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Raymond Colison 18 April 2012

Crises Aesthetic and Politic: Walter Benjamin and the revolutionary reader

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Abstract

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In the chapters that follow, I try to draw a line of thought that starts from questions of misinterpretation concerning Benjamin's artwork essay. In what branches off from there I try to maintain a level of critical intensity and determined non-determination. For example, the first chapter starts with the question of the existence of a definitive version of the *Kunstwerk* essay and, along the way in addressing that problem, also tries to lay out a new way of approaching the critical works of Walter Benjamin as exemplifying a new way of (or return to old ways even!) reading texts in an age where scholarly work seems to be growing increasingly sensitive to issues dealing with the erasure or covering up of less canonical traditions outside the pale of "standard" or "orthodox" criticism.

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Acknowledgements

Is one mind put into another

In us unknown to ourselves

—Susan Howe, *That This*

So many people, texts, conversations, lectures, courses, papers, and friendships (probably some rivalries as well, but they bear no mention here) have shaped the end result of this project that it would be impossible for me to give credit everywhere where it is due. I want to thank by name those who expressed interest in my intellectual and personal growth as well as those whose gifts to me may have been unintended. Were it not for their continuing inspiration, I would still be the poorest in knowledge of all, but I would never have had the honest blessing of being aware of such ignorance. To them I am undyingly grateful.

In particular, I want to thank graciously my committee of John Johnston, Walter Kalaidjian, and Michael Moon. For putting up with my creative throat clearing, I thank them with everything I can.

And lastly, I want to thank those whom I have forgotten or left unnamed. If I have internalized their contributions to my development and the formulation of this thesis, I hope that they will take it as my unsaid gratitude for their extraordinary power of influence.

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Exposé!

Do the gods light this fire in our hearts or does each man's mad desire become his god?
—*Aeneid* IX.184-5

XVI

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 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.

—Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*[i]

What is this? I speculate that it's part of the long formal tradition of the defense of poetry.

In line with the traditional mode or genre of the apology, however, the reception of our message presupposes the existence of some perceived threat to our way of life. Maybe our way of life has long since become a way of doing business, but no matter: maybe our way of doing business, which feels so crass and arbitrary sometimes, determines the essence in life, rather than the reverse being true. Either way, this project will explore the ways in which working within the rhetoric of crisis and crises points to the nature of the world today.

Before I discuss some of the individual connections I see in the world, I want to describe in general my understanding of my state of consciousness at different stages of the project. I have had to cultivate and tend to a paradoxically at once ingenuous and skeptical strain of elective affinity, mediating through different modes, and moods, of

phenomenology. By this I mean that, on the one hand, I entertained my inborn inquisitive propensity to see disparate items in constellation with one another so that their similar elements would gel into a structure whose inner logic might then be analyzed. On the other hand, it required a very real type of labor to dissolve apparent differences, uncovering the general in the particular, and vice versa, while still foregrounding those same historical differences. This skill owes itself to careful calling of something by its proper name / its name proper. This often required a headlong plunge into the chaotic abyss, where subjectivity is absorbed by chaos. But there, connections that had seemed so natural to me once now appeared to have risen almost *ex nihilo*. Or, one might say, their use-value was once again alienated from me, and that would hardly do for my project's purpose, concerned as it was with qualitative assessments.

That was indeed what I began telling people (outside English departments), that I was working on a project looking into different approaches to reality and value. It seemed simple enough on the surface. But inevitably that sense of mastery over what exactly I was doing transmuted into another form of slavery, and slavery to something as vulgar as an assignment, what's more. At first, I would be unaware of the reemergence of this oppression, even as I directed myself straight for it. For instance, I would bog myself down with unnecessary readings or unintentionally develop weird, if not mystified, fetishes of concepts like Thrift and Debt, Asceticism and Pleasure, Panoramas and Panoptica, and others. In short, I was over-committing my plans for the project as a whole and, worst of all, I had no idea what was happening to the surpluses of all my labors. It would only be at a later point that I would discover how some part of me had all along been speculating in the "talking-points-of-an-eventual-paper" market, appropriating

the mental currency produced out of *my* labor time. For my part, this was a matter of putting too much blind faith in my subjective organizational powers. The hold of this false consciousness was put to the test several times, when I would begin to exhibit signs of stress and tremors of doubt in the project. They were traumatic periods of upheaval and times where I felt all my efforts were in vain. At first I attributed growing feelings of distress and despair to a heavy workload and factors outside of myself and not, as I sense now, to an unconscious awareness of the sickness underlying the symptoms, which was that of subjective control. How I wish I had had more prescience into what was revealed by my psychosomatic reactions. What remains most curious to me is, why I did not see these failures as constitutive, as driving forces in my research? All along they had been sordid boons pointing, patiently, to my project's rightful claim to the knowledge of success in and through failure. Put another way, the potential for everything to fall apart was the only thing that pushed the project forward. Looking for answers that would connect the holes in the web that was beginning to take shape, I soon realized, was in truth an act of deferring into the future the coming to a head of the project's insupportable threads of development.

Some consolation came from the fact that the main texts I was using remained virtually unchanged since the project's conception. First of all, I was relying on insights taken from reading Marjorie Perloff's latest book, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by other means in the new century*.[ii] The most incredible and lasting observation I took away from that book was the way in which it cheated the reader into thinking it would form some coherent whole. No, while the sections are related in the questions they are dealing with, for the most part Perloff's genius was an *unoriginal* one, that is, the book's originality lay

precisely in its unoriginal statement. It was just a typical Perloff book, with typically Perloff-like ways of approaching texts by seeking to understand what gave factors gave rise to their creation and what factors continue to shape their re-presentation in the minds of contemporary readers. After some time, however, I became aware that Perloff's book was indeed enacting and dramatizing its claims. It became for me a model of what I hope becomes the new fashion in reading and writing critical works—to approach reading and writing them the same way one would approach writing or reading a poem. Questions of form and its relation to content return to prominence from this way of looking at texts.

I also worked very closely with Susan Buck-Morss' *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*.[iii] It is to this book that I owe perhaps my greatest debt as it is almost solely responsible for introducing me to historical conceptions of dialectical relationships, particularly the dialectics between art and life, art and politics, art and philosophy. I bought the book on a whim in order to learn more about anti-positivist traditions. Little did I know at the time how much my way of thinking would be changed from Buck-Morss' careful and thorough book. Its insights into central European critical theory, philosophic, artistic, and political movements of the early 20th century planted in me a desire to pursue further study into the influence of the Frankfurt School to later French and Anglo-American literary and theoretically driven work. Above all, I am also eternally grateful to this book for writing a critical biography of the life and work of Theodor Adorno. Buck-Morss' patient outlining of the very difficult-to-master idea of Adorno's negative dialectics and non-identity is nothing less than the accomplishment of a Herculean task, especially as

she presents them for the English, probably American, reader unfamiliar with Adorno's work.

Had the project been otherwise, I would have wanted to treat on Susan Howe and her newest book of poems *That This*.[iv] I had never encountered Susan Howe's poetry or ever her name before seeing both in Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius*, but after exploring Howe's very experimental and fascinating poetics that put to question all preconceived notions of textuality, origins, authenticity, lyricity, erasure, history, etc. I sought to show her way of writing as a literary example of the type of reading I believed was required in order to approach Walter Benjamin's artwork essay and especially his other later works *The Arcades Project* and *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. I still hold to my conviction, even if I had to forsake a longer treatment of Howe's practice of writing than I would have liked. Basically, her poetry challenges the reader to question himself and what prejudices, whether historical or artistic or political or unconscious or conscious or whatever, he brings to the page. Howe's non-conventional poetry is paradoxically, though, still very much working within a very New England tradition of autobiographical lyricity, with a de-centered and poly-vocal subject to be sure but an individual all the same. For example, *That This*' part 1 recounts how the person Susan Howe dealt with the death of her late husband Peter. At the same time though, it spins in musings, in poetic prose, on tradition, semiology, life and death, remembrance, the intersections of past and present, and so many other fascinating formal considerations. Something I would have argued from Perloff is the unfairness of grouping Howe today with the Language Poetry movement of the '70s and '80s, as her work is working at the same time in a less spoken-

of shadow of the lyrical, autobiographical tradition and an a-syntactical, a-grammatical mode.

And then, there is Walter Benjamin. Everything in this project ultimately comes back to Benjamin, especially to his *Kunstwerk* essay, but also to his *Passagen-Werk* and his more aphoristic writings. The build up to moments of disintegration described above that precipitated breakdowns in my understanding of where my work was going and what was holding it all together always brought me back to Benjamin and the *Kunstwerk* essay, an eternal return to the origins of the project and the original owner (Benjamin's text) or authority where the project might branch off in new directions. I spent an almost shameful amount of time working through the artwork essay's third version, circa 1939, by closely comparing the English translation with the German text. As someone who does not speak or read German, it was a task only possible thanks to my blended knowledge of English, French, and ancient Greek grammars and, I must admit, close reliance on *Google Translate* and *Wikipedia*'s *Wiktionary* proxy site. I cannot compare my impression of Benjamin's German prose to what would be considered a more standard academic style of his day, but I do know that Benjamin is straight up a difficult writer to read in any language.

I now want to turn to clarify some processes and terms I believe it is important for us to get straight before turning to the main argument of this work.

Secularization and the Secular: Ceremony and Context

I may not find it necessary to use the term *secular* specifically or refer to the process of *secularization*, but I believe that it is a key mechanism in the thought of the Frankfurt School in general, not to mention in Benjamin and Adorno's writing. Basically, it a revolutionary process in the double-sense of "revolutionary": revolving in elliptical orbit and also rupturing out of past ways of doing business into some new era of linear time. The Enlightenment was, in this sense, "secular." On the one hand, one could argue that its web of forces sped up, catalyzed the break with past religious and sacred traditions in pursuit of better schema for organizing the universe's mysterious workings. During the Enlightenment, we usually attribute the rise of the scientific method; democracies or at least centralized rulers with a sense of duty and responsibility to their subjects rather than the medieval *Dieu et mon Droit* justification of monarchy; a cautious replacement of religious superstition with scientific optimism; in general a rise of secular powers that replaced sacred and mystic ones from an earlier age. And yet, the Enlightenment by no means got everything right in the 1700s or the scientific method: the feudal peasantry congregated as a growing urban proletariat; idealist and humanist revolutionary movements like the French revolution ended up falling back into imperial autocracy; the rising middle class soon proved that its virtues were only a new political ruling ideology.

In short, secularization is a two-way street where one has the potential to go either course: on the one hand, a line moving towards demystifying occultist traditions for what they really are; on the other hand, a cyclical return (cf. the Roman secular games that occurred every hundred years) back to ceremonial and systematic methodologies that can then harden into ideology, an incarnated translation of the religion that had been replaced

by secular forces in the first place. Thus the secular swerve is shown to have reverted into what it previously rebelled against. The process is one of dogmatic, uncritical, ceremonial, systematic, blanket conflation of all cases into generalized categories—totalitarianism. As I was saying, the awareness of and resistance to secular processes is central to Benjamin and Adorno's work. In Benjamin, the concept is perhaps most important in Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where society's desire for and belief in inevitable progress towards some utopian future is portrayed as possibly the most dangerous collective way of thinking about history. For, above all else, what Benjamin calls historicism, as opposed to historical materialism, never questions its assumptions in some eternal force pushing humanity onward to a better world. Ultimately, what religious dogmatism and political mythology share in common is their blind faith in the undying and the unchanging, two things which dialectical thought cannot tolerate.

Dialectical Materialism and the Dialectical Image

"Chi a una sola è fidele, verso l'altre è crudele."
—*Don Giovanni*[v]

"Pour l'instant."
—*Hors de Prix*[vi]

In order to resist thinking of events in history as being causally related chains linking the course of time in a linear, historicist fashion, thinking instead of dialectical relations allows one to consider the ways in which an environment can create the potential for certain thinking subjects and reified objects to come into being, even as the

things coming into being are at the same time changing the environment that in turn is influencing their future interactions back onto it and with each other. Dialectics are very much like the webs of relationships used to represent food chains and ecosystems in nature. Very complex systems almost necessitate dialectical thinking because their complexity often is too great even for experts to totally wrap their minds around. The dialectical, in exposing where a subject and object intersect, at the same time recognizes each individually as well and how each can develop internally as much as *inter alia*. In the sense of the former of those two, that it changes internally in addition to how it changes based on external interactions, dialectic thinking shows that nothing is identical with itself except in the moment, the *Augenblick*. Because only the moment frozen in time can hold dialectical processes of co-development in suspense, Benjamin's mode of writing relies heavily on something he came to call the "dialectical image," which puts "dialectics at a standstill."

The Benjaminian exemplar of the dialectical image freezes time between the past and present so that where the two interpenetrate each other can become evident. Another opposition that comes into the equation here is that of the mystical and the material. Thus, the dialectical image, as Benjamin uses it, constructs a moment of lightning-flash brilliance where ideological, uncritical ways of thinking that have been reified in historical objects across time are suspended at an intersection whose center is the image. Thus, not only does the dialectical process win a visible object as a sort of allegory of the social reality as a whole, but the texts that talk about dialectical processes in some ways become representative of the dialectical image themselves. This is where the universal and eternal start to be drawn out of the momentary and particular.

The dialectical image, when drawn on paper, forms a chiastic intersection whose image is dialectical. And yet, the *image that is dialectical* also takes on meaning in representing in a microcosm the *image of the dialectic*. Thus, in the dialectical image is an internal contradiction where two rhetorically constructed binaries are resolved: the image that is dialectical is to the specific case at hand as the image of the dialectic comes to be for the general model of dialectical thinking.

One last thing we cannot forget about the dialectical image is that is also a *dialect* of sorts the concept of which entered modern philosophical thought with Kant and Hegel's recuperation of the term. But Hegelian thesis + antithesis = synthesis is not at all what we are talking about by the time the Frankfurt School starts throwing around the term. Adorno, for instance, thought that Hegel's process of *aufheben* (a three-pronged process by which differences disappear in sublation and transcending, but are also canceled and negated, while furthermore being transferred and carried over in an almost-identical form) as done by Hegel reeked of idealism and never really went beyond its initial material starting points. Dialectical materialism, on the other hand, as practiced by Marx and the tradition tracing its line of work back to him is what we are talking about here.

Etymologies and the Etymological

Etymologies seduce us with their promise of the power of language to call reality by its actual name. Where I use the term "etymology," "etymological," or any of its other derivatives, I am invoking all manner of historical factors and considerations surrounding

the use of a word. If I have not made it quite clear yet, my faith in the power and authority of language is as of yet unshaken. It is thus my intention to bundle all possible connotations and denotations, literal and colloquial definitions, past and present uses of a word into the complex of signification I call "etymology." In practice I will usually apply this conceptualization as a funnel for exemplifying the internal contradictions of a system. So, for instance, with the word "actual" one way we might approach what the actualities of actual-*ity* are by considering its current definitions of genuine, important, current, perhaps by its French or German cognates, and, of course, its descent from Latin *actualis* via *actus*.

More appropriately regarding this section, the etymology of "etymology" merits some discussion. Etymologically, the word "etymology" comes down to the English from the Greek word □□□□□□ meaning "true." Of course, I am not claiming that etymologies offer anything like objective *truth* (a word whose etymology implies faithfulness, constancy—how horribly *passé*): my use of them as a prism with which to view language's uses, historic and present is but a way for me to bring many possible connotations of a word into play and to see where connections arise or go from there.

Finally, a moment of reflection on the etymologies of prepositions: even as they can often be the easiest and most comfortable words in a language to translate, they also, ironically, resist translation and interpretation almost more than any other part of speech. On the one hand, their material form changes slowly over time in the genealogy of languages. On the other, concomitant with their heavy residue of a proto-language, whatever that would be, their etymologies are practically impossible to pin down. I am reminded here of a quotation from Walter Benjamin on a similar phenomenon in

translating poetry: "The limit: music needs no translation. Lyric poetry: closest to music—and posing the greatest difficulties for translation."[vii] Do prepositions thus constitute and underlie linguistic systems in the same way that lyric poetry works to establish a monadic subject? In other words, are they the exception that proves the rule, the particular case that nonetheless says more about the general than any "autonomous" abstraction? Yes and no. Yes, they establish the relations and movements between signs in a language, making figuration and performance possible. No, too, because in some ways—their performativity/activity for one—they seem to call into question the very belief in a linguistic system made up entirely of significations. Thus (to explicate the dialectic we have just put into practice), prepositions expose a twofold ideological assumption about language at opposite ends of a spectrum: 1) in their etymological slipperiness, prepositions hint at a greater simulacrum of etymology and etymological truth, and 2) in their crucial role for figuration (like, as) and ordering (before, after), their place in making words do things in/with relation to each other seems inscribed within a larger system of signification that nonetheless must rely on an internal prepositional signification system to define itself as a web of interconnected signs. Prepositions are thus one sort of pre-position for language to exist. It is both in the sphere of durability—of seeming eternal and with no definite origins, their seeming naturalness—and in the sphere of their opacity—their aura, as it were, the difficulty they pose for translation and comprehension—that *preposition*s as well as the illusion of pre-position are constituted.

Consequently, in spite of my faith in language's privilege of naming reality, I hesitate to equate the uses of a word with the essence of a word. Etymologies prove a means but hardly an end to our discussions.

Crises and the Crucial

Crises are moments when everything becomes at last clear. Or rather, moments when injustices and insupportable flaws in the system become clear. On this point, too, it is crucial to note the exquisite tension in the moment of crisis: right when a decision must be made in order to forestall disaster is just the same moment when it appears at first that no decisions can be made, because the old ways of looking at things no longer work The dialectical image is in its own way a type of crisis holding in tension non-reducible, inassimilable seeming opposites at the point where they touch and can be shown to dissolve into each other. Constructing the dialectical image becomes the praxis of *Ideologiekritk* by way of its liquidating historically respected oppositions, such as objective and subjective, material and spiritual, present and past, and so on.

The etymology of the word crisis might explain better how critical theory gets things done precisely in the moment of its aporia. The word crisis comes from the Greek κρισις, a word meaning "decision," or κριτης "judge," "decider." Obviously its derivatives also give us the English words critic and critical. Having spent so much time undergoing crises and being forced into critical moments at different points in trying to bring this study to completion, I can now say that the critical moment is the intersection between theory and praxis, between aesthetics and politics, between art and philosophy and life.

When critical moments reach a certain density in their occurrence, something quite miraculous happens. My best way of phrasing it comes out of the *Kunstwerk* essay:

"*Die Quantität ist in Qualität umgeschlagen* [Quantity has been transmuted into quality]."[viii] Eventually, a buildup or blockage to continued harmony in the system throws the entire thing into a moment of qualitative transformation. Because dialectical thought dissolves differences as it simultaneously remains aware of their irresolvable differences, inside the dialectic relationship there are internalized paradoxes and conflicts that can bring down the system's inner logic if permitted to get out of hand. At the point of rupture, the previously sound "inner logic" is shown to have been only the perception of harmony all along. Once again, this is why Benjamin and, I would argue, Howe's poetics as well, resist seeing history as on a track of progressive accomplishments and hurdles that can be forever circumvented. In fact, at some point crises must be given some serious consideration as to whether or not they constitute and make possible all other periods of relative calm and order.

