Benjamin, Cinema and Experience:
"The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"

Miriam Hansen

In the representation of human beings through the apparatus, human self-alienation has found a most productive realization. ["The Artwork in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility" (first version, 1935)]

Concerning the mémoire involontaire: not only do its images not come when we try to call them up; rather, they are images which we have never seen before we remember them. This is most clearly the case in those images in which —like in some dreams— we see ourselves. We stand in front of ourselves, the way we might have stood somewhere in a prehistoric past, but never before our waking gaze. Yet these images, developed in the darkroom of the lived moment, are the most important we will ever see. One might say that our most profound moments have been equipped —like those cigarette packs—with a little image, a photograph of ourselves. And that "whole life" which, as they say, passes through people’s minds when they are dying or in mortal danger is composed of such little images. They flash by in as rapid a sequence as the booklets of our childhood, precursors of the cinema, in which we admired a boxer, a swimmer or a tennis player. ["A Short Speech on Proust," delivered by Benjamin on his fortieth birthday, 1932]

Benjamin’s reputation in contemporary film theory and criticism rests to a large extent upon his 1935/36 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” probably the single most often cited text by Benjamin or any other German writer on film.1 That the

1. "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" ("The
essay was written under the influence of Brecht facilitated its assimilation to debates on Brechtian cinema as they took place during the 1970s, for instance, in the British journal *Screen*. The particular blend of Marxism and modernism that determined the reception of Benjamin’s work, however, tended to obscure the more incongruous and ambivalent features of the Artwork Essay, not to mention its problematic status in relation to Benjamin’s other writings. Such a reading was no doubt encouraged by the programmatic tenor of the essay itself, the construction of its argument through a sequence of theses. Yet the one-sided and reductive gesture that may have secured the essay a place in college textbooks cannot be taken at face value; it is just as bound up with the political constellation in which the essay was written as are the contradictions that it so desperately tried to resolve.

In the following, I will elaborate on some of the incongruities of the Artwork Essay and situate them in relation to a theory of experience as it emerges from some of Benjamin’s middle as well as later texts. Brushed against the grain of its programmatic message, the essay still speaks to a number of questions arising at the boundaries between film history, film theory and film criticism. More specifically, Benjamin’s remarks on film touch upon an area for which Tom Gunning, borrowing from Eisenstein, has proposed the productively ambiguous term “cinema of attractions.” This term offers a historical concept of film spectatorship which takes its cue from modes of fascination prevalent in early cinema, feeding on attractions such as the magical and illusionist power of filmic representation, its kinetic and temporal manipulations (not yet subordinated to character movement and the chronological momentum of linear narrative) and, above all, an openly exhibitionist tendency epitomized by the recurring look of actors at the camera. With the standardization of the narrative film (in the U.S. around 1906-07), such “primitive” attractions were systematically suppressed — if not pressed into service — by narrative strategies of viewer absorption and identification. Rather than disap-

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pear, Gunning contends, the cinema of attraction continued “under-
ground,” both in certain avant-garde film practices and as a compo-
nent of particular genres (e.g. the musical) and, I would add, in the
erotic appeal of particular stars. Although the historical phenomenon
in question can be traced most distinctly through the process of its
elimination and appropriation, it nonetheless preserves, in its under-
ground existence, an alternative vision of cinema—a range of film/spect-
tator relations that differ from the alienated and alienating organiza-
tion of classical Hollywood cinema.

The dual focus of this argument is itself endebted to a historical dis-
course on the cinema. It resumes a perspective articulated among
Western European avant-garde artists and intellectuals during the
1920s which was marked by an enthusiasm for the possibilities of the
new medium and a simultaneous critique of its actual development, in
particular its opportunistic recourse to traditional literary and theatri-
cal conventions. In this spirit, Dadaists and Surrealists celebrated the
cinema’s primitive heritage, especially slapstick comedy with its anar-
chic physicality or trick films in the style of Méliès. Likewise, many
writers on the left seized upon contemporary Soviet film as an alterna-
tive to mainstream cinema, as a model of realizing — and reconciling —
the cinema’s aesthetic and political potential (cf. the German recep-
tion of Potemkin).

A decade later, when Benjamin wrote his Artwork Essay, the “all-out
gamble of the historical process” (Kracauer) in which film and photog-
raphy were to play a decisive role seemed all but lost; instead of
advancing a revolutionary culture, the media of “technical reproduction”
were lending themselves to oppressive social and political forces—first and foremost in the fascist restoration of myth
through mass spectacles and newsreels, but also in the liberal-capitalist
marketplace and in Stalinist cultural politics. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s

2. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the
Avant-Garde,” Wide Angle 8.3/4 (1986): 65-70. The question of the difference or
alterity of early cinema has been debated by a number of film scholars—among
them Robert Allen, Charles Musser, Noel Burch, David Bordwell and Kristin
Thompson. On the transgressive potential of eroticism in the star cult see my ar-
ticle, “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship,”
Cinema Journal 25.4 (Summer 1986): 6-32. Thomas Elsaesser examines similar
questions with regard to the historical specificity of Weimar Cinema; see “Film
History and Visual Pleasure: Weimar Cinema,” in Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices,
ed. Patricia Mellenkamp and Philip Rosen (Frederick, MD: University Publications
of America, 1984), 47-84.

3. Siegfried Kracauer, “Die Photographie” (1927), in Das Ornament der Masse
concern with the photographic media still participates in the avantgarde perspective of the 1920s (unlike Adorno’s work on mass culture which clearly belongs to another period). The belated moment of the Artwork Essay only enhances the utopian modality of its statements, shifting the emphasis from a definition of what film is to its failed opportunities and unrealized promises. Thus, the cinema becomes an object—as well as a medium—of “redemptive criticism,” the same effort of critical preservation that inspired Benjamin’s work on Baulelai re and the Paris Arcades, the Passagen-Werk.4

Benjamin actually conceived of the Artwork Essay as a heuristic construction, a “telescope” which would help him look through “the bloody fog” at the “phantasmagoria of the nineteenth century” so as to delineate in it the features of a future, liberated world.5 The “bloody fog” of 1935 made him deploy, in a strategic confrontation, the transformation of experience in industrial society (of which the cinema was both symptom and agent) against traditional notions of art, in particular a belated cult of l’art pour l’art. He had been pursuing a critique of the latter for quite a while, specifically in his polemics against the George circle. Now, with the growing threat of fascism — not only in Italy and Germany but other European countries as well — he perceived a complicity of aesthetic ideology (and individual intellectual exponents like Ernst Jünger and F.T. Marinetti) with the fascist aestheticization of politics and war.6

4. Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” (1972), New German Critique 17 (Spring 1979): 30-59; Habermas in fact includes the Soviet film of the twenties among the objects of Benjamin’s redemptive criticism, a claim that is borne out by a comparison of the status of Soviet film in the Artwork Essay with Benjamin’s earlier, somewhat more distanced and critical report on “The Situation of Russian Film Art” (1927), GS II.2: 747-751, and his defense of Battleship Potemkin in his response to Oskar Schmitz, ibid., 751-55. The first to emphasize the redemptive thread running through Benjamin’s work, connecting philosophy of history, aesthetic theory and the phenomenology of everyday life, was of course Siegfried Kracauer whose own work of the 1920s testifies to a deep affinity with such intentions, likewise rooted in Jewish mysticism: “Zu den Schriften Walter Benjamin’s” (1928), Ornament der Masse, 249-255. Also see Richard Wolin, Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).


6. Epilogue to the Artwork Essay, I, 241-42; “Pariser Brief <1>” (1936), GS III:
From this perspective, reproduction technology figures as an unintentional ally, as it were, prior to any revolutionary possibilities (I, 281). To repeat the by now familiar argument: the technical reproducibility of existing works of art and, what is more, its constitutive role in the aesthetics of photography and film have created a historical standard which affects the status of art in its core. With the elimination of qualities that accrued to the artwork as a unique object — its presence, authenticity and authority, its “aura” — the standard of universal reproducibility shatters the cultural tradition that draws legitimacy from the experience of art, thus baring the entanglement of art and social privilege. At the same time, technical reproduction assumes a crucial role in view of the crisis and reorganization of the urban masses. In this constellation, technical reproduction converges, as an objective development, with self-critical tendencies within the institution of art itself, forced into the open by avant-garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism (I, 237-38, 249-50).

Having established the terms “aura” and “masses” as opposite poles of the political field of force, Benjamin proceeds to assert a functional affinity between masses and the media of technical reproduction by way of what might be called a phenomenological syllogism. If the aura is defined as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be,” the contemporary masses are characterized by an anti-telethetical intention, “the desire [...] to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”

Every day the urge grows stronger [unabweisbarer, i.e. less refutable] to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its image [Bild] or, rather, its copy [Abbild], its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels differs from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality of things [Sinn für das Gleichartige in der Welt]” has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of its

reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the growing importance of statistics.7

Mounted as an argument about large-scale historical shifts in the collective organization of human perception, this passage distinguishes two, perhaps three, interdependent aspects of such a change: its manifestation along spatial and temporal registers (distance/proximity, permanence/transitoriness), and the modality of an object in relation to others, defined by the register of singularity vs. multiplication, similarity or likeness. These aspects may overlap in illustrating the decay of the aura, yet they give rise to diverging lines of argument when Benjamin tries to establish a functional affinity between media and masses.

The spatio-temporal line of argument links film and photography to social change through the concept of “shock,” which Benjamin was to elaborate in his 1939 essay on Baudelaire (“Some Motifs in Baudelaire”) and which he already assumes in the Artwork Essay, especially the first version. The adaptation of human perception to industrial modes of production and transportation, especially the radical restructuration of spatial and temporal relations, has an aesthetic counterpart in the formal procedures of the photographic media—the arbitrary moment of exposure in photography and the fragmenting grip of framing and editing in film. With its dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, with the rapid succession and tactile thrust of its sounds and images, film rehearses in the realm of reception what the conveyor belt imposes upon human beings in the realm of production.8 Resuming Kracauer’s concept of “distraction,” Benjamin cites this grim parallel for its cultural negativity, its subversion of the bourgeois cult of art and of a mode of reception predicated on individual contemplation

7. I, 228, translation modified. Zohn’s translation obliterates the crucial distinction between Bild and Abbild, obviously related terms which have acquired an antithetical meaning at this particular historical juncture: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.” Likeness, reproduction—same difference. At a loss for an antithetical term in what follows, Zohn instead constructs an opposition between “reproduction” on the one hand and “image seen by the unarmed eye” on the other, a freestyle addition to Benjamin’s text.

8. Draft notes relating to the Artwork Essay, GS I.3: 1040; also see “Baudelaire,” I, 175.
and illusionist absorption. In its emphasis on formal discontinuity and disruption, film's rehearsal of the shock effect would thus coincide with the tenets of political modernism, i.e. the Brechtian elements of a "cinema of attraction." (Yet, as I will argue later, the psychoanalytic premises of Benjamin's concept of shock certainly point beyond this affiliation).

