WORDS OF LIGHT

Theses on the
Photography of History

Eduardo Cadava
The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For it is an irretrievable image of the past that threatens to disappear with every present that does not recognize itself as intended in it.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, "Theses on the Concept of History"

I.

HISTORY. — The state of emergency, the perpetual alarm that for Benjamin characterizes all history, corresponds with the photographic event. In his "Theses on the Concept of History," assembled while fleeing from Nazi Germany, shortly before his suicide in 1940, Benjamin conceives of history in the language of photography, as though he wished to offer us a series of snapshots of his latest reflections on history. Written from the perspective of disaster and catastrophe, the theses are a historico-biographical time-lapse camera that flashes back across Benjamin's concern, especially in his writings of the 1930s, over the complicity between aesthetic ideology and the fascist aestheticization of politics and war. Evoking images of the past that flash up only to disappear, inaugural moments of new revolutionary calendars that serve as moving cameras, and secret heliotropisms that link the past to the history of light, the theses work to question those forms of pragmatism, positivism, and historicism that Benjamin understands as so many versions of a realism that establishes its truth by evoking the authority of so-called facts.

For Benjamin, there can be no fascism that is not touched by this ideology of realism, an ideology that both belongs and does not belong to the history of photography. Benjamin's consideration of the historical and philosophical questions suggested by the rise and fall of photography can therefore be understood as an effort to measure the extent to which the media of technical reproduction lend themselves to social and political forces that, for him, go in the direction of the worst. It can also be understood as a means to think
through the revolutionary potential of such media, especially in their deconstruction of the values of authority, autonomy, and originality in the work of art—values that, for Benjamin, helped formulate what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has called the national-aesthetic myths of origin prevailing in fascist Germany at the same time. Benjamin's critique of 'formalization,' his reading of the relation between the emergence of fascism and the concept of the aesthetic, offers an account of the link between the ideology of organism and a commitment to technological power. His concern with photography—its invention and its history—coincides with his interest in the effects of technology on our understanding of the aesthetic, effects that delineate the features of our modernity. The advent of photography, for Benjamin, raises the problem of the work of art in the age of its technological reproduction as the problem of fascism, and hence inaugurates a rethinking of a series of 'concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery... whose uncontrolled (and at present hardly controllable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense' (T 218 / GS 1:435).

His insistence on the necessity of addressing these questions and relations today—then in the 1930s as well as now, under the light or darkness of a scarcely less disastrous historical moment—is, above all, a call to responsibility, a call that requires a passionate and determined effort of reflection. One can no more escape this obligation to think than one can escape the obligation to act. And what must be thought and acted on, under the illumination or darkness of these questions, is the possible convergence of photography and history, a convergence that Benjamin often locates within the historiographical event. He writes:

The tradition of bourgeois society may be compared to a camera. The bourgeois scholar peeks into it like the amateur who enjoys the colorful images in the viewfinder. The materialist dialectician operates with it. His job is to set a focus (fokussieren). He may opt for a smaller or wider angle, for harsher political or softer historical lighting—but he finally adjusts the shutter and shoots. Once he has carried off the photographic plate—the image of the object as it has entered social tradition—the concept assumes its rights and develops it. For the plate can only offer a negative. It is the product of an apparatus that substitutes light for shade, shade for light. Nothing would be more inappropriate than for the image formed in this way to claim finality for itself. (GS 1:1165)

II.

**HELIOTROPISM.** — There has never been a time without the photograph, without the residue and writing of light. If in the beginning we find the Word, this Word has always been a Word of light, the "let there be light" without which there would be no history. In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Tomorrow's Eve*, God gives Adam the gift of history by giving him photography. The first days of creation bring to light a universe of photons whose transmission within time requires the photographic fix. Linking biblical exegesis to questions of electricity, Villiers raises the question of why God had to make light more than once. For light to survive, it must come again, and this coming again has, as one of its names, the name of photography.

In the ancient correspondence between photography and philosophy, the photograph, relayed by the trope of light, becomes a figure of knowledge as well as of nature, a solar language of cognition that gives the mind and the senses access to the invisible. What comes to light in the history of photography, in the history that is photography, is therefore the secret rapport between photography and philosophy. Both take their life from light, from a light that coincides with the conditions of possibility for clarity, reflection, speculation, and lucidity—that is, for knowledge in general. For Benjamin, the history of knowledge is a history of the vicissitudes of light. For him, there can be no philosophy without photography. As he writes in his *Pazsagen-Werk*, "knowledge comes only in flashes" (N 43 / GS 5:570), in a moment of simultaneous illumination and blindness.

III.

**ORIGINS.** — Photography prevents us from knowing what: an image is and whether we even see one. It is no accident that Benjamin's 1931 essay "A Short History of Photography" begins not with a sudden clarity that grants knowledge security, but rather with an evocation of the "fog" that he claims surrounds the beginnings of photography—a fog that, although not so thick as the one that shrouds the early days of printing, nevertheless serves as an obstacle to both knowledge and vision. From the very beginning, then, the
fog occludes the ostensible object of the essay: it disturbs the possibility of a linear historical account of photography's origins. For Benjamin, there can be no history of photography that would begin with the "once upon a time" that characterizes history's cliché—the click of history as well as the negativity from which it develops. This inaugural haze, this luminous mist—a figure Benjamin often uses to allegorize the atmosphere within which memory works—covers nothing that we might understand or encounter in memory. Immediately different from itself, always taking another form, the fog spreads its mist throughout the essay, and in so doing interrupts the dream of knowing and seeing that structures the history of photography, that informs the desire of the photographic event—even before it begins. If a fog encircles the childhood of photography—as it does Benjamin's own recollections of childhood in his Berlin Chronicle, recollections that are, in essence, a series of snapshots in prose—it is in part because, in the experience of the photograph, it is as if we cannot see a thing. In the twilight zone between seeing and not seeing, we fail to get the picture.

IV.

MORTIFICATION.—The incunabula of photography—its beginnings, its childhood, but also its burial place, its funerary plot, its relation to printing and inscription—flashes the truth of the photo. This truth says, if it can say anything, that what structures the relationship between the photographic image and any particular referent, between the photograph and the photographed, is the absence of relation, what Benjamin calls—referring to what, in Eugène Atget's photographs of deserted streets in Paris, anticipates surrealist photography—"a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings" (OWS 251 / GS 2:379). This is why, he explains, "it would be a misreading of the incunabula of photography to emphasize their 'artistic perfection'" (248 / 376). Rather than reproducing, faithfully and perfectly, the photographed as such, the photographic image conjures up its death. Pierre Mac Orlan makes this point in his preface to the 1930 edition of Atget photographe de Paris. There, he writes that "the power of photography consists in creating sudden death. . . . The camera's click suspends life in an act that the developed film reveals as its essence" ("Preface," 43).
against the grain of a certain faith in the mimetic capacity of photography, the photographic event reproduces, according to its own faithful and rigorous deathbringing manner, the posthumous character of our lived experience. The home of the photographed is the cemetery. Benjamin exhibits this insight in his discussion of the early portraits of David Octavius Hill:

In short, all of the possibilities of this portrait art arise because the contact between actuality and photography has not yet occurred. Many of Hill's portraits originated in the Edinburgh Greyfriars cemetery—nothing is more characteristic of this early period, except maybe the way the models were at home there. And indeed this cemetery, according to one of Hill's pictures, is itself like an interior, a separate closed-off space where the gravestones, propped against gable walls, rise from the grass, hollowed out like chimneys, with inscriptions inside instead of tongues of flames. (OWS 244-45 / GS 2:372-73)

For Benjamin, Hill's Edinburgh portraits offer a "literarization" (Literarisierung) of the conditions of living (R 225 / GS 2:688), of the living social context within which we are positioned: we live as if we were always in a cemetery, and we live in this deadly way among and as inscriptions. The portraits bear witness to the recognition that we are most ourselves, most at home, when we remember the possibility of our death. We come to ourselves through these photographs, through these memories of a mourning yet to come. This experience of our relation to memory, of our relation to the process of memorialization, is not at all accidental: nothing is more characteristic. We appear to ourselves only in this bereaved allegory, even before the moment of our death. Subjects of photography, seized by the camera, we are mortified—that is, objectified, "thingified," imaged. "The procedure itself," Benjamin explains, "caused the models to live, not out of the instant, but into it; during the long exposure they developed, as it were, into the image" (245 / 373).