We thus need to see the ways of the crisis as a way of determination. Determination in two senses: present and future. The wordplay I want to use here is the pleasurable dialectic between *immanence* and *imminence*. In *immanent* criticism, a critical moment gives one the authority to decide what internal contradictions exist within the object of one's consideration. One is able to get the sense of what something actually is by allowing it to reveal itself in a moment of its crisis, the liquidation of its outward form. Then, there is *imminent* criticism, where one's knowledge of the inherent tensions developing in the interior affords one the foresight of predicting how the impending moment of rupture and crises will unfold in that object and how it might reorganize itself afterwards, subsuming the opposing forces in a translated form. It is a process remarkably similar to Freud's thinking on trauma and rupture in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Furthermore, just as Freud's traumatic rupturing returns the psyche back to the origin of crisis, so, too, it seems that in the critical moment all things fly back to their origins, which lie with whatever controls or regulates the modes of production and coming-into-being in the first place.

Passing Thoughts

In the chapters that follow, I try to draw a line of thought that starts from questions of misinterpretation concerning Benjamin's artwork essay. In what branches off from there I try to maintain a level of critical intensity and determined non-determination. For example, the first chapter starts with the question of the existence of a definitive version of the *Kunstwerk* essay and, along the way in addressing that problem, also tries to lay out a new way of approaching the critical works of Walter Benjamin as exemplifying a new way of (or return to old ways even!) reading texts in an age where scholarly work seems to be growing increasingly sensitive to issues dealing with the erasure or covering up of less canonical traditions outside the pale of "standard" or "orthodox" criticism.

The rhetoric of Chapter 1 is meant also to be in some way performative of the solutions it proposes for reading Benjamin. Above all, we are long past due talking about knowledge as a skill, a technique! not a thing one has but rather a thing one does. In this sense, critical theory can become the new place where the "theoretical" and the "practical" can face each other and realize their profound interconnectedness. The main drive of the chapters that follow below is not to arrive at a utopia where concepts and

ideas can easily transform into tools and decrees. This project is about a much more subtle but much more responsible mode—as I said earlier, *mood* even—of criticism that changes history by conceptualizing it differently. In the end, while we are going for change that is realized in the external world, without subjective realization of the changing power of knowledge as well, an undialectical reader of this project will most likely misunderstand what I am trying to communicate here. In the same way that art offers the proof of something that is not *real* and yet based in *reality*, somehow infinite in spite of its constitutive matter, so too theoretical work offers proof that learning, desiring to understand and sympathize with another's/an other's complexities exists at the moment in opposition to the defeatist either/or of thinking vs. doing.

Notes:

[i] Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 262.

[ii] Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by other means in the new century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

[iii] Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press, 1977.

[iv] Howe, Susan. *That This*. New York: New Directions Books, 2010.

[v] Aside on *Don Giovanni* necessary: it's absolutely marvelous. I dare say no other work of art has ever captured my fascination so much as this opera. Mozart's music and da Ponte's libretto are, for a thousand and one reasons, profoundly relevant to my life.

[vi] Aside on *Hors de Prix*, a 2006 film, follows: this movie, starring Audrey Tautou, for whatever reason has assisted in permitting me to convince myself that I understand French culture.

[vii] Benjamin, Walter. "Translation: For and Against." *Selected Writings*, *vol. 3 1935-1938*. ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others. Harvard, MA: Belknap Press, 2002. pg. 250.

[viii] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 239.

1

Walter Benjamin's *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*: the dialectic of art and politics in the age of mass movements and the film

The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production. Only today can it be indicated what form this has taken.

> —Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*[i]

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking 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 homogeneous 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 canceled [Hegelian *aufheben*]; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.

> —Benjamin, "XVII," from *Theses on the Philosophy of History*[ii]

I

Statement without Action? Theory sans Practice? Another view.

In this section, I want to lay out the foundations of a program for reading Walter Benjamin by looking closely at the groundwork he himself lays down at the beginning of his "artwork essay" *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (hence referred to by its German, French, or English title, the artwork essay, the *Kunstwerk* essay, the *Kunstwerksarbeit*, or even the *Reproduktionsarbeit*); for in order for us to understand what Benjamin's essay is *saying*, it seems useful also not to overlook what it is *doing*. But perhaps we should clarify first why indeed it is that we should already feel the need to justify the usefulness of being or doing something. Justify, that is, in a threefold sense-context, one less literal than the other two: whether by proving something to be valid, as in a courtroom, or by "making" something just, as before divine eyes, or, allegorically, by adjusting the lines on a page to give them an even, straight appearance, as in printing practices, the ways in which things are justified, claimed as being part of reality, are inseparable from the ways in which things are justified, made to be in line with reality. And yet, once again, there is a level of usefulness in differentiating the *speech* of justification from the *act* of justification from the *speech-act* of justification (and this in turn implies *a priori* belief in the continuous existence of some sort of ever-present justification-ness); further, that level of usefulness is not the same as the one arising from a belief in the usefulness of just conflating speech and act together or making of them diametric opposites.

But as for why it might be useful to examine the relationship between the gesture and statement of Benjamin's essay, the immediate answer, I think, is that doing so makes Benjamin's work more complex and meaningful. For those of us who see the benefit in resisting the problems of a reductive normalization[iii] of Benjamin's writings as it pertains to scholastic anthologizing or, worse, canonization, giving voice to these nuances and shades in a writer of such enviable *sprezzatura* would in itself be delightful and productive. But it goes further than that. Parsing out what the *Kunsterk* essay does from what it says goes beyond mere reading, understanding, or appreciating. It is, first off, a type of writing, literally, and becomes itself a practical action of critical judgment as creative as the essay's insights. Also, in the act of critical engagement with Benjamin's texts, a transformative reading occurs whereby it then becomes possible to recreate, to reproduce mimetically Benjamin's moments of fecundity and thereby to supplement reality, in other words, to change it. The preface, for instance, one of the two particular components of the artwork essay which we shall foreground, performs the incredible speech-act of promising some accomplishable method of praxis to be drawn out of its theoretical observations and fragmented presentation. If we find these promises of payout to be true to their word, if these mechanisms can be learned after all, then the critic's writing hand can become like that of the artwork essay's demystified magician, the surgeon, whose distanced interiority influences the popular misunderstanding of the applications of nihilism, deconstruction, and general anti-positivism to the point where it becomes irrelevant.

I think the best definition I've ever heard of "use value" went something like this: use value is whatever something is used for. The value is released in its being used,

similar to metabolic functions. I now want to restart our discussion with the offhand observation that Benjamin's essay is certainly an *odd*, unconventional essay. If anything, its fragmented sections remind me more of the "*petites poèmes en prose*" of Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* than of the more continuous, monadic—complete might be the best word—style of essay writing. And that style creates a certain effect on the reader's reading. As Baudelaire writes in *Spleen de Paris*' preface dedication to Arsène Houssaye, one signature effect of this style is that of having:

> neither head nor tail, because, on the contrary, everything in it is both head and tail, *alternately and reciprocally*. Please consider what fine *advantages* this combination offers to all of us, to you, to me, and to the reader. We can cut wherever we like—me, my reverie, you, the manuscript, and the reader, his reading; for I don't like to tie the impatient reader up in the endless thread of a superfluous plot. Pull out one of the vertebrae, and the two halves of this tortuous fantasy will rejoin themselves painlessly.[iv]

Likewise, the artwork essay does not offer a straightforward continuity outside of the ordering of its sections, which only loosely refer back to one another. They demand a mobility in the reader's reading of them and could conceivably be read out of order or by skipping over certain sections.

In order to confirm these feelings, which are the suspicion that something similar is at work in Benjamin's artwork essay as in Baudelaire's prose poems, it will be instructive to spend more time on the distinct qualities of Benjamin's artwork essay *qua* essay.[v] Some more questions come out of taking this path: if writing an essay is akin to making an "attempt" at something, then how would we want to decide when an attempt has failed, and is it possible to decide?[vi] Saying "Yes because no, no because yes" as a response demands some of our critical attention to be paid, then, too. And yet how can

someone not state theories about reality without doing something as well to connect those claims to the reality they perceive?

In its premise, my argument is simply that I believe Benjamin writes in a way that has a tendency of being taken too seriously, insofar as seriousness and intellectual play seem to intersect in the artwork essay. And the tone in the artwork essay certainly is optimistic—excited comes to mind as well—but I want to investigate how we would go about making that claim in the first place. And if it were possible that Benjamin's text is only superficially putting on the face of optimism about the role of new technological artistic developments in helping bring about a more egalitarian politics, then in that context certain allegories of reading in Benjamin's essay might have to revise their apparent form. It is tough, though, to go about looking into how one might evaluate delineations between one voice in Benjamin and another, and I want to draw our awareness to the possibility that in our probing we might unintentionally raise the specter of the possibility that Benjamin writes with the tragedian's hand while wearing the mask of the comedy.[vii]

II: The *Kunstwerk* essay, a historical reader

In the same way as man's (and thing's) forms of appearance is grounded in the present social structure, likewise the idea of his essence and the process of its realization arise out of its structure, and its realization must be conceived as a historical task.
—Herbert Marcuse, "On the Theory of Essence"[viii]

Although I wanted to start with what was nearest at hand when reading Benjamin's *Kustwerk* essay, to describe the immediate effects its techniques create and

how they play into making comprehending the essay's "essence" even a possibility—that is, to have started with my reading of the essay's language "in and of itself," as they say—even such an innocent move as that would have been fraught with uncritical assumptions *ab initio*. But at any rate, as my reading of the artwork essay is so interested in questions of its form and language, starting with considerations of the text's history long before it ever came into my hands will, as we shall see, nevertheless also bring in my own narrative of events and takes on objective events. The most obvious explanation for my concern here comes from the fact that there just simply is not a definitive, completed—these are all ways of saying "authentic"—version of the artwork essay (a historical irony given the essay's insights into "authenticity" that should not be lost among our many considerations).

This point alone should give an idea of the difficult task before the Benjamin scholar: how is one to reconstruct a fair version of the artwork essay while being careful not to smooth over the irresolvable historical problem that it is a dynamic text whose existence continually resists concretization? At what point must the critical organizer suspend judgment on the essay's crystallized, reified forms (four of them, for god's sake!) and accept it as a work always to be in progress? Maybe even as a work whose very essence can only be approached obliquely? We need to remember the fact that Benjamin was working on the essay at various points over the course of at least the four years between 1935 and his suicide in 1939.[ix] Four years!—and most English readers at least only ever encounter the version of the essay that comes second to last in Hannah Arendt's edition of *Illuminations*.[x] It becomes our responsibility, therefore, to countenance the possibility that what happens to be currently considered the most

definitive version[xi] of the *Kunstwerk* essay, the *Dritte Fassung* or "Third Version," as a belief has become no longer tenable.

Say, for instance, we were to begin our look into the writing of Walter Benjamin by trying to recreate the experience of reading for certain of his contemporaries. I want to delay, however, before invoking the authoritative contemporaries of Benjamin, i.e., those closest to him and start rather with the text that strangers to Benjamin would have encountered in common with those of his coterie. These readers who were less familiar with his work, or at the very least those who never met the man himself, whose mental ideas of Benjamin were created "solely" by his writings—their distance from the author offers a perspective that we today can sympathize with. Before we go to that spot, however, we must remind ourselves that we are not trying to reconstruct a contemporary (in the sense of the mid-'30s as well as the present time) reading of Benjamin for its own sake. Instead, these constructive readings can become instructive to the purposes of this project in that they work against types of erasure that continue pose a challenge to us and our work.[xii]

At any rate, a general member of the public who was interested in Benjamin's essay on the role of art in society in the age of mechanical reproduction would have first been able to read it in May 1936, in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* being edited at the time by Max Horkheimer.[xiii] This would be the only publicized form the essay would take during Benjamin's lifetime. There the essay comes as the second article in the *Zeitschrift*, sitting in between essays by Herbert Marcuse, an associate of the Frankfurt School who, like many of its members, relocated with it the United States when continued existence in increasingly Nazi-dominated Germany became out of the question, and Hilde Weiss, a

Marxist sociologist.[xiv] If we imagine ourselves flipping through the *Zeitschrift* to page forty where Benjamin's begins, it does not feel incredible to think that a reader might have paused over certain passages of Marcuse's "*Zum Begriff des Wesens*," "On the Theory of Essence," along the way. Specifically, he might have glanced at the two pages immediately preceding Benjamin's *Kunstwerk* essay, where the editor provides a French and English abstract to follow up on Marcuse's German essay. The abstracts are short, but each sentence sags almost under the aegis of a historically determinable discourse.

I want to draw attention briefly to some moves in this abstract, the digested essence of Marcuse's "observations on the theory of essence," in order, first, to situate the artwork essay in a discourse with a particular but complex history. From there, I hope, insofar as it is possible, to test a suspicion of mine—based at the moment on intuition only I must admit—that suggests the possibility that there are traces in the epigraph and preface of the *Dritte Fassung* of the *Kunstwerk* essay that cannot be accounted for by mere empirical comparison of the different versions of the essay in itself. In the language of the epigraph and the preface there are traces not only of the abstract concepts espoused by the *Institüt für Sozialforschung* but also of the material of the *Institüt*'s *Zeitschrift vol. 5:1* itself.

All we need to notice at the moment are Marcuse's approaches to essentiality outlined in the abstract following his essay. Essentially, as it were, he's trying to articulate a new way of talking about *essences* and generality. In his words,

> The article endeavors to interpret the various conceptions of essence as specific stages of the historical development of that thought. With the rise of modern society the demand was made that the essential verities justify themselves before the critical and autonomous reason of the individual, whereas contemporary theory regards them as objects of an intuition and

> believes that reason has to accept them in the way in which they manifest themselves.[xv]

What Marcuse is looking at is thus the difference between natural existence and historical perception of that existence. In the beginning of the 20th century, the turn in phenomenology from valorizing the abstract and eternal towards foregrounding the concrete and the measurable indicates a concomitant relativist swerve in the social understanding of the individual and his relations to other subjects. Objectivism (*Sachlichkeit*) arises out of these considerations because it is seen at first as egalitarian and communal, being open to all. The problem Marcuse has with this sort of objectivity comes when it is taken too far, such that:

> The critical and rational tendencies in the theory of reality are abandoned, reason becomes receptive and heteronomous…Positivism [empiricism that posits the objective as truth and cannot account for subjective presence] represents the undialectical opposition to this theory of reality. It wishes to remove completely the concept of essence from science, but thereby arrives only at an indifferent levelling [sic] of all facts.[xvi]

Thus, Marcuse argues that empirical movements such as Objectivism or the New Objectivity fail to comprehend the ways in which their ascetic[xvii] disregard for the non-observable actually constitutes a new faith in some present tangible truth found in the object. Taken this far, the undialectically-minded, methodical elimination of subjectivity is shown to have pre-anticipated an uncritical acceptance of apparent reality as the only reality.

What Marcuse finds in this historical return to a closed system where individual perception is not taken into account with what is objective manifestation is not only theoretically or philosophically exigent, as it covers up subjective understandings of

reality, but has clear political implications as well. When he outlines a dialectical materialism, it is not for mere understanding of an abstract concept, for knowledge only, but in direct political opposition to positivistic empiricism/objectivity that manifests itself in the form of the totalitarian state.[xviii] When he writes, in 1936, that objectivity's:

> abdication of autonomous critical reason mirrors the adjustment of philosophy to the anti-rational ideology of the new form of authoritarian state…the theory of reality [that "wishes to remove completely the concept of essence from science," cf. above quoted text] turns out to be political mythology[xix]

he is locating his text self-consciously in his own historical setting. This is a two-pronged move. First of all, his reference to the alternately totalitarian Fascist or Stalinist threats to individualism holds his philosophy to its own standards: it is a historically locating move. In fact, the first words of the abstract show that the essay is not talking about universal essence, but the idea of what essence is "during the last decades."[xx] Secondly, in the words "ideology" and "political mythology," more specifically the rhetorically constructed diametric opposition of "philosophy" with "anti-rational ideology," and "theory of reality" with "political mythology," Marcuse is creating a constellation whereby the relationship among the signifiers "philosophy," the "rational [subject]," and "theory of reality" revolves on their shared negation of the terms "anti-rational ideology," "authoritarian state," and "political mythology."

By describing things in opposition to what they are not, at least not in the historical moment, Marcuse introduces an alternative theory of reality that can be applied with revolutionary power against the failing Objectivist philosophical project[xxi]:

> The idea of reality as opposed to appearance contains the positive elements of a critique of reality and of the process of realization of the

> essential potentialities of man and things. They are preserved in the dialectical conception of reality.[xxii]

Reality vs. *appearance*: it was Objectivism's reaction to essentialist phenomenology—Marcuse draws the line of that tradition since Descartes through the early 20th-century with Husserl and Scheler—that raised awareness of the disconnect between the theoretical understanding of reality dominant at the time and the actualities of present-day reality. Essentialist thought had developed to the point where it no longer corresponded with a reality that historically had developed to a point of irrationality in the crisis of the Great War. Following this dialectical reversal of rational reality into irrationality and mythologized reality, essentialism continued to develop but now in isolation within the subjective, rational reality it had created for itself. Its own crisis of identity soon followed because it had continued to develop undialectically with an understanding of reality as constantly changing and circumventing rationality.

But the way empiricism had set itself against the essentialism of its day (a historically locatable, reified form of essentialism following in the tradition of Descartes), with its positing of an eternal reality accessible to the rational mind, had been by positing an opposite but equally hardened reality, one where seemingly natural (because based on an "eternal" nature) but still man-made units of measure were the only determination of the real vs. the false. The dogmatic conviction that nature could be measured by man without his interfering with it or changing it as he measured it doomed empiricism to the same fate as essentialism.[xxiii] Objectivism offered an alternative philosophy, with the acceptance of contemporary reality as irrational at its center, and thus not only turned philosophic realities and traditions on their head but took their place at the top of the

pyramid of relevance. This historical turning of the wheel of fortune as it were was a revolution in the sense of newness as well as eternal return. Further, in its own uncritical resignation to a reality of ever and permanent irrationality, empiricist resignation to apparent reality helped usher in new political realities and traditions as well. Fitting to a *Weltanschauung* positing reality to be hopelessly irrational, the political implications of Objectivism demanded a totalitarian, authoritative, centralized power in order to force sense onto the objectively senseless world. Enter the Fascists.[xxiv]

After showing philosophy and history to be in a dynamic and dialectical relationship, where each develops in its own sphere and yet is influenced in turn by the other where the two intersect, that is, in reality, Marcuse turns his attention in the second part of "Observations on the Theory of Essence" to comprehending the nature of this reality that stands at the center of the history of philosophy and politics. This is what he is talking about when he says "the idea of *reality* as opposed to *appearance*."[xxv] On one hand, the dialectic of actualities and appearances requires a rational subject to distinguish between them, to expose apparent reality as false consciousness. This positive "critique of reality" is countered on the other hand by the "realization of the essential potentialities of man and things." Actualization could stand in for the word "realization," or just as easily reification. The critical subject is thus careful not to forget that the existence of appearances itself evidences a process whereby historical reality crystallizes in objective form, and he is especially careful not to extricate himself from these processes. This is because historical reality for Marcuse is ultimately social reality and the social relations of production. As such, reification and the ways "man and things" are actualized is the objective appearance of social reality: that is, reification marks a process by which social

reality appears on the scene, and thus the truth contained in phenomenal reality and objects is the truth that things are produced/actualized only via the social relations of production. The "potentiality" of coming into being then, is the potential for something to become an appearance signifying the existence of an underlying, hidden, non-apparent Objectivism is thus "political mythology" in that it is "anti-rational ideology"; it covers up the social relations of production and the essential means of production. Actual reality is thus produced in the space between the subject's struggle to evince the hidden social reality out of the object and, while all this is going on, in his struggle not to reproduce his own previous conflations of appearance and reality, in part by the paradoxical realization that appearances can also become a type of reality, at which point they already have done so.