While the spatio-temporal reorganization of experience is traced primarily in the realm of cinematic reception, the line of argument that stresses likeness and multiplicity seems to rely, to a greater extent, on the peculiarity of cinematic representation, the iconic relationship between film and referent. Following an interesting discussion of screen acting, Benjamin establishes the masses as the pre-eminent subject matter of a liberated cinema which he sees prefigured in certain Russian films (e.g. Vertov): "Any man today can lay claim to being filmed" (I, 231). To be sure, this phrase also concerns changes in the relations of reception, in particular, the democratization of expertise which upsets the traditional hierarchy between author and reader/viewer. But modelling his notion of expertise on the fluctuating boundary between commentator and participant in popular discourse on sports events (e.g. newspaper boys discussing the outcome of a bicycle race), Benjamin draws a problematic analogy between live events and a medium of spatio-temporal displacement—an analogy that assumes an unproblematic relationship between film and reality. Relying thus upon the iconic self-evidence of photographic reproduction, he suggestively conflates semiotic and political senses of representation, making the latter vouch for the revolutionary potential of the former.

Moreover, by illustrating this revolutionary potential with references to statistics and polytechnical education, he clearly places the cinema on the side of "experiential poverty" (Erfahrungsarmut), a term that marks a problematic slippage, in Benjamin's writings of that period, between a historical phenomenology tracing the decline of experience and the political endorsement of such a decline for the sake of what

10. The question of screen acting is treated at much greater length in the first version of the essay (GS 1.2: 449-455) where it furnishes an important link between Benjamin's notion of shock and the political function of the cinema, a point to which I will return later.
he calls a “new, positive concept of barbarism.” In light of this agenda, the distinction between “Bild” (image) and “Abbild” (image in the sense of copy, reflection, reproduction) congeals into a binary opposition; reduced to one side of that opposition, a politically progressive cinema would have to become a training ground for an enlightened barbarism. With the denigration of the auratic image in favor of reproduction, Benjamin implicitly denies the masses the possibility of aesthetic experience, in whatever form (and thus, like the Communist Party during the 1920s, risks leaving aesthetic needs to be exploited by the enemy). More important yet, he cuts himself off from a crucial impulse of his own thought — crucial at least to a theory of experience in the age of its declining communicability. Since Benjamin’s contribution to current debates in film studies rests upon an elaboration of the place of cinema in conjunction with this very theory, I will take a detour through some aspects of his concept of “Erfahrung,” a term which “experience” approximates only in the vaguest and most preliminary sense.

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The self-denigrating slant of the Artwork Essay comes into focus only when compared with other writings of his middle and later period in which Benjamin actually tries to redeem an auratic mode of experience for a historical and materialist practice. Relevant here are above all his essays on Surrealism, on photography and on the “mimetic capability”; his work on Proust, Kafka, Leskov and Baudelaire; his epistemological remarks on the “dialectical image” in the Passagenwerk; and, finally, his first-hand account of the effects of hashish. Whether concerned with aesthetic, psychological or historical questions, all these texts contribute to a theory of experience in which the phenomenon Benjamin calls “aura” plays a precarious yet indispensable part.

Benjamin’s attitude towards the decline of the aura is profoundly ambivalent, just as the concept of aura itself displays an “irritating ambiguity.”12 In his 1931 essay on photography, he ventures a first definition of the phenomenon (“a peculiar web of space and time”)13 which he resumes, with slight modifications, in the Artwork Essay.

We define [the aura] as the unique appearance \(Erscheinung\) of a distance, however close it may be. Resting on a summer afternoon and letting one’s gaze follow a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow on one — that means breathing the aura of those mountains, that branch. \([I, 222-23]\)

With this image of an impersonalized subjectivity, Benjamin defines the aura as a mode of perception experienced in relation to natural objects; yet the definition is offered by way of illustrating a historical development — the withering of the aura in the traditional work of art. If the perception of the aura thus refers to a particular appearance of nature in potentially all objects, it is also conceptualized, from the start, as dependent upon the social conditions of perception, as contingent upon historical change.

What then is the particular quality of auratic perception, what makes it indispensable to experience \(Erfahrung\) in the emphatic sense of the word? Significantly — and, perhaps, at first sight paradoxically — the perception of the aura in natural objects rests upon “a projection of a social experience among human beings onto nature.”14 That experience, as Benjamin elaborates in his later essay on Baudelaire, is the anticipated reciprocity of the gaze: “The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return. To experience the aura of a phenomenon means to invest \(belehen\) it with the capability of

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12. Marleen Stoessel, \(Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin\) (Munich: Hanser, 1983), 25. The following remarks to some extent retrace Stoessel’s argument. Also see Habermas, 44-47.


returning the gaze. This experience corresponds to the data of the mémoire involontaire” (I, 188).

While Benjamin alludes to a phenomenological concept of the gaze, he above all invokes the romantic metaphor of nature opening its eyes (Augenaufsclagen der Natur) which already occurs, in a kabbalistic guise, in his 1916 essay on language.15 The notion of “Belehnung” implies both a particular kind of attentiveness or receptivity (the human capability of responding to another’s gaze, whether visual or intentional) and the actualization of this intersubjective experience in the relationship with non-human nature. Hence the experience of the aura in natural objects is neither immediate nor ‘natural’ (in the sense of mythical) but involves a sudden moment of transference, a metaphoric activity.16

The gaze that nature appears to be returning, however, does not mirror the subject in its present, conscious identity, but confronts us with another self, never before seen in a waking state. Undeniably, this kind of vision is not wholly unrelated to the sphere of the daemonic, in particular Freud’s notion of the “uncanny” to which I will return in conjunction with the sexual and gender-specific implications of auratic experience. The Freudian connotation, like the reference to the mémoire involontaire and Benjamin’s glossing of Proust as an expert in matters of the aura, suggests what commentators have pointed out: that the “unique appearance of a distance” which manifests itself in the perception of spatially present objects is of a temporal dimension, marking the fleeting moment in which the trace of an unconscious, “prehistoric” past is actualized in a cognitive image.17

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15. “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” R, 314-32; 325ff. In the kabbalistic framework of this essay, the motif of endowing nature with an answering gaze is prefigured, in an acoustic and metaphysical dimension, in the problem of translation, in the disjunction between the mute language of nature and the multiplicity of human languages, and the fragmentary relationship of either to a paradisical language of names. Also see “The Task of the Translator” (1923), I, 69-82.

16. Perhaps deliberately understating the connection, Benjamin explains in a footnote that the endowment of nature with an answering gaze is “a source of poetry” and adds that “words, too, can have an aura,” illustrating this remark with one of his favorite quotations from Karl Kraus: “The closer you look at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back” (I, 200).

17. Stoessel, 45. Also see Benjamin’s comments on Baudelaire’s “correspondances” which are not simultaneous, as those of the Symbolistes, but are “data of remembrance,” conveying the “murmur” of a prehistoric past (I, 182 and note
Indeed, an important aspect of Benjamin’s notion of the aura is its complex temporality — which inscribes his theory of experience with the twofold and antagonistic registers of memory and history. First of all, Benjamin leaves no doubt that, being contingent upon the social conditions of perception, the experience of the aura is irrevocably in decline, precipitated by the effects of industrial modes of production, information, transportation and urbanization, especially an alienating division of labor and the proliferation of shock sensations. Yet only in the process of disintegration can the aura be recognized, can it be registered as a qualitative component of (past) experience. The first impact of that decline in turn marks a particular historical experience, which is what Benjamin reads, as a “hidden figure,” in the work of Baudelaire.

The traumatic reorganization of perception that masquerades as modernity manifests itself most obviously in spatial terms, as an uprooting of the subject from a human range of perception which Mary Ann Doane describes as a “despatialization of subjectivity.” Since for Benjamin, however, time has conceptual priority over space, this shift is ultimately and more crucially a matter of detemporalization. The images of loss that he evokes in his essay on Leskov, “The Storyteller” (1936), drift from the erosion of spatial relations crucial to the epic tradition — the proximity of the collective of listeners, the mystery of faraway places — to that of the temporal conditions of experience, the dissociation of collective memory and individual recollection, the latter surviving only in the privatized subjectivity of novel writing and reading. The reification of time not only has eroded the capability and communicability of experience — experience as memory, as awareness of temporality and mortality — but the very possibility of remembering, that is imagining, a different world. “The decay of the aura and the atrophy of the vision [Phantasievorstellung] of a better nature (owing to the defensive position of class struggle) are one and the same.”

13, 198-99). The emphasis on the momentary, epiphanic character of auratic experience is linked to a Messianic concept of time, in particular the notion of Jetztzeit, the time of the Now.


19. PW, J76, 1. It is significant that this sentence is preceded by a description of
Superimposed upon the historical-materialist trajectory of decline is a less linear — though no less pessimistic — sense of belatedness, indebted to the temporality of Jewish Messianism. The affinity of the concept of aura with Benjamin’s early speculations on language (see note 15, above) suggests another concept of history, defined by the trajectory of Fall and Redemption. The tension of destructive and utopian impulses characteristic of radical Jewish Messianism could actually be seen as a matrix for Benjamin’s ambivalence towards the aura, even before that ambivalence was enforced by revolutionary intentions and political despair. Thus, because the aura as the necessary veil of beautiful appearance (schöner Schein) pretends to a premature, merely private reconciliation with a fallen world, it requires the destructive, “masculine,” demystifying gesture of allegory, the mortifying grasp of knowledge, of critical reading. For only in a fragmentary state, as “quotation,” can the utopian sediment of experience be preserved, can it be wrested from the empty continuum of history which, for Benjamin, is synonymous with catastrophe.

auratic experience in the reciprocity of the erotic gaze, linking individual sexual desire to the Utopian longings of the human species, and followed by a somewhat laconic equation of the decay of the aura with the decay of potency. While the issue here is impotence in Baudelaire, along with the historical dissociation of sexus and eros (J72a, 2), Benjamin places it in a political context of the bourgeoisie’s ceasing to concern itself with the future of the productive forces unleashed in its service, the decline of the Utopian imagination (J63a, 1; J75, 2). The connection between libidinal and political imagination is resumed in the second of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” I, 253-54 (even more explicit in the restored German edition, GS 1.2: 693-94), where the redemptive promise of erotic happiness is established as the basis of that “weak Messianic power” which links every generation to the preceding ones and by which the past “is referred to redemption.” In this context, also see Christine Buci-Glucksman, Walter Benjamin und die Utopie des Weiblichen (Hamburg: VSA, 1984), 34-35.