What is most striking about the strange situation that Benjamin describes here is that it allows us to speak of our death before our death. The image already announces our absence. We need only know that we are mortal—the photograph tells us we will die, one day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here the way we have always been here, as images. It announces the death of the photographed. This is why what survives in a photograph is also the survival of the dead—what departs, desists, and withdraws. "Man withdraws from the photographic image" (I 226 / GS 1:485),
Benjamin writes in his artwork essay. This withdrawal does not consist in the various forms of shyness that attend the photographic event: in the instance of Hill’s photographs, for example, the “discreet reserve” of his camera, the shyness of his subjects “in the face of the apparatus,” or the photographer who, looking at his photographs, shies away from the looks of his subjects, assuming that they can see him. The withdrawal to which Benjamin refers here is not an empirical withdrawal, but rather a withdrawal that is fundamental to the temporal structure of the photograph. There can be no photograph without the withdrawal of what is photographed. Like the paintings of Charles Meryon, which, in the words of Gustave Geffroy, “are taken directly from life” but nevertheless “give an impression of expired life, of something that is dead or is going to die” (CB 88 / GS 1:392), photographs bring death to the photographed. The conjunction of death and the photographed is in fact the very principle of photographic certitude: the photograph is a cemetery. A small funerary monument, the photograph is a grave for the living dead. It tells their history—a history of ghosts and shadows—and it does so because it is this history. As Roland Barthes explains, if the photograph bespeaks a certain horror, it is because “it certifies that the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing” (79). This identification between image and corpse—the being-toward-death of the image—is the focus of Maurice Blanchot’s 1955 essay, “The Two Versions of the Imaginary.” There, he suggests that “the cadaver’s strangeness is perhaps also that of the image” (256). If it is true that the power of the image belongs to the power of death—to what Blanchot calls “the power of the negative” (261)—then it is only from the point of view of death, from the point of view of the photographed, that an image can be said to be possible. In other words, there can be no image that is not also an image of death. Nevertheless, this image-corpses, a kind of tomb in which subject and object are encrypted, at the same time points to what cannot be reduced to the photograph—the photograph itself. As its own grave, the photograph is what exceeds the photograph within the photograph. It is what remains of what passes into history. It turns in on itself in order to survive, in order to withdraw into a space in which it might defer its decay, into an interior—the closed-off space of writing itself. In order for a photograph to be a photograph, it must become the tomb that writes, that harbors its own death. If the photograph is the allegory of our modernity, it is because, like allegory, it is defined by its relation to the corpse. Like the characters of the Trauerspiel who die because, as Benjamin says, “it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter the homeland of allegory” (O 217 / GS 1:392), the photograph dies in the photograph because only in this way can it be the uncanny tomb of our memory.

V.

GHOSTS. — Photography is a mode of bereavement. It speaks to us of mortification. Even though it still remains to be thought, the essential relation between death and language flashes up before us in the photographic image.12 “What we know that we will soon no longer have before us,” Benjamin writes, “this is what becomes an image” (CB 87 / GS 1:590). Like an angel of history whose wings register the traces of this disappearance, the image bears witness to an experience that cannot come to light. This experience is the experience of the shock of experience, of experience as bereavement. This bereavement acknowledges what takes place in any photograph—the return of the departed. Although what the photograph photographs is no longer present or living, its having been there now forms part of the referential structure of our relationship to the photograph.13 Nevertheless, the return of what was once there takes the form of a haunting. As Benjamin suggests in his 1916 essay on the Trauerspiel, “the dead become ghosts” (GS 2:136). The possibility of the photographic image requires that there be such things as ghosts and phantoms. This identification between the photographic process and the figure of the ghost is made in the name of Atget in Robert Desnos’s belated notice of the photographer’s death. “Atget is no more,” he writes. “His ghost, I was going to say ‘negative,’ must haunt the innumerable poetic places of the capital” (“Spectacles of the Street,” 17). Suggesting that it is from the ghost of Atget that we will be able to make innumerable, poetic prints of Paris, Desnos here evokes the irreducible relation between life and death that structures the photographic event. We could even say that the lesson of the photograph for history—what it says about the spectralization of light, about the electrical flashes of remote spirits—is that every attempt to bring the other to the light of day, to keep the other alive, silently presumes that it is mortal, that it is always already touched (or re-
touched) by death. The survival of the photographed is therefore never only the survival of its life, but also of its death. It forms part of the "history of how a person lives on, and precisely how this afterlife, with its own history, is embedded in life" (C 149 / B 220). As Kracauer explains, anticipating Benjamin's insight:

The image wanders ghostlike through the present. Ghostly apparitions occur only in places where a terrible deed has been committed. The photograph becomes a ghost because the costume doll lived... This ghostlike reality is unredeemed... A shudder goes through the viewer of old photographs, for they do not illustrate the recognition of the original but rather the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the person who appears in his photograph, but the sum of what is to be deducted from him. It annihilates the person by portraying him, and were he to converge with it, he would not exist. ("Photography," 56)

This is why it is precisely in death that the power of the photograph is revealed, and revealed to the very extent that it continues to evoke what can no longer be there. Since this possibility is exposed at death, we can assume it exists before death. In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him—it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at. The photograph is a farewell. It belongs to the afterlife of the photographed. It is permanently inflamed by the instantaneous flash of death.

VI.

Mimesis. — The forgetting of the photograph's ghostly or spectral character, of its relation to a death that survives itself, corresponds to what Benjamin refers to as "the decline of photography." This decline is at first presented as a decline that can be understood temporarily, that can be traced within the history of the photographic event. Early photographs are described as having an aura, an atmospheric medium that lends them a phantasmatic, instantaneous, hallucinatory quality—a quality that, as he tells us, is "by no means the mere product of a primitive camera" (OWS 248 / GS 2:376). Later photographs, however, are said to be marked by an increasingly mi-
metic ideology of realism, an ideology reinforced by advances in the technical sophistication of the camera. What is surprising is that photography’s decline does not coincide, as one might expect, with a decline in the technical efficiency of the camera or in its capacity to register what is photographed. Rather, it corresponds to the technical refinement of the camera’s performance. “In that early period,” Benjamin writes, “object and technology are as exactly congruent as they become incongruent in the following period of decline. For so long as advances in optics made instruments available that overcame darkness entirely and recorded appearances like a mirror” (248 / 376-77). The conquest of darkness by the increased light of photography conjures a link of fidelity between the photograph and the photographed. Advances in the photographic apparatus, in the optical system formed by the lenses that transfer photographed images into an image recorded on a plate or film, and, finally, in the chemical process whereby the object of the optical system is revealed, seem to make possible a coincidence between the moment of the act of recording and the moment of the referent. Yet it is precisely the conviction in this coincidence, in the photographic possibility of faithful reproduction, that for Benjamin marks the decline of photography.

As Baudelaire explains, in a passage cited by Benjamin, “In these sorry days, a new industry has arisen that has done not a little to strengthen the asinine belief... that art is and can be nothing other than the accurate reflection of nature... A vengeful god has hearkened to the voice of this multitude. Daguerre became his Messiah” (256 / 384-85).

For both Benjamin and Baudelaire, the historical and mimetological schema presupposed and enacted within the time of the decline of photography—(1) the decline inaugurated by the advent of photography in the way we perceive the relation between the work of art and what it represents; (2) the decline that happens in photography, within the history of photography; and (3) the decline that is photography—perverts, because it forgets, the disjunctive power that Benjamin locates in the structure of the photographic event. This is why the photographic light that “overcomes darkness entirely” fails to illuminate the photograph, and fails precisely because it forgets what a photograph is, because it dissimulates the photograph’s inability to represent. Benjamin’s reversal—a reversal that follows Baudelaire’s own—of the values of incongruency and congruency, infidelity and fidelity, suggests that the decline of which he writes is not a decline that occurs in and with time. “There are no periods of decline” (N 44 / GS 5:371), he explains elsewhere. If there are no periods of decline, it is because there is no period without decline. This is why the decline of photography needs to be understood as structural, a necessary dimension of any photograph, rather than as merely a moment in a temporal process. The decline of photography names the photographer’s own decline, its movement away from the schema of mimetic reproduction. It suggests that the most faithful photograph, the photograph most faithful to the event of the photograph, is the least faithful one, the least mimetic one—the photograph that remains faithful to its own infidelity. It dissolves—it is the dislocation, from within, of the possibility of reflection. Immobilizing and interdicting the passage between the photograph and the photographed, the decline of photography names both the involuntary conjuring of a distance, of an aura, and the forgetting of this ghostly emergence. The doctrine of mimesis that organizes Benjamin’s essay on photography—a doctrine that anticipates the general theory of mimesis he offers in his two 1931 essays, “The Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty”—presupposes a congruence between subject and technique that corresponds to, is congruent with, an essential incongruence. The photograph, the medium of likeness, speaks only of what is unlike. It says “the photograph is an impossible memory.” Because this forgetting is inscribed within every photograph, there is history—the history of photography as well as the history inaugurated by the photograph.

VII.

TRANSLATIONS. — The disjunction that characterizes the relation between a photograph and the photographed corresponds to the caesura between a translation and an original. As Benjamin notes in his 1923 essay “The Task of the Translator”—written as an introduction to his own translation of Baudelaire’s Tableaux parisiens—“no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original” (I 73 / GS 4:112).

Like the photographer who must acknowledge the infidelity of photography, the Benjaminian translator must give up the effort to reproduce the original faithfully. Or rather, in order to be faithful to what is translatable in the original, the translator must depart from it, must seek the realization of his task in something other than the original itself. “No translation,” Benjamin
reproducibility makes the world possible, for the photographic principle without which the eternal return could never return. The movement of history that emerges from this principle of reproducibility names the immobilization that, like the photographic apparatus, seizes the thing or event in the process of its disappearance. The world of the eternal return is a world that incessantly fixes and returns to the event of a vanishing, and what vanishes in this return is not only the finite subject matter before the cosmic camera in which the world begins but the possibility of returning itself. A return without return, Blanqui’s eternal return tells us that the photographed, once photographed, can never return to itself—it can only appear in its withdrawal in the form of an image or reproduction.