The use of the dialectic between appearance and reality, as we can see already, is that it works within historically relevant binaries, such as the *entre-guèrre* period's opposition between authoritative bending of reality to the will of the subject and objective reception of reality in its irrationality. In their respective "critiques of reality," which negated their other as false or exterior, they forgot to consider the negation of themselves or their own interior transformation from critical to uncritical subjects, undergoing the process of dialectical reversal held in the "potentialities of man and things," as commodities or reified concepts/social relations, mere signifiers in other words, to take on historical meaning as something other than what they once were. This is where the concept of materiality comes into play. The idea of material essence, essential materialism as it were, the idea of a dialectic between materiality and essence can be actualized in the form of a critique of historical reality, both the historical

conception of reality as well as the actual manifestations, political or economic for instance, of that reality. While working within the bounds set by historical definitions of the real, dialectical materialism goes beyond and circumvents its own preset bounds by its negation of all definitive ends, conclusions, suppositions, its denial of the either/or as the only option. In subsuming historically apparent contradictions and making their inherent irreducibility interior to itself, anti-positivism thus "contains the positive elements," whose internalized non-identity becomes the essence of the dialectic, always to be non-identical to itself and thus resistant to calcified hardening as reified commodity or as ideology.

At this point in the discussion though, we are long overdue for a treatment of the Frankfurt School, that sphere of critical thinkers, friendships, essays, books, publications, social theory, and many other things besides, and the dialectic among its members, Marcuse, and of course Benjamin. We would be hard pressed indeed to overstate the significance of Marxist tradition's historical materialism to Marcuse and Benjamin's approach to understanding the possible social implications of their work. Crucial to this materialism, of course, are dialectical relations, not causal ones, such as the intertwinement of Marx's base and superstructures (*Basis und Überbau*) whose negative dialectic together *is* Nature, however mediated between subjective and objective realities.[xxvi] Even nature, though, cannot be considered just in these terms. And that is something not to be overlooked: the Frankfurt School wanted to adjust Marx to present times, and in doing so they not only recuperated Marx's methods of analysis and his initial concerns but appropriated his mode of analysis to suit their own critical tastes. Take, for instance, Theodor Adorno, whose essay on dialectical materialism "Die Idee

der Naturgeschichte" ("The Idea of Natural History") traces its genealogy to Marxism through Georg Lukács's practice of *Ideologiekritik* on bourgeois culture to conceptualize nature and history within a Marxist tradition but with the realization of changed historical circumstances, particularly of a more pervasive capitalist reality and all that such a reality entails. Nature, in the Frankfurt School's traditional use of the term, as each person perceives it cannot be ontologically separated from *Gesellschaftsformen*, that is, modes of social interaction.[xxvii] In other words, neither nature nor social history can stand as first principles philosophically:

> Indeed, each was itself dialectical; each had a "double character." Nature had a positive, materialist pole: it referred to concrete, individual, existing being which was mortal and transitory—for Adorno, the material products of men's labor as well as their own corporeal bodies. Natural matter "embodies history; in it appears what is substantial in [history]." At the same time, nature had a negative meaning. It referred to the world not yet incorporated into history, not yet penetrated by reason, hence outside of human control. In this sense, nature was "the mythical…that which is eternally there…as the fateful construction of pre-given being." This was nature's static side, perpetuated by the unchanging rituals of the people who submitted to its domination.
>
> History, too, had a positive and negative meaning. Adorno defined the former as dialectical social praxis…The double character of the concept of history, its negative pole, was determined by the fact that the actual history of actual human praxis was *not historical* insofar as it merely statically reproduced the conditions and relations of class rather than establishing a qualitatively new order.[xxviii]

What I am trying to show here—besides the dizzying level of embroilment among the work of different early 20th-century critical theorists—is one particular strain of development in critical discourse using Marx's investigations for a model. Adorno's materialist conception of history goes hand in hand with Marcuse's distinction between essences and appearances. The two also indicate the Frankfurt School's influence on

conceiving of ways to apply their observations of social development gleaned out of their perceived place in philosophic tradition back onto the philosophic and political world.

We can now begin to consider what Marcuse means in his abstract when he talks about "the function of the concept of reality in dialectical philosophy, with the help of which it overcomes relativism":

> The opposition between appearance and reality is here conceived as a historical relationship, in the determination of which enter as integral elements the social interests of the theory [of reality as dialectical]. In the *course of historical trend*, with which the theory is bound up and which is supposed to abolish the opposition between appearance and reality, the particular interests become truly general, and a *new kind of universally valid truth arises*. Reality which stands at the center of the dialectical theory and determines all other concepts, refers primarily to the essence of man.[xxix]

The English does not give the best sense of what Marcuse is actually saying here. Where an English reader would see "In the course of historical trend," the French reader would get the more suggestive sense of historical praxis, "La praxis historique à laquelle la théorie est liée."[xxx] For Marcuse, all praxis and theory are inextricably bound together. Historically, the theories behind ruling class ideologies governed praxis, that is, "the course of historical trend"; but a dialectical theory of reality as Marcuse is advocating sets itself against ideology. Its theory and praxis are continually relevant—"the positive elements" of appearance and reality "are preserved," as Marcuse says, at the same time as their fundamental oppositions are "abolished"[xxxi]—and thus also ever able to be historically expedient in the form of *Ideologiekritik*. The practice of dialectical theory is critical negation carried out to the point where reality itself transforms through the intellectual labor of the critic.

This is where the key concept of hope for the future comes in to play that overcomes the resignation to relativism so often assumed inevitable of semiological discourses. But, and this is the key to what Marcuse is arguing that will prove salient to this entire study, discourses that talk about apparent reality as a covering up, or a death even, of reference (whether that be the Author, truth, signified, class struggle) nonetheless retain the quality of being meaningful. In fact, even were they to systemically kill off any knowledge of actual reality, the potential uses for such a system would seem to point to an alternate modicum of underlying verity. In the hands of the dialectical materialist critic these potential uses are often unintended. That is because, as Marcuse says, "in the course of historical trend [praxis]…the particular interests become truly general, and a new kind of universally valid truth arises."[xxxii] In the critic's sublating *Aufhebung*[xxxiii] of the disparate concepts of appearance and reality, he re-functions (*Umfunkioniert*) apparent reality so that the particular reality contained within the truth of its appearance shines through and manifests as a universal indication of contemporary man's "essential" existence in the struggle to master more than one reality. So there is always hope that in the future appearance and reality will cease to be exterior to one another.

How exactly to accomplish this is another story and something the Frankfurt School critics were skeptical of, especially in the 1930s when capitalistic modes of production had proven extremely *durable*. For the problem with an *Aufhebung* of appearance and reality was precisely that, as the word *aufheben* also connotates, the radical negation and transcending of their limits nonetheless carried over the same problems as before of material irreducibility and of hardening of thought. Thus, the

possibility of a history of man liberated from present-day toils was bound up as well in "the double character of the concept of history, its negative pole, determined by the fact that the actual history of actual human praxis was *not historical* insofar as it merely statically reproduced the conditions and relations of class rather than establishing a qualitatively new order."[xxxiv]

We are now approaching the point where we can at last look closely at Benjamin's writing specifically, but we will find even then that we cannot focus on just Benjamin himself. We will focus on the epigraph and the preface of the *Dritte Fassung* of the artwork essay, which evoke Benjamin's style par excellence, especially in the last few years of his life before his tragic suicide at the French-Spanish border in 1939. Benjamin's epigraph and preface are themselves extremely suitable for discussing his methods because together they set up an opposition of *revealed* and *concealed* modes of production of his essay. In terms of the artwork essay modes of production obviously and most literally refer to the technological reproduction of artworks. In these literal terms, the *Zeitschrift*'s version of the essay redacted the epigraph and preface, an erasure that we will look at historically and critically in its significance to Benjamin scholarship today. But there is an additional sense of technical reproduction of art in the context of a very Benjaminian use of language and critical technique. In this latter sense, the epigraph and preface draw oblique attention to the ways in which Benjamin produced his essay and the ways in which the reader re-produces it.

The praxis of reproducing theoretical concerns, as we have already noted several times over, occludes the particular interests that first produced them and transforms them into general considerations, but nonetheless considerations whose transcending of past

concerns is more accurately an *Aufhebung*; the new carries over from the old and contains the former contradictions of the old in itself, having internalized them to master them. Thus, it will be worthwhile to see what traces of the *Zeitschrift*-published version exist in the *Dritte Fassung*'s epigraph and preface. How we might go about identifying where traces of the older versions manifest themselves in a transmuted form will in turn not only tell us something about the nature of Benjamin's artwork essay and how we should read it. In the end we shall see how the new ways in which Benjamin's text can be read also point to unintended consequences of the critical decisions of Hannah Arendt's supervised *Illuminations* translation whose general implications are only comprehendible to us doing Benjamin scholarship today.

III: Essays upon Epigraphs: Autobiography as re-production

> Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.
>
> —Paul Valéry, "La conquête de l'ubiquité," cited as the epigraph to the third version of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*[xxxv]

In the quotation that both saves and chastises, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin. It appears, now with rhyme and reason, sonorously, congruously in the structure of a new text. As rhyme it gathers the similar into its aura; as name it stands alone and expressionless. In quotation the two realms—of origin and

destruction—justify themselves before language. And conversely, only where they interpenetrate—in quotation—is language consummated. In it is mirrored the angelic tongue in which all words, startled from the idyllic context of meaning, have become mottoes in the book of Creation.

—Walter Benjamin, "Karl Kraus"[xxxvi]

The editors Rolph Tiedermann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser set the editorial precedent in their *Gesammelte Schriften* (1955) of Benjamin's work for differentiating among the different versions of the *Kunstwerk* essay.[xxxvii] The overall argument of the four versions that Benjamin's editors delineate remains for the most part the same, the importance of recognizing how aesthetics can correspond with political action and change; what makes an impression on the reader of the four versions is not essential differences among the essays so much as their individual tweaks in form. The more, we will see, that one considers what appear to be minor structural differences as opposed to changes of theoretical content, the more one realizes that the two are aspects of the same process and furthermore that content cannot be considered outside of context. At the last, we will have to reconsider the very ways in which we think of the *essential* content of the essay itself.

If we continue by discussing the *Zeitschrift* version that follows the Marcuse essay we were looking at a moment ago, it is possible to call it maybe the most noticeably altered version of the four, even just starting with its being labeled the *Französischen Fassung*, the only version not to be named according to an ordinal numbering but rather by questions of language. Its very name is thus off the bat a conventionally-created exception in the line of first, second, third. But even were it not for the Tiedermann and Schweppenhäuser's nominal suggestion of its difference from the other versions of the

essay, obvious differences still make it feel aberrant or secondary in the historical trajectory of Benjamin's work on the piece. For starters, it is a collaborative French translation of the *Zweite Fassung* by Benjamin Pierre Klossowski.[xxxviii] Second, unlike all the other versions, it is the only one not to have an epigraph at the beginning. We will note more on this difference soon. Most importantly as far as the content of the essay goes, the French edition begin immediately with aesthetic rather than political considerations. As it turns out, political realities of the 1930s meant that Benjamin had to agree to remove the essay's preface, whose openly Marxist affiliations lay the groundwork for its aesthetics, from the French version, "L'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa réproduction mécanisée," before it could be published. Instead the essay commences with section one's opening claim, "*Il est du principe de l'oeuvre d'art d'avoir toujours été reproductible* [It is out of principle that the work of art has always been reproducible]."[xxxix] By beginning with an aesthetic as opposed to a political stance the French edition's first sentence offhand appears more fitting of an essay focusing on changes in the arts, but what this edition smoothes away is precisely the urgent edge to Benjamin's insistence on how pressing the nature of those changes is in the Europe of the late '30s. Indeed, writing to Horkheimer a few months before the publication of the essay, Benjamin told him that it would be detrimental to omit the preface of the essay "if this work is to have informatory value for the *avantgarde* French intelligentsia."[xl] With this remark in mind, Susan Buck-Morss' claim that "Benjamin's final agreement to such changes was based not so much on Institute pressure and financial necessity as on sympathy for the real difficulties the Marxist formulations could have caused the Institute"[xli] tells us that the argument to keep the preface in the published version as well

as the ultimate concession for its removal both indicate Benjamin's prioritizing of academic, scholarly issues as much as, if not more than even, general political concerns outside of intelligentsia and Institutes.

These historically relevant circumstances surrounding changes made to the essay are lost, however, in part due to the essay's language, not only literally but figuratively altered as well in the French. One notices most prominently the disappearance of the words Fascism and its historical converse Communism. For instance, in the essay's epilogue (section XIX in the French version), "der Fascismus" is replaced with either "l'état totalitaire" or "les doctrines totalitaires"; "der Kommunismus" becomes "les forces constructives de l'humanité."[xlii] We are reminded of Marcuse's oblique reference to "authoritarian states" earlier. Ironically, the word changes made out of consideration for historical exigencies, the Institute in exile having to tread carefully at the time in the United States, cover up the very time-specific historical events that engendered the very thinking on the relation of philosophy to politics or art to politics in the first place. In the passage of history, word choices tied to very specific, particular historical factors take on a new, more general meaning in a broader context. Evoking "the constructive forces of humanity" applies more abstractly to the human condition than does "Communism" specifically, but in the right context those words take on coded meaning as well as explicit ones. Thus out of the literal shift from calling Fascism by its proper name to connoting its presence by "the totalitarian state" arises a more expressive act of translation: the particular Fascism of the '30s is transformed into the universal "totalitarian doctrines." In many ways, then, we should not downplay the significance of the French version. Even in the fact that Benjamin did not fully author the translation

points to the fact that the French version's literal act of translating became more than a slight shift in content: the essay proved itself worthy to address questions and issues outside of its own time and circumstances. To some degree it broke out of the materialist bonds that would otherwise doom it to transience and eventual irrelevance.

So it is difficult to consider the *Französischen Fassung* as the least representative of the essence of Benjamin's artwork essay without also questioning how we are defining what is exterior here to the essay itself. If words such as "totalitaire" and "constructive" can be shown to have coded as well as open significance, then how are we not to say that any word in the *Zeitschrift* edition can have different meanings for the initiated vs. the uninitiated reader? In other words, where can we say that the essay's voice starts and ends? These are questions of discourse and I/thou-like distinctions but their answers have very real political significances because they open the possibility for mistranslation, miscommunication, and thus transformation, real as well as linguistic. So let us go to what has been used most frequently by editors as the representative *Fassung* of the artwork essay, the *Dritte Fassung*. Two ways the third version stands out against the others lie in that 1) it takes the first and final sections of the *Erste* and *Zweite Fassungen* and makes them, respectively, into a *Vorwort* and *Nachwort*, a preface and epilogue; 2) it replaces the epigraph used in the first two versions, a sentence quip by the post-French-revolutionary writer Claire de Duras, with a block quotation from a contemporary, Paul Valéry. The Duras quote goes "Le vrai est ce qu'il peut; le faux est ce qu'il veut."[xliii] Taken out of its context purposefully by Benjamin, the reader is free to muse on alternate meanings of the maxim: "What is possible is true; what one wishes, false"; or, maybe, "*Reality* is what one is able [to do]; *appearance* is what one wants [to do]." It is my belief

that we should give our attention to the strain of *reality vs. appearance*, especially following our look at the function of the two in Marcuse's "Zum Begriff des Wesens" as well as in general Frankfurt School critical theory as we move now at last to talking about Benjamin's epigraph and preface in the *Kunstwerk* essay, *Dritte Fassung*.

The epigraph citation introducing *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* represents the Benjaminian "dialectics at a standstill" par excellence. Not only does it serve as opening thoughts—the beginning of Benjamin's formulations on the dynamic relationships among "art," the reception of art, artistic techniques arising out of new media technologies, and at last the artistic, re-functioning transformation of modern techniques (artistic and critical) towards real political pursuit of better social realities; read as a prose poem, a piece of literature, its language mirrors the critical essay's discourses and arguments from whatever angle. Or, perhaps, rather than a mirror, we should imagine it as a refrain embodying the underlying, ghostly and eternally persistent voices and vocabularies in the essay, such as those emanating from phonographs or audio systems today. Then again, in its simultaneous appearance both as text fragment and articulately developed idea, the Valéry quotation starts to sound much like a snapshot of the full-fledged essay. Has Benjamin's quoting Valéry already obliquely directed our attention to the camera lens' effect? As we will see the masses' aesthetic reception of cinematographic processes is not one wholly conscious of the hidden "surplus value" created by the director's labor in editing. The director's capitalization, as it were, on this surplus value can, for Benjamin, on the one hand quickly relapse into a cultish object fetishization of the magic "silver screen," which indeed characterized some Fascist propaganda by the essay's publication in 1936. On the

other hand, the skilled filmmaker arouses an audience's latent critical abilities while, thanks to the film's fragmented nature, continually delaying the hardening of critical habits.[xliv]

We will explore all these dynamics again in our continued reading of the essay, so suffice it to say for now that the Valéry epigraph reproduces more fruitfully in terms of the camera's/cameraman's psychoanalytic consciousness-raising and critical distancing than it would if read by itself. But first, we should open discussion about Benjamin's analytical methods in his artwork essay by noting what he does with a simple, *seemingly uncritical* (because subsequently unmentioned in the criticism itself), but nonetheless suggestive transplant of text from one space-time to another. The epigraph makes up the first paragraph of a short piece called "La conquête de l'ubiquité," which Benjamin, as he notes, found in Valéry's 1931 collection of writings called *Pièces sur l'art*.[xlv] That collection mingles ekphrases on various artistic genres, media, and conventions of presentation, e.g., museum exhibitions, that made up the artworld of Valéry's time. Earlier too we called the epigraph part of a prose poem, and though this is not entirely true—*Pièces sur l'art* is ostensibly a collection of critical investigations and essays—we must insist on Benjamin's wanting us to read "La conquête" as a *piece* about art in the French, and English, senses of the word. That is, *comme une pièce*, "La conquête" not only stands as a fragment that may be considered on its own, but also as one part in an assemblage, an artistic composition, a token or game piece, a *pièce de théâtre* in French, as well as in other connotations. Citing "La conquête" in a new context, Benjamin gives Valéry's already interpretable-as-poetry prose the poetic force of an epigraph. This act of citation, as Benjamin *intends* to say in his essay "Karl Kraus," dramatizes an untenable

binary between poetry and criticism as it becomes, ironically, both a fixed and floating signifier "startled from the idyllic context of meaning,…a motto in the book of Creation."[xlvi]

That motto, when we take into account how it came into being—the circumstances of its production, as it were—encapsulates the moment of creation in an intersection where poetic infinitude of expression guides and is guided by in turn the selective channeling of critical taste. That is, Benjamin's grafting of another text onto his own brilliantly gives the quotation huge generative power that can be directed wherever the grafter deems fitting.[xlvii] It is as if Benjamin were a figurative cameraman zooming his lens in on one paragraph from "La conquête." All that we see as the viewing public, after all, is the reproduction of Valéry's text with the frame of its former context edited out. But in its role as epigraph citation, something else is at work, a creatively fertile move. The observation that:

> the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful

does not privilege any one form or medium of art over another and additionally takes pleasure in the wordplay between a "work of art" and "the arts" as practices and techniques. For the attentive reader, the epigraph's perpetually shifting stance with regards to the longer, if not deeper, essay creates the desire of wanting to know which "techniques…adaptability and precision…ideas and habits…profound changes" factor into reworking the "ancient craft of the Beautiful." Like most desire stemming from preliminary curiosity and wonder, we never do transcend the starting lack of knowledge; we only transfer it to some new object. In other words, some deeper mechanisms underlie

the epigraph's authority in its ambiguous, loose statements that create a desire within us the demands of which can only be fulfilled in a future time by reading and rereading the *Kunstwerk* essay. Now, it seems, the creativity of Benjamin's "summoning the word by name" does not end just with his transcription of Valéry; the suggestibility of the new context of "La conquête" is in part due to the very act of citation itself. By directing the reader's attention to Valéry while withholding his interpretation of the passage, Benjamin has given the reader a collective means of textual reproduction and gestured at a model for obtaining common ownership of other means of reproduction.