21. The trajectory between allegorical destruction and redemption links Benjamin’s earlier work, in particular The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1925) and
The possibility of transforming an aural mode of experience, of redeeming it from the dead-end of cult and social privilege, turns on a particular moment in the development of the productive forces—which Benjamin designates as the “dialectical, Copernican turn of recollection.” This moment is the anticipated awakening of the “dreaming collective,” a key metaphor in the sections of the *Passagenwerk* written before 1935, and the dream refers to the historical nightmare of capitalism. “Capitalism is a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-sleep came over Europe, and in it, a reactivation of mythic powers.”

With this theoretical trope, Benjamin added a decisive—and, to critics like Adorno, dangerous—twist to the philosophical concept of “Naturgeschichte,” according to which both terms, “nature” and “history,” are dialectically mediated rather than antithetical. Thus, while man’s historical subjection of (both inner and outer) nature left nothing in nature that was not historical (and hence alienated), history itself had assumed the appearance of nature, masking its social and economic relations as mythical fate. Taking this concept one step further, Benjamin decided to treat the 19th century, with its unprecedented proliferation of ever new commodities, consumer goods and fashions, as “an original form of prehistory [Urgeschichte]” (N3a,2) so as to get at the layer of dreams that both sustained and exceeded the historical order of production. As mythical images, the phantasmagorias of modernity were by definition ambiguous, promising a classless society while perpetuating the very opposite; yet as dream images they could

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his major essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (1922), to his writings of the final years, especially section N of the *Passagen-Werk* and his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). Also see his “Central Park,” 46: “The image of ‘redemption’ entails the firm, seemingly brutal grasp [Zugriff].”


be read and transformed into historical images, into strategies of waking up. To quote Susan Buck-Morss,

The nightmarish, infernal aspects of industrialism were veiled in the modern city by a vast arrangement of things which at the same time gave corporeal form to the wishes and desires of humanity. Because they were "natural" phenomena in the sense of concrete matter, they give the illusion of being the realization of those wishes rather than merely their reified, symbolic expression. [...] It was as "dream-images of the collective" — both distorting illusion and redeemable wish-image — that they took on political meaning.24

Benjamin found this perspective prefigured in the Surrealists, especially their explorations of "the most dream-like object in the world of things": the city of Paris. In Aragon's Paysan de Paris and Breton's Nadja, he recognized his own fascination with an urban landscape cluttered with objects that had lost their value as commodities, the most recent casualties of the cult of the New. Surrealism "was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'obsolescent,' in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them."25 To be sure, such energies are revolutionary primarily in their negativity; the misery revealed in the afterlife of interiors, of enslaved and enslaving objects, translates into politics as a "revolutionary nihilism." Yet, as "everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world," the outdated displays of the Paris arcades present an "ideal panorama of a primeval time barely gone by [einer kaum verflossenen Urzeit]," "a world of secret affinities."26 Thus, the unruly assimilation of the modern to the archaic not only challenges history's claim to progress; it also offers a chance of redeeming auratic experience as a cog-

25. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (February 1929), R, 181 (trans. modified). In a letter to Scholem of 1929, Benjamin refers to the Surrealism Essay as "an opaque paravent before the Arcades project" (PW, 1090). For an earlier statement on Surrealism see his "Traumkitsch" (1927), GS II.2: 620-22.
nitive mode, transformed by the historical demolition of the aura under the impact of shock. As Habermas observes: “The experience released from the ruptured shell of the aura was, however, already contained in the experience of the aura itself: the metamorphosis of the object into a counterpart [Gegenüber]. Thereby a whole field of surprising correspondences between animate and inanimate nature is opened up, wherein even things encounter us in the structures of frail intersubjectivity.”

To Benjamin, the Surrealists signalled the possibility of such a redemptive turn by their efforts to overcome the esoteric, isolating aspect of inspiration, to give the aural promise of happiness a public and secular meaning—to make it a “profane illumination.” Whether in their collective amnesic communication, their experiments in automatic writing or pursuits of erotic passion, they defined the sphere of political action in terms of the sphere of their physical and psychic existence and vice versa, projecting an integral “sphere of images [Bildraum]” that might be up to the experiential needs of a “collective physis.” Clearly, Benjamin was not interested in Surrealism as a literary movement (nor in its occult and neo-romantic tendencies) but, rather, in the anti-aesthetic impulse of its manifestos, collages and performances—in the radical crossing of the artificial flowering of images of second nature with a mode of experience traditionally reserved for those of an ostensibly more primary nature. “We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optics that perceives the everyday as impenetrable and the impenetrable as everyday.”

The possibility of experience in a disenchanted world, indeed the very possibility of conceptualizing experience, also implies a crossing in another sense, the charting of a historical and epistemological transition, a veritable “work of passage.” A figure probably closer to

27. Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,” 45-46.
28. “Surrealism,” R, 192, 190; GS II.1: 309f., 307. The political implications of this program are fleshed out more clearly in Adorno’s commentary on Benjamin’s recourse to the discourse of dreams: “The absurd is presented as if it were self-evident, in order to strip the self-evident of its power.” Über Walter Benjamin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 54. It should also be remembered that Benjamin saw Surrealism as a practical critique of official Marxism, the tradition of “metaphysical materialism” which has consistently neglected the unconscious and libidinal side of human experience and failed “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.” Also see Benjamin’s draft notes, GS II.3: 1021-41.
Benjamin's intellectual persona than the Surrealists is that of the flaneur, a key figure in both the Passagen-Werk and the essays on Baudelaire. Already in 1929, the year he wrote the essays on Surrealism and on Proust, Benjamin sketched out his theory of experience in a review of a contemporary book on Berlin, "The Return of the Flaneur."29 This review illuminates the connection between Benjamin's notion of the aura and a secularized, profane mode of experience in a number of ways, anticipating the most important aspects of his theory of experience. The journey of the writer as flaneur (in this case Franz Hessel) is diametrically opposed to that of the tourist who seeks out the monuments and exotic attractions of foreign sites; rather, it is a purposeless purposeful drifting into the past which turns the city into a "mnemotechnic device." The muse of memory takes the flaneur, invariably, on an itinerary which leads, "if not down to the Mothers [of Goethe's Faust], so into a past which is all the more fascinating since it evokes more than the author's merely individual, private [...] childhood or youth, more even than the city's own history." As the detective/priest of the "genius loci," the flaneur reads this "more" in the phenomenology of the minute and inconspicuous, the "scent of a particular threshold or the touch of a particular tile." Since such images "inhabit" the city as a collective space, the literal "wooden threshold" turns into a "metaphoric" one, and the "penates" or "threshold goddesses" — like those that fascinated Benjamin at the entrance of the Paris arcades — become spatial allegories of a temporal crossing or historical change ("Zeitenwende"). For anybody who can read its signs, who can make the "stony eyes" of these pagan deities "look back at us," this crossing harbors a density of meanings, at once habitual and disjunctive, intersecting past and future, history

29. "Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs" (review of Franz Hessel, Spazieren in Berlin, 1929), GS III: 194-99. One might as well substitute Benjamin's own writings on Berlin, "Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert" (1932; an earlier version of which is "A Berlin Chronicle," R, 3-60), as well as the fragments of Einbahnstrasse (1928) and the series entitled "Denkbilder," GS IV.1: 305-438. The "Denkbild" (thought image) is the medium of Benjamin's peculiar mode of theorizing which attempts to resolve the opposition between a philosophical (Kantian) concept of experience and the historical (and thus temporally disjunctive) texture of the lived moment. In this context, the importance of childhood memory for Benjamin's work cannot be emphasized often enough, in particular his insistence on the historicity of the childhood experience of each generation; see Buck-Morss, "Passagen-Werk," 217ff.
and myth, loss and desire, individual recollection and collective unconscious.

It is that mode of reading which Benjamin tried to theorize, from an anthropological-historical perspective, in his speculations on the “mimetic faculty.” Like Kracauer’s earlier and Adorno’s later concepts of “mimesis,” Benjamin’s too has to be distinguished, absolutely, from the traditional, Platonic concept of mimesis as well as from contemporary Marxist theories of reflection (Widerspiegelung); it was actually in explicit opposition to the latter—as much as in observance of the Biblical taboo on representation—that the writers of the Frankfurt School endorsed and redefined the idea of mimesis. Moreover, the concept of mimesis complements the philosophical analysis of Naturgeschichte, in that it envisions a relationship with nature that is alternative to the dominant forms of mastery and exploitation, one that would dissolve the contours of the subject/object dichotomy into reciprocity and the possibility of reconciliation.30

Benjamin himself referred to the first version of the essay, “The Doctrine of Similarity” (written 1933), as a “theory of language” and explicitly linked it to his 1916 essay, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” Two years later, after finishing the second version of the essay, “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1935), he thanked Gretel Adorno for sending him Freud’s essay on “Psychoanalysis and Telepathy,” emphasizing its affinity with his own reflections on the mimetic residue of language.31 Considering these two points of reference, it seems safe not to expect anything resembling a realistic concept of representation. In semiotic terms (following Peirce), mimesis is not concerned with an iconic relationship, a perceptual likeness between sign and reality. If the correspondences actualized by the mimetic faculty pertain to any aspect of signification, then it is to the realm of the indexical, which involves a relationship of material contiguity hinging upon a particular moment in time and thus brings into play the disjunctive temporality of all reading.32

30. On “mimesis” in Adorno and Benjamin, see Buck-Morss, Origin, 87f. The concept is central, not only to the Frankfurt School’s philosophy of history, most notably Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944), but also to Adorno’s posthumously published Aesthetic Theory (1970).
31. Editors’ commentary, GS II.3: 950-58; another source Benjamin himself suggests in a letter to Scholem is the kabbalistic book of Zohar.
32. Philip Rosen has recently drawn attention to the connection between
The mimetic faculty in human beings responds to patterns of similarity or correspondence in nature; it is the capacity to recognize and produce such correspondences in return. Benjamin traces this capacity back to phylogenetic and ontogenetic modes of imitating nature, the former a necessary conforming to nature’s superior force, the latter still present, without obvious purpose, in the games of children. “A child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train.” As both examples suggest, the mimetic faculty, like the analogue patterns that stimulate it, is subject to historical change. Thus, our capacity of perceiving similarity has definitely diminished; but the similarities we perceive consciously (e.g. in faces) relate to the “countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all” like “the tip of the iceberg” to its submarine volume. “The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation.” Obviously, this question overlaps with the question of the aura, and the rephrasing of the question, as we shall see, opens up an important dimension in Benjamin’s theory of experience.

