubly linked *dialectical images*. This forms the basis of his polemic against historicism. He writes:

Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our existence has assigned us. The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.

As should be clear, Benjamin is again following the idea that images look toward their "completion" — and "visionary" historians look backward to the specific *Ursprung* of their present — their redemption, or rescue by a future generation; images, like texts,³²² have dialectically within themselves an image of a specific future deciphering, a future reading that would do them justice. Note that it is a *specific* future with power enough to read what was not written. History is to be read like a text in which certain signs have only now become readable (and in Judaic spirit, the text is the site of truth). Writes Benjamin in the *Passagenwerk* (qtd. in Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1238):

³²¹ Reference to his *Thesen* in a letter to Gretel Adorno, Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1226.

³²² In this respect, *specifically* Benjaminian texts, of which the *Thesen* is but one example.

Will man die Geschichte als eine Text betrachten, dann gilt von ihr, was ein neuerer Autor von literarischen sagt: die Vergangenheit habe in ihnen Bilder niedergelegt, die man denen vergleichen könne, die von eine lichtempfindlichen Platte festgehalten werden. "Nur die Zukunft hat Entwickler zur Verfügung, die stark genug sind, im das Bild mit allen Details zum Vorschein kommen zu lassen".

A specific future, that is, endowed with a *weak* messianic power to read the specific text or images from the past. It is a weak power which through its "redemption" of the text from the past points toward a prospective larger redemption, a more fully sustainable rescue of the things from oblivion. In this way if "like ultraviolet rays memory shows to each man in the book of life a script that invisibly and prophetically glosses the text" (Benjamin 1986: 89), this memory is but a minuscule residue of the gift of memory of a Divine Mind (perhaps). Humanity's remembrance of a past looking forward to the present mimes the messianic remembrance which does not distinguish between small events and large events. Benjamin (1992a: 246) writes:

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor once acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past — which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.

It is then, in this spirit that Benjamin's suggestion in the *Trauerspiel* book must be understood: that there is no such thing as a separate art history. The art historian's "little" redemption of specific objects from the past echoes the "large" redemption which would rescue all objects from the oblivion of history. The historian is therefore given the ethical task of representing and acting on he name of the oppressed — against the oblivion to which the writers of history — the conquerors — have consigned them. The historian, in other words, reads the redemption of the oppressed in the forgotten, the detritus or trash of history.

The art historian's citations out of context (against a system of genres), will find its full fruition, that is, understanding in a future which is given a greater power to cite the past in all its moments. It is the art historian's modest rescue of forgotten things, inconspicuous waste products which points toward a messianic redemption of all that is forgotten, lost by the wayside. Here Benjamin (1992a: 246) marries Marxism and Messianism:

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.

This retroactive power calls into question that which is established or fixed as written history. Again courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude outwit a given rule. The point is that the truth lies hidden behind the appearance of things of history. With the right amount of humour and cunning the appearance can be liquidated with a small messianic power which *remembers* what is lost, rescuing it from the oblivion to which a victorious rule has consigned it. It is memory which has retroactive power, as it reveals the inconspicuous things of the past to be augurs of a given present.

The memory in question is that of the "messianic" historical materialist, not of the historian who would "remember" and celebrate only the history of the victor in the form of its spoils. The auspicious link between the past and the present is not causal or linear as it would be to the historicist; *not inevitable but fortuitous* as in Proust's *mémoire involontaire*. History for Benjamin is not a linear, continuous series, but a series of discontinuities. Axel Honneth (1993: 93) writes:

Because it [Benjamin's conception of a new historiography, GTS] must, as with Proust, generate images of the past that can enter a communicative relation with experiences of the present, Benjamin undertakes the difficult, indeed daring, attempt to transfer Proust's narrative techniques to the depiction of history. Taking one's orientation from Proust's conception of remembering should ensure that historiography assumes the form of a world disclosure [Heidegger's *Weltenschlossung* is recalled, GTS] which is directed backward and by means of which former victims become the symbolically represented partners of a reopened process of reaching understanding. Thus, for Benjamin, making history present [*Vergegenwärtigung der Geschichte*, GTS] must mean projecting images of a past epoch which share with Proustian memory images the property of being so direct and charged with experience that we can, as it were, enter into communication with them.

As in the case of film where involuntary memories are triggered dialectically by using the montage format, as a way to bring the oppressed audience into a direct communication with their present, to awaken them from what Bloch (1973: 251) memorably called "das Dunkle des gelebten Augenblicks", a form of historiography is required which utilises "magical experiences" in order to awaken the nonmagical. Benjamin's conception of a Proustian historiography mobilises magical experiences with the eye on an ethical awakening, a sudden interruption, disrupting the given (written historical continuity, the causal chain of events) to bring the past into direct communication with the present. Honneth (1993: 94-95) continues:

Here it is clear that Benjamin does not want to counteract the historical process of the loss of experience with possibilities of a re-enchantment of the world [as in Ernst Jünger for example, GTS]; rather, the moral [ethical] impetus of his philosophy of history forces him to treat magical experiences as the methodological model for a historiography that may be able to settle our debt to a past generation.

In this context it may also be added that involuntary recollection is closely tied to *forgetting*. Benjamin (1992a: 198) writes that one should refer to Proust's epic work of recollection as "a Penelope work of forgetting". He asks, "Is not the involuntary

recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the wharf, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness?" Indeed, but forgetting must be seen in the sense of interrupting the restrictive intellect, resentment and neuroses, paranoia, forgetting the day in order to work at night, and finally, in the spirit of the destructive character, forgetting in order to clear away, opening up space. Benjamin suggests remembering to forget, that is, by chance, involuntarily; not forgetting to remember because of appearances, the appearance of the continuum which Benjamin sees as a historical oblivion.³²³ Benjamin writes against becoming entrapped in the phantasmagorias of the psyche, and uses the example of Proust who introduced his theory of involuntary memory against Bergson's theory of remembrance based on *durée*. Helga Geyer-Ryan (1994: 31) notes lucidly:

Forgotten things are not preserved in some strange space in the psyche but in the material world outside. In Proust, memories of manifestations in time are transformed into separately preserved reserves which are spatially distributed. They remain — as if shut in jars — in various places distributed through the years of our lives. 'That is why the better part of our memories exists outside us, in a blatter of rain, in the smell of an unaired room or the first crackling brushwood fire in a cold grate.' Yet these three images point to a paradox: it is the most fleeting, transitory, and precisely non-materially fixed perceptions which remain 'preserved' outside the psyche. (The same idea is found later in the most diverse avant-garde documents, ranging from Brecht's early lyrics to Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'.) For Proust these perceptions of transitory sensations remain committed to the realm of the forgotten, since at the time of the sensation they had no elemental function, i.e. for him they remain 'in reserve'. Forgetting seals them off and keeps them fresh.