XII.

**REPRODUCIBILITY.** — There will have always been technological reproducibility. What Benjamin means by technological reproducibility, however, is not what the French and English translations have always described as mere ‘mechanical reproduction.’ For Benjamin, the “technical” is not the same as the “mechanical”; its meaning is not circumscribed by the machinery of science. As he explains in his essay on Eduard Fuchs, “technology is obviously not a purely scientific phenomenon. It is also an historical one” (OWS 357 / GS 2:475). He suggests that technical reproducibility can only be understood by considering the historical relations between science and art—especially in terms of their relation to the historical conditions of production and reproduction. Although the word “technical” is never “defined” by Benjamin in any prolonged or explicit way, it is linked, as Weber rightly notes, “not to the empirical fact of reproduction, but to the possibility of being reproduced, to reproducibility as a mode of being. However clumsy even in German the noun Reproduzierbarkeit may be, it has the virtue of distinguishing between a structural attribute and an empirical fact” (“Theater, Technics, and Writing,” 17). In other words, technical reproduction is not an empirical feature of modernity; it is not an invention linked to the so-called modern era. Rather, it is a structural possibility within the work of art. “In principle,” Benjamin tells us, “a work of art has always been reproducible” (I 128 / GS 1:474). It has always been able to be copied. In the seeming progression from Greek foundling and stamping, to bronzes and coins, to woodcuts, and on through printing, lithographs, photography, and sound film, if the technological reproducibility of a work of art suggests something new, this something new is not a “first time” in history. Rather, it marks the intense acceleration of a movement that has always already been at work within the work. “Historically,” Benjamin notes, technical reproducibility “advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity” (Ibid.). The “something new” with which Benjamin is here concerned is not, then, merely “reproduction as an empirical possibility, a fact which was always more or less present since works of art could always be copied,” but, as Weber suggests, “rather a structural shift in the significance of replication itself. . . . What interests Benjamin and what he considers historically ‘new,’ is the process by which techniques of reproduction increasingly influence and indeed determine the structure of the art-work itself” (“Theater, Technics, and Writing,” 18)—or even, of our existence in general. For as we know, every moment of our life, of our relation to the world, is touched directly or indirectly by this acceleration, an acceleration that had already prepared for the coming of the camera—where replication and production tend to merge. Indeed, the technology of the camera also resides in its speed, in the speed of the shutter, in the flash of the reproductive process. Like the irrevocable instantaneousness of a lightning flash, the camera, in the split-second temporality of the shutter’s blink, seizes an image, an image that Benjamin himself likens to the activity of lightning: “The dialectical image flashes [ist ein aufblitzendes]. The past must be held fast as an image flashing within the Now of recognizability” (N 64 / GS 5:591–92). And this recognition coincides with a moment of blinding, with the production of an afterimage. An instrument of citation, the camera here cites the movement of lightning, a movement that never strikes the same place twice. In the same way, reproducibility has always reproduced itself, but never in an identical manner.

The question of the meaning and origin of photography precedes or at least corresponds to the question of the meaning of technology. There can be no understanding of photography without a thinking of the relation between photography and the history of technology. This is why technology can never simply clarify or explain the photographic event. This is also why the age of technological reproduction includes all of history. “To each age
correspond quite specific techniques of reproduction," Benjamin writes, himself reproducing a passage from Fuchs. "They represent the prevailing possibility for technological development and are . . . a result of the specific requirements of the time" (OWS 384 / GS 2:503).

What is at stake in the question of technological reproduction of photography, for example—is not whether photography in what way all art is photography. For Benjamin, as soon as the technique of reproduction reaches the stage of photography, a fault line traverses the whole sphere of art: photography transforms the entire notion of art. The presumed uniqueness of a production, the singularity of the artwork, and the value of authenticity are deconstructed. As soon as one can reproduce, the function of art is reversed:

Technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art for the first time in world history from its parasitical attachment to ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, a multitude of prints is possible; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the entire social function of art is reversed. Instead of being founded on ritual, it begins to be founded on another practice—that is, to be founded on politics. (I 224 / GS 1:481–82)

The semblance of its autonomy disappears forever. By substituting a plurality of copies for a unique original, technologically produced art destroys the very basis for the production of auratic works of art—that singularity in time and space on which they depend for their claim to authority and authenticity. Every work is now replaceable. The changes in the technical conditions for the production and reception of art constitute a break with tradition that effectively removes the previous ritual or cultic bases of art and facilitates the predominance of the political function of art. "This is not a time for political art," Adorno writes in his essay on political commitment. "Politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it appears to be politically dead" ("Commitment," 93–94). If politics, however, fascist less than communist, depends on photography and film's capacity to exhibit and manipulate bodies and faces, then all politics can be viewed as a politics of art, as a politics of the technical reproduction of an image.45 This relation between art and politics is a motif that runs through the work of many of the fascist regime's most important ideologues. Joseph Goebbels, for example, made this point in an open letter to Wilhelm Furtwängler that was published in the Lokal Anzeiger of 11 April 1933. There—responding to Furtwängler's claim that the only viable distinction within art is that between "good" and "bad" art, and not one made on the basis of race—Goebbels writes:

It is your right to feel as an artist and to look upon matters from the living artistic point of view. But this does not necessarily presuppose your assuming an unpolitical attitude toward the general development that has taken place in Germany. Politics, too, is perhaps an art, if not the highest art, most all-embracing there is. Art and artists are not only there to unite; the far more important task is to create a form, to expel the sick trends and make room for the healthy to develop. As a German politician I therefore cannot recognize the dividing line you hold to be the only one, namely the one between good and bad art. Art must not only be good, it must also be conditioned by the exigencies of the people or, rather, only an art that draws on the Volkstum as a whole may ultimately be regarded as good art mean something for the people to whom it is directed. (Cited in Reiman Man Who Created Hitler, 171)

If, as Lacoue-Labarthe has suggested, "the political model of National Socialism is the Gesamtkunstwerk [the total artwork]," it is because the Gesamtkunstwerk is a political project . . . which does not merely mean that the work of art (tragedy, music, drama) offers the truth of the polis or the State, that the political itself is instituted and constituted (and regularly re-grounded in and as a work of art)" (Heidegger, Art and Politics, 64). This is why the entirety of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay can be read as a critical response to the fascist effort to mobilize works of art—including photography and film—toward both the production of an organic community and the formation of this community (the German people or nation) as a work of art itself. Benjamin's insistence on the disintegration of the auratic character of the artwork, for example, belongs to his effort to deconstruct the values of ori
lization of the identificatory mechanisms of the masses means that there can be no politicization of the human face that does not belong to an ideological combat zone. It is within this combat zone that Bloch, in a discussion of montage, states that in “the all-exploding, all-shattered Today ... human beings lack something, namely the main thing: their face and the world which contains it” (Heritage of Our Times, 228).

XV.

CAESURA. — History comes to a head in a moment of disaster, in the time of the disaster that structures the danger of history. In the almost-no-time of this breakdown, thinking comes to a standstill. It experiences itself as interruption. As Benjamin explains, historical thinking involves “not only the movements of thoughts, but their arrest as well” (L 462 / GS 1:702). The catastrophe of history—the catastrophe that is history—corresponds to history’s efforts to arrest this arrest. In other words, the catastrophic is the insistence on an organic or progressive history. That things just go on,” Benjamin tells us, and have gone on this way, “this is the catastrophe”: “Catastrophe is not what threatens to occur at any given moment but what is given at any given moment” (CP 50 / GS 1:683).53 The head to which history comes during the time of the catastrophe of this catastrophe is, as he notes in his Trauerspiel, “a death’s head” (O 166 / GS 1:343). It is the deadly head of Medusa. For Benjamin, there can be no history without the Medusa effect—without the capacity to arrest or immobilize historical movement, to isolate the detail of an event from the continuum of history. Adorno himself recognized this point when, in his 1955 portrait of Benjamin, he claimed that the glance of Benjamin’s philosophy is “Medusan” (“Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 233).54 The Medusa’s gaze stalls history in the sphere of speculation. It short-circuits, and thereby suspends, the temporal continuity between a past and a present. This break from the present enables the rereading and rewriting of history; the performance of another mode of historical understanding, one that would be the suspension of both “history” and “understanding” (that is, the end of history and understanding as the directional and teleological paths we have always understood them to be). This other mode of historical understanding would be that of the historical materialist, of the one who “blasts the epoch
out of its reified historical continuity" (OWS 352 / GS 2:468). Whereas "historicism presents the eternal image of the past," historical materialism offers a specific and unique experience with it. The task of historical materialism is to set in motion an experience with history original to every new present. It has recourse to a consciousness of the present that shatters the continuum of history. Historical materialism conceives historical understanding as an afterlife of what is understood, whose pulses can still be felt in the present" (ibid.).