A key term for understanding the transformation of the mimetic faculty is the notion of “non-sensuous similarity” (“unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit”) which Benjamin illustrates, in a characteristic detour, with reference to astrology (a paradigm he himself relates, in a preliminary note, to the question of the aura; GS II.3: 958; 956). In an archaic past, he insists, there was a mimetic correspondence between a person’s moment of birth and the constellation of the stars; more important yet, it was perceived by the ancients and passed on to the new-born as the gift of mimetic knowledge. The perception of this correspondence, however, was bound to a moment in time, a fleeting instant (the moment of birth, the particular constellation of the stars) and depended upon the presence of a reader, individual or collective, for an interpretation.

indexicality and temporality in the film theory of André Bazin (“History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin,” Wide Angle, forthcoming 1987). On the basis of Rosen’s redemptive critique of Bazin, there are indeed some interesting parallels between Bazin and Benjamin, although their concepts of history are worlds apart, owing not only to the latter’s commitment to historical materialism but likewise to a different religious and theological background.

33. GS II.1: 205, 210. The second version of the essay is translated in Reflections, 333-36; the first version, translated by Knut Tarnowski, with an introduction by Anson Rabinbach, in New German Critique 17 (Spring 1979): 65-69. In the following I rely on the first, longer version unless otherwise indicated.
Astrology is merely a belated — and rather “crooked” — theory in relation to this early practice, reinterpreting — and often misinterpreting — the latter’s dates which by now have lost any sensuous and experiential basis of similarity.

Benjamin might as well have used the example of psychoanalysis: the Freudian theory of repression similarly relies on the assumption that there is meaning in everything and that everything truly significant has already happened in the past; the repressed moments of infancy return in our adult lives as alien, distorted (and distorting), unreadable signs. But Benjamin leaves the child playing at being a windmill or a train and instead turns from astrology to another “canon of non-sensuous similarities” — language. It need hardly be repeated here that Benjamin’s theory of language is diametrically opposed to a Saussurean view of language as a system of arbitrary and conventional signs. This does not necessarily mean that he subscribes to an onomatopoeic view of the origin of language. Rather, he shifts, via the problem of translation — the relationship between words of different languages denoting an identical meaning — to an area central to the tradition of linguistic mysticism: written language, the graphic image of words and letters. “The most important of these connections may well be the one ... between written and spoken language,” governed by a similarity of a highly abstract, non-sensuous degree.

At this juncture, psychoanalysis enters through the backdoor of graphology which “has taught us to recognize images, or more precisely picture puzzles [Vexierbilder], in handwriting” as a hidden trace of the writer’s unconscious. The mimetic faculty expressed in individual writing, Benjamin suggests, must have played an even more important part in the archaic history of written language: “Thus, along with language, writing has become an archive” — and, he adds later, our “most complete archive” — “of non-sensuous similarities or non-sensuous correspondences.” This “magic” aspect of language, however, is inseparable from its semiotic aspect and the meaning of each mani-


35. On different directions in graphology, among which he singles out a more recent psychoanalytic approach against earlier positions, in particular Klages, see “Alte und neue Graphologie” (1930), GS IV.1.2: 596-98.
fests itself only through the material basis of the other. Hence, the perception of similarity is bound up with the temporality of reading, the momentary and ephemeral configurations of meaning, their “flashing” into a constellation. Yet the growing speed of writing and reading also enhances “the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language,” to a point where (and here the 1935 version departs from the earlier one) the transformed “powers of mimetic production and comprehension [...] have liquidated those of magic.”

Rather than a theory of language as such, Benjamin’s reflections on the mimetic faculty imply a theory of reading. The mimetic dimension of reading responds to a level of meaning which Roland Barthes, faute de mieux, has termed the “third” or “obtuse” meaning. For Benjamin, the semiotic aspect of language encompasses both Barthes’s “informational” and “symbolic” levels of meaning, whether in abstract philosophical, political, psychoanalytic or narrative discourses, while the mimetic aspect would correspond to the level of physiognomic excess. As the reference to Barthes implies, Benjamin’s notion of reading was not confined to written material, but ranged from the ancient reading of constellations on the surface of the sky — “to read what was never written” — to a critical reading of the “natural” phenomena of nineteenth-century capitalism. The medium of such critical reading is language, to be sure, but the “temporal abyss,” the cognitive disjunction which propels such reading, is more than a metaphor of the aporetic nature of all language. While language and experience in Benjamin are intimately interlocking terms, they can neither be identified with, nor hierarchically subsumed by, each other.

36. R, 336. It is no coincidence that, in a note relating to the mimetic faculty, the name of Brecht appears as an example of “a language purified of all magic elements” (GS II.3: 956).


38. The most brilliant attempt to claim Benjamin for the tradition of linguistic skepticism is the late Paul de Man’s reading of “The Task of the Translator,” Yale French Studies 69 (1985): 25-46. “Now it is this motion, this errancy of language which never reaches the mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach, it is this errancy of language, this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife, that Benjamin calls history. As such, history is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language; it is not natural, for the same reason; it is not phenomenal, in the sense that no cognition, no knowledge about man, can be derived from a history which as such is purely a linguistic complication; and it is not really temporal either,
What is at stake for Benjamin is the possibility of a different use of language, one that could mobilize the mimetic power historically concentrated in language against the "'Once upon a time' of classical historical narrative" (PW, N3,4). Defining the "pedagogic side" of the Arcades Project, he quotes Rudolf Borchardt: "To train our image-making faculty to look stereoscopically and dimensionally into the depths of the shadows of history" (N1,8). This heuristic gaze should produce, not hermeneutical images (in which past and present mutually illuminate each other as a continuum), but "dialectical images"—images "in which the past and the now flash into a constellation." The dialectical optics of the historical gaze arrests the movement of ('natural,' archaic, mythical, dreamlike) images in the moment of their "coming into legibility"; it gives them a "shock," that is, it allegorizes them into quotability. But only "at a standstill" can they become genuinely historical images, monads that resist the catastrophic continuity of time.39 "The first stage in this voyage will be to carry the montage principle over into history" (N2,6).

Before I resume the question of film by way of what might seem like a surreptitious analogy, I will briefly return to the notion of "non-sensuous similarity" and the implied distinction between similarity (or resemblance) and sameness, between affinity and identity—which is at least as crucial to Benjamin's vision of the cinema as the principle of montage. As we could see from his genealogy of the mimetic faculty, the category of similarity itself has undergone a change of meaning. It has withdrawn into non-sensuous, i.e. figurative, correspondences, not only because the subjective and intersubjective capability of perceiving similarity has declined, but because, for related reasons, the status of sensuous, i.e. obvious and literal, correspondences is irrevocably compromised by the effects of universal commodity production and a concomitant standardization of social identity and subjectivity. Indeed, experience in the emphatic sense confronts these reified forms of similarity with a different kind of similarity—which Benjamin unfolds in

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because the structure that animates it is not a temporal structure. Those disjunctions in language do get expressed by temporal metaphors, but they are only metaphors" (44). For an early response to deconstructionist readings of Benjamin, see Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation," New German Critique 17 (Spring 1979): 70-98.

his “Image of Proust” (1929): “The similarity of one thing to another which we are used to, which occupies us in a wakeful state, reflects only vaguely the deeper resemblance of the dream world in which everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise, opaquely similar one to another” (I, 204).

In Proust, the logic of unconscious association that distinguishes similarity from identity is that of the mémoire involontaire, the involuntary recollection (Eingedenken) which interweaves remembrance and forgetting into a textual counterpart or, rather, inversion of “Penelope’s work,” yet like hers a work that stems itself against the linear course of time. Remembrance, in the Proustian as well as Freudian sense, is incompatible with conscious remembering (Erinnerung) which tends to historicize, to fixate the image of memory in an already interpreted narrative event (Erlebnis); not self-reflection, but an integral “actuality,” a “bodily,” to some degree absent-minded “presence of mind,” is its prerequisite.40 Proust turned day into night and remembering into an unceasing, interminable textual process, driven by a “blind, senseless, obsessive [...] will to happiness,” which nearly made Benjamin’s own heartbeat stop in affinity. The “elegiac” direction of Proust’s quest, after all, was Benjamin’s own, just as the writer’s solitary endeavor to recapture, “synthetically,” a formerly collective mode of experience remained a daemonic shadow for the critic’s career, inseparable from his political itinerary and historiographic project. Moreover, the compulsion to transfigure a distorted existence into a “prehistoric” world of correspondences marks a decisive ambiguity, in the idea of “eternal recurrence,” between the mythical reproduction of catastrophic sameness and the utopian craving of “the yet once again” which characterizes the movement of desire, the inexhaustible structure of the wish:

Children know a symbol of this world: the stocking which has the structure of this dream world when, rolled up in the drawer, it is a “bag” and a “present” at the same time. And just as children do not tire of quickly changing the bag and its contents into third thing —namely, a stocking— Proust could not get his fill of emptying the dummy, his self [die Attrappe, das Ich], at one stroke in order to keep garnering that

third thing, the image which satisfied his curiosity or, more precisely, assuaged his homesickness [...] homesickness for the world distorted in the state of resemblance, a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through. [I, 204-5]

The distortion, as Irving Wohlfarth points out in an excellent reading of this passage, “lies in the eye of the beholder qua identical subject.” If the “true face of existence” is “surrealist,” the only adequate mode of representation is one of mimetic transformation, figuration or displacement — the “distortion of distortion.” 41

It is no coincidence that the distinction between similarity and sameness again comes into play, a few years later, in Benjamin’s “Hashish in Marseilles” (1932). A physiognomic experiment par excellence, the drug had evoked in him “a deeply submerged feeling of happiness” which was more difficult to analyze than any other sensation he experienced in that state. Groping for a description, he recalls a phrase from Johannes V. Jensen’s Exotic Novellas (1919): “Richard was a young man with a sense for everything in the world that was the same [Sinn für alles Gleichartige in der Welt].” This sentence had pleased me very much. It enabled me now to confront the political and rational sense it had had for me earlier with the individual, magical meaning of my experience yesterday (R, 142-43). If before he had taken Jensen’s phrase to underscore the significance of nuances in an age of unprecedented standardization, it acquired a different meaning in conjunction with his artificially distorted perception: “For I saw only nuances, yet these were the same.” Benjamin attributes this blurring of similarity and sameness to a sudden “ravenous hunger to taste what is the same in all places and countries,” but he introduces this hunger by way of a metaphoric operation, a double troping of the Marseillean cobblestones (which might as well have been in Paris) as the bread (loaves) of his imagination. Towards the end of the passage, Benjamin recalls a train of thought beginning with, “All men are brothers,” whose last and — he assures us — “less trivial link” might have involved “images of animals.”