This is all to say that in these here opening remarks we should already note that, when one reads Benjamin's *Kunstwerk* essay and at any point turns back to Valéry in Benjamin's poetic-photographic-phonographic-cinematic epigraph, Benjamin's writing, the critical essay, lends itself to becoming reproducible within the structures and words of Valéry's poem, the literary. As was said earlier, the epigraph is Benjaminian par excellence: in it the reproduced text, the essence of cited-text-ness, serves as the dialectical image wherein crystallize the drives, arcs, tenors, double entendres, and all other irreducibly complex elements of Benjamin's style, as they refract through its quartz lens.

And so, what I am getting at is that in a certain sense "La conquête de l'ubiquité," as an artistic epigraph, ubiquitously performs and reenacts anew its own "conquest of ubiquity." Each time, though, it reads as a slightly different kind of conquest, proving not only the infinitude of its poetic expression but on another level testing and vindicating the applicability of the essay's critical, theoretical focus to facets of life outside of itself. The essay on *Kunstwerke*, at first initiated by the citation from "La conquîete," grows and

develops till Benjamin can repay the starting debt to Valéry and actually, if we continue this analogy, overthrow Valéry's position as the epigraphic *prima mobile* creative source. In doing so, the dialectic of works of criticism in relation to works of art produces a text that is neither of them and yet at once both of them. Benjamin's essay justifies continued study and *relevance* of Valéry's poetry, and so, once the creative process gets going in the act of citing a poetic text at the beginning of a theoretical essay, the two texts continually structure, build off of, illuminate, and reconcile each other's approaches to the art-reality dialectic. The more, we shall see, that we come back to the epigraph, the more we will see Benjamin's critical technique crystallize into something quite revolutionary itself: an incredibly expressive and enduring essay where the lines between critical value assessments and artistic creativity interpenetrate.

Art, in representing the interrelatedness between the general and the particular, speaks to the very nature of ubiquity and ever-present-ness, its (art's and ubiquity's) nature being not one of absolute exception from nature's laws *per se*, which would mean an immortal and constant status, but, on the contrary of a fluid co-development within dynamic environments that creates only a simulacrum of permanence. We unconsciously register this type of phenomenon whenever we gamble with the human need to communicate. Individual subjects need to talk to one another on one level because they do not understand each other *ab initio*; that silence can also communicate requires us to refine this need as one not necessarily of communication, then, but of touching. Yet this need for interpretation stems, again, from language being completely particular in circumstantial contexts, which grants it the power to do things, while also absolutely general in its iterable nature, which grounds the very possibility of learning to

communicate in the first place. Artistic languages represent this eternal desire to communicate and treat on the consequences of failed understanding and losses in translation.

I am not the first to notice a creative originality in Benjamin's manner of critical writing that resists, laughs at even, any definitive statements being said about it, more like a work of art. In *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff approaches Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* as:

> less interested in representing the realities of life in nineteenth-century Paris or in establishing the motive of Baudelaire's poetic-production than in creating its own textual "arcade"…As such, the *Passagen-Werk* could hardly have been brought to any kind of satisfactory conclusion, even if Benjamin had lived to "complete" it, because the citational material took on a life of its own—a life, not of historiography or of philosophical treatise but of poetic construct. There is now a whole library on the philosophical/political perspective of the Arcades Project, but its literary appeal—an appeal evident in the response of its avid readers over the past few decades—remains less clearly understood.[xlviii]

For Perloff, Benjamin's later more fragmentary writings, with their heavy use of citation and reliance on intertextuality, represent to us today a model of an ur-hypertext that not only permits but encourages and rewards a non-linear mode of reading, where one moves among the various "hyperlinked" entries and pages.[xlix] Benjamin's artwork essay, while not quite as free-form as his *Arcades Project*, is nevertheless constructing a similar inner logic with its epigraph that is cited text as well with its multiple versions, which in one sense can be read as citations of each other. Even though only the first version has names for its sections, and so there exists less of a visible "gap between expectation and fulfillment," which Perloff sees in the *Arcades*, there is undoubtedly some of the same striving for a literary inventiveness.[l] One can't help but feel Benjamin spurring novelty

out of the *arrière-garde* essay form so that it can be considered fitting not just for explaining the internal mechanisms that create meaning in the new media of photography and film but also so that the essay form might come into its own in a new century, with unprecedented technological and technical developments, like collage and montage, taken into consideration when composing its form and structure.

Furthermore, at some point enough quantitative accumulation of creative readings leads to a qualitative shift in our understanding of kinds of artistic representation. Epigraphs such as "La conquête de l'ubiquité," become dialectical images despite at first sight seeming incredibly poor of any concrete imagery whatsoever. One brings the Valéry fragment into conversation with Benjamin's essay and, presto, the same literal words possess an entirely new significance. "Neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial": we have lost our ability to distinguish between art and life because the old[li] models for their differentiation no longer apply the same way. Our perceptions have altered. What is absolutely incredible is that looking back we can see that such changed perception was pre-anticipated in the quid pro quos of suggesting that Valéry's essay—and, likewise, Benjamin's essay—be read poetically. In this sense, is Valéry not *really* a poet and Benjamin likewise doing more than mere "criticism" (in an older sense of the word).

And, as we've said already about the *Zweite Fassung*, Benjamin's poetic translation—Valéry's French essay appears in German, by the way—is translation in the literal and figurative terms of *trans* + *latus* "carried across." Even before Benjamin's *Vorwort* grounds his analysis of contemporary art in the discourses of Marx's methodology in *Capital*, the essay seems to be speaking from many places Literally the

Valéry epigraph is citing a moment of translation from the discourse of French criticism to German prose poem. But the *act* of citation-translation, as Benjamin is saying in "Karl Kraus" is crucial as well. Thus the speech-act of reproducing Valéry *transforms the realities* of Valéry's historical, linguistic location. It objectifies them, turning his words into a sort of free-floating open discourse that can be reused and reproduced in other contexts to speak through other discourses, while nevertheless retaining its traces of original material conditions.

Thus, now it becomes our responsibility to recognize a new perspective on Benjamin's statement that: "In quotation the two realms—of origin and destruction—justify themselves before language."[lii] The act of poetic citation forces discourses focused on "origin and destruction" to justify themselves, to explain themselves before a mode of translational language whose particular reality of existence makes their philosophy/aesthetic of end-all be-all presence vs. absence no longer applicable to general reality. We will see this in the next chapter, but language's role in judgment is that of naming reality, calling things what they really are and not what they appear to be, even when it unintentionally points to a truth in appearances through miscommunication. In a more literal sense, though, the words "origin and destruction," which no longer seem to apply to a reality of traces where material conditions are not destroyed in their generalization but rather covered up, their day of judgment forestalled, now can be viewed in their "original" context: Benjamin's personal choice to describe a materialist philosophy dialectically by using the language of theology.

Combining discourses of the mythical past and the fleeting present, or theological mysticism with Marxist materialism, or Surrealist dream images with the phenomenal

object fetish all were part of Benjamin's method of bringing disparate phenomena into constellation with each other so that something bigger than both of them might become *readable*, *interpretable*. In the context of the greater artwork essay then, it is possible to see Benjamin, appropriating Valéry's language in the epigraphic citation, as already translating "La conquête de l'ubiquité" for use in his upcoming analyses of aesthetics and politics. We might thus read how Benjamin, via Valéry, is promising an exegesis on some "physical component [of Modern art] which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power," one that approaches it from all sides, combining in very typical Frankfurt School fashion Marxist interpretations of the material conditions predicating the current situation in art with Freudian psychoanalysis that provides the tools for understanding how the mind receives the "technically/technologically-reproduced" works of art. What is more, the pre-Modern artist's "power of action upon things," as Benjamin will elaborate further, is "insignificant in comparison with ours," we standing on the other side of the abyss created by new artistic media steeped in mechanic technologies. Further complicating this artistic "power of action upon things," for Benjamin, stands the ever-present threat of capitalistic, read here Fascistic, appropriation of the new technologies in order to reproduce the same conditions that prolong class inequality and violent exploitation. For Benjamin, no one owns "art," but methods of producing works of art may be transformed and exploited by various interests, totalitarian or collective.

Of course, eventually even our assertion of the importance of the epigraph to the essay as a whole hits a wall. The more we insist on the wide-ranging applicability to the artwork essay in general of the epigraph and what it stands for, the closer we come to

forcing ourselves to liquidate those very claims. For one thing, Benjamin's essay makes use of multiple instances to cite texts, even quoting again from another place in "La conquête de l'ubiquité," and it seems unfair to play down *a priori* the significance of those citations relative to the epigraph unless we investigate their roles in the essay too. Furthermore, the more we depend on the epigraph to provide a structure for the essay as a whole, that is, the more ubiquitous we make Valéry's conquest of Benjamin's essay, the more unlikely it seems that Benjamin would put all his cards on the table from the get-go and even more unlikely that he would want us to think of the epigraph as primary, as origin, solely because it happens to be the first thing we read. After all, if the epigraph deconstructs originality (at the epigraphic moment of embarkment no less!) in its figuring of a dialectic between art and reality, a dialectic ever present in the *Kunstwerk* essay, so that it universally underlies and grounds the claims that come after it in the artwork essay, then ordering and structuring Benjamin's essay by its epigraph sets up a new hierarchy in its own sense. As it turns out, the inherent oxymoron of a free-floating-but-rooted citation of the type Benjamin describes in "Karl Kraus" pre-anticipates the breakdown of order into disorder fomented by our theorizing about the "physical component [of the process of citation] which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be." Indeed, the development of internal contradictions to the point of crisis, when not only does the ground cease to be firm beneath our feet, but also, importantly, things appear to fly back to their places of origin, becomes crucial to our investigation. *In this sense crisis formation and the aftermath of crises can be read as the driving forces of history*. Dialectical materialism or negative dialectics, basically interchangeable terms for our purposes, is thus *critical theory*: it's essence is both critical choice and choice during

crisis, and yet the judgment contained in the act of criticizing pre-anticipates a future critical moment. And so, having experienced the inverting process of dialectical materialism in our treatment of the Valéry epigraph's relation to the artwork essay, we come full circle and to a new beginning, still laden with paradoxes but at least *enriched* and *subjectively* transformed in our knowledge.

We have perhaps been exploiting our reading of the *Dritte Fassung*'s epigraph, but such is a way of figuring the allegory of reading a text through the language of crisis formation and, conversely, talking about the understanding of crisis formation through the allegory of reading. In essence, the epigraph is standing in a place and time of prescience from which it claims to see the future. If indeed that future will be created out of dialectical reversals, those inevitable consequences resulting, as we have established, from internalizing paradoxes—whether they be by nature rhetorical, such as Benjamin's treatment of criticism as citational poetics, or social, as with the inner contradictions of capitalist modes of production—consequences resulting from pardoxes inherent to systems *ab initio*, then we would do well, as Valéry stresses, to expect crises, maybe even with increasing frequency, in the future.

With this knowledge, I think we can adequately read Benjamin's preface in the artwork essay's third version, which appeared as section "I" in the *Erste* and *Zweite Fassungen* and was omitted, erased in the *Zeitschrift*-published *Französischen Fassung*. One key to reading the preface is that, visible or no, *Capital* underlies all. That is, Benjamin's Marxist aesthetics takes the investigative methods used by Karl Marx and applies them to contemporary aesthetics. Something Benjamin notes in his *Passagen-Werk* quips on "the experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural

death."[liii] As this statement is rich in meaning, let us first consider it in the context of what we have just been talking about with dialectical materialism. That capitalism just won't die, at least not a *natural* death, suggests an uncanny adaptability and fluidity of capitalism as a system. And yet, despite being a system riddled with inherent contradictions—Marcuse was pointing to this in the fact that modern society cannot seem to abolish the opposition of appearance and reality without a hardening of philosophical truth into political ideology—capitalistic modes of production seem impervious to the *natural* laws of decay and dialectical reversal. That is, economic crisis after economic crisis comes and goes, but the system of capitalism manages to circumvent and destroy barriers to capital accumulation even as it is ever carrying within it internal contradictions. This seems to suggest some exploitive and subjective knowledge of the nature of crisis formation for what it really is that allows the subjective, exploitative system to transform itself *in anticipation* of crises!

Now enter the second sense of "it will not die a *natural* death," in the opening words of Benjamin's preface:

> When Marx undertook his analysis of the modes of capitalistic production, this mode was in its infancy. Marx directed his efforts in such a way so as to give them *prognostic* value. He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalistic production and through his presentation showed *what could be expected* of capitalism in the future. The result was that one could expect it not only to exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity, but ultimately to create conditions which would *make it possible* to abolish capitalism itself.[liv] (my emphasis)

Note the words "make it possible to abolish": they indicate the fact that, left to its own devices, capitalism usually finds a way to overcome its crises of identity. In other words, "exploiting the proletariat with increasing intensity" does not imply a causally inevitable

relationship between crisis formation and the end of capitalistic systems; it merely makes such outcomes possible, yet still unlikely given the self-consciousness of a ruling subject. This is where the critic comes in as one who outwits the agility of capitalism to adapt to new historical environments: he must match the privileged status that the capitalist subject holds in terms of its ownership of the means of production with his own "prognosis," his own type of *anticipation* and *speculation*, to "show what can be expected." It should be noted that this speculation balances between critical interpretation (Marcuse's "rationality") of apparent reality and a receptivity of the actual ways in which phenomena present themselves. An approach such as Marx used of dialectical materialism and consciousness of the non-identity between appearance and reality thus grounds itself in the present, which is constantly moving somewhere else, to avoid useless utopian "theses about the art of the proletariat after its assumption of power or about the art of a classless society," which "would have less bearing on these demands [of prognosis] than theses about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production."[lv]

They are thus "useless for the purposes of Fascism." Fascist ideology is political mythology par excellence in that it invokes its place as the heir to a glorious nationalistic tradition and see its coming as heralding a messianic return to the glory of some lost past, the restoration of a broken totality. As such, it can only be totalitarian, not to mention steeped in "outmoded [to Benjamin; 'traditional' to a Fascist] concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—concepts whose uncontrolled [read 'undialectical'] (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense."[lvi] Fascism, in truth the perverted heir of a *Belle*

Époque mentality, sees history as a trend towards progress. In opposition to the claims of Fascist historicism, historical materialism or a materialist conception of history does not allow itself to force theory as ontology onto reality but rather to use theory as a method of investigation into the reasons why reality's texture is so hard to hold on to.

We should also note the word "infancy," a richly fertile word describing the stage of development when one is unable to speak or to articulate one's experience. The historical materialist is always in an infant state, or at least never forgets that he once was in one. We might say that it describes the reader at this point in his reading of the text as much as it did for Marx when he began to read the *Gesellschaftsformen* of his day as texts. Art, in this case literary art but eventually all art, within the tradition of artistic things thus becomes a model for the dialectic between appearance and reality, as well as between past and present, and present and future. In the paralipomena to the *Erste Fassung* Benjamin notes on the reading of artistic tradition as a text with prophetic qualities: it must be written in the actual time of the present, under present material conditions, but its artistic essence allows it, like a text, to take on ever-new meaning adaptable to present concerns.[lvii] Thus, understanding the basic conditions underlying production of contemporary experimental art opens the possibility to imagine and actualize how they might be received in the future. The concept is tricky, but by reading general meaning and greater significance into the material conditions of present art, one is in part producing those significances.

Thus the reader's perception of prognosis in a text actually turns out to be the reader's creation of the appearance of prognosis from the future standpoint. That is, the dialectical materialist is aware of the present's tendency to misinterpret past and present

events as being causally connected in linear sequence. He thus tries to influence how his analysis will be misunderstood in the future once the material conditions of its present condition and production no longer apply or have been forgotten. The privileged critic anticipates the crisis of future misunderstanding and therefore reasserts all the more his claims on the present means of the production of his text. For Benjamin, this means developing a very individual style of writing and doing criticism that includes, for instance, an opaque style that demands interpretation between the appearance of authorial voice, on the one hand, and linguistic performative force seducing the reader to view a statement's apparent fact as identical to Benjamin's actually held critical opinion. Add in some cited text, usually without critical explanation of its use value, and a discourse that juxtaposes mysticism and materialism, and the "real" Benjamin, his essence and voice, become hidden under web of coded significances. That is not to say that Benjamin himself is no longer present; our senses tell us otherwise, and as we have been showing, there is an abstract truth even in sensual hallucinations. Likewise, there is a truth in that we can mistake the mask for the man

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IV: Re-covering our Subject

Men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours…our modern knowledge and power.
—Valéry, "La conquête de l'ubiquité"

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
—T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion"

Once again, if we imagine the epigraph taken from "La conquête de l'ubiquité" as an ever-present backdrop against the "Kunstwerk" essay, it is already possible to see a reflection of Valéry's sense of history in Benjamin's preface. Valéry identifies two historical phenomena transforming our definitions of what art pertains: on one hand, a certain "amazing growth [*accroissement*] of our techniques [*moyens*], the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating."[lviii] These techniques form a plurality of driving forces that, on the other hand, all share a "physical component [*partie physique*]"—singular!—"which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power." Based on his confidence in the development of a group of very diverse and active techniques, along with the existence of some underlying "physical component" in all arts (which has furthermore altered the ways in which we conceive of and perceive matter, space, and time), Valéry expresses his "certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful" and foresees even more "great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts."[lix]

The artwork essay's promise, speaking through Valéry's text, of "great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts" is never fulfilled on the pages of the artwork essay alone. No, the fulfillment of its promises is only ever realized if indeed the subject is also transformed. Susan Buck-Morss demonstrates what I am talking about with this sentence:

> But only a critical attitude towards jazz (or any other phenomenon), a refusal to identify with it, could discover this truth. The uncritical affirmation of jazz was "pseudo-democratic." Jazz was 'static' indeed in both meanings of the English word: it was mythically repetitive, and also a garbled message: "interference" which needed deciphering. This deciphering did not leave the object (or the subject) untouched: it was praxis, *intervention*, knowledge which altered the phenomena so that, like *Vexierbilder* they could never be viewed in the same, mystifying way

> again: "*If jazz were only really listened to, it would lose its power. then people would no longer identify with it, but identify it itself*."[lx]

It seems as though we have been talking about the role of the objectivity in this chapter, by coming at the object of our consideration from multiple perspectives and by anticipating in the object's dynamic qualities the possibility of discovering new ways of looking. But the role of subjective forces cannot be overlooked, especially in texts that deal with how the subject's particulars can indeed create a change in general reality.