However, Honneth (1993: 94) also asks whether the methodological reproduction of states of reduced attention holds its own against actual rare moment of half-wakefulness and reduced attention and, on the other hand, the tough question: "even if such a methodological reproduction of a quasi-magical experience were possible, it would still be

³²³ Cf. Baudrillard who writes somewhere in the context of postmodern culture and history that images disappear "faster and faster in the rear-view mirror of memory".

unclear to what extent it would be meaningful to speak of a communicative relationship to people or even groups of people who belong to the realm of the dead". It will be remembered that in the context of film Benjamin insisted, at least immanently, on the ephemerality of the dialectical procedure. Raising consciousness through the realm of art — in the broader context of a history of art consisting not only of fine-art images but also mass cultural artefacts — at certain critical moments of history one could only hope for small victories. The programme was one of preparation, transition, a passage rather than a system. As for the viability of a "symbolic" restitution of the fate of the dead, and of their moral integrity³²⁴ becomes an unshakeable responsibility — after all, it is a question of liquidating the mythical fear of fate and retribution.

The totemic nature of the effigy which is fetishistic has to be undone in order to look *through* the image into the clearing of history. It will be remembered that photography, for example, has the distinct ability to record by allegory rather than symbol, and save often forgotten fragments for eternity. In this way the effaced "faces" of the oppressed is marked, not consigned to oblivion, and the marking or quickening becomes a way to grasp the present "crisis". For Benjamin grasping the present means intrinsically grasping the past — understanding the latter in the prophetic nature of the former. The redemption is critical, as the aura of the images of the past appear but momentarily and can only be understood in this one moment.³²⁵ The fortuitous memory, then, is a dialectical image. Benjamin (1992a: 247) writes:

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. 'The truth will not run away from us': in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the exact point historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

³²⁴Even without Benjamin's metaphysical premises, the idea of reclaiming a forgotten past, ripping it from its mythical shroud, reaching through the lie for the truth - *because it is too late*.

³²⁵*If not, not*. See Kitaj's 1979-6 painting of this name.

Remembering, which is usually part of a conservative approach, finds its “destructive” or vigilant counterpart in this form of memory, which knows that what is not grasped in its sudden appearance (like in the gesture of a child clutching a glass) disappears forever. This immense *responsibility* toward the past also holds for the present. Historicism may be complacent about the “flow” or “state of things” but the historical materialist is acutely aware of the moment of danger that determines the past and the present. He is not a conformist. Writes Benjamin (1992a: 247) :

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

The enemy is Fascism which rears its head through a conformism that empathises with victors. The historical materialist who recognises the danger in this conformism, this going with the flow, will be the historian or chronicler who prophetically sees hope in the past, in a memory that flashes past. For, theologically inclined as he is, he knows that the Messiah is expected at the time of the Antichrist; the one’s destruction calls for the salvation of the other.³²⁶ The prophetic historical materialist is able to see a true image of the present in the past, as he does not keep step with the conformist view of the present. It is the conformism, moreover, of the historicist who empathises with the victor, that recognises history only in cultural treasures, in the spoils of war, that must be interrupted. Conformist

readings of history focus only on victory, forgetting the defeated. Only through the crude and material “faces” of the oppressed may the true spiritual face of things in fact be revealed. As Benjamin (1992a: 113) writes in the context of Kafka’s figures of dejection: “It is for them and their kind, the unfinished and the bunglers, that there is hope”. A critical understanding of loss amid abjection is a small reminder of redemption proper.

Moreover, history which knows only victory is the culture of barbarism that the new barbarians would negate, *remember to forget*. Going against historicism, then, means going against the historical norm, recognising it as a critical moment of danger. In the now famous words of Benjamin (1992a: 248):

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.

This conviction goes against the grain, against the current, against the continuous flow of Bergson’s *durée*, against the continuum, against tradition, against a culture of barbarism that weakens the struggle against fascism because “in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm” (Benjamin 1992a: 249).

Hans Jorg Sandkühler (1973: 83) notes that Benjamin’s *Thesen* runs the risk of being assimilated into the culture of barbarism, into this conservative and conformist tradition: “W Benjamins Thesen selbst sind in Gefahr, als ‘Kulturgut’ überwältigt zu werden, das ‘niemals ein Dokument der Kulture ist’, ‘ohne zugleich ein soches der Barbarei zu sein. Un wie es selbst nicht frei ist von Barbarei, so ist es auch der Prozeß der Überlieferung nicht, in der es von dem einen an den andern gefallen ist’”. To underline this point, Irving Wolfarth (1993: 1) at the celebration of the centenary in 1992 of Benjamin’s

³²⁶Or “Other” as in Levinas, where the face of the oppressed other shocks us into

birth noted wryly that the celebration seemed to be exactly the kind of cultural event which Benjamin deemed barbaric. How do we escape this, how “avoid serving up a culinary Benjamin to the jaws of the culture industry?”

In Wohlfarth’s reading, in the spirit of the destructive character, it is the jagged edges of Benjamin’s text which provide the footholds to get beyond the work, and beyond a culture of barbarism. If Benjamin was destructive of history and tradition, yet also “involuntarily” retaining its jagged lines and sweeter memories, by violently quoting images out of context, raping the symbolic appearance of things, in order to reach behind the trite face of beauty — so also we quote his texts out of culture and tradition. There is after all a revolutionary chance in every moment — every moment grasped like a fortuitous “prophetic” or “enceinte” memory. It is this *discontinuity* which provides the foothold, against the historicists who create a continuum of prosperity, against the partisan critics of Benjamin who desire to assimilate him into a culture of progress and health, but also against the Benjamin “celebrations” of the apologetics who smooth over the jagged revolutionary. In this way, and in typical self-deprecatory fashion, Wohlfarth opens himself and his fellow intellectuals up to criticism in order to get beyond it.

“Destruction”, interruption, or *Umfunktionierung* of a culture and tradition means perpetually running against a continuing current that assimilates everything, making everything its own, in this way robbing the things of their possible subversiveness. This destruction of conformism is filled with Benjamin’s gnostic and kabbalistic re-reading of redemption through destruction. Furthermore, it is a reading of “history as catastrophe” opposed to the historicist reading of history as progress. Rupture signals not only a desire for redemption in the kabbalistic sense of history and revelation. It also signals a Marxist belief in revolution, as well as a more immediate redemption in the sense of the actual writing of a text against progress. Benjamin (Scholem 1989: 262) wrote in his last letter to Scholem of January 11, 1940: “Every line we succeed in publishing today — no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it — is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness”. Crisis and redemption, rupture and salvation, prophecy and the present

consciousness, a consciousness of the ethical or divine Other?

signals a *self-knowledge* — a contentious belief, it is true, in the prophecy of writing the past against the dangerous conformism of the present, and the nebulosity of the future: a small victory in the face of a large defeat (perhaps).³²⁷ The question of its viability when wrenched away from its theological and Marxist premises (both of whom are ugly today), remains.

2. Rupture

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin 1992a: 251).

The allegory above signals amongst other things Benjamin's gnostic or kabbalistic vision of history, at least as it has its *Ursprung* in the Fall. It will be remembered, however, that the reference to the Fall is only an initial springboard, a trope toward the representation of a truth, in this case the crisis Benjamin's then present was trapped in.