Benjamin's sixteenth thesis claims that this leap out of a predetermined history and into "true" history takes place in "a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands by and has come to a standstill" (I 262 / GS 1:702). Arguing according to the logic of the photographic image—that is, negatively—Benjamin characterizes his position on history and historiography against prevailing ones, and does so by affirming a movement of interruption that suspends the continuum of time. By retaining the traces of past and future—a past and future it nonetheless transforms—the photograph sustains the presence of movement, the pulses whose rhythm marks the afterlife of what has been understood, within the movement it gorgonizes. Only when the Medusan glance of either the historical materialist or the camera has momentarily transfixed history can history as history appear in its disappearance. Within this condensation of past and present, time is no longer to be understood as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial, an imagistic space that Benjamin calls a "constellation" or a "monad." "Where thinking suddenly stops in a constellation saturated with tensions," Benjamin writes, "it gives that constellation a shock, by which it [thinking] crystallizes into a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where it confronts him as a monad" (262-63 / 702-3). If this break from the present signals the taking over of a past (in theses VI and XIV, for example), the arrest of thought in a constellation or monad "blasts" this past open—and no less so because this constellation or monad itself consists of differences of force and meaning, of heterogeneous inscriptions and transcriptions. This blast solicits "a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. The benefit of [the historical materialist's] method is that in the work the lifework is preserved and aufgehoben; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history" (263 / 703). This blast "shatters the continuum of history" and in so doing reveals the history hidden in any given work. It discloses the breaks, within history, from which history emerges. Focusing on what has been overlooked or hidden within history, on the transitoriness of events, on the relation between any given moment and all of history, the historical materialist seeks to delineate the contours of a history whose chance depends on overcoming the idea of history as the mere reproduction of a past.

The radical temporality of the photographic structure coincides with what Benjamin elsewhere calls "the caesura in the movement of thought" (N 67 / GS 5:595). It announces a point when "the past and the present moment flash into a constellation." The photographic image—like the image in general—is "dialectics at a standstill" (N 50 / GS 5:578). It interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, one that spaces time and temporalsizes space. A force of arrest, the image translates an aspect of time into something like a certain space, and does so without stopping time, or without preventing time from being time. Within the photograph, time presents itself to us as this "spacing." What is spaced here—within what Benjamin elsewhere calls "the space of history" (Geschichtsraum; N 45 / GS 5:571)—are the always becoming and disappearing moments of time itself. It is precisely this continual process of becoming and disappearing that, for Benjamin, characterizes the movement of time. Speaking of Proust, in a passage that asks us to think about the relation between time and space, he writes: "The eternity that Proust opens to view is space-crossed time, not limitless time. His true interest concerns the passage of time in its most real, that is, its space-crossed figure" (I 211 / GS 2:320). The spacing of this space-crossed figure—which is, as Benjamin notes, a temporal operation: "the passage of time" (space and time are here intertwined, and to such a degree that they can no longer be distinguished)—opens a space for time itself, dispersing it from its continuous present. This is why he continues by claiming that this figure "nowhere prevails in a more undisguised form than in remembrance, within, and in aging, without" (Ibid.). Looking both backward and forward, this figure marks a division within the present. Within the almost-no-time of the camera's click, we can say that something happens. For Benjamin, however, for something to happen does not mean that something occurs within the continuum of time, nor does it imply that something becomes present. Rather, the photographic event interrupts the present; it occurs between the present and itself, between the movement of time and itself. This is why nothing can occur in either the continuous movement of time or the pure present of any given moment. As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, "nothing can take place, because
there is no place (no ‘spacing’) between the presents of time, nor between
time and itself’ (“Finite History,” 156). For Benjamin, nothing can take place
before the photograph, before the event of the photograph. Effecting a cer-
tain spacing of time, the photograph gives way to an occurrence. What the
photograph inaugurates is history itself, and what takes place in this history
is the emergence of the image.

The photograph is always related to something other than itself. Sealing
the traces of the past within its space-crossed image, it also lets itself be
(re)touched by its relation to the future. Related to both the future and the
past, the photograph constitutes the present by means of this relation to what
it is not. If a space must separate the present from what it is not in order
for the present to be itself, this space must at the same time divide the present.
In constituting itself, in dividing itself, this interval is what Benjamin calls
“space-crossed time”—time-becoming-space and space-becoming-time.

From the very moment of the photographic event, the abbreviation that
telescopes history into a moment—an abbreviation or miniaturization that
tells us that history can end or break off—suggests that what inaugurates
history is written into a context that history itself may never completely
comprehend. This context—an isolated historical monad that contains “the
whole course of history”—exceeds the limits of its representation. As Ben-
jamin explains, “the events surrounding the historian and in which he takes
part . . . underlie his presentation like a text written in invisible ink” (N 67 /
GS 5:95). To write history is therefore not to represent some past or present
presence. “To articulate the past historically,” Benjamin writes, “does not
mean to recognize it ‘as it really was.’ It means to seize a memory as it flashes
up at a moment of danger” (I 239 / GS 1:695). History therefore begins where
memory is endangered, during the flash that marks its emergence and disap-
ppearance. It begins where the domain of the historical cannot be defined by
the concept of historicality—where representation ends. As Nancy puts it:
“The historian’s work—which is never a work of memory—is a work of
representation in many senses, but it is representation with respect to some-
thing that is not representable, and that is history itself. History is unrepre-
sentable, not in the sense that it would be some presence hidden behind the
representations, but because it is the coming into presence, as event” (“Finite
History,” 166). For Benjamin, neither Medusa nor history can be viewed or
comprehended directly—nor even in the technologically lit realm of the
headlight.
XXIV.

SHOCKS. — In Benjamin’s etiology, shock characterizes our experience. While linked to a particular experience—an experience of danger and bereavement—it exemplifies, in the words of Miriam Hansen, “the catastrophic and dislocating impact of aural experience in general” (“Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience,” 211). The advent of shock experience as an elemental force in everyday life in the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin suggests, transforms the entire structure of human existence. While Benjamin identifies this process of transformation with technologies that have “subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training,” and that include the invention of the match and of the telephone, the technical transmission of information through newspapers and advertisements, and our bombardment in traffic and crowds, he singles out photography and film as media that—in their techniques of rapid cutting, multiple camera angles, instantaneous shifts in time and place—raise the experience of shock to a formal principle: “Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like,” he explains, “the ‘snapping’ of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were” (174–75 / GS 1:530). In linking the experience of shock to the structure of delay built into the photographic event, Benjamin evokes Freud’s own discussions of the latency of experience, discussions that are themselves often organized in terms of the language of photography. In Moses and Monotheism, for example, Freud claims that “the strongest compulsive influence arises from impressions which impinge upon a child at a time when we would have to regard his psychical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact itself cannot be doubted; but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture” (SE 23:126). Freud goes on to suggest that the delay of the shock experience is due on the one hand to the remoteness of the period concerned and on the other hand to the process whereby the event is met, our reaction to it.

Freud links the event’s remoteness not simply to the remoteness in time of the events of our childhood, but more importantly to the distance between an event and our experience or understanding of it—a distance that tells us that we experience an event indirectly, through our mediated and defensive reaction to it. Confronted by an event that paralyzes us by the magnitude of its demand, an event that we recognize as a danger, we fend off the danger through the process of repression: the danger is in some way inhibited, and its precipitating cause—the event, with its attendant perceptions and ideas—is forgotten. Not entirely effaced, however, the danger of the event renew its demand and opens another path for itself, emerging, symptomatically, as an image of what has happened—as a return of what was to have departed—without our acquiescence or understanding. What characterizes this process, a process whereby a moment of danger, a state of emergency, corresponds to the involuntary emergence of a symptom or image, is “the far-reaching distortion to which the returning material has been subjected as compared with the original” (23:127). As in Benjamin, what characterizes experience in general—experience understood in its strict sense as the traversal of a danger, the passage through a peril—is that it retains no trace of itself: experience experiences itself as the vertigo of memory, as an experience whereby what is experienced is not experienced. For both Freud and Benjamin, consciousness emerges as memory begins to withdraw.