When, soon after, under the impact of the deepening political crisis, Benjamin reaches the conclusion that intellectuals on the left cannot

but actively promote the demolition of the aura, he finally seems to abandon the distinction between similarity and sameness altogether, collapsing the mimetic faculty into the manifest, 'obvious' iconicity of photographic representation. The quotation from Jensen returns in the Artwork Essay in a slightly modified form, as a general mode of perception whose growing "sense for things in the world that are the same [Sinn für das Gleichartige in der Welt]" has seized even the unique object by means of technical reproduction — and young Richard is elided in favor of the "contemporary masses" as the collective exponent of that sense. Incurring Adorno’s charge of romanticizing the proletariat, Benjamin splits off the element of similarity from his concept of mimesis and attaches it, as "sense of sameness," to the masses; he further positivizes it by placing it in diametrical opposition to the aura. Thus, he not only surrenders the ground of his theory of experience, the motivating tension of difference and affinity; he also makes the discontinuities of memory and history congeal into the linear presence of polytechnical education, popular expertise and a pseudo-scientific notion of "testing" which cannot be dissociated from its industrial-capitalist origin. If anything in Benjamin, it is this lapse into presence which would have to be considered nostalgic, especially in light of his later writings (the second Baudelaire essay and the "Theses on the Philosophy of History") which restore the dimensions of dialectical temporality to his thought, at a time when the political — and with it his personal — situation had darkened beyond recall.

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Even in the Artwork Essay, however, there are glimpses of mimetic cognition and figuration, suggesting that the cinema’s role in relation to experiential impoverishment could go beyond merely promoting and consummating the historical process. Undeniably, the medium of film, like photography, participates in that process. As a technology of reproduction, it expands, to an unprecedented scope, the archive of "voluntary, discursive memory" and thus inevitably reduces the play

42. The first version of the Artwork Essay still includes a reference to Jensen (GS 1.2: 440). Zohn's translation of the phrase as "sense of the universal equality of things" (I, 223) substitutes political pathos for physiognomic perception, exaggerating Benjamin's own tendency in the Essay.
of involuntary recollection. Likewise, its mechanical procedures intervene in temporal and spatial relations, disregarding ‘natural’ distances, and thus compound the proliferation of shock sensations that seal human consciousness in a permanent state of psychical defense. And, finally, the cinema epitomizes, in the very structure of the apparatus, the decline of the human capability to return the gaze, a historical experience Benjamin found registered in Baudelaire’s description of eyes that could be said to “have lost the ability to look” (I, 189). But precisely because of its contemporaneity and complicity with the industrial transformation of human perception, film could also fulfill a cognitive task: “Film is the first art form capable of showing how matter interferes with people’s lives. Hence, film can be an excellent means of materialist representation” (I, 247). Chaplin’s exercises in fragmentation are a case in point: by chopping up expressive body movement into a sequence of minute mechanical impulses, he renders the law of the apparatus visible as the law of human movement — “he interprets himself allegorically” (GS 1.3: 1040; 1047).

Besides allowing for an allegorical analysis of the shock effect, the mimetic capability of film also extends to specific techniques designed to make technology itself disappear. The complex and highly artificial manner in which film creates an illusion of reality, Benjamin argues, gives it a particular status in the technical mediation of contemporary life. As if by a logic of double negation, film grants us “an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment,” which is what human beings are “entitled to expect from a work of art” (I, 234).

The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, [...] presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the scene being enacted such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, crew, etc. — unless the position of his eye were identical with that of the lens. [...] In the theater one is well aware of the place from which the events on stage cannot immediately be detected as illusionary. There is no such place for the movie scene that is being shot. Its illusionary nature is a nature of the second degree, the result of editing. That is to say, in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect, freed from the foreign substance of equipment, is the result of a special procedure, namely, shooting from a particular camera set-up and linking the shot with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality
Here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become the 'blue flower' in the land of technology. [I, 232ff.]

This passage is one of the most puzzling in the essay and it is not exactly illuminated by Zohn's translating of the proverbial 'blue flower' of German Romanticism, Novalis' "blaue Blume," into an "orchid." What does Benjamin mean by the "equipment-free aspect of reality"? How, one might ask somewhat bluntly, does it differ from the reality effect, the masking of technique and production which film theorists of the 1970s were to pinpoint as the ideological basis of classical Hollywood cinema? First of all, the reality conveyed by the cinematic apparatus is no more and no less phantasmagoric than the "natural" phenomena of the commodity world it endlessly replicates; and Benjamin knew all too well that the primary objective of capitalist film practice was to perpetuate that mythical chain of mirrors. Therefore, if film were to have a critical, cognitive function, it had to disrupt that chain and assume the task of all politicized art, as Buck-Morss paraphrases the argument of the Artwork Essay: "not to duplicate the illusion as real, but to interpret reality as itself illusion."  

Still, why did Benjamin choose, albeit with a shade of irony, the highlyauratic metaphor of the Blue Flower — the unattainable object of the romantic quest, the incarnation of desire? I perceive in the above passage an echo of the "distortion of distortion" that Benjamin traces in the work of Proust, of which the "dialectical optics" of the Surrealists is just a more contemporary, collectivized (and certainly less memorable) version. Accordingly, "the equipment-free aspect of reality" that even generations who have learned to live with a declining aura and its false resurrections are "entitled to expect from a work of art" seems to me linked, in whatever alienated and refracted manner, to that "homesickness for the world distorted in the state of

45. Also see Benjamin's review of Aragon, "Traumkitsch" (1927), which begins with a reference to Novalis' Heinrich von Ofterdingen: "It is not so easy any more to dream of the Blue Flower" — instead of opening up a blue distance, the dream world has turned gray with dust (GS II.2: 620).
resemblance” which Proust’s writing pursued to the point of asphyxiation. Such film practice, however, would have to desist from submerging the contradictions of second nature in mythical images of the first, itself long domesticated and enslaved, and instead lend its mimetic capability to “a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through.”

Benjamin himself may not have made that connection explicit (and might not have approved of it), yet several lines of his argument suggest a position from which the cinema could be redeemed — for film history, film theory as well as film practice — as a medium of experience. To develop these lines, I will double back on the question of human self-representation which I had mentioned earlier, in conjunction with Benjamin’s shortcircuiting of the iconic quality of cinematic signification with the political rights of the masses. In the first version of the Artwork Essay, Benjamin elaborates in greater detail on the relationship of human beings and technology which, instead of liberating them from myth, confronts them as a force of second nature just as overwhelming as the forces of a more elementary nature in archaic times. This confrontation is rehearsed, in the field of art, whenever an actor plays before a camera instead of the virtually present theater audience: “To act in the stream of klieglights [Jupiterlampen] and simultaneously meet the requirements of sound recording is a highly demanding test. Passing this test means to maintain one’s humanity in the face of the apparatus.” The screen actor has to muster a total and bodily presence of mind while foregoing the aura that emanates from the here and now, the presence of the stage actor. At the same time, he or she knows, when confronting the inhuman gaze of the camera, that it substitutes for another gaze, physically absent yet intentionally present — that of a mass audience. The latter's interest in the actor's performance preexists the individual film, story or character portrayed: the actor becomes a stand-in, a representative of their own daily battle with an alienating technology.

For it is likewise an apparatus [Apparatur] that supervises the process by which, every day, the overwhelming majority of people living in cities and working in offices and factories are expropriated of their humanity. In the evening, the same masses flock to the movie theaters to watch an actor take revenge in their place, not only by asserting his humanity (or
whatever may appear to them as such) in the face of the apparatus but by making that very apparatus serve his own triumph. [GS 1.2: 450]

In the second version of the essay, Benjamin comes close to reversing his argument, now emphasizing the audience's placement on the side of the camera and admitting identification with the actor only insofar as the viewer identifies with the testing, critical, impersonal attitude of the apparatus (I, 228) — i.e. trimming it to a Brechtian concept of distanciation. Bracketing the obvious idealization at work in the earlier (though just as much in the later) version, I still consider the unrevised passage significant because it recognizes historical and collective dimensions even in a more naive form of spectatorial involvement, aspects of fascination and identification that are not necessarily exhausted by the textual interplay of scopic and narrative registers.\(^{46}\) Granted, Benjamin had every reason to mistrust the masses' interest in the screen actor, whether it fuelled the pseudauratic cult of the star or redefined standards of success in the arena of politics (I, 247) — an observation even more to the point in the 1980s than in the 1930s. If he appears to be taking a more positive view in the passage quoted above, he does so on no less political grounds. For the rhetoric of New Objectivity and proletarian culture notwithstanding, the triumph of the actor's "humanity" is, after all, a Pyrrhic victory; its power to move an audience is due to the negative reality it temporarily eclipses, the social and historical experience of alienation. Hence the alternative to the cinema's mirroring and administering of reified forms of identity is not simply a positive representation of the masses but, rather, a film practice that would give aesthetic expression to the scars of human self-alienation (Selbstentfremdung).

The mimetic transformation of such scars is not confined to the human body; it extends to the relationship between human beings and their environment — indeed, to invoke the more recent (and perhaps unique) example of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, the most radical sight/site of human self-alienation might be that of an environment evacuated of human life. This possibility is adumbrated

in Benjamin’s “Short History of Photography” (1931), an essay which anticipates (along with a first definition of the aura) another strand of the Artwork Essay: the metaphor of the “optical unconscious.” In his genealogy of photographic representation, Benjamin traces a dialectical movement from early images of the human countenance, the last refuge of aural intimations of desire and mortality; through late 19th-century portrait photography, with its masquerade of social identity against the backdrop of bourgeois interiors; to Atget’s photographs of deserted Paris streets, courtyards and shopwindows (shot “like scenes of crime”) in which the human form has been displaced with serial formations of everyday objects (rows of bootlasts, hand-trucks, uncleared tables). Having thus initiated “the emancipation of the object” from a deteriorated auratic context, Atget inspired the more programmatic efforts of Surrealist photography to promote a “therapeutic alienation between environment and human beings” — therapeutic again in the sense of a “distortion of distortion,” the dialectics of defamiliarization and similarity. Only a break with the personality-centered, commercial tradition of representation, Benjamin concludes, will restore a physiognomic sensibility towards both the human body and the world of things. This is demonstrated by “the best of Russian films” which teach us that, like the faces of people who have no investment in photographic immortality, “even milieu and landscape will reveal themselves only to those photographers who can read the nameless appearance [namenlose Erscheinung] inscribed in their countenance.”

The “nameless appearance” of things and faces is merely a more mystical designation of the phenomenon for which Benjamin coined the shorthand of the “optical unconscious,” “[das] Optisch-Unbewusste.” In the 1931 essay, he elaborates on a mimetic affinity of photographic technique (especially the possibilities of enlargement and split-second exposure) with the physiognomic aspects of its material, with “image worlds [Bildwelten] that inhabit the smallest things, readable though covert enough to have found shelter in day dreams” (GS II.1: 371). As he will repeat in the Artwork Essay, “it is evidently a different nature

47. GS II.1: 380; 379. The auratic connotation, inseparable from Benjamin’s political assessment of photography, obviously gets lost when “namenlose Erscheinung” is translated as “anonymity” (Screen 13.1: 21); for a link between Benjamin’s kabbalistic notion of the “name” — as in the paradisical language of names — and his concept of mimesis, of similarity as the organon of experience, see PW, 1038; also Buck-Morss, Origin, 88-90.
that speaks to the camera than that which speaks to the naked eye; dif-
ferent above all because it substitutes, for a space interwoven with hu-
man consciousness, another space, an unconsciously permeated space” (I, 236f.).