"History as catastrophe", then, is what Benjamin opposes to the politicians who stubbornly believe in a myth of progress, politicians, moreover, who sold out the

³²⁷ Reading out of context Benjamin's (Scholem 1989:14) statement to Scholem in a letter of July 26, 1932 (a time, according to Scholem, when Benjamin was considering suicide), "And though many — or a

battle against Fascism — in this Benjamin was thinking specifically of the Hitler-Stalin pact, a development which delivered a major blow to his hopes for a revolutionary art based on Russian avant-garde art theory. Benjamin writes in much more of a dejected tone than his Artwork essay, that in the way that hermetic monks were given certain thoughts to ponder, thoughts which would have them turn away from the world, so also the thoughts he was developing in the *Thesen*. In other words, like the angel allegorised above the historian would turn his back on the present infatuation with technological, militant progress. Instead the apocalyptic historian fixes his eyes — helplessly it might be added, as the historian, in the image of the angel who cannot close his wings, cannot intervene, cannot restore, make whole again³²⁸ — on the disaster, the ruins left in progress' wake.

As the first part of the *Thesen* is directed against the conformism of historicism, the second part is directed against its political accomplice, conformist social democracy. Benjamin (1992a: 250) writes that “Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement”. According to Benjamin the social democracy of Joseph Dietzgen resurrected the old Protestant ethic of work amongst (factory) workers; except that it did so through a vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labour, which “bypasses the question of how its products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal. It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism”. Benjamin (1992a: 251) continues by opposing the domination of nature with a Scheerbartian/Fourierian utopian vision of the harmonisation of nature and man — again, Benjamin “redeems” the utopian conception of using technology not to master nature but in accordance with its rhythms:

sizeable number — of my works have been small-scale victories, they are offset by large-scale defeats”.

³²⁸ And yet, perhaps in the way in which Scholem (1989: 237) read Kafka’s “failure” as a success — “since he really did comment, if only on the nothingness of truth or whatever might emerge there” — and also keeping in mind Benjamin’s idea that certain works can only really be completed at some point in the

The new conception of labour amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naïve complacency is contrasted with the exploitation of nature of the proletariat. Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound. According to Fourier, as a result of efficient co-operative labour, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labour which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb, as potentials. Nature, which as Dietzgen puts it, 'exists gratis,' is a complement to the corrupted conception of labour.³²⁹

Moreover, according to Benjamin the conformist philosophy of social democracy smoothes over any sign or notion of subversion, as in, for example, the marxian notion of an oppressed class appearing as "the last oppressed class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden" — Benjamin writes that "Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui", that call for revolution in the preceding century which had a major influence on Benjamin's thinking. By hailing the workers as the redeemers of the future, social democracy managed to rob them of their strength; strength manifest in their hatred and in their spirit of sacrifice: "for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (Benjamin 1992a: 251 & 252).

Benjamin's polemic, it may be said, is directed against the idea that the good times are still coming, inevitably. For this reasoning has history, and the history of mankind on a linear road of progress, a continuum akin to Bergson's *durée* which is one of homogenous, empty time. Benjamin's conception of history as catastrophe is then a fundamental critique of this empty time of progress. He proposes instead, in Blanquian

future, so his image of the historian really does comment, and may properly be understood — in context, but also out of context — today.

³²⁹ In an insert in the earlier *One-Way Street*, Benjamin (1986: 76) wrote in a similar vein against the exploitation of nature: "The earliest customs of peoples seem to send us a warning that in accepting what we receive so abundantly from nature we should guard against a gesture of avarice. For we are able to make Mother Earth no gift of our own. It is therefore fitting to show respect in taking, by returning a part of all we receive before laying hands on our share. [...] If society has so degenerated through necessity and greed that it can now receive the gifts of nature only rapaciously, that it snatches the fruit unripe from the

manner, its blasting apart, its rupture to replace homogenous time with “time filled by the presence of the now” (Benjamin 1992a: 252-253) — *Jetztzeit*.

It will be remembered that contra Hannah Arendt’s (Benjamin 1992a: 253) reading of *Jetztzeit* which links it to the mystical *nunc stans*, a symbolic mode of thinking which has the word of God complete within the sign itself, Benjamin’s conception of a fulfilled present, although closely versed in the dialectic of rabbinic, Kabbalistic mystical rupture and revelation, has its “paradox” not in an immediate inward revelation but in a secular leap into the past that transgresses the present dialectically, historically, through an image of *Ursprung* which spells both the becoming and the demise of itself. In other words, the Marxian *revolution* of Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* has “allegorical” roots as it pictures the cosmic rupture in a present which is always displaced. If “Marx hat in der Vorstellung der klassenlosen Gesellschaft die Vorstellung der Messianischen Zeit säkularisiert” (Benjamin 1977, 1.3: 1231), this utopian sign of redemption, of *Rettung* and *Erlösung*, is an ephemeral one, weak because it lacks the “confidence” in totality projected by the symbolical revelation. In this way Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* is merely a residue, a trope, rather than a belief: as in allegory, it can mean absolutely everything.

Nevertheless, the revolution is geared toward a (utopian) classless society. Benjamin (1977, 1.3: 1232) writes that “Dem Begriff der klassenlosen Gesellschaft muß sein echtes messianisches Gesicht wiedergegeben werden, und zwar im Interesse der revolutionären Politik des Proletariats selbst”. It is a Marxian revolution as read through a Blanquian cosmic rupture, and its fulfilled and transfigured present may be marked as such — “in the guise of holidays which are days of remembrance”. For Benjamin (1992a: 253) , such days do not mark the calendar as time does — in a continuum — as “monuments of a historical consciousness” (contra monuments of victory) they rather bring time to a dialectical standstill. Benjamin (1992a: 254) writes:

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism

trees in order to sell it most profitably, and is so compelled to empty each dish in its determination to have enough, the earth will be impoverished and the land will yield bad harvests”.

supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.

Where the historicist, who has his ally in the social democrat as personified by Joseph Dietzgen, perpetuates the continuum of progress through the postulation of an "eternal image", the historical materialist goes against the grain, fixating on the particular, the "extreme". Again Benjamin's earlier *Trauerspiel* philosophy of art history comes to mind: the interruption of genre conventions with the particular example, the extreme image. For Benjamin the history of art embodied the representation of truth, the Idea in which the work is sublated and redeemed. According to Benjamin a true history of art would entail the interruption of the continuum of history, ripping a work out of context, time brought to a standstill in the monadic image — illuminating a moment of truth.

Politically and historically speaking then, for Benjamin revolution and redemption is not the ultimate goal of history but its *interruption*. That history "keeps on going like this is the catastrophe" (Benjamin qtd. in Buck-Morss 1986: 140). Writes Benjamin (1977, 1.3: 1231):

Das Unheil setzt damit ein, daß die Sozialdemokratie diese Vorstellung zum "Ideal" erhob. Das Ideal wurde in der neukantischen Lehre als eine "unendliche Aufgabe" definiert. Und diese Lehre war die Schulphilosophie der sozialdemokratischen Partei [...] War die klassenlose Gesellschaft erst einmal als unendliche Aufgabe definiert, so verwandelte sich die leere und homogene Zeit sozusagen in ein Vorzimmer, in dem man mit mehr oder minder Gelassenheit auf den Eintritt der revolutionären Situation warten konnte. In Wirklichkeit gibt es nicht einen Augenblick, der seine revolutionäre Chance nicht mit sich führte — sie will nur als eine Spezifische definiert sein, nämlich als Chance einer ganz neuen Lösung im Angesicht einer ganz neuen Aufgabe. Dem revolutionären Denker bestätigt sich die eigentümliche revolutionäre Chance jedes geschichtlichen Augenblicks aus der politischen Situation heraus. [...] Die klassenlose Gesellschaft ist nicht das Endziel des Fortschritts in der Geschichte sondern dessen so oft mißglückte, endlich bewerkstelligte Unterbrechung.