It is here that we can begin to register the possibility of a history which is no longer founded on traditional models of experience and reference. The notion of shock—of a posthumous shock that coincides with the photographic event—in fact requires that history emerge where understanding or experience cannot:

The greater the share of the moment of shock in particular impressions, the more incessantly consciousness has to be present as a screen against stimuli, the more successfully it operates, the less these impressions enter Erfahrung; rather, they fulfill the concept of Erlebnis. Perhaps the peculiar achievement of shock defense may in the end be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its [the incident’s] contents. (165 / GS 1:65)

The experience of shock, “the fact of latency,” as Cathy Caruth has recently argued in regard to Freud, “would seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known; but in a latency inherent to the experience itself.” The historical power of shock, she goes on to explain, “is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only
in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (“Unclaimed Experience,” 187). “Only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously,” Benjamin writes, “what has not happened to the subject as an experience [Erlebnis], can become a component of the mémoire involontaire” (1 160–61 / GS 1:613). It is what is not experienced in an event that paradoxically accounts for the belated and posthumous shock of historical experience. If history is to be a history of this “posthumous shock,” it can only be referential to the extent that, in its occurrence, it is neither perceived nor experienced directly. As Benjamin suggests elsewhere, “The dialectical image is one that flashes. Thus—as an image that flashes in the now of recognizability [Erkenbarkeit]—the image of the past is . . . to be held fast. The recovery that is accomplished in this manner and only in this manner always lets itself be won only as what irretrievably loses itself in the course of perception” (CP 49 / GS 1:682). For Benjamin, history can be grasped only in its disappearance. This is why, as he explains in his Proust essay, it is not what is experienced that “plays the main role for the remembering author, but rather the weaving of his remembrance, the Penelope work of memory” with “a Penelope work of forgetting” (I 202 / GS 2:311; see Jacobs, “Walter Benjamin”). This is the lesson that Benjamin offers, not only in his writings on photography, but also in a passage from his memoirs of his childhood in Berlin, a lesson itself framed within the language and temporality of photography:

Anyone can see that the duration for which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory. Nothing prevents our keeping rooms where we spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting entirely where we passed months. Thus it is certainly not owing to an all too short exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the twilight of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day, from alien sources, it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixed the room’s image onto the plate. But it is always we ourselves who stand at the center of these rare images. And this is not so enigmatic, since such moments of sudden exposure are at the same time moments when we are beside ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday (taggerechtes) self involves itself actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by shock,
like the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this sacrifice of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images. (R 36–37 / GS 6:316)

During the flash of the mind’s camera—a moment when, beside ourselves, we are no longer ourselves—we experience the shock of an experience that tells us that memory, all remembrance of things past, registers, if it registers anything, its own incapacity, our own immolation.

That the space of photography is a site of the self’s hoever or whatever enters this space is always some-takes this point in an extraordinary passage from the ion of his 1934 Berliner Kulturum Neunzehnhundert. If between language and photography, he suggests the self’s essential relation to alterity. He claims that he first encounters this alterity—an alterity that strangely compels him to be like another—in its relation to language. Not knowing the word “Muhme,” for example, he transforms the figure in an old children’s verse, Muhme Rehlen, into “a spirit” called the “Mummerehlen” (GS 4:260–61). Such misunderstandings, Benjamin notes, may dissemble a world to the child but they nevertheless reveal to him “the ways that led into the world’s interior.” More particularly, the distortions of language that characterize his encounter with the world lead him to the interior of language. What makes language language, he discovers, is its capacity for distortion. He soon learns to wrap himself in words that are at the same time “clouds.” Distorting the words he does not understand, he articulates a relation between these words and the things and persons that make up his world. This work of dissemblance, Benjamin goes on to suggest, dissembles not only words but also the world and everything in it. As he notes later, the “entire distorted world of childhood” (262) finds its place within this activity of dissemblance, disguise, mummery. The child cloaks himself in a series of cloudy words, all of which are organized around the word mummery: there is for the child nothing but mummery. It is what compels him to become like something else:

The gift of recognizing similarities is really nothing but a feeble vestige of the old compulsion to be and act in a like manner. Words exercised such power over me. Not those which served me as models of proper behavior, but those which made me resemble apartments, furniture, clothes. (261)

The movement of mummery at the heart of language demands that the child, in order to be who he is, become like an other. The words that compel him to become like a thing—for example, like an apartment, like furniture or clothing—at the same time tell him that he can never be himself. Or rather that, in order to be himself, he must always depart from himself. Nevertheless, the one thing to which he can never bear witness is his becoming a thing. This is why, Benjamin explains, he can never resemble his own image: such a coincidence would name the moment of his death. He exhibits this law of death and disguise in a description of his visit to a photography studio at the age of ten. There, he not only gives us an example of his capacity for transformation but he also explains why he can always only be himself as an other. It is in fact because he can never reside in his “own image” that he becomes perplexed when a “likeness” [Ähnlichkeit] of himself is demanded of him. He writes:

That was at the photographer’s. Wherever I looked, I saw myself surrounded by screens, cushions, pedestals which lusted for my image like the shades of Hades for the blood of the sacrificial animal. Finally I was presented before a coarsely painted Alpine view and my right hand, which had to hold up a goatee hat, cast its shadow upon the cloudy and glacier-snow of the backdrop. Yet the tortured smile around the mouth of the young mountaineer is not as saddening as the gaze that sinks into me from the child’s face in the shadow of the household palm. It belongs to one of those studios that, with their stools and tripods, tapestries and easels, partake of both the boudoir and the torture chamber. I’m standing bareheaded, holding in my left hand a mighty sombrero, which I allow to hang down with studied grace. The right hand is occupied with a staff whose lowered handle is visible in the foreground, while its end is hidden in the bundle of ostrich plumes, which flow forward off a garden table. Entirely off to the side, next to the door curtain, the mother stood rigid, in a tight bodice. Like a mannequin she gazes at my velvet suit, which for its part, seems overloaded with trimmings and cut from a fashion magazine. But I am disfig
the two" ("Force of Law," 991), that does not have recourse to technology, to the technical media, often in the name of progress. This is why so many of Benjamin's writings are directed against the rhetoric of progress, technological or otherwise. It is also why it is often difficult to distinguish between one revolution and another. As Jean-Luc Nancy notes, that "Fascism and Nazism were also revolutions, as were Leninism and Stalinism" means that "it is therefore also a question of revolutionizing revolutions... This requires something on the order of a revolution in thinking" (Experience of Freedom, 164). In the instance of technology, it requires a manner of thinking that emphasizes the unforeseeably mediated relations that prevent the meaning of an event from ever being present.

11. See Nancy, Inoperative Community, especially chapter 7.


13. This passage has been discussed in the context of Heidegger's relation to the question of technology in general by Ronell in Telephone Book, 197-201. See also Dienst, Still Life in Real Time, 106–10.


15. Barthes makes a similar point in his Camera Lucida, 64–65.


17. The citations are from Moholy-Nagy, "Unprecedented Photography," 85, and Passuth, Moholy-Nagy, 328. In order to address the importance of being photograph-literate, Moholy-Nagy claims elsewhere that "there ought to be an Academy of Light." He continues: "the forming of such an academy could be justified on economic grounds alone by reference to the changes in the economic situation, the new forms of appeal to the public—press photos, book illustrations, theatrical lighting, advertising of films and illuminated advertising, to say nothing of the developments the future may bring and all that would be directly born of such a center devoted to the theoretical and practical study of the use of light" ("Light Painting," 343).

WORDS OF LIGHT

1. Cf. this point with Hamacher's analysis of the "logic" of such realism—as it appears in Sartre's "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur" and Paul de Man's wartime writings—in his "Journals, Politics."

2. See Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art and Politics, 62–70. For another recent analysis of the relationship between the political project of National Socialism and aestheticism, see Huemer's "Journals, Politics."

3. That Benjamin saw his attempt to rethink the status and nature of the work of art as a means to combat fascism is well known. See Wolin, Walter Benjamin, especially 183–98, and Düttmann, "Tradition and Destruction." On the political stakes of his thinking on photography, see Puppe, "Walter Benjamin on Photography." For three excellent analyses of the role of art and the technical media within the political agenda of National Socialism, see Syberberg, Hitler; Virilio, War and Cinema; and more recently, Ronell, Telephone Book and "Differends of Man" (especially 266).

4. Although today we may understand the importance and relevance of these reflections, it is no longer simply a question of crisis. Everything happens as if we understood and shared the discretion, everything happens as if we all acknowledged the massive role that photographic technologies—their productions, diffusion, and manipulation—have in what we call "our historical reality." Indeed, no single instant of our life is not touched by the technological reproduction of images: here we could consider a vast array of ideological forms—fashion, cinema, newspaper illustrations, televsional representations, advertising, political campaigns, and so on. We need only recall the tragedy of what we now refer to as the "War in the Gulf." If this war taught us anything, it taught us what has been true of all wars—there can be no way that does not depend on technologies of representation. This was a war whose entire operation depended on the technologies of sight: satellite and aerial photography, light-enhancing television cameras, infrared flashes and sighting devices, theromographic images, and even cameras on warheads. The war machine was in every way a photographic machine. To think what made the Gulf War possible would at some level involve a thinking of the relation between photographic technologies and what Virilio has called "the logistics of military perception" (War and Cinema, 1).

5. Benjamin is not the first to suggest the urgent necessity of thinking photography and history together. Kracauer, in his 1932 essay "Photography" (an essay to which Benjamin's own essay on photography refers; see OWS 245 / GS 237), had already seen photography as a means for reconsidering the relation between history and historicism. Early in the essay, he claims that historicism "etemered at about the same time as modern photographic technology" (49). Questioning the historicist assumption that history is linear and sequential, he attempts to transform both the concept of history and a thinking of photography by emphasizing what for him is their interrruptive, even dangerous character: "The turn to photography," he writes, "is the life and death game [Volangue-Spiel] of the historical process" (61).