It is only now that we can return to the issue we first raised about the difficulty of editing Benjamin's work for publication. The *Zeitschrift*'s editors found it difficult due to Benjamin's objections over what was essential to his texts; those of his *Gesammelte Schriften* did as well but their difficulty was in recreating a representation of the artwork essay as an unfinished text. As we have more than shown, it is not possible to talk about one version of Benjamin's text without also referencing a vast mix of other writers and texts around it. Furthermore, it becomes reductive even to focus on one version of the essay without also referring to its other incarnations. We have discussed the *Französischen Fassung*, which was in its way a translation of the *Zweite fassung*; the *Dritte Fassung*, whose epigraph and preface's striking similarity in objective and method to the abstracts of an essay by Herbert Marcuse demand that we consider that Benjamin was recreating the contexts in which the French version appeared by exchanging Marcuse for a combination of Valéry's essence and Marx's methods; we even brought in to consideration the external paralipomena from the *Erste Fassung*. With so much information to process together, no authoritative version can ever come into being, unless it be a version reproduced *out of the interstices* of the extant *Fassungen*, revisions, notes,

critical commentary, translations, and ever on and on. Such creation of an "Interstitial" *Fassung*, insofar as it is possible, can only take on form in the mind of the reader. Was this Benjamin's plan?

Obviously, under present historical conditions, this unrealized "text," the only authoritative version possible, cannot be shared or discussed in Benjamin scholarship. Let us, then, put that utopian thought aside on the "Idealist" shelf and turn back to Arendt's *Illuminations* version. Her "Third Version" seems at first to go against all that we just claimed a true-to-reality version of Benjamin's essay would have: no critical commentary besides Benjamin's notes; an English translation; the presentation of totality. But let us look into the truth of its apparent completeness. After all, on the most basic level her critical editing of Benjamin in *Illuminations* of 1969 reveals at least one thing: the material crystallization in objective form of Arendt's critical choices. And if, as we have also noted 1) there are traces of previous contexts in the *Dritte Fassung* and 2) that prognosis is the anticipation of future misinterpretation of the particular for the general; then, perhaps all along Arendt's text manages to contain the essence of Benjamin's essay in a way.

Likewise, we can at last consider the possibility that Arendt appears to have found her editing task an insuperable challenge as well. She was friends with Walter, and the potential for her edition to be read as Arendt's way of autobiographical writing about their friendships must not be discounted without due attention. Just as Benjamin "wrote through" and over Valéry and Marx to place himself in history while simultaneously changing the way certain histories might be read, so Arendt can be seen to be leaving her own trace on Benjamin's writing by gathering a *critical selection* of his work in

Illuminations. If this is so, we should consider the way in which she testifies to Benjamin's memory by firmly asserting her version and testimonial of his character and personality. Isn't there some way in which *Illuminations* has become Arendt's way of asserting a certain way of reading Benjamin, long before he became fashionable (and profitable) in the eyes of university presses and websites? I would still be willing to bet on *Illuminations* remaining in the future a "definitive" book in Benjamin circles. As neither Arendt nor Benjamin are able to answer these questions directly, it requires some interpretation, some choosing, and in this case, some rhetoric of crisis.

The general move of this chapter has thus been a dialectical foregrounding of the material and the objective in order to get back to a way of talking about the subject's role in the creation of reality. The crises of subjectivity perceived in discourses that call for a return to certain types of reading are in fact often only perceived crises.[lxi] For they open new avenues for talking about subjectivity that go beyond, say, its relation to "true" objects or even actual "reality." As Benjamin says, "it would therefore be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon."

Notes:

[i] This is the English translation used by Hannah Arendt in her edition of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 217-18). It comes from the Preface to the artwork essay's "*Dritte Fassung*."

It is now fifty-three years since *Illuminations* appeared, one of the first English editions of Benjamin's work. What great opportunity indeed that our present moment occasions a new reading of Arendt's edition in light of Benjamin's statement ("has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production") contained within it.

[ii] Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 262-3. Brackets represent the translator's note: "The Hegelian term *aufheben* in its threefold meaning: to preserve, to elevate, to cancel."

[iii] Although, I feel that just as easily, I could have phrased this sentence: "For those of us who see a benefit to maintaining our readings of Benjamin's work as a protest against modern day erasures and silencings."

[iv] Baudelaire, Charles. "À Arsène Houssaye." Taken from *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*. trans. Raymond N. MacKenzie. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008. pg. 3, my emphasis.

The reader's *impatience* must not be overlooked—there is something seductive about the form of *Spleen de Pari*s for the modern reader.

[v] The ideology that Baudelaire is always nearby with Benjamin's work is worth noting here as an approach distinct from what this chapter seeks to accomplish but at the same time revealing of some sort of critical inclination, whether on Benjamin's or our own part.

[vi] "Once I had begun to work, I found out that not only did I remain very distant from my mysterious and brilliant model, but that I was creating something (if it can be called 'something') altogether different, an accident in which anyone else would find cause for pride, but which can only lead to deep humiliation for one who thinks the poet's greatest honor lies in having accomplished *exactly* what he had planned to do" (Baudelaire, "A Arsène Houssaye." *Le Spleen de Paris*, 4).

[vii] I am not aware of any critical work specifically focusing on the point I am about to make, but I am sure that one arena for future Benjamin scholarship could come out of bringing into a direct conversation Benjamin's baroque study, the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*The Origin of German Tragedy*), with his *Kunstwerk* essay.

[viii] Marcuse, Herbert. "Zum Begriff des Wesens." *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung: Herausgegeben im Auftrag des Institüt für Sozialforschung*, vol. V:1. ed. Max Horkheimer. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1936. pg. 39. A French and English abstract follow the German essay.

[ix] Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*. vol. I:2. ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974. 1035: "The earliest attested record of the artwork essay [the *Schriften* refer to the essay as the '*Reproduktionsarbeit*,' curiously reminiscent of Benjamin's *Passagenarbeit*] is the draft from 1935" (my translation).

[x] Although there it does appear admirably juxtaposed alongside Benjamin's phenomenally brilliant *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

For simplicity's sake—well, there are other reasons too, which I will explain in the section to which this note connects—quotations from and page references to the *Kunstwerk* essay come from the translation that appears under Arendt's aegis:

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 217-251.

Of course, I am also being somewhat unfairly hyperbolic. There is no way for me to verify what version "most English readers" go for, but a search for the text online yields certainly more fruitfully for someone looking for the Arendt-edited Zohn translation. In conversation in the zone of the academe as well, one often hears the Zohn translation spoken of as if it were the authority on the matter. While Georgetown University, for instance, provides a hypertext version of the artwork essay (http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/benjamin-work-of-art.html), whoever approved the online version thought it necessary only to give a cursory note about the somewhat misleading English title that translates "seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" as "['its' redacted] Mechanical Reproduction." It seems most likely to me that Zohn wanted to privilege the historical sense of the title as it pertained to the first publicized version of the essay, whose French title "L'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa réproduction méchanisée" would on one level translate more faithfully in English as "Mechanical Reproduction" as opposed to "Technical/Technological Reproducibility."

In respect with this last point, Harvard does appear to display some concern for alternative translations. On the university's website one can find a PDF version of the essay, taken from Harvard's English edition of Benjamin's writings (*Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-40. ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 251-283. PDF available online at: http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic235120.files/BenjaminWorkArt.pdf). Still, there exists, unless I am mistaken, a slight inaccuracy in the notes on the translation:

"Written spring 1936—March or April 1939" (*Selected Writings*, 270).

Except, as Susan Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin wrote a letter to Horkheimer in October 1935 concerning the finished essay's "thrust in the direction of a materialist theory of art" (Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute.* New York: The Free Press, 1977. 146). The letter was even published in the *Gesammelte Schriften* (Buck-Morss, 286, note 97). How in their translation of precisely those writings did Eiland and Jennings miss this point? Is it not somewhat historically ironic that Benjamin's essay of a "materialist theory of art" itself became a victim of a historical erasure of sorts?

All of this is to point somewhat obliquely to the rather vulgar problems related to anthologizing and canonization of an author I referred to earlier above on pg. 3 and note 3, as well as below on pg. 6 and note 12 below. On the one hand, Georgetown's site, with the exception of the short note on the title's alternate connotations, acts as though the *Illuminations* translation were all. On the other hand, while Harvard's version might give a more faithful representation of the art object that is Benjamin's essay in English—an effect due, no doubt, in part to the seal of an Ivy League Press as much as the skills of the editors—it is also guilty of some type of reductive misreading of the essay that does not come in the translation *per se* but, rather, in the stated "fact" about translation considerations. And perhaps this is related to why Harvard's version of Benjamin poses some threat to other traditions of Benjamin characterization. For the Eiland-Jennings version of the essay is ostensibly much more anthologized and critically annotated than,

say, Arendt's edition's presentation of the essay. The latter does without the critical notes that the Harvard editors' version weaves in among Benjamin's; it presents Benjamin's writing to the reader for the most part unmitigated.

Once again, I note all this here because, while the Harvard press is doing admirable work, its actions also change Benjamin in a way. Maybe I am becoming too nostalgic, but it does bear taking this long note into account with the fact that Arendt interacted with Benjamin and some of his contemporaries in his lifetime. And, obviously, Eiland and Jennings are working in a tradition of sorts related to critical scholarship of a writer's corpus. Marjorie Perloff notes the problems of form that Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin's translation of Benjamin's incomplete masterwork *The Arcades Project* faces with regard to reducing that work's heteroglossia to an "easier" to read, predominantly English form (Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by other means in the New Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 28)

[xi] Although of course there are some exceptions. In response to the previous note (cf. note 10 above), Harvard University's Belknap Press has released a translation of the *Zweite Fassung*, the "Second Version," edited by Michael Jennings (cf. note 10), Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin (*The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge: 2008). Additionally, with increased attention to Benjamin's Schriften, audiences are becoming more aware of the editorial reasons for the essay's difficulty. To the point though, I am once again talking specifically about a problem for Anglo-American and other English readers, particularly those whose work does not center on Benjamin.

[xii] This is intentionally "vague." I am skeptical about how my methods will be received.

[xiii] Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press, 1977. pg. 286, note 98. I reproduce the note here:

> "There were a variety of drafts and revisions of this essay. As far as the editors of Benjamin's works have been able to establish, Horkheimer received the first definitive German draft, as did Bernhard Reich in Moscow. It is reprinted as the 'Erste Fassung' in [Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*] I:2. 431-469. Horkheimer and Benjamin decided that the article should appear in French, and the draft (somewhat revised) was soon translated for publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Adorno received a copy of the first French draft (now lost) to which he responded in his letter of March 18, 1936. The French draft was then altered considerably by people connected with the Institue *Zeitschrift* in Paris. Benjamin's strong protest to the changes led to a series of complications that delayed its publication for half a year. The changes were aimed primarily at eliminating formulations too easily taken as 'a political confession' (i.e., Communist) which might provoke suspicions against the exiled Institute, causing a 'serious threat' to its continued existence in the United States ([Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*], I:3, p. 1019). In the end, Benjamin agreed to most of the changes. The draft finally published in the *Zeitschrift* in May 1936, 'L'Oeuvre

> d'art à l'époque de sa réproduction méchanisée,' is thus substantially different from the first German version. (It appears in the appendix of [Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*], I:2, pp. 709-739.) Benjamin later wrote a second German version, probably in 1937-1938, which, among other changes, reinstated the more radical, more Marxist formulations. He sent it to Gretel Adorno, and it is this version which she and Theodor W. Adorno included in their 2-volume edition of Benjamin's *Schriften* published in 1955 (where it is misleadingly identified as a translation of the 1936 version printed in French in the *Zeitschrift*). From here it was translated into English as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, pp. 217-251. It appears as the "*Zweite Fassung*" in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I;2, pp. 471-508."

[xiv] I of course continue to discuss Marcuse's piece following this note, but Weiss' essay, whose English title is "A Working Class Survey Conducted by Karl Marx," is also of interest. Weiss compares Marx's method of conducting surveys among the working classes against the conventional practices of his time, which often:

> "were conducted essentially from viewpoints of social legislation, philanthropy, or were even animated by a bias against the labor movement. Marx, however, in the survey that he initiated in 1880, not only wanted to deliver information on working and living conditions of the workers to the public, but tried to clarify by the questionnaires the thoughts of the workers themselves on their own situation and its social causes" (Weiss, Hilde. "Die 'Enquête ouvrière' von Karl Marx." *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, V:1. 97.).

[xv] Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens." 39. The abstract follows the German essay in French and English translations.

[xvi] Ibid. 39.

[xvii] Bourgeois asceticism would be a more specific term and one more in line with Marxist critical theory in particular.

[xviii] Lest we forget, political motivations do not necessarily include party affiliation. This is one of the problems that Adorno mistook at first in Benjamin's artwork essay, as we will see in the next chapter.

[xix] Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens." 39.

[xx] Ibid. 39.

[xxi] Which was itself a revolutionary turn against Romantic subjectivity, and that against the Enlightenment. But Utilitarianism and Objectivism, once they became invested with the same reverence once given over to the mystical. Obviously though, these revolutions in thought were accompanied by radical shifts in culture in general.

[xxii] Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens." 39. Here is the French translation:

> "Dans l'idée d'essence opposée au phénomène sont contenus des éléments positifs, critique de la réalité 'mauvaise,' processus de réalisation des possibilités authentiques de l'homme et des choses. Ces éléments positifs, la doctrine dialectique de l'essence les conserve" (Marcuse, 38).

[xxiii] And of course, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, introduced in the 1920s, was already an indication of the problems via quantum mechanics that empiricist science would not be able to assimilate into its world view using the Enlightenment's scientific method.

[xxiv] Remember though, increased attention to Objectivism *did not* cause or lead to Fascism. Rather, the realization of Objectivistic concerns in philosophy established the conditions that in part made the rise of Fascism *possible*, although not inevitable.

[xxv] Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens." 39.

[xxvi] The term "negative dialectic," of course, is not my own but Theodor Adorno's. I elaborate further on how I conceive of the term in the note that follows below.

[xxvii] Here, I must take a moment to confess that my understanding of Marx's materialist dialectic approach to history relies more than anything on Susan Buck-Morss' reading in *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*. Buck-Morss puts forth there that Theodor Adorno and Benjamin interpreted Marx's methodology, in its negation of Kantian epistemology, Hegelian synthesis, and early 20th-century bourgeois metaphysical philosophy, as a viable alternative to approaching the problems of society in their time. She writes,

> "during the Königstein talks of 1929, Adorno agreed with Benjamin that 'dialectical,' 'materialist' theory required that they take seriously a radical relativism which ruled out ontology and all philosophical first principles in favor of an 'immanent' method with its focus on the present as the mediation for all statements of 'truth' and 'meaning'" (53).

This resulted in their conviction—using terms inspired by Lukács (especially his *Die Theorie des Romans* and *History and Class Consciousness*)—to reverse modern man's alienation from the "first nature" of things, whose historically-created "second nature" led him to submit to convention as true reality (55). Whereas Lukács had:

> "used 'second nature' synonymously with Marx's concept of 'fetish' in his analysis of bourgeois conventions in terms of the commodity structure…As Adorno employed the term in his own writings, 'second nature' was one of a constellation of critical concepts together with 'fetish,' 'reification,' 'enchantment,' 'fate,' 'myth,' and 'phantasmagoria'" (55).

[xxviii] Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. 54, Buck-Morss' emphasis. Text with quotation marks indicates Adorno's writing from "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," cf. Buck-Morss note 82, chapter 3 of *Origins*: "Adorno, 'Die Idee der Naturgeschitchte' (1932), *GS* 1, p. 346" (226).

[xxix] Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens." 39, emphasis mine. Here is the French as well:

> "La deuxième partie du travail cherche à montrer la formation du concept d'essence dans la philosophie dialectique qui, grâce à ce concept, surmonte le relativisme sans retomber dans la métaphysique dogmatique. L'opposition de I'essence et du phénomène est conçue ici comme une relation historique, et dans la constitution de celle-ci les intérêts sociaux de la théorie pénètrent à titre d'élément constitutif. La praxis historique à laquelle la théorie est liée et qui doit supprimer (*aufheben*) l'opposition, rend les intérêts particuliers vraiment généraux et fonde un type nouveau de vérité universelle. Le concept d'essence qui est au centre de la doctrine dialectique et qui determine tous les autres concepts est le concept de l'homme" (38).

[xxx] Cf. note 30 above.

[xxxi] The German word *aufheben* carries the three senses of preservation, elevation, and cancellation, senses that English and French find hard to carry over. Buck-Morss uses the term sublation; Adorno's translators at one point use "negates and transcends" ("A Portrait of Walter Benjamin." *Prisms*. trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. 233).

[xxxii] Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens." 39, my emphasis.

[xxxiii] Cf. note 32 above.

[xxxiv] Buck-Morss. *Origins*. 54.

[xxxv] This is the English translation used by Hannah Arendt in her edition of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 217). She locates it in *Aesthetics*, Ralph Manheim's translation of selections from Valéry's work (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series, 1964. 225). Page numbers in this essay, unless otherwise specified, refer to the Arendt-supervised edition (pg. 217-251). The Zohn translation can be found online as well, the best place being http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/benjamin-work-of-art.html.

[xxxvi] Benjamin, Walter. "Karl Kraus." *Reflections: essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings*. Ed. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. 269.

[xxxvii] Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 681. This page refers to a very useful table that Benjamin's editors set up to map out the differences between an *Erste, Zweite, Französischen*, and *Dritte Fassung* of the "*Kunstwerkarbeit*." All relevant pages from Benjamin's *Schriften* can be accessed online at: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/Benjamin_Kunstwerk.pdf

[xxxviii] Klossowski also translated other major German writers into French, reproducing Nietzsche in *Le Gai Savoir*, Heidegger in *Nietzsche*, and Wittgenstein as *Tractatus logico-philosophicus suivi d'Investigations philosophiques* ("Pierre Klossowski. *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Klossowski. Accessed 28 March 2012).

[xxxix] Benjamin, Walter. "L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa réproduction méchanisée." *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* vol. V:1. ed. Max Horkheimer. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1936. pg. 40.

[xl] Letter, Benjamin to Horkheimer, 29 February 1936. The letter can be found in Benjamin's *Schriften* (cited above), 992. English translation taken from Buck-Morss, pg. 287, note 103.