The revolution as Marxian, Messianic, and Blanquian rupture, interrupts the continuum, the always-the-same. As history is crisis its truth may be made manifest at a moment of

danger, a dialectical moment in which time comes to a standstill.³³⁰ Opposed to the additive method of historicism,³³¹ the historical materialist methodology would be destructive-constructive. Benjamin (1992a: 254) writes in his *Thesen* in a similar vein as in his “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede”, underscoring his philosophy of configuration, monad, shock, montage:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history — blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled [sublated as in Hegel’s tripartite “Aufhebung”, GTS]; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history.

If the idea of progress has history flow in a continuum, its interruption or disruption would see it fixate into configured monads. Instead of the causal link of history as in historicism, the historical materialist, who is both influenced by Marxism and Messianism, “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one”. This means quoting the past out of context in a configuration which is shocked into a standstill in a monadic moment pregnant with “prophetic” tensions: a present filled with *Jetztzeit*. Benjamin (1992a: 255), as prophetically inclined historical materialist, writes that the historical materialist “establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time”. Again, a definite moment in the past is signalled in a definite present, the former looking toward this specific latter, whilst the latter looks backward from whence it comes. In this way, writes Benjamin (1977, 1.3: 1046),

³³⁰ As in a photograph allegorically speaking.

³³¹ Benjamin (1992a: 254) writes: “universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time”.

Die Geschichte der Kunst ist eine Geschichte von Prophetien. Sie kann nur aus dem Standpunkt der unmittelbaren, aktuellen Gegenwart geschrieben werden; denn jede Zeit besitzt die ihr eigene neue aber unvererbte Möglichkeit, die Prophetien zu deuten, die Kunst von vergangenen Epochen gerade auf sie enthielt.

The disruptive historian reads the present in the past, rather than the present in the future. In fact, the historian would confer with the revolutionary who seeks to destroy the notion of progress, in order to reveal the false appearance which keeps it afloat. In the same way that the revolution interrupts history and marks this eruption with a holiday of historical consciousness, so also the ripped out of context images of the past which monadically preserve a lifework, an epoch, an entire course of history. It is not a subjective process of prophecy, but an objective marking of the past in the present; vice versa, it is the redemptive reading against the current of the present in the past. The revolutionary monadic moment as embodied by the historical holiday or the historical image is a sign of remembrance. It reveals a true fulfilled present in a momentary flash: "For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (Benjamin 1992a: 255).

If the historian prophetically reads a specific present in a specific past, as if endowed with a weak messianic power for redemption, he looks toward the coming of the Messiah, in the way in which he awaits and foresees the coming revolution. And as is well known, in apocalyptic "tradition" this coming will be a destructive one, as the Messiah signifies a complete rupture, a (violent) cessation of all history. In other words, contextually speaking, Benjamin's notion of a specific moment is revealed in a specific moment of the past, in the way that "to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history" (Benjamin 1992a: 253). He has in mind a very particular vision of the present, as predicted — perhaps silently — in the past. The prediction concerns an immanent Messianic revolution. What Benjamin reads dialectically in the images of the past is the catastrophe of history, the present moment of danger; and vice versa, he reads the catastrophe of history in the moment of danger of his present. For Benjamin only by turning his back on the false appearance of the present as a causal link to the inevitable progress of the future, only by fixing on the debris of history left behind, consigned to the oblivion of forgetting, does the

true image of history reveal itself — in an involuntary image that flits past. Grasping it means rescuing it; negating the present means transforming it anew; destroying the continuum is a process which would signify a Messianic revolutionary redemption. One could say, then, that the *Thesen* as a programmatic historical text, written in the tractatus vein of the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" and the self-ironic monograph "The destructive character", is Benjamin's final allegory of his methodological theory of grasping the transitory image of destruction/salvation as it disappears into the nought.

Now it will be clear that for all its secularisation by way of a Marxist revolutionary vernacular, such an image of historical interruption, rupture and redemption leans heavily on a mystical Judaic philosophy. Furthermore, as has been discussed before, such a dialectic of destruction and redemption is a particular modernist notion. Robert Alter (1994: 429), for example, writes that Scholem's mystical imagery reflects imagery from then current modernist literature: "especially his repeated evocation of an 'abyss' into which things collapse or on the brink of which they totter, and his use of volcanic and pyrotechnic metaphors to suggest the reality felt by the mystics". Moreover, in terms of the dialectic or paradox of destruction and transformation Benjamin has marked affinities with the Kabbalah inspired Scholem.

Alter (1994: 436) writes that Scholem's vision of history is one which would transgress any notion of continuity, of the wholeness of tradition.³³² Scholem's ambivalent attraction and reaction to, horror and fascination with the antinomian movement of Sabbatianism has its cause in their extreme self-contradiction. "For Scholem the modernist, a perception of existence in permanent contradiction with itself, however painfully impairing, was also a mark of the spiritual profundity of the antinomian movement". And that fundamentally, if Sabbatianism could lead people into a spiritual catastrophe, apostasy, it also expressed "a powerful urge of the Jewish people to renew its

³³²Benjamin it is true, has an ambiguous view of tradition: on the one hand, he insists on the continuity of tradition as in the Storyteller essay and in his claim that the tradition of philosophical language must be maintained albeit radically transformed — this would also refer to the tradition of experience where wisdom is handed down from generation to generation; and on the other hand, he calls for an abrupt rupture of tradition, a complete breach or fissure orchestrated by the messianic destructive impulse — violently interrupting the flow of things.

existence by drastically transforming its terms, thus pointing forward historically to the Enlightenment, the Emancipation, and finally to the Zionist revolution”.

Alter (1994: 436 & 437) points out, however, that it must be remembered that for Scholem, as for Benjamin for that matter, “binary pairings” such as destruction and transformation are “never simply negated in this simultaneous rupture and maintenance of tradition, but rather, as Scholem would have it, dialectically transformed”. As discussed earlier, there is a crucial tension between binary opposites, a perpetual paradoxical crisis which signals its own incandescent fulfillment through its own negation. Reality is pushed to its limits, even transgressing it through a fiery revelation³³³ In short, both Scholem and Benjamin, in the tradition of modernist literature such as Joyce, Pound, Woolf, and T.S. Eliot have an apocalyptic view of history as catastrophe: “as unending trauma, constantly repeated in memory and paralyzing the present”. The task would therefore be to rupture this catastrophe of the always-the-same trauma, “breaking the death-like spell cast over the past by [the sentimental and prudent bourgeois, GTS] predecessors” (Atler 1994: 438 & 441).

Furthermore, keeping Benjamin’s kabbalistic orientation in mind, in terms of his conception of revolution, a distinction must be made between different traditions of revolution. In an unpublished critique of Ronald Paulson’s *Representations of revolution*, Calvin Seerveld (1996) criticises Paulson for a reductive conception of revolution. He introduces six striking different concepts of revolution (although there might be more), each one possessing its own distinct pictorial means.