The attribution of psychic, physiognomic, even psychoanalytic faculties to the camera is a topos of early 1920s film theory, notably in Jean Epstein and Béla Balázsf. Benjamin’s conceptualization of the “optical unconscious” in the context of photography, however, points to a more specific source, Kracauer’s great essay of 1927. Prefiguring the superimposition of modernity and prehistory that Benjamin was to advance in his essay on Surrealism and the Passagen-Werk, Kracauer’s reflections on photography locate the radical function of the medium (intercut with an analysis of its ideological, mythological function) in the arbitrary moment of exposure, the moment of chance that might capture an aspect of nature at once alienated and released from the tyr-
anny of human intention — the “dregs of history.” In that tradition and, like Kracauer, indebted to Jewish mysticism, Benjamin develops the notion of an “optical unconscious” from the observation that the temporality of some early photographs, despite all preparation and artistry on the part of both model and photographer, compel the beholder to seek the “tiny spark of accident,” the “here and now” by which the image is branded with reality, and thus to find the “incon-
spicuous spot” which might yield, in the quality of that minute long past, a “moment of futurity responding to the retrospective gaze” (GS II.1: 371).

Such a belated form of “magic” is unavailable to the medium of film, given the compulsory temporality of the code of movement, not


49. Kracauer, “Die Photographie” (note 3, above), 24-25, 28, 32, 37-39; also see Heide Schlüpmann, “Phenomenology of Film: On Siegfried Kracauer’s Writings of the 1920s,” this issue.
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to mention narrative. This may be one answer to the question Benjamin poses in his notes to the Artwork Essay: “If the aura is in early photographs, why not in film?” (GS I.3: 1048). When he resumes the metaphor of the “optical unconscious” with reference to film, he complicates and to some extent revises that question, though again evading any explicit differentiation between the two media. While the Photography Essay illustrated the “optical unconscious” with examples from biophysics and botany, the Artwork Essay draws on the imagery of a social and mechanized world, the discourse of alienated experience. Significantly, Benjamin introduces the “optical unconscious” in the Artwork Essay (second version) with a reference to Freud’s Psychopathology of Everyday Life, noting the historical impact of this work on the perception of conversational parapraxes (“Fehlleistungen im Gespräch”). As Freud has altered our awareness of language, he argues, cinematic techniques such as close-up, time lapse and slow motion photography and, above all, montage have changed our perception of the visual world:

Our taverns and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our train stations and factories appeared to have us locked up beyond hope. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of one-tenth seconds, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly embark on adventurous travels. [I, 236]

In this context, Benjamin emphasizes the fragmenting, destructive, allegorizing effect of cinematic devices, their tendency to cut through the tissue of reality like a surgical instrument (I, 233). Revealing the ‘natural’ appearance of the capitalist everyday as an allegorical landscape, the camera’s exploration of an “unconsciously permeated space” thus overlaps with the area of investigation pursued, in different ways, by the flaneur, the Surrealist, the dialectical historian. Not surprisingly, Benjamin envisioned an “impassioned” film on the archeology of Paris in the Passagen-Werk (C1,9) — and we might add examples from a whole tradition of city films ranging from Vigo and Vertov through Godard, Kluge, Sander and Ottinger.

If the mimetic capabilities of film were put to such use, it would not only fulfil a critical function but also a redemptive one, registering sediments of experience that are no longer or not yet claimed by social and economic rationality, making them readable as emblems of a “forgotten future.” In other words, although film as a medium enhances the
historical demolition of the aura, its particular form of indexical mediation enables it to lend a physiognomic expression to objects, to make second nature return the look, similar to auratic experience in phenomena of the first. Such film practice, however, would not only have to reject the misguided ambition to adapt and prolong the bourgeois cult of art; it would also have to abandon classical standards of continuity and verisimilitude and, instead, focus its mimetic devices on a non-sensuous similarity, on hidden correspondences in which even the dreamworld of commodities may “encounter us in the structures of frail intersubjectivity.” Such a return of the gaze, in the emphatic sense, would always involve a transgressive, unsettling moment; it is certainly not, as in commercial conventions of direct address, “a question of the photographed animals, people or babies ‘looking at you’ which implicates the customer in such an unsavory manner.”

Like his remarks on film throughout the Artwork Essay, Benjamin’s elaboration of the “optical unconscious” oscillates between a description of technical innovations and their emancipative possibilities, between historical analysis and a utopian discourse of redemption. Rather than merely a case of methodological confusion, this sliding is motivated by a dialectical movement within certain key concepts (e.g. ‘nature,’ ‘history,’ ‘aura’) and theoretical tropes (e.g. ‘eternal recurrence,’ ‘dreaming collective’) whose meaning depends upon the particular constellation in which they are deployed. Thus, the recuperation of the cinema as a medium of experience brings into play a constitutive ambiguity in Benjamin’s concept of “shock,” an ambiguity crucial to his endorsement of a “distracted” mode of reception.

In the historical etiology emphasized earlier, shock figures as the stigma of modern life, synonymous with the defensive shield it provokes and thus with the impoverishment of experience. But the term is

also used to describe the moment of sexual recognition (as in Baudelaire’s sonnet “A une passante,” I, 169) which, while linked to a particular historical experience (the alienation inflicted upon love by urban life), an experience of loss, exemplifies the catastrophic and dislocating impact of auratic experience in general.\footnote{51} In this dialectical ambiguity, however, shock may assume a strategic significance — as an artificial means of propelling the human body into moments of recognition. Introducing a “tactile” element into the field of “optical reception” (GS I.2: 466), allegorical devices like framing and montage would thus have a therapeutic function similar to other procedures — the planned rituals of extraordinary physical and mental states, like drug experiments, flaneurist walking, Surrealist seances or psychoanalytic sessions — procedures designed to activate layers of unconscious memory buried in the reified structures of subjectivity. “From this perspective, film and photography could be considered as staged events [Veranstaltungen] for reclaiming collective and anthropological [menschheitsgeschichtliche] experiences which become ‘quotable’ as such only at the point when their actual, historically perverted substance disintegrates.”\footnote{52}

It is the possibility of such critical reinscription, finally, which makes the cinema indispensible to a new epic culture (in the Brechtian sense), as Benjamin suggests in his 1930 review of Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz. The cinema’s promise of collectivity resides less in the miraculous conversion of economically motivated quantity into political quality suggested in the Artwork Essay (I, 244), than in the shock-like configuration, or re-figuration, of social documents — images, sounds, textual fragments of an alienated yet common experience. The revolutionary potential of montage thus hinges not only upon the formal rehearsal of the shock-effect but also, and perhaps primarily, upon the mimetic power of its elements, the “complicity of film technique with the milieu.” Since the unconsciously permeated space re-


\footnote{52. Stoessel, 161.}
vealed at this historical juncture can only be a collective one, the cinema becomes a place in which traditional class structures collapse, allowing the bourgeois intellectual to cross over, a possibility — and no doubt an autobiographical need — which Benjamin had already spelled out in his defense of Potemkin: “The proletariat is the hero of those spaces whose adventures make the bourgeois abandon himself with a throbbing heart in the movie theater, because he must relish the ‘beautiful’ even and especially where it speaks to him of the destruction of his own class.”

* * *

The discontinuous return of an auratic mode of experience through the backdoor of the “optical unconscious” allows us to reconsider the concept of aura itself and perhaps to demystify some of its implications. The physiognomic quality that the Surrealists — and before them Proust — sought in the most ordinary objects may invite Marxist terms of analysis but ultimately eludes theories of commodity fetishism and reification. When Adorno proposed a clarification of the notion of aura along those lines, suggesting that the trace of the “forgotten human residue in things [des vergessenen Menschlichen am Ding]” was that of reified human labor, Benjamin insisted that this was not necessarily the object of forgetting and remembering he had in mind in the Baudelaire essay. “The tree and the bush that we endow [with an answering gaze] were not created by human hand. Hence, there must be a human element in objects which is not the result of labor.” That forgotten human element, as Marleen Stoessel argues in her ingenious commentary, is nothing but the material origin — and finally — that human beings share with non-human nature, the physical aspect of creation which Benjamin himself eclipses from his reading of Genesis in the 1916 essay on language. The dialectic of

53. “Erwiderung an Oscar A.H. Schmitz” (1927), GS II.2: 753. The review of Berlin Alexanderplatz is entitled “The Crisis of the Novel,” GS III: 230-36; on montage, 232f. The function of film, as of Döblin’s novel, is similar to that Benjamin ascribed to the flaneur as “epic narrator” — a sharpening of the “sense of reality, a sense for chronicle, document, detail” (III: 194).

54. Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, 29 February 1940; Benjamin’s response, 7 May, 1940, repr. GS I.3: 1130-35; 1132.
forgetting and remembering which constitutes his theory of experience therefore has more to do with a different kind of fetishism: the curious economy of knowledge and belief that occupied Freud.55

The pull of the past that maintains the aural wish as unsatisfiable may be veiled in metaphors of prehistory — Baudelaire’s vie antérieure — but it has a psychic source which is, quite literally, too close to home. The desire that beckons Benjamin from Goethe’s line, “Ach, du warst in abgelebten Zeiten meine Schwester oder meine Frau” (“Oh you were in bygone times my sister or my wife”)56 is clearly transgressive. And Benjamin’s autobiographical revelation (in the letter to Adorno quoted above) as to the “root of [his] ‘theory of experience’ ” leads us straight to what we might have suspected all along. Remembering childhood summer vacations with his family, he recalls his brother saying, after obligatory walks through idyllic landscapes, “Da wären wir nun gewesen” (“there we would now have been”). The curious temporality of aural memory — the utopian glimpse of a prehistoric past at once familiar and disturbingly strange — not coincidently resembles certain dreams that Freud describes in his essay on “The Uncanny” (1919), relating them to a male perception of the female genitalia as something uncanny (unheimlich):

This unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heimat [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a humorous saying: ‘Love is home-sickness’; and whenever a person dreams of a place or a landscape thinking, still in the dream, ‘this place is familiar to me. I have been there before,’ we may interpret the place as being the mother’s genitals or her body. In this case, too, the

55. Stoessel, 61f., 72-77, and ch. 5, especially 130ff. Adorno, in his letter to Benjamin, had proposed a distinction between two kinds of forgetting that come into play in Benjamin’s theory of experience, an “epic” and a “reflektory” (“reflektorisches”) forgetting (GS I.3: 1151). It would be interesting to consider this distinction in light of the ambiguity that riddles Freud’s own interpretation of fetishism, as to whether the fetishist’s inconsistency is located in processes of repression (i.e. in the unconscious) and a compromise-formation (“Fetishism” [1927]) or whether it actually entails a splitting on the same level, as in his later text, “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense” (1938); J. Laplanche & J.-B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 119.