[xli] Buck-Morss. *Origins*. pg. 287, note 103.

[xlii] Benjamin, "L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa réproduction méchanisée." 65-66. German text from "Dritte Fassung." *Schriften*. 505-508.

[xliii] Benjamin, *Schriften*. *Erste Fassung* (in which the epigraph gets its own page): 432; *Zweite Fassung* (where it is directly above section I): 350.

[xliv] Thus the role of the individual artist is still there, despite the machine. The photographer or camera man, like the covered-over subject Marcuse saw in Objectivism, cannot be forgotten. The next chapter will focus on how it is possible to misread this key element in the artwork essay.

[xlv] Valéry had, however, previously published "La conquête de l'ubiquité" in two places, as Jean Hytier indicates. Cf. Valéry, Paul. *Oeuvres*. vol. ii. Ed. Jean Hytier. Dijon: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960. note to pg. 1284:

> "Published in *De la musique avant toute chose* [Music before Everything] (works by Paul Valéry, Henri Massis, Camille Ballaigue, etc…), *Éditions du Tambourinaire*, 1928. Republished in *Nouvelles Littéraires*, Saturday 28 March 1931, and also in three editions of *Pièces sur l'art*. See also De la musique encore et toujours (works by Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau, etc…, preface by Paul Valéry), Éditions du Tambourinaire, 1946" (pg. 1580, my translation).

[xlvi] Benjamin. *Reflections*. 269. Also, note the etymology of *motto*, from Italian for "word."

[xlvii] Grafter in this context obviously connotes a derivative of the act of horticultural or surgical grafting. It is important to note, too, the double sense of a grafter as one who takes or distributes money illicitly, usually in bribes, for his own profit. What constitutes creative appropriation as opposed to plagiarism does not concern this paper, but we would be remiss not to mention bourgeois and rather privileged views concerning

originality, as applied to individual ownership of words or ideas, that deem outright citational poetic practices as "unoriginal" while calling other types of allusion "genius."

[xlviii] Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by other means in the new century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 28.

[xlix] Ibid. 31-2.

[l] Ibid. 32.

[li] "How old?" is never quite clear in the text, for good reason: once we begin looking for origins of movements or sentiments, cultural and individual, we too often set the date at a point either exaggeratedly far back in history or much too close to the present (maybe myopia is worse).

[lii] Benjamin. "Karl Kraus." 269.

[liii] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. [X11a,4], pg. 667. This comes from the X *Konvolut*, the subject of which is Marx.

[liv] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 217

[lv] Ibid. 218

[lvi] Ibid. 218

[lvii] Benjamin, *Schriften*. 1046: "Die Geschichte der Kunst ist eine Geschichte von Prophetien. Sie kann nur aus dem Standpunkt der unmittelbaren, aktualen Gegenwart geschrieben werden; denn jede Zeit besitzt die ihr eigene neue aber unvererbbare Möglichkeit, die Prophetien zu deuten, die die Kunst von vergangnen Epochen gerade auf sie enthielt"

[lviii] Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 217.

[lix] Ibid. 217. "La conquête de l'ubiquité," written in 1928, contains a peculiar sentence that situates it in twentieth-century history but which, when read as if "La conquête" were published today, curiously speaks to ongoing evolutions in how we conceive of art and technology: "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was for time immemorial." I think the ability to misinterpret that sentence as applicable to readers in 2012 speaks to the power of the types of "prognostic," i.e. productive, critical activities I'm trying to articulate. The etymological differences between the two words speak louder to what I am trying to say maybe more than I should be betting on them to.

[lx] Buck-Morss, *Origins*. 109-10. Text in quotations is Adorno's.

[lxi] In the case of economic crises, as we will see in a later chapter, there are concrete human costs without a doubt. But the *rhetoric* of crisis is often ideologically or historically motivated when the preservation of the subject is on the line.

2

The Act of Witnessing:

Adorno, Benjamin, and

Exegesis as Apology

I

Continuing Problems with Interpretation

Our last chapter dealt with some interesting observations into Benjamin's mode of writing in the artwork essay. Its fragmentary and incomplete nature, indeed its very essential resistance to being totalized, as evidenced by the different extant versions and a writing style that never reveals all its cards, gives the text an adaptability and fertility demanding critical interpretation like a work of art. Put in terms of the sedimented words on the pages of the different versions we saw that, if we consider their fixed (as events, material origins) as well as dynamic (as language, with essential potentiality) traits, we can form a loose conception of the different *Fassungen* of the artwork essay as allegories for its greater inter-(con)textual and con-founded whole. It is my belief that if we view the artwork essay as being really a collection of artwork essays whose sum total is never complete, we can also use the discourses for explaining its case-specific challenges for applications outside of the *Kunstwerk* essay's contexts. It then transcends an existence whose presence would otherwise never escape the hell of being useful only when talking about aesthetics as they apply to mechanically- vs. non-mechanically-reproduced art. The field of "Aesthetics," after all, derives its name from the Greek α□σθέω, the verb not only of artistic reception but of apperception in general.

These reflections raise new questions and challenges for us though, and particularly the tendency to misunderstand and misrepresent Benjamin needs further examination. For as we saw in weighing the third version of the *Kunstwerk* essay's epigraph and preface against something that could be read like an epigraph-preface to the

French version,[i] Benjamin's brand of critical investigation is not Valéry's *per se* and certainly not Marx's (although Marxian) but something born of the tension between the two that also passes beyond the rhetorically circumscribed (and tropically juxtaposed) bounds of a Valéry-Marx dualism. This excess of significance, however, makes it incredibly tough to treat the essay's monadic voice as a unity one would normally expect in a scholarly critical essay.[ii] So, our next questions, in a line of so many, about what the artwork essay means must address not only the problems of reading Benjamin inter-textually but intra-textually too.

Because, to be fair, even if one reads Benjamin's artwork essay in the two original languages and compares the four versions, their footnotes, paralipomena, later critical commentary, and what was published around them (literally in space as well as figuratively in time), the essay's hidden interstitial meaning does not surrender itself in due form to the reader's eye or mind. It bears repeating that the essay gathers different nimbi about itself the opaqueness or transparency of which depend on the reader's understanding of the ways in which Benjamin's writing rewards delaying the critical tendency to determine what something is saying before appreciating the effectiveness of how it performs the utterance. My personal feelings regarding just the richness of Benjamin's text in terms of its resistance to being understood, one might say, are those not of cheated satisfaction but rather of a continuing pursuit for some miraculous intersection of truth with conclusion, where/when new beginnings and realities can come into being. After all, to what extent is the way that we structure and categorize history and the historical—such a large part of which is through languages of telling and retelling, retracing and rewriting—what determines our cognitive understanding of what

the past is as opposed to the present or the future? These are all things dealing with a fundamental knot of a presently inextricable blur of "reality as opposed to appearance," as Marcuse put it, or maybe nature and nurture, φυσις and νομος. On the positive side, knots are ties which bind, so their role in physics surely must not be wholly imagined. At the same time, however, knots in places where their action potential holds the possibility of being too fixed to undo or too automatic to control can quickly degenerate into crisis points. In these cases, perhaps careful analysis can loosen the knots (the etymology of *analysis* actually comes from "loosening") so that the cord configurations can be altered

Benjamin, at any rate, does not appear to have been bothered by the propensity in his writing for the esoteric knot-tying of statement with gesture, of the critic's claim with the artist's genres. One of his closest friends, Gershom Scholem, nodding at what was "too strong an element of the enigmatic and unfathomable in his mental make-up not to provoke" a difficult reading experience, testifies that Benjamin's "critics' misunderstandings would surely have been a source of amusement to him who even in his brightest hours never abandoned the esoteric thinker's stance."[iii] Furthermore this incomprehensibility revolves around a seemingly intentional in-comprehensive-ness: Scholem describes how in a "long passionate conversation about this work [the *Kunstwerksarbeit*] in 1938 [Benjamin] said in answer to my objections: 'The missing philosophic link between the two parts of my essay, about which you complain, will be supplied more effectively by the Revolution than by me.'"[iv] This hearsay can tell us more about Benjamin's sense of history that we described in the previous chapter as continuously being recreated in the present's understanding of history and the historical. For Benjamin clearly did not view history as a continuous stream progressing from one

point to another but instead saw in the present concretized, reified traces of the past whose outer appearance may or may not correspond with the form they might potentially take under the examination of the critical mind. As such, he locates the interpretive keys in a future moment, the moment of "Revolution" what's more, when a break with the past's way of doing things will also restore things to a past, complete state and place of lost, whole origins. Let us begin, then, by trusting Benjamin's word for the moment and explore what he could mean by a revolution whose ability to "supply" a lost totality to the artwork essay supersedes the power of the author's.

Taking Scholem's unintended (at least for our purposes) gem of an anecdote on revolutionary time as a keystone clue into Benjamin's way of writing the artwork essay, this chapter thus proposes to continue developing a way of reading Benjamin's *Kunstwerksarbeit* from a different angle than the preceding chapter. There we concluded by posing the possibility that Hannah Arendt's editorial direction that culminated in the translation of the essay in *Illuminations* (1969) was in some sense her way of leaving a personal imprint on future Benjamin scholarship. Whether or not she was conscious of such a move or of the present-day implications of looking at what she did as a signature event, that is, as a moment where Arendt's text signs traces of her name alongside and in the name of Benjamin, we cannot know for sure. So we should check our speculative interpretation there, as indeed there seems to be a better way of looking into this process of critical rewriting or erasure that is both closer and more obviously to hand in other texts.

Arendt's book *Illuminations*, taken as a critical moment in the history of Benjamin scholarship, shows the influence of critical reception on a writer's historical

fate, as it were. And the tendency to misread Benjamin's writings is something that particularly concerned his friends Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Besides Bertolt Brecht, Scholem and Adorno probably stand as the figures most intimate with Benjamin's way of writing. In asking ourselves if or how their friendships with Benjamin might have given them a privileged insight into his way of practicing critical theory, we will need to ask how they could assert such closeness to Benjamin's thought and critical theories without destroying their critical distance and separation from Benjamin's writing in the process. If we pay attention to the ways in which academic writers bear witness to their traditions, the future return on our payment may bring about some other, presently unknown miracle of understanding how Benjamin's image as a man or corpus of writings has been shaped in large part by events that came after his death. It is my hope that our argument's course will give occasion to talking about the way in which the future is contained not in some abstract yet-to-be but rather in the "durable past," that is, the enduring past whose presences persist into the present, though not always on the conscious level. Thus the raising to consciousness of these traces of the past might allow us to work towards a better understanding of how their continued presence, even the presence of their absence might shape the future.

II

Two Witnesses

The analogy that will carry us forward here is the figure of the witness, particularly the witness to a trauma. For indeed, the two writings that we will focus our

attention on in conjunction with the artwork essay, Scholem's "Walter Benjamin" and Adorno's "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," were not deemed necessary to write while Benjamin was still alive and could literally speak for himself; they came in the long years following his suicide in late September 1940. The event itself, in spite of its apparent brutality and its seeming insignificance when weighed against the deaths of so many others during the 20th century's most destructive war, nonetheless all but cried out to be noticed as a historically symbolic moment. Fleeing Paris to escape the invading Nazis, Benjamin and his company got as far as the French-Spanish border, the very cross-roads between life ahead and death behind, at Port Bou, a point where departure would have been possible but for the border guards' denying their passage due to Benjamin's lacking the proper travel papers.[v] As Susan Buck-Morss says:

> The war, the horrors committed against the Jews in Germany, the loneliness of emigration, combined with the dissipation of potential for revolution, were all *expressed* in Benjamin's *gesture* of suicide. As the literal acting out of the "liquidation of the individual," it was a *tragic allegory* of the *contradictions inherent* in the historical present.[vi]

Though its physical characteristics could never go beyond the realm of a historic, unrepeatable act, forever gone in the past with the end of Benjamin's literal life, the metaphysical significances of Benjamin's suicide continue to rupture into the present, rewriting the event of Benjamin's death in a new context where its symbolic characteristics, thanks to their translatability, their ability to be "carried across," eventually replace the historical event's comparatively crass material limits with a symbolic infinitude "expressing" more than a simple assessment of life or death.

Such is the potential power of witnessing: the presence of the witness allows for the possibility of similarities between the act of witnessing and of history as collective

memory. The word *witness* has etymological ties to Old English *wit(t)* and *gewit(t)*, which refer to consciousness: witnesses and witnessing are thereby bound up with the *psyche* and its internal mechanisms. "To witness" can suggest anything from seeing an event take place, having knowledge of that event from observation or experience, being present at the signing of a document so as to give what it says the force of law, and also to giving or serving as evidence, testifying to the "truth and nothing but the truth," as they say.[vii] How are we to handle, however, the *absence of any conscious witness*, or one not wholly present to himself, who nonetheless is somehow present at the signing of an event into the books of history? How can such a witness still transform his testimony into historical cloud seeding?

The answer to that question perhaps lies in a further usage of the word *witness*, where witnessing can describe the setting, the *context*, in which something takes place. We might, for instance, say something like "The past twenty years witnessed a rise in personal computer use." I want to stress this sense of the word witness in our investigation for two reasons. One, Adorno and Scholem were not literally present at Benjamin's death—indeed, neither of them were even in Europe when it happened. Two, the men themselves, Benjamin, Adorno, and Scholem are no longer living and present to bear witness to us today concerning their works. Thus, conceptualizing a type of witnessing that goes beyond mere bodily presence will permit us to talk about how Scholem's and Adorno's texts, written in Benjamin's memory, become the sites that witness the transformation of the materiality of Benjamin's death into the symbolic resurrection of his *Geist* in the following decades.

And so, if we cannot say that Benjamin's life and work have been unchanged by his friends' bearing witness, we become responsible for looking into the mechanisms and techniques underlying this metamorphosis. As in the previous chapter, we are less concerned here with assessing the relative worth of Adorno and Scholem's portrayals in themselves; instead we are looking at the relationship between qualitative value and quantifiable value and how each is constituted.[viii] One of the first things we might notice about Adorno "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" and Scholem's "Walter Benjamin," then, is that they hardly let another world-view in edgewise, giving their own depictions of Benjamin's character and his work instead of relying on his words to represent him on their own. For both of them this seems to stem from real misgivings about scholarly work being done with Benjamin's writings by people outside his intimate circle starting after the publishing of his *Gesammelte Schriften* in 1955. I say scholarly work because, after all, Scholem delivered his lecture that was later published as "Walter Benjamin" in an academic setting at the Leo Baeck Institute, and Adorno wrote what was later translated into "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" for a book on "Cultural Criticism and Society" that also featured critical essays on Proust, Bach, Schoenberg, Kafka, and other literary and musical artists.[ix] These observations point to something of a historical irony when we reflect on the fact that Benjamin's friends were the first people involved in ensuring that his work became widely available in the post-war years, but that their creation of Benjamin scholarship also brought about unintended consequences vis-à-vis a perceived need to direct that scholarship away from certain directions.

The fact that both Adorno and Scholem's essays begin by invoking Benjamin's ghost/*Geist* is quite telling of how they saw his legacy in the years following his death. Compare the opening sentences of Adorno's piece:

> The name of the philosopher who took his life while fleeing Hitler's executioners has, in the more than twenty years since then, acquired a certain nimbus, despite the esoteric character of his early writings and the fragmentary nature of his later ones. The fascination of the person and of his work allowed no alternative other than that of magnetic attraction or horrified rejection.[x]

with those of Scholem's:

> In 1965 it will be 25 years since Walter Benjamin—for as many years a close friend of mine—took his own life when, on his flight from the Germans, he had crossed the Pyrenees into Spain with a group of refugees…A life lived entirely beyond the footlights of the public scene, though linked with it through his literary activities, passed into complete oblivion, except for the few who had received an unforgettable impression from him…In the generation of authors as well as readers now coming into its own he is greatly respected as the most eminent literary critic of his time.[xi]

Both take as their starting points a moment of traumatic rupture in the sudden and irrecoverable loss of their friend Benjamin against the equally traumatic backdrop of war, but they go beyond a mere reporting of circumstances. Adorno figures Benjamin's remaining presence as an auratic "nimbus" whereas Scholem places himself among the initiates of "the few who had received an unforgettable impression from [Benjamin]" as though he could still point to visible traces where Benjamin's character had touched him, in the sense of impression *qua* the literal leaving of a trace. But they both also cannot deny that there are throngs of others outside the gates, as it were, desiring entrance into the mysteries of Benjamin's life and works. Luckily for them, Scholem says, forthcoming

work will greatly add to collective understanding of who Benjamin was and "will present a picture of his life and work."[xii]

Bearing witness to something is much more than merely passing along information, and neither Adorno nor Scholem, it seems, was entirely happy with the growth in Benjamin's readership. Regardless of the volume of critical editions of Benjamin's work, no amount of anthologizing and collecting can return certain parts of Benjamin's character crucial (at least in Adorno or Scholem's mind) to understanding his writings. Scholem puts things quite bluntly, saying in the first sentence of part II of his lecture on Benjamin's character:

> In the years which have passed since the publication of his *Schriften* a good deal has been written about Benjamin, much of it silly or petty…The peculiar aura of authority emanating from his thought, though never explicitly invoked, tended to challenge contradiction, while the rejection of any systematic approach in all his work published after 1922—a rejection which he himself proclaimed boldly from the hoardings—screened the centre of his personality from the view of many.[xiii]

And even though Adorno's tone is less polemical than Scholem's, one still gets the sense that he's stressing a difficulty with reading Benjamin which some unnamed critics are failing to comprehend. For instance, he scoffs at a certain "Existentialist overlord" who "had the effrontery to defame him as being 'touched by demons', as though the suffering of a person dominated and estranged by the mind should be considered his metaphysical death sentence, merely because it disturbs the all-too-lively I-Thou relationship."[xiv] But even beyond that, Adorno's essay seems to be imagining potential opponents more than addressing specific living ones. For this reason his language is always trying to focus on the nuances that make Adorno an individual thinker and not reducible to a movement or tradition. One typical move in Adorno's essay is that of constant negation that resists a

concrete picture being formed of Benjamin. In one such paragraph, a reader has to piece together fragmented qualifications:

> Because what *distinguishes* his philosophy…he *seems* to converge with the general intellectual current…*But* the decisive differences between philosophers have always consisted in *nuances*; what is most bitterly *irreconcilable* is that which is similar but which thrives on different centres; and Benjamin's relation to today's accepted ideologies of the 'concrete' is no different…By this he *in no way* intended…*Rather*, his desperate striving to break out of the power of cultural conformism was directed at constellations of historical entities which *do not* remain simply interchangeable examples for ideas *but which in their uniqueness* constitute the ideas themselves as historical.[xv]

Adorno clings to the incommunicable as another way of talking about Benjamin, relying on misunderstandings as "the medium in which the noncommunicable is communicated."[xvi] This is an important rethinking of the idea of *misunderstanding* because it is trying to think through a new way for approaching Benjamin's fragmentary writing, which lends itself to being misunderstood to the point where it is a text that cannot be totalized. Adorno gives historical misinterpretations a truth of their own, noting their function in reality, which is that of creating historical potentialities whose tensions are interior to a materialist conceptions of history. In other words, Adorno's concept of misunderstanding as it applies to Benjamin tries to accommodate the reality that Benjamin *is misunderstood* rather than merely abstracting a theory of Benjamin's essence out of his personal understanding.