1 *militaristic* “permanent revolution”

dialectical incorporation, particularly opportunistic; Heraclitean

format common to Fascism, Lenin, Trotsky ...

2 *insurrectionist* revolution

³³³Alter (1994: 439) observes that there is “a kinship between Benjamin’s visual image of the past as something that flashes, a chain of fragmentary illuminations, and Scholem’s repeated invocation of radiance or fire to represent his own subject”.

volcanic eruptive from the “bottom-up”, and “evolutionary”
mutation; Darwinian, early Freudian, Engels’ Scientific socialism”
— a pattern as old as Anaximenes, or as new as Brecht

3 *counter-revolutionary* restoration

hierarchical authority and order deeply approved; Monarchical
framework of the later Aristotle, Burke

4 *elective/reprobative* promissory revolution

stern “top-down” repressive omelette made de novo from-and-
above the broken eggs; Old Parmenidian set-up of a privileged,
wholly other Central Committee

5 *benign* “armchair” revolution

presto move to pristine sweetness-and-light spirituality above
the crass world of civilised discontent and war; Rousseau
(Utopian) Socialist outlook, a Spiritualist view

6 *anarchist*

atomic break-up/break-down of all and any power authorities; the
old philosophical materialist/hedonist position of Lucretius,
Sartre

If it may be said that Camus, for one, oscillates between the last two concepts, and given the fact that there is often a striking similarity in the imagery used by Benjamin and Camus (Cf. Benjamin’s “City Portraits” and Camus’ writing on Algeria, e.g. “Short Guide to Towns Without a Past” and “Helen’s Exile”), one might for the sake of argument suggest that Benjamin exhibits a “benign” anarchism. And yet, besides the fact that Benjamin’s conception of revolution is specifically and quite acutely aimed against a particular historical situation of crisis as perpetuated by social democracy and Fascism, Seerveld could add another category of revolution, that of the Messianic or gnostic notion of “creation is destruction”, “history as catastrophe” which for all its Lurianic utopianism and “light” mysticism pivots on a profound pessimism not easily married to either a concept of the benign or hedonistic. One might term such a concept a *double negative* revolution, as

in a paradoxical, dialectical reversal itself vacillating between light and dark, horror and fascination, abjection and pleasure — Sabbatai Zevi, Blake, Nietzsche, Artaud, Bataille — in the sense of being typical of mythologising thought — might be representatives. Of course, as it would be a fully modernist conception, any notion of an *actual* transformation through revolution is a debatable issue. Perhaps a “political” theory of aesthetics must take precedence over the actual grime of politics in real society — avoiding the pitfalls of *realpolitik*.

However, John Millful (1996), for one, is deeply sceptical of such modernist-messianic conceptions of a double negation. He writes that “the fascination of a dialectic which teaches you that the negations of history contain their own negation is endless...”. “Writers as diverse as Kafka, Feuchtwanger, Schnitzler and Toller, separated already by worlds from literal religious belief, return again and again to the image of the end, an end not justified nor prepared by their own ungratified search for acceptance, but holding the age-old promise of sudden epiphany, the emergence of the solution when it seems at its most remote” (Millful 1996: 130 & 131). Millful (1996: 132) continues:

The allegory of reversal may have its deepest historical roots in Jewish Messianism, but it has long since become the common property, not only of German Jews and Germans, but of all those who can no longer envisage a change for the better, grounded, and taking its source, in the present. This dream of reversal has elements both of destruction (and self-destruction) and betrayal: it can only release the new by destroying the old, including the self which, as Brecht wrote in an early gloss on his own pseudo-Leninist reversal, *The Measures Taken*, is ‘the last bit of rubbish you have to get rid of’, formed as it is by the same rejected present. And this self-hatred, throwing oneself on the pyre with the rest of the world, becomes the moral excuse for involving the apocalypse (Mill 1996: 132).

Harsh words indeed, and not so very far of the mark either, if it is remembered how hauntingly closely related a particular brand of Jewish self-hatred is to Fascism itself — that dark force growing from the contemporaneous situation Benjamin so vehemently rejected. This, then, pointing to the ultimate *failure* of modernity, of Messianic Modernism. A failure Benjamin, and his counterpart Kafka, was far from being unaware of. It is the failure to marry in any sustainable way, politics and the realm of aesthetics, reality and mysticism; the failure to politicise the masses through a pedagogic art; the

failure to counter another war, or to create a truly utopian community of light and space; the failure of Russia as signified by the Hitler-Stalin pact. It is the failure of art in an aestheticised world of the spectacle.

And yet, it must also be said that this image of failure is an image as well of “hope” or “desire”. Benjamin’s ultimate failure to gain acceptance, to reach common ground, to break away from his own isolation is also the story of an intellectual success. Kafka’s failure to “complete” his writing,³³⁴ the failure of the Angelus Novus to close its wings, awaken the dead, and make whole what is smashed, Fourier’s failure to realise his utopia in the co-operative “phalansteries”, in actual fact points the way *through* its own abjection or dejection — by not being intended for an actual institutionalised realisation or “system”.

In Benjamin’s particularly viable conception of a history of art, as delineated by a subversive reading of artworks and their contexts, from the embankments of an *ironic* postmodernity, the *texts* of the above failures may be the specific site for a bodily “redemption” — a textual one not short of humour, of lightness, or of seriousness. Moreover, although modernity is often a striking example of the inadequacy of intellectuals upon entering the realm of politics, it must be said that Benjamin’s “rebellious” criticism of the politics of this times, be it of right-wing intellectuals or left-wing intellectuals, of communists or fascist, precisely because it often took its cue in the realm of art and the non-conformist intellect gave it a powerful voice.

Any notion of a history of art today which takes into consideration the “myth” or ideology behind the appearance of itself, criticising the appearance of its own success and unity, can be a viable critical vehicle (as can, perhaps as a preparational site, Benjamin’s idea of a historical text formatted as *montage*, a collage of “citations”, which might be constructed out of multi-media). If all we have to show for a political consciousness is a system for action completely devoid of the *potential* in the *allegorical* reading of reality, if we negate the potential inherent or immanent within the “textual” negation of negation because of the failure of such projects in pragmatic reality only, then

³³⁴As mentioned before, Scholem (1989: 237) disagreed with Benjamin’s reading of Kafka’s work as being ultimately a failure, for, as he writes to Benjamin, Kafka did really comment, even “if only on the nothingness of truth or whatever might emerge there”.

Benjamin's "failure" merely remains a "benign" failure. But, on the other hand, if it is understood (in Adornian terminology) that the failure of "art" or of "philosophy" is precisely the manifestation of its "truth", that is, its historical truth, than the failure of Benjamin read through the failure of Kafka, the Angelus Novus,³³⁵ and Fourier's Utopia is transformed, albeit temporarily, into a model for a future reading/writing. As a textual configuration of failures (of double negations and ambiguity) the sensual body behind the text, and the text of the body is made manifest, critically but also with *jouissance*: "Since pleasure is the Unique, to reveal pleasure is itself a unique duty..." (Barthes 1994: 341).

3. Kafka, the Angelus Novus, and the utopia of Fourier

To perform the negative is what is still required of us, the positive is already ours.