Kracauer reiterates this point in his introduction to his History: The Last Things before the Last. There, in a statement about the trajectory of his previous writing that is itself articulated in the language of photography, he notes: "I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality" (43; I am grateful to Thomas Levin for directing me to this passage). For both Benjamin and Kracauer, what gives thinking history to think about is photography.

6. See Villiers de l'isle-Adam, Tomorrow's Eve, especially the section entitled "Snapshots of World History." For an excellent reading of the novel that focuses on the relations among light, technology, and the production of images, see Gasché, "Stillef-erous Fold." See also Bellour, "Idéal Hadaly."

7. Paul Virélé elaborates this point on the occasion of the centenary of photography, claiming that there are "very intimate and very ancient affinities between light and Philosophy." "Philosophers in every age," he goes on to say, "theorists of knowl-
edge as well as mystic authors, have shown a rather remarkable predilection for the most commonly known phenomena of optics, which they have often exploited—sometimes in the most subtle manner—in order to figure the relations between consciousness and its objects, or to describe the illusions or illuminations of the mind” (“Centenary of Photography,” 197 / "Centenaire de la Photographie," 104). Derrida reinforces this point when he suggests that the metaphor of darkness and light is "the founding metaphor of Western philosophy": "the founding metaphor not only because it is a phantological one—and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photograph, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light—but because it is a metaphor” (“Force and Signification,” 27). In relation to Benjamin in particular, Norbert Bolz’s essay, "Der Fotoapparat der Erkenntnis" confirms that photography is Benjamin’s metaphor for historical knowledge in general (21–22).

8. For a discussion of the relation between the weather and perception in Benjamin, see Hamacher, "Word Wolke—If It Is One.”

9. Mac Orlan elaborated this correspondence between photography and death again in his 1929 essay “Elements of a Social Fantastic.” He writes, “What is utterly mysterious for man is, unarguably, death. To be able to create the death of things and creatures, if only for a second, is a force of revelation which, without explanation (which is useless), fixes the essential character of what must constitute a fine anxiety, one rich in forms, fragrances, dislikes, and, naturally, the association of ideas. It is thanks to this incomparable power to create death for a second that photography will become a great art” (32).

10. Benjamin does not identify the specific photograph to which he refers here. Nevertheless, of the many calotypes that Hill made at Greyfriars, there is a series of shots taken at three different tombs, each of which fits Benjamin’s description. The most likely candidates are a group of calotypes made at the Dennistoun monument (one in particular, entitled “The Artist and the Gravedigger,” appears as plate number 57 in Heinrich Schwarz’s David Octavius Hill, to which Benjamin refers in his essay on photography), but those taken at the Byrness monument and at the Naismith monument are also possible. What is most striking in all of these is indeed how closely the tombs resemble fireplaces. See Stevenson, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, 191–94.


12. This formulation is indebted to Heidegger’s discussion of the relation between death and language in On the Way to Language. See On the Way to Language, 107, and Unterwegs zur Sprache, 215. Heidegger explicitly discusses the relationship between death and photography in his analysis of the Kantian notions of image and schema. Suggesting that what links death and photography is their capacity to reveal the process of appearance in general, he writes:

   The photograph of the death mask, as copy of a likeness, is itself an image—but this is only because it gives the “image” of the dead person, shows how the dead person appears, or rather how it appeared, . . .

   Now the photograph, however, can also show how something like a death mask appears in general. In turn, the death mask can show in general how something like the face of a dead human being appears. But an individual corpse itself can also show this. And similarly, the mask itself can also show how a death mask in general appears, just as the photograph shows not only how what is photographed, but also how a photograph in general appears.

   But what do these “looks” (images in the broadest sense) of this corpse, this mask, this photograph, etc., now show? Which “appearance” (Eides, Idee) do they now give? What do they now make sensible? In the one which applies to the many, they show how something appears “in general.” (Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, 64)


14. Giving an account of the ghostly dimension of early photography, Tom Gunning has noted that, while "photography emerged as the material support for a new positivism, it was also experienced as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles” (“Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations,” 42–43). In other words, if the invention of photography was a turning point in the history of the process of identification—as Benjamin reminds us, "photography made it possible for the first time to preserve permanent and unmistakable traces of a human being” (CB 48 / GS 1:350)—it was also understood as a technological means of capturing and reproducing specters. Nadar makes this point in his autobiography (a book that Benjamin read and cites repeatedly in the Passagen-Werk) by evoking Balzac’s theory of the ghostly character of both photography and life in general:

   According to Balzac’s theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. Since Balzac believed man was incapable of making something material from an apparition, from something impalpable—that is, creating something from nothing—he concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent layers, that is, the very essence of life. (“My Life as a Photographer,” 9)

For Balzac, photography is another name for the production of ghostly images. Or, as Benjamin would have it, the ghost is the residue of technological reproduction.
For a genealogy of the role of ghosts within the early understanding of photography and film, see Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations."

15. I am indebted here to Hamacher's formulation of the relation between history and citation in Paul Valéry's La jeune parque, in his "History, Teary," 84–85.

16. Cf. on this point what Derrida says about the power of the name in Mémoires, 49 and in "Signature Event Context," 7–8. On the suggestion that the deadly power of the image "does not wait for death, but is marked out in everything—and for everything—that awaits death," see his "By Force of Mourning," 180–81.

17. It may also correspond to the gesture that gives birth to myth in general. According to Scholem, Benjamin early on thought that a "spectral" age of organic unity with nature had preceded the age of myth and that "the real content of myth was the enormous revolution that polemicized against the spectral and brought its age to an end" (Walter Benjamin, 61). We can make two remarks here: first, the effort to efface the photograph's ghostly character can be situated before the birth of photography, as we generally conceive it, and second, the growing conviction in the realism of the photograph (as Benjamin describes it) can be understood to belong to the world of myth.

18. Benjamin here seems to be following Heinrich Schwarz's formulation in his David Octavius Hill. There, describing Hill's work, Schwarz writes: "Hill remained true to his primitive mechanical equipment even when he expanded his apparatus to fulfill the expectations that already mastered instruments completely vanquished darkness and that delineate phenomena as does a mirror." It is important to register the degree to which Benjamin's "Short History of Photography" recirculates the way one passes around photos—the arguments of the photographic books he lists in his notes: the Bossert and Guttman collection of photographs from 1820 to 1870 (1936), the Schwarz book on Hill (1931), Karl Blossfeld's photographs of plants (1930), Atget's photographs (1911), and Sander's photographs (1919). To a large degree the essay is itself a series of snapshots or photos of the arguments presented in these books. There is much work to be done here, but Price's chapter on Benjamin in The Photograph provides an excellent start in this direction (see especially 57–61).

19. It is no accident that Benjamin refers to both the language of photography and the fleeting character of the image in his discussion of the perception of similarity. In "The Doctrine of the Similar," he writes: "The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up [Aufblitzen]. It fits by; may perhaps be won again, but, unlike other perceptions, can never really be held fast. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly, transitarily as a star constellation." (D 66 / GS 2:206–7).

20. For readings of Benjamin's translation essay that trace the consequences of his discussion of the essential disjunction between an original and its translation, see de Man, "Conclusions," and Jacobs, "Monstrosity of Translation."


22. Beyond its association with photography and writing, lightning is also understood by Benjamin as an "emblem of the descending technological age" (GS 5:213).

23. This inability is stated more strongly as a refusal to be photographed in One-Way Street: "the truth refuses (like a child or woman who does not love us), facing the lens of writing while we crouch under the black cloth, to keep still and look amiable" (95 / GS 4:138).

24. For an extended and complementary reading of this passage, see Bahti, Allegories of History, 245–48.

25. Learning to die is what Montaigne understands as the endless task of philosophy in general. As Nancy reminds us, "Montaigne has fixed once and for all, at the threshold of the epoch of desire, the exemplo of this endless task—and this is also why he attributes the end of philosophy to our 'learning to die,' that is, for him, to our learning to accept the infinite distance between us and our signification (or better still: to our learning that the final signification is the arrest of signification)" (L'oubli de la philosophie, 48).

26. Menke makes a similar point in her reading of "Lehre vom Ähnlichen." See Sprachfiguren, 288–92.

27. Responding to Adorno's own understanding of the image as a constellation, Benjamin linked the dialectical image to the figure of the constellation in a letter of 10 August 1935 to Gretel Adorno:

   How apt W.'s definition of the dialectical image as a "constellation" seems to me, and how undisputed certain elements of this constellation, to which I referred, nevertheless appear to me: namely, the dream figures. The dialectical image does not draw a copy of the dream—it was never my intention to assert this. But it does seem to me to contain the instances, the moment of the interruption of awakening, and indeed to produce its likeness only from these passages just as an astral image emerges from luminous points. (C 510 / B 688)

28. Stéphane Moses makes this point in "Ideas, Names, Stars," 84. He also notes that the theme of stars returns in the Passagen-Werk within one of Benjamin's discussions of the effects of technology on urban space. There, Benjamin links the destruction of aura to the absence of stars: "The metropolis does not know the true twilight. Artificial lighting in any case deprives it of its transition to night. The same circumstance causes the stars to fade in the city sky. Their rising is noticed least of all. Kant's depiction of the sublime as 'the moral law within myself and the starry heavens above me' could not have been conceived in this way by a city dweller." (GS 5:433).