We need to develop this point a little more. Here's the thing: *Adorno is not claiming to understand Benjamin any better than anyone else*. This is a crucial point and warrants, paradoxically maybe, the simple statement of its "truth." Additionally, Adorno is not claiming that there is some unchanging or even generally stable essence in

Benjamin's writing. Here is what he actually says about misunderstanding being the communication of the noncommunicable, in context:

> In view of his wily aim in opposing the shopworn themes and jargon of philosophy—the latter he habitually proclaimed 'procurer language'—it would be easy enough to dismiss the cliché of 'essayist' [the reputation Benjamin's essays, such as the *Kunstwerksarbeit* brought him] as a *mere* misunderstanding. But the recourse to 'misunderstandings' as a means of explaining the effect of intellectual phenomena does not lead very far. It *presupposes that there is an intrinsic substance*, often simply equated with the author's intention, which exists *independently* of its historical fate; such a substance is in principle hardly identifiable and this is all the more so with an author as complex and as fragmentary as Benjamin. Misunderstandings are the medium in which the noncommunicable is communicated.[xvii]

Really, if that's possible to say, what Adorno is doing is comparable to treating Benjamin as a text, something with no mind of its own but which reflects the mind of the reader. This removes the "presupposition that there is an intrinsic substance," a non-essentialist way of reading that redirects critical attention to the historical, i.e. contextual and structural, situation over the "author's intention," which cannot be known for sure and can only be approached indirectly by looking at what is perceived in common by everyone. But at the same time, even though Adorno is taking a non-essentialist, materialist view towards authorial intention, he is not discrediting the existence of an "intrinsic substance" in a text but rather an "intrinsic substance…which *exists independently* of its historical fate." In other words, Adorno's essay challenges the *a priori* proximity of intrinsic substances contained in the vulgar concept of a misunderstanding. For Adorno, *misunderstandings* are the exceptions that prove the rule, precisely because their supposed or presupposed existence is problematic for materialist, semiotic, and other discourses and often force one to return to an aporia of underlying,

unknowable but unavoidable reference/referents. This aporia cannot be dealt with head-on by materialist discourses, which are supposed to acknowledge openly only a constant doubt—a forced misunderstanding in a way—towards "true" reference and meaning the same way they mistrust outward appearances. This should not be taken as the impossibility of choice; quite the contrary, doubt and skepticism are clearly choices in that they choose to refuse until presented with all possible options, but concerning even the possibility of that sort of panorama and complete way of seeing they must remain skeptical.

I want to propose that we read these statements about Scholem's and Adorno's treatment of misunderstanding and incomprehension as variations whose similarities thrive on the linguistic construal of a crisis: that of misunderstanding what is actually at work in Benjamin's works. The rhetoric of crises explodes conventional understanding, demanding some sort of reevaluation or new approach to concepts or, even more generally, to the way we conceive of knowledge. Thus in their very definition crises preclude the possibility of holding on to knowledge that can be had forever; all crises show to be true is that knowledge is slippery and often forsakes those invoking its authority long before they are aware of the change. Or rather, because that last sentence accords to knowledge a mind of its own, the relationship between crisis and knowledge is contained within the dialectic of the critical moment, when choice feels most necessary but simultaneously most suspect, which is just as much the momentary criticism, where one is constantly doubling back to what remains unanswerable despite one's critical power.[xviii] Whether or not the misunderstandings of Benjamin's writing that Adorno's or Scholem's essays have in mind are actually "silly or petty," is less important than the fact

that Adorno and Scholem stress the possibility for them to be read in those ways as evidence pointing back always to their manifestations in the historical moment as texts.

III

Reproducible Art as Model: the Critic of Aura and the Auratic Critic

The rebus is the model of his philosophy
—Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin"

The key to the picture puzzles is lost. They must, as a baroque poem about melancholy says, 'speak themselves.'
—Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin"

Art complicates the question of simple separation and difference, whether the simple difference between art and politics, philosophy and life, critical theory and praxis, crises and stability, and so on. I want to take Adorno's "Portrait of Walter Benjamin" into consideration with some of the pictures Benjamin talks about in the *Kunstwerk* essay. Both works treat mysticism and obscurity as irresolvable elements only when they are mistaken to be eternal or independent of the historical, material matters with which they co-exist in the world. The *Kunstwerk* essay seeks to understand the processes that give different types of art their value and meaning. On the other hand, Adorno's essay wants to complicate conventional understanding of Benjamin's writings by rejecting the too-easily made, and therefore suspect, claim that Benjamin is misunderstood because his intentions are obscure. Adorno is dispensing with the idea of intentionality and

authorship that presupposes a unified, preexistent, original significance. Instead, he is making the necessary, historically conscious move of treating Benjamin's texts as the only remaining substance of Benjamin's person. The texts are the only things that materially precede and preexist the readers; for Adorno, any essence must be removed from them, in terms of placing it somewhere else but not destroying it.

I suggest a closer reading into section XI of the artwork essay for two reasons. The first is that it talks about Benjamin's concept of the auratic illusion and what the new mechanically reproducible art of photography and film does to this force, which this chapter has been dealing with by treating from the idea of misunderstanding essence or authorial intention. The second is that it is one of the most vivid sections of the artwork essay, one of the most poetic in that Benjamin explains his ideas through dialectical imagery.

These images, comparing the painter and cameraman with the magician and surgeon, are not to be taken too seriously though, although they appear at first to fit nicely in to the binary opposition that Benjamin has established by section XI. The section begins with a sentence reiterating how "The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this" in that, unlike art received, say, in the theater house, film presents on its surface a direct transmission of real experience.[xix] Photography and film have their own illusory nature, but it is hidden and thus, like Lukàcs' "second nature," is "that of the second degree, the result of cutting."[xx] Thus the photo and film, as cuttings or *citations*, one might say, of reality in new contexts become works of art as a result of a type of alienation from their origins. Benjamin has by this section already, in fact, set up the concept of art in the

Kunstwerk essay as being tied to its reproducibility, whether literal, in photos or films, or abstract, in the enduring cult value attached to painting and sculptures whose significance is reproduced by political ideologies. Unlike older artistic media, however, Benjamin claims that the new arts have internalized their mechanically-reliant productive forces. Camera effects, for example, are created by reproducing the machine's perspective, projected on the screen or the light-sensitive paper used in exposing techniques. Where once the artist eye was in the invisible background of all painting, now the camera lens hides behind the art.

Because technology has reached a point where it can make virtual realities, Benjamin calls "the equipment-free aspect of reality…the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology."[xxi] This image requires an odd shift in our understanding of the interpenetration going on here. One would expect the technological reproduction of reality to be an invasion into the organic, natural sphere by the mechanic, inorganic. Instead, Benjamin figures it as quite the opposite—the organic breaking into the sphere of the technological! Technology claims and appropriates part of natural reality for itself, bringing with it the problems tied up with apparent reality vs. actual reality. The mediation by the machine and the cameraman, we must not forget, is never innocuous; it leaves traces on the object and, further, can only reproduce what is visible to the eye on the surface.

Benjamin's way of writing in the artwork essay, therefore, cannot be said to have any sort of linear progression: all progression is at once a recalling back to the origins that made such development possible in the first place. This does not mean that the origins have priority either, but merely that their presence can never be entirely dispelled

with. If we want another dialectical image elaborating the internal contradictions of what mechanically reproducible artwork does compared with highly auratic, "one of a kind," artworks, Benjamin gives the reader in the second half of section XI the contrasting figures of magician and surgeon. Asking himself the question of how to compare the cameraman to the painter, Benjamin "takes recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation":

> 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 increases by virtue of 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.[xxii]

It is still, as Benjamin himself admits, just an "analogy." We must think of the analogy as being more important to its historical moment, however, than to the ways that art appears to us today. For Benjamin, the main difference between painting and photography in the end will always come from the two sides of their production: 1) the differences in the ways in which they were at first produced, the modes of production as figured by the allegory of the magician's versus the surgeon's work and 2) the work of art itself whose material, ultimately, is what history holds on to, reproduces. Thus, arising from the different ways of making art in painting as opposed to photography or film, "There is a *tremendous difference* between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is *a total one*,

that of the cameraman consists of multiple *fragments which are assembled under a new law*."[xxiii]

So, going back to thinking of the historical moment in which the artwork essay was conceived—i.e. Benjamin's desire to work out theses that would contribute to critical debate on how to work against the forces of Fascism that were threatening to silence many writers and artists in the post-Weimar, pre-war period, which was equally a stance in solidarity with the proletariat's as-yet-unrealized revolution against capitalism—the analogy to which Benjamin takes "recourse" in a difficult situation is a tool to help him set up a principle by which he thinks alternative, non-ruling subjects can continue in their traditions despite totalitarian violence. In the fragmentary nature of film and photography, the brief reproductions of reality as they appear to the eye in momentary time, a sustained subject or narrative is without help. Therefore, by working through fragments, what Benjamin appears to be doing is in fact something quite else from the formation of a cogent and grandly organized theory on revolutionary aesthetics. Quite the opposite: he is placing his hope, as he told Scholem,[xxiv] in the impending revolution in thought and politics to fill in the gaps of his logic, the same way that the viewer's mind fills in the gaps and interstices of a collage or montage.

I now want to return to the critics who set their cognitive powers to trying to justify the loose ends in Benjamin's writing, whether with some critical "Portrait," as Adorno's essay, or some "picture," as Scholem calls one critical volume of Benjamin's work.[xxv] I believe that it is possible to consider Adorno as presenting Benjamin in his "Portrait of Walter…" as himself a work of art, visible to the reader of his texts. What becomes most curious is the effect of the picture Adorno's essay builds. As a literary

work, it can be said to build something comparable by analogy to a painting, not a direct representation of Benjamin or his works, but one relying on images, anecdotes, and figural tropes.[xxvi] What is most curious, however, is that by nature of the literary genre, Adorno can only recreate Benjamin's personality in "multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law," in the sense that Adorno seems to be more than merely witnessing to Benjamin's spirit. His essay also seems to be witnessing the appropriation of Benjamin's ways of thinking into Adorno's mode of criticism. In a way, Adorno's "Portrait of Walter Benjamin" takes the fragmented memory of his friend and uses it as a model, a vehicle with which to express his own philosophy of negative dialectics. Susan Buck-Morss also notices how Adorno's writing seemed to internalize Benjamin after the latter's death:

> More strongly than ever, Adorno internalized Benjamin's philosophy in an act of *Aufhebung*, in all three senses (preserving, negating, going beyond) of this Hegelian term. It meant that he preserved his friend's work in his own so that nothing he wrote was untouched by Benjamin's personal language and unique epistemological method. But it also meant that he redeemed by means of this method the very problems in Benjamin's work which he had criticized in their correspondence.[xxvii]

Indeed, Adorno's treatment of Benjamin's odd juxtaposing of the theological, mystified images with material, historical critique without resolving the two poles was the subject of more than a few of their correspondences. In March 1936, for instance, Adorno wrote to Benjamin concerning the artwork essay saying, "what I would postulate is *more* dialectics. On the one hand, dialectical penetration of the 'autonomous' work of art which is transcended by its own technology into a planned work; on the other, an even stronger dialecticization of utilitarian art in its negativity."[xxviii] Similarly, Adorno criticized an early draft of the *Exposé* to *The Arcades Project*, which Benjamin referred to as

"methodologically most intimately connected"[xxix] to the artwork essay, as being not dialectical enough. He writes Benjamin in 1938 to tell him that "Motifs are assembled but not elaborated…can this method be applied to the complex of the *Arcades*…*without* a theoretical interpretation—is this a 'material' which can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura?"[xxx]

It was precisely Benjamin's unmediated critical mode that Adorno critiqued with the claim that it often "tends to turn into a wide-eyed presentation of mere facts."[xxxi] What Benjamin thought of the method of his *Arcades Project*:

> literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them"[xxxii]

bears similar methodological presentation to the artwork essay's quick, concentrated observation and bits of citation with brief critical exegesis, but Adorno did not see the uses of either work, at least not in Benjamin's lifetime. Compare his skepticism of the fragmented way of writing in Benjamin's later works with his understanding of it after World War II. Adorno is far more complicit with Benjamin's conceptualizations of a post-totalitarian mode of writing:

> To interpret phenomena materialistically meant for him not so much to elucidate them as products of the social whole but rather to relate them directly, in their isolated singularity, to material tendencies and social struggles. Benjamin thus sought to avoid the danger of estrangement and reification, which threaten to transform all observation of capitalism as a system itself into a system.[xxxiii]

Furthermore, Adorno's post-war stance on Benjamin also became more and more accepting of the latter's unmediated and seemingly un-critical presentation of phenomena

as being beyond the present-day comprehension of their significances. When Adorno describes Benjamin's later philosophy and how it moved ever more towards dialectics—a contrast to his previous position—he depicts Benjamin's species of figuring the dialectic as:

> not intruding from without on a thought which was inherently static, nor was it the product of mere development but was rather anticipated in the quid pro quo between the most rigid and the most dynamic elements in his thought during all of its phases. His conception of 'dialectics at a standstill' emerged with increasing clarity.[xxxiv]

I believe that Adorno's interpretation is in some way also describing the process by which he came to understand Benjamin's approach to understanding the world as one trying to suspend judgment on things, a different way of coming at the object of Adorno's critical method, negative dialectics.

IV

A Portrait Without a Subject?

So what was it about Benjamin's death that might have changed the circumstances of Adorno's approach to his writings? Perhaps the answer lies in Benjamin's freedom from the influence of Brecht, whom Adorno and Scholem both regarded as a detriment to their mutual friend's line of thought. Actually, Adorno had told Benjamin in March of 1936 that, "Indeed, I fell 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. Please understand my criticisms only in this spirit."[xxxv] Is Adorno's "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" somehow a secret

and unspoken confessional apology to Benjamin that Adorno could never give as much as it is a defensive apology of Benjamin's writings that Benjamin would never write himself?

"Holding your arm steady": this position feels much more in line with Adorno's voice in "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," where his sympathy with Benjamin's investigative methods is much more obvious. But texts are strange witnesses and sites of witnessing, and Adorno's image of his hand guiding Benjamin's arm, a gentle coercion, holds an amazing truth when thought about while reading Adorno's exegesis of his friend. Adorno's "Portrait" is at once a writing of Benjamin and a self-writing through Benjamin, perhaps best expressed in the rhetorical figure of crossing. Based on the title of the essay, we might construct the following comparison:

Adorno : Painter : : Benjamin : Painting

But this analogy is also a dialectical image. For yes, Adorno, in bearing witness to the loss of his friend, colleague, in some sense mentor, establishes himself as the authoritative painter of Benjamin's nuanced way of thinking, with Benjamin constructed in the essay as the object under Adorno's gaze. But Benjamin's image is not reproduced unchanged, and neither is Adorno untouched by his own testimony. For we might say that the Adorno-is-to-Painter-as-Benjamin-is-to-Painting parallel is simultaneously a reverse parallelism, whereby we could equally say that:

Adorno : Painting : : Benjamin : Painter

Adorno is in some way really writing himself and the autobiography of his complex historical swerve in the way he understood Benjamin's methodology following his friend's death. In this sense, Benjamin is not a distant object in a painting but also the

camera lens that Adorno directs, intentionally or no, back on himself. As such, Benjamin is the painter of his own portrait, and so much is obviously true inasmuch as Benjamin's texts are what Adorno is working through in the first place.

The act of witnessing is thus never so simple as a one-way street. Even when one is thinking about something, one is internalizing the concept to assimilate it, subsume it, sublate it, in an act of *Aufhebung* with one's own self. In the process, the historical understanding of the object of consideration can be altered, as Adorno's essay surely has affected contemporary ways of thinking of Benjamin's style. But the witness cannot be unchanged after giving testimony; indeed, his testimony records the traces by which his life was altered in the first place by the one being judged.

Notes:

[i] Herbert Marcuse's abstracts of "Zur Begriff des Wesens," appearing after the essay of the same name in volume 5:1 of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, cf. Chapter 1, pg. 38-9.

[ii] Perhaps this is one reason for why the seat of a university tenured position was always to be beyond his reach. Gershom Scholem, in his lecture on "Walter Benjamin," says:

"For more than two years Benjamin worked to attain habilitation as a Dozent (lecturer) in Modern German literature at Frankfurt University, encouraged at first by the Head of the Department, Professor Franz Schultz who promptly backed out as soon as he received the thesis, covering his retreat with polite manoevres [sic]. He and the Head of the Aesthetics Department, Professor Hans Cornelius, complained in private that they did not understand a word of the paper. Yielding to strong pressure, Benjamin unfortunately agreed to withdraw the thesis which was sure to be rejected. He had already lost his rapport with the university and with the university way of organizing the pursuit of learning. Having felt obliged to undertake the attempt, its failure in circumstances bound to arouse bitterness nevertheless moved him to a sigh of relief, clearly expressed in his letters. He was all to well aware of the kind of game that was being played in the academic disciplines of philosophy and literary history. Yet, by withdrawing the paper as a thesis, he lost the opportunity of publishing it with a foreword that would have placed on record the ignominy of the university that turned the thesis down. The foreword he had actually written and it is still in my possession. Indeed it may be said that this

paper—published in 1928 under the title *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of German Tragic Drama), is one of the most eminent and epoch-making habilitation theses ever submitted to a philosophical faculty. Its rejection, which set Benjamin finally on the road of the free-lance writer—or more aptly of the *homme de lettres*—compelled to earn his living by his pen, was a symbol of the state of literary scholarship and the mentality of the scholars during the Weimar period that has lately been the subject of so much praise. Even when it was all over, long after the Second World War, a highly equipped representative of that branch of learning was capable of dismissing the failure of Benjamin's academic bid with the nefarious and insolent phrase that 'you cannot habilitate *Geist'*. It was in keeping with that state of affairs that the book, when published, encountered a profound silence, and that in the years before Hitler not a single specialized journal deigned to review it.

Admittedly, Benjamin did not make things easy for his readers." (Scholem, Gershom. "Walter Benjamin." *The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, no. 1-19. Lecture 8*. trans. Lux Furtmüller. New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1965. pg. 14)

[iii] Scholem, Gershom. "Walter Benjamin." *The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, no. 1-19. Lecture 8*. trans. Lux Furtmüller. New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1965. pg. 9.

In 1965, Scholem addressed the Leo Baeck Institute in New York with a lecture on Benjamin's relationship with Judaism. The two had first become acquainted in 1915 and often communicated by correspondence, as Scholem moved to Palestine in 1923 (Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press, 1977. pg.195, note 53).

[iv] Ibid. 17. The two parts to which Scholem was referring are 1) the essay's treatment of the aura and the role played by new technologically-reproducible artworks in "prying an object from its shell, to destroy its aura" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 223), whose presence depends greatly on the sense of eternal durability in the artwork and 2) a development in thought where the film, that union of the revolutionary new technologies of the phonograph and camera lens, comes to be treated as the most cutting-edge (in a rupturing way that makes new history possible) medium of art ("Walter Benjamin," 17).