Kafka, *Aphorisms*

The allegorical texts of Kafka, contrary to the opinion of many, provide an iridescent image of the world. That his "doxological" texts are populated by creatures, unfinished forms, abject figures, is proof not of an existential Angst with which the author is afflicted,³³⁶ but of a daring hope and radiant happiness even in the most forlorn of times. This hope may be defined as stemming from a deep self-irony, a lightness of heart in the face of the most nebulous force: the absent but always looming father, a *deus absconditus*. That this absent father may be any number of things marks the surface (!) of the porous allegories; that the stories are multi-layered in terms of the presence of absence is exactly what constitutes their joy. This is unfortunately not the place for an in-depth study — a study which could would have to take into consideration several traditions with which Kafka may be connected, be that the gnostic tradition (as Harold Bloom is wont to do),

³³⁵Whose "forlorn" emblem so many writers have pondered over, Cf. Bahro 1987, Buci-Glucksmann 1982, Müller 1982, in Niethammer 1992.

³³⁶The biographer Ronald Hayman (1983) fixates on this supposed Angst of Kafka.

the Haggadic tradition, in the tradition of the brilliant author Robert Walser's *Die Gehülfe*,³³⁷ the nomad Yiddish Actors whom Kafka was fascinated by, Pascal, Zeno's paradox and Kierkegaard (amongst other more hermetic references, compliments of Mr. Borges). Instead, the aim is to sketch or stretch a "parallel" between the "abjection" of Kafka and Benjamin, in reference to the allegorical Angelus Novus, in the light of Fourier's fantasies — by way of an open and immanent reading of three quotes:

The word 'unfolding' has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. The second kind of 'unfolding' is really appropriate to the parable; it is the reader's pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka's parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud unfolds into a blossom (Benjamin 1992a: 118).

No sooner was I done than the ceiling was cracking up indeed. Still from high above — I had misjudged the height — in the semidarkness, an angel, wrapped with golden strings in bluish-violet sheets, was slowly descending on large white wings with a silky shine, stretching out the sword with his raised arm. "An angel, that's what it is!" I thought. "All day he has been flying toward me and I did not know it in my unbelief. Now he will speak to me." I lowered my eyes. But when I raised them again, the angel was still there, to be sure, hanging rather far beneath the ceiling, which had closed up again, but he was no living angel any more, only a painted wooden figure from the prow of a ship, as they would hang from the ceiling in sailor's taverns. That was all. The knob of the sword was fitted to hold candles and to collect the flowing tallow. I had torn the lightbulb down, I did not want stay in the dark, a candle could still be found, so I stepped onto an armchair, stuck the candle into the sword knob, lit it, and then sat long into the night, under the angel's feeble light (Kafka, diary entry, 25 June 1914, *Tagebücher*; qtd. in Werckmeister 1996: 266).

It is no surprise to find that Barthes's Fourier essay concentrates upon showing that his delineation of Utopia represents a kind of *writing*, in which the power and freedom of the signifier is vastly extended, and the role of the signified is very much shrunken (elsewhere, in the near-contemporary *Empire of Signs* in particular, there seems to be a relationship between the Barthesian distinction of signifier and signified with the opposition matriarchal/patriarchal). He, too, has a section entitled 'Hieroglyph', which proceeds from the premise that the decipherment of the world through nature's hieroglyphs that Fourier undertakes is a

³³⁷ It is said that Kafka was particularly fond of the schizophrenic author, Robert Walser.

necessary preliminary to its alteration. It works in tandem with what Barthes calls 'systematisation' (as opposed to 'system'), a classificatory activity which organises the 'marvellous reality' that Fourier imagines in such intense detail in an openly-structured series of linguistic categories. He is the inventor of a language for this world, and it is significant in the context of Benjamin's work that Barthes should describe his method of classification as 'baroque': 'Inserted in the history of the sign, Fourier's construction puts forward the claims of a baroque semantics, which is to say one that is open to the proliferation of the signifier: infinite and yet structured' (Hollington 1996: 121).

A return to the Benjaminian Baroque then, of an allegorical language whose figuration may refer absolutely to anything else: it unfolds not into a flat sheet (although it may do this too), but into a blossom, a flower as in Fourier's writing: "Fourier loves to dress up the most reasonable propositions in reflections of a fantastical kind. His discourse is like a higher language of flowers" (Benjamin qtd. in Hollington 1996: 121). And yet, as Benjamin points out in his *Trauerspiel* study, it is the dejected or abject which is the source material of the seventeenth-century Baroque; excess and waste, death and decay. It will be remembered that for Benjamin this Baroque stage of abjection becomes the allegorical site of salvation, through a dialectical or paradoxical about-turn. Through the allegory of the seventeenth-century Benjamin comments on the twentieth-century, its politics and its history — in this way he comments on and develops his own methodology through the methodology of others. The process would be a self-referential one, immanently critiquing the material beneath it. If art and politics have always been closely related, for several social and historical reasons, each era needs to devise its own systematisation as to how to formulate the problem of the truth. Hence Benjamin's notion of undoing the causal link by means of the disruptive and epochal configuration. History in Benjamin's thinking is cosmogonic, as it is for his counterparts Scheerbart and Fourier. And if Kafka's mythical Urcreatures who³³⁸ populate a "world theatre"³³⁹ (Benjamin 1992a: 121) are also the creatures of *Trauerspiel*, their beauty lies in the obscure, the half-lit, the distorted, "among the accused persons, for example" (Benjamin 1992a: 112). But

³³⁸ Kafka's creatures play themselves as Brecht's actors do in epic theatre.

³³⁹ As in *Weltbühne* — all the world is a stage — a central metaphor of the seventeenth-century *Trauerspiel*.

their light comes from the fact that they distort reality — in so doing revealing it in a historical clearing.

The new angel is imaginary and allegorical and points to the *Ursprung* but also to the future. The angel is, moreover, androgynous, as befits a creature with visionary talents: he/she may have its wings caught in a storm blowing in from Paradise, the Fall, but its feet are claws which may pull the idle historian with into the nought. The angel is an image in an allegorical network, not a political program as such; at a time of crisis one reading may take precedence, whilst at a time of circumspection another angel may show its face. Too many readers of the allegory burden it down with political innuendo or psychological analyses — only, ignoring the possibility for an image to have its own historical context however far removed we may be from it, that is, how ever far apart the image and its “original” context may be in an age of mass reproduction. The task at hand is to re-read the image through other images, as artists, but also art historians tend to do.³⁴⁰

And if the abyss also refers to utopia, negatively perhaps, any claim to wholeness has to be temporary. Each situation or context demands a specific attitude: both in terms of reading and writing a history, then and now. If politics demands vigilance as to the ruling or the oppressed classes, so also does the reading of aesthetics. But following any one system is bound to lead to oppression: circumspection demands of us to be rid of the partisan or doctrinaire attitude, be that in terms of the past, the present or the future. Reality is fantastical precisely because there are so many passages, and so few taken. Perhaps taking the discredited road has more to offer than is traditionally thought. Marx and Engels, before becoming Leninised, Stalinised etc., etc., wrote in *German Ideology* “...that the real content of these systems is hardly to be found in their systematic form is best proved by the orthodox Fourierists ... who, despite their orthodoxy, are the exact antipodes of Fourier: doctrinaire bourgeois” (qtd. in Barthes 1993: 366). Roland

³⁴⁰Thinking of Benjamin’s use of the Klee painting may refer the reader to Benjamin’s earlier use of Dürer’s etching *Melancholia I* in the context of the Baroque book. The latter is also an allegory of a “fallen angel”; and a sudden shift in direction may unearth Kitaj’s 1975-6 painting, the double portrait, *From London (James Joll and John Golding)*, a diasporist painting which takes its composition from the Dürer. The angel has many guises (allegory means reading one text through another; it means the doubling of a text).