29. It is perhaps also why Benjamin more than once notes that stars never appear in the writings of Baudelaire—"or if they do, that they are always in the process of fading or disappearing. There is much to be said about the importance of stars in this reading of Baudelaire. We could even say that such a reading is organized around an understanding of the role the stars play in the poet's various allegories of history. Benjamin suggests their importance when, in the section of the Passagen-Werk devoted to Baudelaire, he provides us with a list of what he calls "the principal passages concerning the stars in Baudelaire... "How you would please me, O night! without these stars / whose light speaks a known language / For I seek silence, the night, and
The secret trial is the night, the night of horror! The public debate is the joyful sun" (Oeuvres 349). His recourse to a language of flashes and blindness can be registered throughout his writings; see especially Oeuvres 61, 76, 231, 293, 445, 625, and 636.

37. Buck-Morss makes a similar point in Dialectics of Seeing, 106.

38. Blanchot associates the advent of modern technology with the transformation of man into stars in The Infinite Conversation. He writes:

Today the event we are encountering bears an elementary character: that of the impersonal powers represented by the intervention of mass phenomena, by the supremacy of a machineline play of these forces, and by the seizure of the constitutive forces of matter. These three factors are named by a single term: modern technology. For the latter includes collective organization on a planetary scale for the purpose of calculating planned, mechanization and automation, and, finally, atomic energy—a key term. What up to now only the stars could do, man does. Man has become a star. The astral era that is beginning no longer belongs to the bounds of history. (266)

See also his effort to associate a break from the order of stars with disaster in general in his Writing of Disaster, 48–75.

39. This identification between the Trauerspiel and a principle of repetition that is at the same time a means of transformation can be read in Benjamin’s early essay "Trauerspiel and Tragedy." There he tells us that "the law of the Trauerspiel" rests on repetition (GS 2:36). "The universality of its time," he says, "is spectral" (ibid.). If this mourning play is characterized by a concept of time that is organized around a ghostly repetition, it is also marked by a language that is essentially in permanent transformation. As he explains in his essay "The Signification of Language in the Trauerspiel and Tragedy," "the word in transformation is the linguistic principle of the Trauerspiel" (138). Gathering together the motifs of mourning, repetition, specters, transformation, and the play of language, these two essays provide a context within which we can understand further Benjamin’s interest in Blanqui’s text. For a discussion of the importance of this essay to an interpretation of Benjamin’s reflections on the relation between naming and mourning, see Düttmann, La parole donnée, 135–41.

40. That phantoms belong to the medium of light through which vision is both possible and impossible can be confirmed within the movement of what Blanqui calls "the obscurity of language" (L’éternité par les astres, 46). It is there that the spectacle solaire oscillates in its meaning between the solar spectrum and the solar specter or phantom. As the figure of what is both dead and alive at the same time, the ghost belongs to the essence of Blanqui’s universe. It helps account not only for why "simple bodies" cannot be seen (43), but also for the universe’s incomprehensibility (6). To see in Blanqui means to see through ghosts—which means not to see at all. As he puts it, "We have seen nothing, it is true, but because we cannot see anything" (43).

41. For a historical discussion of the Blanquiists and their politics of commemoration, see Hutton, Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition, especially 11–21.

42. I would like to emphasize this point: it would be a mistake to read this text solely as the hallucinatory madness of an aging revolutionary who, imprisoned in the twilight of his life, looks to the stars for refuge and consolation, or who, like the society against which he fought, throws his projections on the sky. The first thing we can say is that Blanqui’s interest in cosmology can be said to have begun as early as 1841 and that it remained a permanent interest throughout his life. Dommanget has documented Blanqui’s readings in astronomy and probability theory and, in particular, traced his readings in Laplace’s Exposition du système du monde (Blanqui, 147–49). In addition, we can begin to read Blanqui’s accusations against the society that has hidden him away in prison not only in his encrypted references to his own imprisonment (24) but in his references to Haussmannization (53) (this massive program to renovate the topography of Paris, designed in part to make revolution more difficult, was organized around l’Arc de Triomphe, which is located in la place de l’Étoile), to our capacity to interfere with the physical laws of the universe and thereby overthrow nations and empires (65), and to the relays between revolutions in the sky and those on the earth (34–35). Blanqui’s entire text should be read in terms of its engagement with the field of politics—an engagement that revises the terms in which we generally speak of politics. If, as Benjamin puts it, the text seems to register Blanqui’s surrender to a "social order that [he] had to recognize as victorious over him in the last years of his life," he still "kneels down before it with such violence that its throne is shaken" (C 549 / B 2:741 and G 5:168).

43. Baudelaire’s sketch is reproduced in Soupault’s critical biography of Baudelaire (Baudelaire, 13).

44. Cf. here Derrida’s formulation concerning the relation between the question of technology and that of writing in Of Grammatology, 8.

45. See Düttmann, “Tradition and Destruction,” 532. This link between the domain of the political and the reproduction of images is made explicit in Benjamin’s essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.” There he describes the sphere of political action as “a space reserved one hundred percent for images” (R 197 / GS 2:390).

46. Benjamin makes a similar point in the appendix to his artwork essay. There, he writes, “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing—war” (I 241 / GS 1:506).

47. Weber makes this point in his essay “Mass Mediaturas,” 83.

48. On this point, see ibid., 89. This essay has been very helpful to me in framing my discussion of the relation between Jünger and Benjamin. Although Weber does not write directly about Jünger, his attention to the ambivalences inscribed within Benjamin’s relation to the technical media makes his essay an important lever for any discussion of these two theorists of photography.

49. For an excellent discussion of Jünger’s historical and theoretical relations to the question of photography, see Werneburg, “Ernst Jünger and the Transformed World.” (I am indebted to this essay throughout my comments on Jünger.) See also Huysen, “Fortifying the Heart,” and Kaes, “Cold Gaze.”
50. Riefenstahl confirms that the Nuremberg congress was staged to be photographed in Hinter den Kulissen des Reichs-Parteitag-Films. She writes: "Preparations for the congress were fixed in conjunction with preliminary work on the film—that is to say, the event was organized in the manner of a theatrical performance, not only as a popular rally, but also to provide the material for a propaganda film. . . . Everything was decided by reference to the camera." (cited in Virilio, War and Cinema, 55).

51. Lacoue-Labarthe makes this point in Heidegger, Art and Politics, 64.


53. For a parallel passage, see N 64 / GS 5:392: "The concept of progress should be grounded on the idea of catastrophe. That things 'just keep on going' is the catastrophe. Not something that is impending at any particular time ahead, but something that is always given. Thus, Strindberg—in To Damascus?—: Hell is not something that lies ahead of us, but this very life, here and now."

Benjamin's discussion of catastrophe has significant connections with the messianic dimension of his writings on history, and touches on the Judaic conception of messianism as it is described by Scholem himself. "Jewish Messianism," Scholem writes, "is in its origin and by its nature—this cannot be sufficiently emphasized—a theory of catastrophe." See "Understanding of the Messianic Idea," 7; see also Wolfhart, "Messianic Structure." It is within this discussion of catastrophe, here and elsewhere, that one could begin to trace in Benjamin a notion of a finite messianism—a messianism that is neither outside time nor in the future, but rather what is given in time. The messianic in Benjamin belongs to the structure of what he calls Jetztzeit, "now-time." It is both what is exposed to time and what exposes time. This is why it is the task of the historical materialist to establish "a conception of the present as the 'Jewish' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time." (l 263 / GS 1:704). The messianic is finite—that is to say, marked historically and temporarily—not only because it emerges in fragmentary form but also because its essence is not in itself. The messianic involves neither a negation of time nor a cessation of time in a present, but rather a differential structure of time. For Benjamin, the messianic is what happens in and as history.

54. Bloch already made this point in his 1928 review of Benjamin's One Way Street. He notes that the "same glance that decays causes the diverse flow to freeze at the same time, consolidates it" (with the exception of its direction), Elecitzizes even the imagination of the most variant intertwining; this makes this philosophizing uniformly Medusan, in accordance with the definition of Medusa in Gottfried Keller as the "petrified image of unres." (Heritage of Our Times, 356-357).

55. This discussion of the relation between space and time is itself a fragmentary, photographic montage of Nancy's essay, "Finite History." See also Derrida's "Differance." For a genealogy of Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image, see Jennings.

56. For a reading of the relation between the figure of Medusa and Benjamin's reflections on history, see Abbas, "On Fascination," 57.

57. Except for the second-to-last "now" in Nancy's passage, I have substituted "now-time" for "now" in order to emphasize that the "now" is filled with time, as well as to get closer to Benjamin's Jetztzeit.

58. Benjamin found this passage in a September 1843 letter from Marx to Ruge. He uses it as one of his two epigraphs to the Passagen-Werk's "Kovnolot N."

59. Benjamin makes this point again when he writes that "the Now of recognizability is the moment of awakening" (GS 5:608). On Benjamin's relation to surrealism, see Führkis, Surrealismus als Erkenntnis, and Cohen, Profane Illumination.