56. I, 187; my emphasis.
unheimlich is what was once heimisch, home-like, familiar; the prefix “un” is the mark of repression.57

The pre-Oedipal wish can only survive as repressed, as displaced and transformed by fetishistic denial which for Freud, in any case, is a defense against the threat of castration. Benjamin’s writing seems driven by a desire at once to reverse and to rehearse that displacement, to destroy the fetishistic illusion while preserving the promise of happiness that it allowed to sustain. His theory of experience hovers over and around the body of the mother — as a memory of an intensity that becomes the measure of all cognition, of critical thought. As he announces in one of the earliest sections of the Passagen-Werk: “What the child (and, weakly remembering, the man) finds in the old folds of the mother’s skirt that he held on to — that’s what these pages should contain” (K2,2). Yet even this rare reference to the mother’s body succumbs to fetishistic mediation — memory resides in the fabric of the cloth — and thus refers us to the section on fashion (Konvolut B); here fetishism is explicitly linked to death, the “sex appeal of the inorganic” which guides the senses through the “landscape of the [female] body” (B3,8; B9,1). The image of the mother’s body, as disturbing to Benjamin as to patriarchal discourse in general, shortcircuits desire and mortality — of which castration is perhaps the most powerful metaphor.

More often, therefore, the source of anxiety and fetishistic displacement remains textually unacknowledged (or ironically distanced): threat and promise of the pre-Oedipal wish are in a sense re-fetishized, held in a semi-repressive abeyance which allows him to garner the reflections of its psychic, aesthetic and experiential intensity. This complex strategy of allusion and evasion is nowhere as evident as in Benjamin’s concept of the gaze, pitched betweenauratic vision and the historical reorganization of subjectivity. In a note to his essay on the mimetic faculty (1935), Benjamin speculates on the connection between the aura and astrology: “Are not the stars with their distant gaze the Urphänomen of the aura? Can we conclude that the gaze was the first mentor of the mimetic faculty?” (GS II.3: 958) Again, a prehistoric, phylogenetic perspective is offered instead of a more obvious one, namely, the constitution of the gaze in the relationship between

mother and child. The memory of what is all too close has to be projected into a stellar distance; yet this metaphorical defense allows Benjamin to conceptualize a dimension of reciprocity which defies the social and historical organization of looking, with its ceaseless reproduction of the subject in terms of mirror identity, unity, presence and mastery.

Benjamin comes closest to naming the absent mentor of the gaze in the second Baudelaire essay, when he cites Proust as implicitly touching upon a theory of the aura: “‘Some people who are fond of secrets flatter themselves that objects retain a trace of the looks that once rested upon them.’ (What else but the ability of returning the gaze.)” (I, 188). The prototype of a look that leaves a residue, that lingers beyond its actualization in space and time, is the maternal look that children (of both sexes) know upon themselves even as they are separating, and which actually enables them to separate.58 Assimilated to an Oedipal economy, the memory of this imagined glance is likely to succumb to repression — and hence bound to return as distant and strange. Elucidating Proust’s “evasive” remarks, Benjamin shifts to Valéry’s characterization of perception in dreams (“The things I see, see me just as much as I see them”) to arrive at Baudelaire’s lines, “L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles / Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.”59 The “gaze heavy with distance” that Benjamin reads in Baudelaire’s “regard familier” turns on the same axis that, according to Freud, links “unheimlich” to “heimlich,” a psychic ambivalence which challenges the narcissistic complacency of the gaze: “The deeper the absence of the counterpart which a gaze had to overcome, the stronger its spell. In eyes that merely mirror the other, this absence remains undiminished” (I, 189-90).

Benjamin undeniably participates in a patriarchal discourse on vision insofar as the auratic gaze depends upon a veil of forgetting, that is, a reflective yet unacknowledged form of fetishism which reinscribes the female body as source of both fascination and threat. In his almost obsessive and experimental undoing of that very defense, however, he seems to be seeking a position in relation to vision, to the image and


59. “Man wends his way through forests of symbols / Which look at him with their familiar glances” (I, 181-82; 189).
the eye, which has traditionally been assigned to women, as a group historically excluded from scopic mastery. Insofar as the social organization of vision is predicated on sexual difference, it is epitomized in the conventions of classical cinema which center the viewer in a position of voyeuristic separation and fetishistic distance. Given the centrality of the female image to a voyeuristically and fetishistically defined spectatorial pleasure, the woman’s look occupies a precarious (if not impossible) place, because it remains too close to the body, narcissistically over-identified with the image.\footnote{60} The distance that appears in the aural gaze is not exactly the same thing as the fetishistic distance that affords the male subject pleasure without anxiety (nor is the “absence” that the gaze has overcome to be equated with a Lacanian “lack”).\footnote{61} On the contrary, the pre-Oedipal wish that propels, albeit in a semi-repressed mode, Benjamin’s concept of the gaze potentially upsets the fetishistic balance of knowledge and belief, calling into question the binary opposition of distance and proximity that governs ‘normal’ vision, along with its alignment of sexual difference, subjectivity and identity. If anything, the aural gaze seeks to unravel the compromise that sustains “the dummy, the self” so as to conjure up the memory of a different world, a “world distorted in the state of resemblance.” By definition, such a mode of vision destabilizes the identical subject: “I have experience,” Benjamin quotes from Kafka, “and I am not joking when I say that it is a seasickness on dry land” (I, 130).

To recapitulate: the register of distance and proximity in Benjamin’s concept of the gaze — and theory of experience — exceeds spatial parameters, just as the gaze itself comprises both the visual sense and that of a phenomenological intentionality. Not only are distance and

\footnote{60. Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” \textit{Screen} 23.3-4 (Sept.-Oct. 1982): 74-87; 78-80.} \footnote{61. Terry Eagleton attempts to read Benjamin’s concept of the gaze through Lacan (“Of the Gaze as Object Petit a”) in \textit{Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism} (London: Verso, 1981), 38f.; this attempt — as most of the book — bears out the metaphor of cannibalism which culminates the author’s poem, “Homage to Walter Benjamin” (184). Undoubtedly, there are a number of contiguities between Benjamin and Lacan’s concept of the gaze (perhaps owing to a common phenomenological undercurrent), but there are also crucial differences: Benjamin, like Freud, was obsessed with questions of temporality and memory; Lacan’s concepts, as far as I can tell, fundamentally rely upon spatial models, which may account for their often criticized lack of historicity.}
proximity entwined in a single metaphor of psychic ambivalence, but their political significance is bound up with the question of temporality, referring at once to the mnemonic slant of experience and to the historical conditions of its possibility; indeed, the congealing of the temporal dialectic of experience into spatial categories (the negative distance of reified labor or aesthetic contemplation, the illusory closeness of the commodified image) is itself a sign of the times. With the “optical unconscious,” Benjamin readmits dimensions of temporality and historicity into his vision of the cinema, against his own endorsement of it as the medium of presence and tracelessness. The material fissure between a consciously and an “unconsciously permeated space” opens up a temporal gap for the viewer, a disjunction that may trigger recollection, and with it promises of reciprocity and intersubjectivity.62 That these promises remain largely unrealized, given the imbrication of vision, narrative and subjectivity in classical cinema, does not diminish the critical force of the argument. Rather, it reminds us that the privatized, isolating and one-sided voyeurism that defines spectatorship in classical cinema represents a particular historical formation — and not necessarily an ontological function of the apparatus as theorized, for instance, by Metz and Baudry.

Moreover, the notion of the optical unconscious offers a perspective on marginalized forms of spectatorship, historically associated not only with early cinema (the “cinema of attractions”) but also with the precarious position of female audiences in relation to classical modes of narration and address. Whether defensively stereotyped by male commentators or articulated in women’s own analysis of their Kinosucht (addiction to the cinema), female spectatorship was often perceived as a mode of reception at once excessive and compensatory, as seeking a distance in the gaze which was increasingly denied by social reality — and, for that matter, by dominant film practice.63 In her 1914 study of

62. This temporal gap that opens up in the world of things has nothing to do with the time-lag between seeing and knowing that assures the male child a cognitive superiority with regard to the regime of castration (Doane, “Masquerade,” 79f.). Rather, it is structurally closer to the effect of “trompe l’oeil” which Doane describes in her essay on “The Moving Image” (note 18, above), 45-49, as an undoing of a psychical defense by staggering and thereby breaking down into its elements the compromise of knowledge and belief that constitutes fetishism.

motion picture audiences, Emilie Altenloh found women — across class boundaries — generally responding more strongly than male moviegoers to the synaesthetic and kinetic aspects of film, besides expressing a greater interest in social melodramas, especially if they featured female protagonists; and even though they were likely to have forgotten plot or title of a particular film, the women interviewed vividly remembered sentimental situations, as well as images of waterfalls, ocean waves or drifting ice-floes. In the over-identification with such images, in the failure to maintain a narratively stabilized distance, is there not an element of Benjamin’s “daydreaming surrender to faraway things” (I, 191)? What is more, this different economy of distance and proximity also recalls a different organization of public and private spheres, a time when looking was not yet reduced to voyeuristic isolation. To quote Horkheimer and Adorno’s notorious statement: “Inspite of the films which are intended to enhance her integration, the housewife finds in the darkness of the movie theater a place of refuge where she can sit for a few hours free of obligations [unkontrolliert], just as she used to gaze out of the window, when there were still homes and the hour after a day’s work [Feierabend].”64 Such a mode of absorption may be regressive, to be sure, just as the identification — to the point of tears — with sentimental situations may not be wholly unrelated to masochism, yet it also has a cognitive function, in Adorno’s words, in giving “temporary release [...] to the awareness that one has missed fulfillment.”65

The affinity with a disposition attributed to female spectatorship crucially distinguishes Benjamin’s notion of “distraction” from a Brechtian concept of distanciation (Verfremdung). Certainly, the political valorization of a distracted mode of reception (as first elaborated by

Whose Public Sphere,” New German Critique 29 (Spring/Summer 1983): 147-84; 173ff. The term “Kinosucht” is used in Emilie Altenloh’s dissertation, Zur Soziologie des Kino (Leipzig: Spamersche Buchdruckerei, 1914), 65. Benjamin himself, in the first version of the Artwork Essay, singles out women as a particularly susceptible target for the capitalist film industry’s strategies of illusory mass participation (GS 1.1: 456). On the other hand, he motivates his “philosophical” interest in fashion by referring to “the extraordinary scent [Witterung] which the female collective has for things awaiting us in the future” (PW, B1a,1).