Barthes added: "Fourier's work does not constitute a system; only when we have tried to 'realize' this work (in phalansteries) has it become, retrospectively, a 'system' doomed to instant fiasco; system, in the terminology of Marx and Engels, is the 'systematic form,' i.e., pure ideology, ideological reflection; *systematics* is the play of the system; its language that is open, infinite, free from any referential illusion (pretension); its mode of appearance, its constituency, is not 'development' but pulverization, dissemination..." (Barthes 1993: 367). If Benjamin devotes a large part of the unfinished *Passagenwerk* to Fourier, and Fourier's fantasies occur in the *Thesen* as a viable vision for the future, he allows his thoughts to remain open, *precisely* because a serious political crisis had struck the present. After all, his method is one of subverting a system, not to concoct and fall prey to the exploitations of another one.

The Baroque book is devoted to allegory; its subversive political viability today lies in its insistence on the dialectical turn-about whereby redemption occurs through the ruin. It is a destructive book in the spirit of Kafka: "Wozu lesen wir denn das Buch? damit es uns glücklich macht? Mein Gott! ... ein Buch musz die Axt sein für das *gefrorene Meer* in uns". In terms of art history, all images may by nature be ruins: reading *through* it is the closest thing to the truth one may hope for in a time of transition, change, passage. And if Benjamin wrote to Scholem that the essential feature of Kafka's parables is *humour*, and that "the key to Kafka's work is likely to fall into the hands of the person who is able to extract the comic aspects from Jewish theology" (Scholem 1989: 243), so also in the case of Benjamin. When the chips are down, humour, then, *dark humour* that is, is what ties together multiple lines — Benjamin to Kafka to the new angel, and to the utopia of Fourier. In this light the abject ceases to be neurotic.

Without ever boasting of it, Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by supplying a lot of romances of chivalry and adventure for the evening and night hours, in so diverting from him his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that his demon thereupon freely performed the maddest exploits, which, however, lacking a preordained object, which Sancho Panza himself was supposed to have been, did no one any harm. A free man, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his

crusades, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, and thus enjoyed a great and profitable entertainment to his days (Kafka qtd, in Benjamin 1992a: 135).

Conclusion

It is a widely published fact that Benjamin was not only a deeply ambiguous person, but that, more importantly, his writing is deeply ambiguous. It has not been the aim of this thesis to refute this notion; rather, to place the writing in context, then as now.

With this in mind, any “conclusion” is doomed to restrictiveness and reduction. And yet it can be said that a “development” may be traced from a beginning to an end, however vague both loci may be. In the case of Benjamin, an intellectual development would constitute a becoming but also a disappearance, a destruction but also a salvation. It is often the case that what may be postulated with enthusiasm in one context is negated in another context. This, of course, makes it doubly hard to put a finger on the pulse of the body of work, if such a “beat” remains elusive, vague. Nevertheless, it is this writer’s belief that such a pulse exists, be it overt in one section, surreptitious in another. It remains only to follow the “traces” as they appear and disappear, rise and fall: for this would in essence entail Benjamin’s own writing methodology.

Benjamin’s conception of “experience” recurs in various guises from the early to the late work. It has metaphysical undertones emphasised in Part 1 of this thesis, at other times Marxist orientated politics take the place of metaphysics, as developed through Part 2. Benjamin’s early work was concerned mostly with the “spirit” of literature, the “essence” of a work of art; the later work focused on the material “truth” of a social reality as seen through various art forms. And yet for all the seeming contradictions between the spiritual or theological and the politically committed, a few key themes run throughout as an Ariadne thread through a labyrinth: subversiveness, critical consciousness, mortification, redemption, desire, transfiguration and the abject. And strikingly it was found to be Benjamin’s use and re-use of *allegory* that does the (un-)linking.

Allegory as the main component of Benjamin’s writing and thinking — allegory as language and image, subversive and redemptive; as *problematic* and *extreme* art form; as aesthetical and political tool; as theological and materialist problematising

trope and methodology. This maybe in the sphere of social criticism or art criticism. Coupled with an inexhaustible dialectic, moreover, allegory locates Benjamin's philosophically orientated history of art.

If Benjamin's varying conceptions of experience — aesthetic, political, and social — is combined with the allegorical impulse it should become clear that destruction and creation, for Benjamin, constitutes the major part of having true experience, i.e., historical *Erfahrung*, as opposed to inward restricted *Erlebnis*.

It must be added that in terms of the now "ugly" Messianic and Marxistic angle, the bipolar connection between theology and materialism in the actual historical study of Benjamin's career and development, such notions retain an enigma which occurs not only on the aesthetic level. Of course, there can be no return to Benjamin's Messianism nor to his Marxism, at least not without substantial transformation. And in the context of political fecundity in the aesthetic sphere, or the political role of the intellectual, it is found that both Adorno's holding out for the *autonomous* work, and Benjamin's Brechtian call for the mortification of the artwork in favour of *Gebrauchskunst*, may have validity, even if only seen from a temporary vantage point.

Moreover, considering all criticism against Benjamin's method, it should be reiterated that when Benjamin's work is taken as an oeuvre, as a life-work with an after-life, the flaws, failures, and ambiguities have a tendency to work themselves out; and certainly this "working out" is a prime characteristic of Benjamin's work proper. That his prophetic tendency (not least in regarding the after-life of his own work) may rub academics and intellectuals up the wrong way is perhaps its best element — in this way it avoids being "completed" and packed away in a prone to be defunct "system".

Added to Benjamin's sometime presumptuous mysticism and esotericism is the historical fact that instead of a proletarian revolution (as Marx was wont to prophecy, and others with him, including Benjamin himself who tended to shy away from categorical statements), capitalism has by and large absorbed socialism (for various political and economic reasons); and — speculating freely — it is fast turning into a "world system" in which "city states" like Singapore develop (by the morphing of their own "inner logic", so to speak), one could say asexually or androgynously with regards the "fetishistic" look of

the microchipological products created and consumed daily (of which the putting up and taking down of posters advertising new action films almost daily is a prime exhibit). City states which maintain an incredible porousness as to what comes in and what leaves the city, paradoxically by imposing an incredibly strict and nebulous control quite identical to that of a police state. The “myth” of this development, of this simulacrum to use Baudrillard’s terms, was not foreseen by Benjamin; and yet... with his study of the *prehistory* of modernity, the *appearance* of reality, of representations, of the inherent *abyss* within *aestheticism* and the *spectacle*, Benjamin did announce, from far away, possible things to come.