Scholem did not react favorably at all to the essay Benjamin sent him in 1938. In fact, it is probably worth reproducing some history via Buck-Morss' narrative:

> "But when Benjamin sent the essay to Gershom Scholem [also having sent it the same year to Brecht], the person who should have appreciated its 'mysticism' criticiszed its Marxism instead. Benjamin expressed disappointment and surprise that Scholem couldn't find the terrain of thought in which they were earlier both at home, blaming it on the French language of the copy. When they later discussed the essay in Paris in 1938, Benjamin defended himself against Scholem's criticism by claiming, according to Scholem, that in this essay, as always, his Marxism was 'not of a dogmatic nature but a heuristic, experimental one.' Scholem recalled him insisting that
>
> > …the transferal of metaphysical, indeed theological trains of thought which he had developed in our years together profited precisely within a

> Marxist perspective, because there they could unfold with greater vitality, at least in present times, than in the one for which they were originally intended." (Buck-Morss, *Origins*, 149-50. Text cited within Buck-Morss from Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, pg. 251)

Two further observations: first, Scholem appears to have agreed with Benjamin's sentiments about the French version's poor handling of certain terms. He certainly sounds relieved in 1965, looking back on how the *Kunstwerk* essay "was for a long time only available in a French translation which presented formidable hurdles to understanding, until the German text became accessible at last in 1955 [in Benjamin's *Schriften*]" (Scholem, "Walter Benjamin," 17).

Second, Brecht thought the essay far too mystical, criticizing the concept of the aura as utter metaphysical uselessness and decrying how it served as the basis in a materialist approach to history (Buck-Morss, 149).

[v] Buck-Morss, *Origins*. 162.

[vi] Ibid. 165 (emphasis mine).

[vii] "witness." *New Oxford American Dictionaries*. 2007. 8 April 2012.

[viii] In a less coded discourse, we could simply say "the relationship between exchange value and use value." The artwork essay figures a similar though unique tension between "cult value [*Kultwert*]" and "exhibition value [*Ausstellungswert*]," tied to, respectively, the mystical, aesthetic, interior, exclusive, and, on the other hand, the secular, political, exterior, inclusive (Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." *Illuminations*. ed. Susan Buck-Morss. trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1977. pg. 224-25).

[ix] Cf. note 3 above. Adorno's "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" appeared first in German as "Charakteristik Walter Benjamins" in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955).

[x] Adorno, Theodor W. "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin." *Prisms*. trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967. 229.

[xi] Scholem, "Walter Benjamin." 5.

[xii] Scholem, "Walter Benjamin." 5. He is referring specifically in this phrase to the 1966 collections of Benjamin's letters, which, as it turns out, he co-edited with Theodor and Gretel Adorno. These appeared in two volumes as Benjamin's *Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966).

[xiii] Ibid. 9.

[xiv] Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin." 231.

[xv] Ibid. 231, emphasis mine.

[xvi] Ibid. 232.

[xvii] Ibid. 232, my emphasis.

[xviii] Doing so turns the ontological first questions into ever-present, durable questions, a move that maintains the primacy of the "first" while also leaping over the burdens of "first."

[xix] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. pg. 232.

Cf. the *Kunstwerksarbeit*'s epigraph from Valéry, "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial" (217).

[xx] Ibid. 233.

[xxi] Ibid. 233. Cf. with the German text from the *Dritte Fassung*: "Der apparatfreie Aspekt der Realität ist hier zu ihrem künstlichsten geworden und der Anblick der unmittelbaren Wirklichkeit zur blauen Blume im Land der Technik" ("Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." Accessed online 9 April 2012. http://www.arteclab.uni-bremen.de/~robben/KunstwerkBenjamin.pdf.

[xxii] Ibid. 233.

[xxiii] Ibid. 233-4, my emphasis.

[xxiv] Cf. quotation from pg. 4, and note 4 as well.

[xxv] Cf. pg. 10 and note 12.

[xxvi] Some of the more salient pieces of the constellation Adorno constructs are: Benjamin's fascination with snowglobes (233); his distaste for words like 'personality' (235); his x-ray vision (231); his similarity to the young Hegel (236); his glance as Medusan (233); and others (Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin").

[xxvii] Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics*. 170. Cf. pg 182 as well:

"The idea that a cluster of elements which on the surface appeared to be unrelated and irrational (in this case, responses to an opinion questionnaire) could be rearranged in various trial combinations (the final F scale was the product of many such arrangements) until they fell into a configuration with an inner logic which could be read as meaningful (here the structure of the authoritarian personality) fully paralleled the method of

constructing constellations which Adorno had outlined in his 1931 inaugural address, and hence his and Benjamin's Königstein position. The fact that the tests were administered not to a 'random sample,' but to groups representing 'extremes' (from middle-class students to inmates of a prison and a psychiatric institution) also reflected Benjamin's approach, just as the distinction between the latent and manifest meaning of the questionnaire items paralleled Benjamin's distinction between intention and 'unintentional truth.'…At the same time, the empirical method of *The Authoritarian Personality* avoided what Adorno had considered the defect of Benjamin's later work (and reflected Horkheimer's influence) in that all the elements of the constellation were related to a general theory of anti-Semitism and their interpretation was in every case mediated by that theory."

[xxviii] Letter, Adorno to Benjamin, 18 March 1936. *Aesthetics and Politics*. trans. Ronald Taylor. London: NLB, 1977. 124. Adorno's emphasis.

[xxix] Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics*. 146.

[xxx] Letter, Adorno to Benjamin, 10 November 1938. *Aesthetics and Politics*. 127. Emphasis Adorno's.

[xxxi] Ibid. 129.

[xxxii] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999. [N1a,8] pg. 460.

[xxxiii] Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin." 236.

[xxxiv] Ibid. 233-4.

[xxxv] Letter, Adorno to Benjamin, 18 March 1936. *Aesthetics and Politics*. 126, my emphasis.

3

The Gambler as Critical Historian: Metaphor, Allegory, and Critical Theory/Praxis

Method of this project: I hold in my hands the slips of paper that are my notes as they were the cards dealt to me as if in the gambling hall. I can only win by closely guarding their true power and by reading the house's odds against me. The stakes are no lower than my soul itself. The cards in my hand, the chips on the table, they are the reified beauties of my work. In card play the dual realms of work and leisure justify themselves before the materialist conception of history.

—RNC

It is perhaps beating a dead horse to begin by citing the shared etymological senses of the words metaphor and translate. Both metaphor, from Greek *meta* + *pherein* "to carry/bear across," and translate, from Latin *trans* + *latus* "to carry/bear across," internalize a linguistic action of transference and delivery in their very names. That talk of the shared etymologies of metaphor and translation should itself become an exercise in metaphors and translation suggests a curious play between abstractions and the particulars. One wonders to what extent translation is actually like metaphor, and vice versa, whether all creation of metaphor and every act of translation is like carrying an object between two, or more even, places. In reality, the multifarious historical uses and meanings of a word calcify, in a process reminiscent of subterranean mineral formations, in its spoken, signed, or graphic form. As Wittgenstein put it, if we see *that* a word means one thing, we are not acting as a translator; we are reporting—"carrying back," as it were—but without actual carrying, just observing.[i] On the other hand, if we recognize seeing a word *as* signifying many possibilities at once, our metaphorical translating faculties come to bear. Translation and metaphor, then, is not a mere statement of perspective but the active manipulation of, and participation in, language that changes not only the object of its "bearing across" but also, on the delivery side, the atmosphere and context of linguistic understanding, i.e. significance.

In book twenty-two of the *Poetics*, Aristotle, going over the ways in which complexity and nuance in diction heighten the force behind language and give it color, says that "the greatest thing is the use of metaphor. That alone cannot be learnt; it is the

token of genius. For the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblance."[ii] It is difficult to convey succinctly in English the layers of metaphor that Aristotle's diction in the Greek carries with it, once again, via etymologies. In what follows, I propose to do a closer reading of the phrase praising metaphor from *Poetics* in order to suggest the presence of an allegory inherent in metaphor's double-sense of seeing and acting, making it the paradigm of language's ability to pre-anticipate—almost with the sense of stage design—not just to affect, but effect certain responses from the person interpreting the metaphor. From there, I believe that we can move from Aristotle to Walter Benjamin, someone whose critical feel for the texture of figuration becomes evident in his writing's preoccupation with calling something by name to perform some duty. I will bring some of Benjamin's metaphors from his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" into conversation with the figure of the gambler from a chapter of the *Arcades Project* and wager myself on their analogous relationship to the allegory of speculation, in all senses of the word, in *Poetics*.

In Greek, the text cited above from Aristotle's treatment of metaphor appears as follows: *monon gàr toûto oúte par' állou esti labein euphuias te sémeion esti: tò gàr eu metaphérein tò tò homoion theõrein estin*.[iii] First of all, we should render a more literal translation in English: "For this [the use of metaphor] alone is both impossible to acquire from another person and is a sign of a native genius [*euphuias*, a good quality by nature]. For the making of good metaphors [*tò eu metapherein*] is the beholding [*tò…theõrein*] of the similar element [among differences, presumably]" (translation mine). I wish to emphasize two words here, *metapherein* and *theõrein*. In the former of the two, we have, in one sense, the gerund form of *to metaphorikon*, "the metaphorical thing," but, more

importantly, a verb also used as a synonym of transference, "carrying across or with." As for the other word, *theõrein*, its etymology reveals a historical context of seeing, but a particular type of regarding. *Theõrein*, from whose roots we have English "theory" as well as "theater," can be the mere act of beholding, viewing, but it comes from the context of an official spectator, the *theõros*, present at religious festivals and public games.[iv] What's more, the *theõros* also served as the state ambassador sent to an oracle (*theõros* as a combination of *theós* + *õra*, "god [+] concerned, heeding") to procure a prophecy or to present an offering.[v] And so, returning to Poetics, when Aristotle says "the making of…metaphors is the beholding…," he is obliquely figuring his statement with 1) the image of carrying, bearing one thing across to somewhere else, and 2) a word tied to officials whose function is ceremonial, either at games and festivals or before an oracle, the medium of the gods.

Thus at once, Aristotle sees *that* metaphor is an eye for the similar but also sees metaphor-making *as* a mystical allegory: just as an ambassador, a *theõros*, a representative of the people, bears some question or gift to offer to an oracle so that she might foretell events to come—the language of which must also be interpreted—so the poet, one characterized by *tò tò homoion theõrein*, offers his metaphor up as a thing of prophecy, a sign directly carrying across, *eu metapherein*, the messages of heaven. In this allegory, I perceive a connection between the eye that sees and the hand that offers, carries, bears, acts. The public representative of the *theõros*, then, becomes the living incarnation of the place where theory and praxis of both poetics and politics intersect.

This allegory of poet and metaphor, to me, seems to suggest something analogous to Benjamin's metaphors in his artwork essay that in turn, I intend to show, can be best

understood by the allegory of the gambler from the "O" *Konvolut* of the *Arcades Project*. The specific metaphor to which I am referring is the play of the German word *Spiel* in the artwork essay. While Benjamin uses the example of a *Schauspieler*, the actor, as well as *Bühneschauspiel*, the stage actor; *Spielraum*, the "field of action"; *Spielart*, variety; and *Schauspiel*, a pageant;[vi] it is this last case that I want to consider here. Hannah Arendt's edition of the artwork essay renders the phrase "*ein Schauspiel, das keinerlei Konzentration verlangt, kein Denkvermögen voraussetzt*"[vii] quoted from Georges Duhamel on the ways film serves as a new distraction for the masses, as "a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence."[viii] In section XV Benjamin goes on to defend the positive value of being in a state of distraction with the following:

> A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regards to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.[ix]

We must consider Benjamin's formulations in light of the essay's general argument that reproducible-on-a-mass-scale forms of art destroy the aura that Benjamin sees as dangerously tied with *Kultwert*, cult-value. This cult-value represents a mystification of the original use-value of works of art that, in the case of religious icons and institutionally-owned "authentic" paintings, perpetuates exclusive, class-centered access to the methods of production and modes of reception of artworks. For Benjamin, to concentrate on a work of art is to be "absorbed by it," penetrated and arrested by the art's socially-created, artificial aura. In the metaphor of the Chinese painter, Benjamin means

to show how overly cult-valued art represents a subjugation of man to the art rather than a controlling of the medium on behalf of the viewer. In the essay's Epilogue he stresses the threat this "aestheticization of politics" poses with respect to de-individualizing. That is, in construing the destruction of the individual subject as beautiful and pleasurable, Futurism and Fascism glorify a de-humanization, such as mass death either in war or in Nazism's demands for consolidation of plural interests into totalitarian ones.[x] In response, Communism "politicizes aesthetics," partly working from a state of mass distraction.[xi] No one's interests overrule those of another; all society is viewed as comprising individual occurrences of individual subjects.

The key to the mechanism at play here in a state of distraction, a state, to quote Duhamel again, "requiring no concentration and presupposing no intelligence," one based on instincts, reflex, and habit, is the fact that, without concentration, the masses liquidate and move beyond the bourgeois desire to interpret the unknown, to predict the future, to read history as a text of progress. If Benjamin abhors the idea of anything, as the artwork essay, the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, and the *Arcades Project* make quite clear, it is the false ideology of history as progress and development. So, to understand Benjamin's refuting of Duhamel's figuring of the film as a spectacle, a pageant to which the masses pay no "authentic" critical attention, we should look at the curious word itself *Schauspiel*. *Spiel* in German, like *theõrein* and *metapherein*, can be translated in many forms, anything from play to match to game to gambling. In the last sense Benjamin's "O" *Konvolut* in the *Arcades Project* illuminates the ways in which the gambler's, *der Spielers*, state of distraction becomes an allegory of the materialist approach to viewing history, an approach that Benjamin conflates with the film's ability to show us a

consciousness that may appear as continuous but in truth is built of independent, spurting, ruptures that blend together to create the illusion of trends and direction.

For instance, analogous to film techniques' demystifying of a linear perception of time, seeing trends in past events in order to predict the odds of something happening in the future are rendered absurd by game theory:

> The greater the component of chance in a game, the more speedily it elapses. This state of affairs becomes decisive in the disposition of what comprises the authentic "intoxication" of the gambler. Such intoxication depends on the peculiar capacity of the game to provoke presence of mind through the fact that, in rapid succession, it brings to the fore constellations which work—each one wholly independent of the others—to summon up in every instance a thoroughly new, original reaction from the gambler. This fact is mirrored in the tendency of gamblers to place their bets, whenever possible, at the very last moment—the moment, moreover, when only enough room remains for a purely reflexive move. Such reflexive behavior on the part of the gambler rules out an 'interpretation' of chance. The gambler's reaction to chance is more like that of the knee to the hammer in the patellar reflex.[xii]

In other words, the non-superstitious gambler's imposed state of distraction, of living in the moment, as it were, becomes a resistance to being absorbed by the aura of the game, particularly of almost winning, which as Benjamin says "will cause the uninitiated to think that he is 'in luck' and has only to act more quickly and courageously the next time around."[xiii] We must not fail to notice something in Benjamin's language, however: despite his allegory of *der Spieler*'s rejection of concepts of fate or luck as they appear on the gambling table, and in spite of his refusal to condemn the image of a *Schauspiel* "which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence"—moves seeming to react against Aristotle's mystical image of a *theõros* in the course of his civic-religious duties—despite Benjamin's materialist view condemning this auratic figure as an allegory of anti-enlightened *Kultwert* par excellence, he still uses the same language in

talking about *der Spieler* or the masses' reception of films. "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,"[xiv] says Benjamin in the artwork essay, and the same de-mystification that reproducible artworks shed on aesthetics in general applies with gambling's relation to divination. Benjamin muses in the Arcades Project, "Are fortunetelling cards more ancient than playing cards? Does the card game represent a pejoration of divinatory technique? Seeing the future is certainly crucial in card games, too."[xv] Even as the fortuneteller's cards' *Kultwert* can be figured as having passed away with their secularization as playing cards, we might also draw the metaphor of their rebirth in an altered form. The proof of this transforming rebirth lies with the superstition of luck in card games or of the cult of the "star" in Hollywood.

Before tying together all these loose ends into some semblance of progression and development, we shall pause over one last metaphor Benjamin uses of the gambler, which brings Aristotle's mystic allegory of metaphor and the artwork essay's viewing/reading of film *qua* consciousness-rupturing into its aura. He figures *der Spieler* in the Arcades Project as the swordsman, a fencer: "Only the future that has not entered as such into his consciousness is parried by the gambler."[xvi] Benjamin's mode of cognition makes the metaphor of the gambler into a duel with time itself—dead time that appears as a string of unchanging, set-in-stone events leading in the direction of "progress," maybe Benjamin's most hated word when paired with history. He stands, much as the materialist historian, in opposition to time figured as history-as-progress. The "future that has not entered as such into his consciousness" is the dream of the future, an

interpretation, something carried across, or sent down, from the gods. He takes the gamble if he chooses to wager on a firm interpretation of the oracle's prophecy.

Benjamin stands in a strange place between materialism and mysticism. In materialist, dialectical thinking of history he sees the tools to approach a broken reality consisting of images and accumulated things. In mysticism, with its nature of metaphor as paradoxically distant and alongside (*par' autou*, in the Poetics: metaphor bridges chasms of misunderstanding between two people while also remaining impossible to learn from another person), Benjamin sees the power to alter perceptions, raise or tear down institutions, and in short, accomplish things. What materialism gives to theory, to spectating, beholding, and offering, mysticism delivers by praxis, by carrying across, doing. For Benjamin, the two irreducibly non-identical terms find their intersection in the gambler, in *speculation*: speculation, the combination of spectating—observation—expecting, and prospecting, that is, betting and gambling. In the big payout, the proletariat might accomplish seemingly instantaneously what would otherwise take an age; similarly, in the catastrophic loss, the bourgeoisie brings about its own destruction by increasing risky speculation. But, Benjamin would stress, this outcome will most likely never come to pass—the bourgeois-owned house has the advantage—if anticipating the future relies on superstition, whose hands hold the sword but whose eyes are blind.

Notes:

[i] "*Seeing that* vs. *Seeing as*." Philosophical Investigations. Wikipedia. Viewed 6 March 2012. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_Investigations#cite_ref-25>.

[ii] Aristotle. *Poetics*, 1459a. ed. R. Kassel. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966. online at *Perseus Project*. Viewed 6 March 2012.

http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0055%3Asection%3D1459a.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Middle Lidell entry for "*theõros*." Greek Word Study Tool. Perseus Project. Viewed 6 March 2012. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=qewro%2Fs&la=greek&can=qewro%2Fs1&prior=*)efe/sia#lexicon.

[v] ibid.

[vi] Benjamin, Walter. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. dritte Fassung. §IX; §VIII; §XIII; §XIV; and §XV, respectively. Viewed 6 March 2012. http://www.arteclab.uni-bremen.de/~robben/KunstwerkBenjamin.pdf.

[vii] ibid. §XV. pg. 26.

[viii] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." trans. Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. Online. Viewed 6 March 2012. < http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/benjamin-work-of-art.html>.

[ix] ibid. §XV.

[x] ibid. "Epilogue"

[xi] ibid. "Epilogue"

[xii] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999. [O12a,2], pg. 513.

[xiii] ibid. [O13,1], pg. 513.

[xiv] Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." §II.

[xv] Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. [O13a,2], pg. 514.

[xvi] ibid. [O13,2], pg. 513.