Kracauer) converges with the intentions of epic theater in its negation of the bourgeois cult of culture, in its radical critique of fetishistic illusionism and corresponding attitudes of individual contemplation and catharsis. Likewise, we can see how Benjamin, in his search for contemporary aesthetic models, might have assimilated Brecht’s strategy of demonstrating patterns of alienation (Entfremdung) through devices of estrangement (Verfremdung) to his own notion of a dialectical optics, the mimetic displacement he traced in Proust and the Surrealists. Yet the temporal gap that opens up with the optical unconscious, the surrender of spatial orientation to the gravity of the gaze, the memory image that seizes the beholder rather than vice versa — these aspects of Benjamin’s theory of experience belie his endorsement of entertainment as critical expertise. If anything, distraction still contains the possibility of losing oneself, albeit intermittently, of abandoning one’s waking self to the dreamlike, discontinuous sequence of sense impressions that Benjamin sought in his own experiments with hashish or drifting through the Paris Arcades.

The psychoanalytic undercurrent of Benjamin’s quest for experience, finally, links the Marxian analysis of alienation to the frontier between psyche and body, the realm which Freud troped as the bodily ego. The notion of human self-alienation implies the historical exchange with nature as Naturgeschichte, just as the idea of a reconciliation with nature crucially entails accepting the memory of those aspects of human nature which are sacrificed, from generation to generation, for the sake of the social domination of non-human nature. While Benjamin knew well enough that ideology and class interest were most effective on the level of the unconscious, especially if propped onto Oedipal necessity, he nevertheless — like Adorno and, for that matter, Marcuse — took eros to be a source of resistance against social forms of identity, a defiance of fate.66 Invariably, however, the subject’s relationship to the body is governed by the

66. See PW, O1,1, where he links sexual libido to the kabbalistic concept of the “name”: “The name itself is the cry of naked lust.” Also see “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1937), trans. Knut Tarnowski, New German Critique 5 (Spring 1975); 27-58; 50-54. The idea of a reconciliation with nature in the end turns on this libidinal materialism, just as the notion of a “complicity of nature with the liberated human being” which children know from fairy tales is associated with the rare experience of erotic bliss (Glück) (I, 102).
same dialectic of forgetting and remembering as the auratic gaze and, like the latter, can be traced only through tropes of psychic ambivalence — distance and proximity, strangeness and familiarity. Thus Benjamin speaks in his essay on Kafka of the body, “one’s own body,” as “that most forgotten alien land [Fremde]” (I, 132; 126), a territory as strange and familiar as the frontier creatures that populate Kafka’s tales.

Forgetting may be the prerequisite of auratic experience; but there is an aspect to forgetting which does not necessarily reach the reflective level of fetishism. Whether or not it plays a part in fetishism, the most purposeful form of forgetting is repression, and the price of repression is distortion, “the form that things assume in oblivion” (I, 133). The projection of a “mysterious guilt” that Benjamin observes in Kafka’s figures of distortion (or in Tieck’s “Fair Eckbert”) takes us back once again into the domain of the uncanny. For the self which auratic vision calls up from a prehistoric past, unsolicited and unexpected, is a daemonic double, more likely an antagonist than a narcissistic ego-ideal. Although he would not have concurred with the Freudian reading of this double, Gershom Scholem elucidates the importance of this figure in his speculations on “Benjamin’s Angel,” as a condensation of utopian, satanic and melancholy strands in his friend’s troubled genius. Benjamin himself often enough associated auratic vision with a moment of danger, even the confrontation of death, as in the speech on Proust he delivered on his fortieth birthday (see epigraph). According to Scholem, this was the date of his intended — though at the time not executed — suicide.

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67. Stoessel points out that the repressed which returns in Tieck’s story as uncanny is the “forgotten” knowledge that the hero’s deceased wife was actually his half-sister (Aura, 138f.). Though Benjamin invokes this story again in his exchange with Adorno concerning the question of forgetting, he carefully avoids any reference to the incestuous nature of the “mysterious guilt.”

68. Freud discusses the phenomenon of the daemonic double in his essay on the uncanny (On Creativity and the Unconscious, 140-143). At a later point in the essay, he reports two incidents — one autobiographical and one involving the physicist Ernst Mach — illustrating the shock of seeing oneself or, rather, mistaking one’s own image for someone else’s, in Mach’s case a “shabby-looking school-master” and in his personal case an unpleasant looking elderly gentleman (156). Doane elaborates on this effect (which in both cases is linked to movement) as an instance of the trompe l’œil (“When the Direction...,” 44ff.).

69. Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel” (1972), in On Jews and Judaism in Crisis (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 198-236; 236. Also see Scholem’s Walter
By the same token, the gap of human self-alienation that opens itself to the technically mediated gaze by virtue of the optical unconscious is not exactly of an idyllic, harmless, let alone nostalgic quality. Benjamin’s recourse to psychoanalysis, especially in connection with the cinema, takes on its full significance only against the backdrop of the particular social and political constellation. In the first version of the Artwork Essay, the reference to Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is missing; instead, the section on the “optical unconscious” is entitled “Mickey Mouse” and continues, past the ending of the section in the second version, with a speculation on its eponymous hero. With its techniques of mimetic figuration, Benjamin suggests, film can visualize a whole range of experiential modes outside so-called normal perception — deformations, displacements, catastrophes, forms of psychosis, hallucinations, dreams and nightmares — a process which involves translating individual experience into a collective form: “Film has launched an attack against the old Heraclitean truth, that in waking we share a world while sleeping we are each in separate worlds.” This is evident, according to Benjamin, not so much in cinematic renderings of the dream world, but in “the creation of figures of the collective dream such as the earth-encircling Mickey Mouse” (*GS* I.2: 462).

The collective dream is as much subject to historical change as individual dreams, and just as he attempted to put a phenomenology of dreaming and waking at the service of historical materialism, Benjamin also insisted on the historicity of dreams themselves: “The statistical analysis of dreams would push beyond the serenity of anecdotal landscapes into the waste land of battle fields. Dreams have decreed wars, and wars since the beginning of time have settled right and wrong and have defined the limits of dreams.”

Adorno, as is well known, had severe objections to Benjamin’s notion of the “collective dream,” not only because he suspected shades of Jung but because in his view any existing collectivity could only be false. Right as he may

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have been in questioning Benjamin’s political illusions concerning the self-organization of the proletariat, he underrated his friend’s insights into mass psychology. The bourgeois taboo on sexuality, as Benjamin argues in another context, has imposed particular forms of repression upon the masses, thereby fostering the development of sadistic and masochistic complexes which could in turn be used for purposes of domination. Thus, while references to Disney in the Passagen-Werk stress the utopian content, albeit weakened and repressed, of the collective fantasy, the Artwork Essay reads the figure of Mickey Mouse more specifically in terms of the political constellation of the 1930s. Given the technologically enhanced danger of mass psychosis, certain films may function as a kind of psychic vaccination: hyperbolizing sadistic phantasies and masochistic paranoia, they allow their viewers a premature and therapeutic acting out through collective laughter. In this historical constellation, Mickey Mouse joins the tradition of the American slapstick film, up to and including Chaplin, and as with the latter Benjamin never forgets that “the laughter [these films] provoke hovers over an abyss of horror.”

Benjamin’s reflections on Mickey Mouse, cut from the final version on Adorno’s advice, are remarkable especially in comparison with Horkheimer and Adorno’s indictment of Donald Duck in their chapter on the “Culture Industry” in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944). Much as the Disney films themselves may have changed in the intervening years, Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the sadomasochistic mechanisms operating in “the iron bath of fun” reveals a relatively reductive, behaviorist model of spectatorship: “Donald Duck in the cartoons, like the unfortunate in real life, gets a beating so that the viewers can get used to the same treatment.” Benjamin’s conception of spectatorship is in the end more complex, because he is less interested in a critique of ideology than in redeeming the reified images of mass culture and modernity for a theory and politics of experience.

73. GS I.2: 462; II.2: 753. In Benjamin’s radically anti-auratic essay, “Experience and Poverty” (1933), Mickey Mouse appears in a somewhat ambiguous role as the dream hero of those who are fed up with the accumulated experiences of culture and humanity (GS II.1: 218f.). In the material accompanying the Artwork Essay, however, we find the fragmentary note: “The availability of Disney’s method for fascism” (GS I.3: 1045).
Granting film dimensions of figurative difference and mimetic experience that Horkheimer and Adorno reserved only for works of high art, Benjamin could envision a cinema that would be more than a medium of illusionist presence, a cinema that would release its archaic dream into a practice of profane illumination. To be sure, this vision has to be grounded in a critical analysis of the culture industry or, to use Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s term, the “consciousness industry” — all the more since Horkheimer and Adorno’s pessimistic assessment has not only been vindicated in retrospect but is daily being surpassed by political reality. Benjamin’s concept of experience, however, with its emphasis on memory, historicity and intersubjectivity, remains a crucial ingredient in theories concerned with an alternative organization of the media, in particular Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s study, Public Sphere and Experience (1972). Adorno himself, especially in some of his later essays, resumed Benjamin’s perspective, to some extent revising his earlier objections surrounding the issue of collectivity and reception. I conclude with a quotation from Adorno’s “Prologue to Television” (1953) which asserts the utopian promise of aural distance in the very technology that appropriates and reproduces the viewer’s desire as that of a consumer.

It is impossible to prophesy what will become of television; its current state has nothing to do with the invention itself, not even the particular forms of its commercial exploitation, but with the social totality in and by which the miracle is harnessed. The cliché which claims that modern technology has fulfilled the fantasies of the fairy tales only ceases to be a cliché if one adds to it the fairy tale wisdom that the fulfillment of wishes rarely benefits those who make them. The right way of wishing is the most difficult art of all, and we are taught to unlearn it from childhood on. Just as the man whom the fairy has granted three wishes spends them on wishing a sausage on his wife’s nose and then wishing it away again, the contemporary whom the genius of human domination of nature allows to see into the distance perceives there nothing but the usual, embellished by the lie that it is different which lends a cloak of false meaning to his existence. His dream of omnipotence is consummated as

75. See especially his essay, “Transparencies on Film” (1966), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, New German Critique 24-25 (Fall/Winter 1981-82): 199-205; further references in my introduction to this essay, 186-198.
impotence. To this day, Utopias have been realized only to disabuse human beings of any utopian desire and commit them all the more thoroughly to the status quo, to fate. For television [Fernsehen] to realize the promise that still resonates in its name, it would have to emancipate itself from everything that revokes its innermost principle, the most daring sense of wish fulfillment, by betraying the idea of Great Happiness to the department store of the small comforts [die Idee des Grossen Glücks verrät ans Warenhaus fürs kleine].

76. Adorno, Eingriffe (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963), 80.