David Frisby (1996: 30) writes that “If indeed the origins of phantasmagorias and simulacra coincide, then does this not suggest that a prehistory of postmodernity is overdue?” In this sense, again Benjamin’s inherent flaw may point the way to an important “new” critical attitude, specifically in the realm of “representation”. Again Frisby (1996: 29):

A dimension of postmodernity, and one which plays a prominent role in Benjamin’s exploration of modernity is the transformation of representations. There are two aspects of this transformation highlighted by many postmodern theorists: first, a perceived shift from discourse to figuration (signs, icons) and the proliferation of images, and second, the problematization of the relationship between signifier and referent (in which the signifier *is* the referent). Certainly, Benjamin’s detailed investigations of representations (including the commodity itself) are of importance here; so, too, in his study of the relationship between allegory and commodity. In this context, we would have to ask whether Baudrillard’s assertion that we now consume only the images of commodities (the illusion of the illusion) is not already prefigured in Benjamin’s own analysis.

That Benjamin’s work, for all its modernist flaws and failures, because of its lucidity both technicality and analytically speaking, often looks toward the work of later authors, and often, this “influence” goes unrecorded. It could therefore be said that this thesis hopes to have illuminated certain areas of influence, not only on Benjamin’s own writing, but of Benjamin’s work on much contemporary thought. If there is one thing to be learned from Benjamin, it would be the need for a historical grounding, no matter how “small” the

topic. It may here also be added that Benjamin's insistence on historical *awakening* is as critical today as it was then.

Finally, in terms of Benjamin's epistemology, Frisby (1996: 29) points out that "At all events knowledge of the truth is associated with transcendence of illusion without 'the evaporation [...] of the object', but having rendered 'oneself sceptical of the "now" in things'". Much can be said for Benjamin's insistence on focusing on the actual object, the particular, the extreme. From a postmodern standpoint, where the illusion of illusion predominates, such a historical epistemology offers a firm grasp on the ephemera, as they flash by, appearing to disappear. And speaking from an art historical point, that which lies in complex constellations beneath the image under scrutiny may be "illuminated" by adopting a methodology of cross-contextuality,³⁴¹ "to explore multidimensionally the site of the metropolis and modernity (including archaeological and topographical explorations), as well as cultural productions in modernity" (Frisby 1996: 31), in the postmodern, and *through the image itself*.

³⁴¹ Perhaps cross-contextuality in Derridean fashion.

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SUMMARY

TITLE: WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORIES OF EXPERIENCE: A CRITICAL STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF ART AND THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS.

The question of Walter Benjamin's thinking on aesthetics is by now as much part of culture as Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*, proving once again that culture has a tendency to appropriate and defang its most articulate critics.

In a sense the aim of this study is to forge the way to a clearing by observing Benjamin's ideas on the paradoxes of culture, in the *context* of a body of thinking. The study is composed in such a way as to uncover the 'inner logic' of an ambiguous, contradictory, and subversive oeuvre: for all the paradoxes the essence remains written by the same hand.

Although Benjamin wrote sharply against any notions of a 'system', the 'systematising' nature of his thinking needs to be delineated. Part one serves to root Benjamin in a gnostic-theological belief that language is revelatory, that the text is a source of truth. Part two, perhaps as an antithesis, focuses on Benjamin's move to images; a distinctly political move directed against the aestheticisation of reality common to modernity. If for Benjamin the fecund thinker would be a strategist and mobilizer of pessimism, his own acute sense of melancholy finds its apotheosis in a belief in messianic history. Part three, referring back to part one, is devoted to the discussion or "synthesis" of this messianic tendency, the substance of much contemporary debate.

The study concludes by locating Benjamin's 'Utopian' thinking in the present historical, political, aesthetical context; that is to say, marking the immediate influence Benjamin has on much postmodern thinking, a fact too often ignored whilst being appropriated as its own.

Not forgetting the fact that Benjamin himself exhibited modernist aesthetic preoccupations with amongst other things shock and montage, if Benjamin is highly critical of ahistorical aestheticist thinking, then a rehabilitating criticism must be directed at the kind of postmodern thinking, which despite its fervent claims to the contrary, succumbs to such ahistoricism: aestheticising politics instead of politicizing aesthetics. If Benjamin is appropriated without reference and understanding of the historical context a crucial uncovering of the present tendency fails to take root. In this sense reading the contemporary through the "failure" of Benjamin is a critical move.

OPSOMMING

TITEL: WALTER BENJAMIN SE TEORIEË VAN ERVARING: A KRITIESE STUDIE IN THE GESKIEDENIS VAN KUNS EN DIE POLITIEK VAN ESTETIKA

Die vraag na Walter Benjamin se denke oor die estetika het net so deel van die kultuur geword as Andy Warhol se kannetjies Cambell sop; 'n teken dat die kultuur die neiging het om die mees uitgesproke kritici te annekseer, om die skerpte van hulle kritiek skadeloos te stel.

Dit kan gesê word dat die doel van hierdie studie is om 'n ruimte te skep waarbinne 'n perspektief gevind kan word op Benjamin se gedagtes oor die paradokse van kultuur. Hierdie studie is op so 'n manier saamgestel dat dit daarin kan slaag om die 'inner logika' van 'n ambivalente, teenstrydige en subversiewe oeuvre bloot te lê: ten spyte van al die paradokse dra die essensie die teken van dieselfde hand.

Ondanks die feit dat Benjamin se geskrifte vel gekant is teen enige vorm van "sisteem", is dit die opdrag om Benjamin se eie "sistematisering" te markeer. Dit word gepoog in Deel Een om Benjamin te plaas binne 'n gnostiese-teologiese tradisie wat gesetel is in die oortuiging dat taal 'n openbarende kwaliteit besit, dat die teks met ander woorde die waarheid herberg. Deel Twee, miskien in die vorm van 'n antitese, laat die fokus op Benjamin se skuif na beelde val, 'n doelbewuste politieke skuif wat gerig is téén die estetifisering van die werklikheid, só kenmerkend van die moderniteit. Indien, volgens Benjamin, die daadwerklike denker as strateeg en mobiliseerder van die pessimisme sou optree, vind Benjamin se eie akute sin vir die melancholie sy apotheose in die geloof aan die messiaanse geskiedenis. Deel Drie, terugverwysend na Deel Een, konsentreer op die diskussie òf sintese van hierdie messiaanse tradisie, inderdaad die inhoud van heelwat kontemporêre debat.

Die studie sluit af deur Benjamin se 'utopiese' denke te plaas binne in die teenswoordige, politieke, estetiese konteks; dit wil sê, om die onmiddellike invloed van Benjamin op heelwat van die postmoderne denke uit te wys, 'n invloed wat dikwels in die toeëiening van sy gedagtes totaal verswyg word.

Sonder om na te laat dat Benjamin self in beslag geneem is met die modernistiese estetifiserende tendense van onder andere skok en montage, moet dit onomwonde gestel word dat Benjamin uiters krities staan teenoor ahistoriese estetifiserende denke; daarom moet 'n rehabiliterende kritiek teen 'n tipe postmoderne denke gerig word wat ondanks sy heftige aanspraak tot die teendeel, verval in ahistorisme: d.w.s. estetifisering van die politiek in plaas van politisering van die estetika.

Indien Benjamin toegeëien word sonder verwysing ná 'n begrip van van die historiese samehang, is dit onmoontlik om die teenswoordige tendens oop te vlek. Op hierdie manier word die lees van die kontemporêre deur die perspektief van Benjamin se "mislukking" 'n kritiese onderneming per se.