60. As Benjamin explains in the Passagen-Werk, alluding to the same "alarm clock" (Wecker), "The first waking stimuli [Wecker] deepen the sleep." (GS 5:494).

61. Adorno reinforces Benjamin's identification of surrealism with the photographic elements of its concept of awakening in his 1956 essay "Looking Back on Surrealism." There, he writes: "As a freezing of the moment of awakening, Surrealism is akin to photography" (89). On the relation between surrealism and photography in general, see Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," "Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," and "Photography in the Service of Surrealism."

62. As in Benjamin, the "Copernican revolution" in Kant is also cast in optical figures. It is "a change in point of view," Kant writes, such that "our representation of things, as they are given, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves, but that these objects as appearances, conform to our mode of representation" (Critique of Pure Reason, 24).

63. The link between history and seeing is written into the word history. As Giorgio Agamben has noted, "Like the word indicating the act of knowledge [éclair], so too the word historia derives from the root il- which means to see. Histo is in origin the eyewitness, the one who has seen." (Infancy and History, 94).

64. In his essay on Proust—an essay organized around the "image" of Proust—Benjamin suggests that the space of Proust's writing is always that of the photographic darkroom. Within a discussion of the relation between memory and forgetting, he writes: "This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisrupted work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques [of the mémoire involontaires] might escape him." (l 202 / GS 2:311).

65. Proust refers to photography as an archive of memory in the last fragment of Jean Santeuil. There, writing of the involuntary memory that emerges when one hears a particular piece of music, he notes: "And the photography of all of this had taken its place within the archives of his memory, archives so vast that he would never look into most of them, unless they were renewed by chance, as happened with the shock of the pianist this evening." (cited in Chevrier, Écrit sur l'image, 21-22). He takes this phrase from Baudelaire, who, in his Salon of 1859, in the section called "The Modern Public and Photography," uses it to distinguish photography from art. As Baudelaire writes, speaking of photography: "If she saves from oblivion the crumbling ruins, books, engravings, and manuscripts that time devours, the precious
things whose form will disappear and which demand a place in the archives of our memory, she will deserve our thanks and applause” ("Salon of 1859," 297).

66. At the end of his essay on surrealism, Benjamin suggests that it is only through a technology that brings together the body and image, matter and psyche, that we can begin to understand the revolutionary potential of images. He writes of the image sphere "in which political materialism and physical nature share the inner man, the psyche, the individual, or whatever else we wish to throw to them, with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains unrent." "Nevertheless," he continues,

indeed, precisely after such dialectical annihilation—this will still be an image-space and, more concretely, a body-space. . . . The collective is a body, too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, for all its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image-space in which profane illumination makes us feel at home. Only when in technology body- and image-space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto. (R 192 / GS 2:309-10)

67. On this point, see Comay, "Benjamin’s Endgame," 259.

68. Soon after his appointment as minister for propaganda in March 1933, in a speech to representatives of the press, Goebbels confirms Bloch’s suggestion that, despite its rhetoric of awakening, Nazism favored a kind of intoxication or addiction over enlightenment:

We cannot be satisfied with just telling people what we want and enlightening them as to how we are doing it. We must replace this enlightenment with an active government propaganda that aims at winning people over. It is not enough to reconcile people more or less to our regime, to move them toward a position of neutrality toward us, we would rather work on people until they are addicted to us. (Cited in Welch, Third Reich, 24)

Welch includes the entire text of Goebbels’ speech in the appendix to his book, 136-46. Goebbels refers later in the same speech to the propagandistic basis of the slogan “Germany Awake.” He states:

The art of propaganda is to gather completely confused, complex and composite ideas into a single catch slogan and then to instill this into the people as a whole. I must once more cite as proof a precedent from our own propaganda past, namely the Day of the Awakening Nation on 4 March. No one, either friend or foe, can have any doubts that this day was the greatest propaganda achievement realized in Germany within living memory. But this achievement was only made possible because for a whole week we abandoned all other work and focused the popular vision as if by hypnosis on this one event. (144-45)

69. For a reading of the relation in general in Benjamin between citation and history, see Balfour, “Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin’s History).”

70. I am indebted here to Elissa Marder’s discussion of this passage in “Flat Death,” 138.

71. Jay’s Downcast Eyes, 192-203, and Deleuze’s Cinema I offer a general account of Bergson’s recourse to the language of film and photography.

72. In a figure that would later be mobilized within contemporary film theory, Valéry also suggests that we can find the resources for a discussion of film already at work in the Greeks. He notes on the occasion of the centenary of the invention of photography: "What is Plato’s famous cave, if not a camera obscura—the largest, I think, that has ever been realized? If Plato had reduced the mouth of his grotto to a tiny hole and applied a sensitized coat to the wall that served as his screen, by developing the rear of the cave he could have obtained a gigantic film; and heaven knows what surprising conclusions he might have left regarding the nature of our knowledge and the essence of our ideas" ("Centenary of Photography," 197 / "Centenaire de la photographie." 106).

73. For a condensed account of Bergson’s critique of photography and cinematography, see Creative Evolution, 339-46.

74. I am indebted here to Derrida’s analysis of the relation between the unconscious and techniques of reproduction in "Freud and the Scene of Writing."

75. A similar point is made by Jacques Lacan in his discussion of the role of the other’s gaze in the constitution of our self as a photograph. He writes:

I must, to begin with, insist on the following: in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. . . . It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which—if you will allow me to use a word, as I often do, in a fragmented form—I am photographed. (106)

For a discussion of the photographic resources to be found in Lacan’s concept of the gaze, see Silverman, “What Is a Camera?”

76. Benjamin links these images to a kind of cinematic movement, stating that "they present a quick sequence, like the small leaflets, precursors of the cinema, in which we, as children, could admire a boxer, a swimmer, or a tennis player during his activities" (GS 2:1064). He associates this cinematic image with the moment of dying at least two more times: once in the last paragraph of the Berliner Kindheit (430), and again at the end of his discussion of the motif of death in the tenth section of "The Storyteller" (194 / GS 2:449-50).

77. The word “experience” derives, as Roger Munier has noted, "from the Latin experiri, to undergo. The radical is experiri, which we find again in periculum, peril, danger." This etymological link between traversing and danger is kept in the German Erfahrung, experience, which itself derives from the old high German fana, danger, from which we get Gefähr, danger, and gefährden, to endanger. To experience some-
thing—and here we may recognize the strict sense that Benjamin gives the word *Erfahrung*—is to put oneself in danger, to exist within a permanent state of danger and emergency. For a fuller discussion of the etymology of “experience” see Münier’s “réponse à une enquête sur l’expérience,” in *Mise en page* 1 (May 1972), cited in Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience*, 30–31.

78. On the relation between words and clouds in the *Berliner Kindheit*, see Hamacher, “Word Wolke—if It Is One.” Although Hamacher does not address directly the photographic elements of “The Mummerreihen,” I have found his concern with the issues of language and mimesis in this section to be closely related to my own discussion of Benjamin’s photographic self-portraits.

79. In her history of nineteenth-century photography, Gisèle Freund (to whom Benjamin owes many of his thoughts on photography) reinforces this point when she notes that, within the space of the photographic studio, “the sitter seems to be nothing more than a prop in the studio” (*Photography and Society*, 61). In the effort to reproduce a replica of the bourgeois interior, the photographic studio becomes the means whereby the photographed becomes a corpse. Benjamin makes this point in relation to the late-nineteenth-century interior in *One-Way Street*. There, he writes:

> The bourgeois interior of the 1860s to the 1890s, with its gigantic sideboards dis tended with carvings, the sunken corners where palms stand, the bay window embattled behind its balustrade, and the long corridors with their singing gas flames, fittingly houses only the corpse. “On this sofa the aunt cannot but be murdered.” The soulless luxuriance of the furnishings becomes true comfort only in the presence of a dead body. (OWS 48–49 / GS 4:86)


81. If, as Benjamin suggests elsewhere, “a hell rages in the commodity soul” (GS 5:466), it is because of the multiple, shifting uses to which a commodity can be put—that is, because of its shifting significations. If this hell is interrupted at all it is only through an abstraction, a ghost—in this instance a ghost that, drinking the blood of the sacrificial animal, is now able to speak, and to speak the truth. The truth of this ghost names the dissimulation at the interior of the process of capital itself. Capital in fact requires that there be *mummen*. As Thomas Keenan notes, wherever “the capitalist mode of production prevails, something (economic) shows itself by hiding itself, by announcing itself as something else in another form” (“Point Is to (Ex)Change It,” 157). It would be necessary here to trace the manner in which Benjamin mobilizes the language of disguise against the disguise he understands to be central to the progress of capital. Such an analysis might begin with his discussion of the relations and differences between allegory and the commodity in “Central Park.”

82. In his 1902 “Tagebuch von Wengen,” Benjamin describes his trip to the Alps with his mother and brother in terms that present, in miniature, many of the details of this photographic scene from the *Berliner Kindheit*. See especially his description of the *Genrebild* that furnish many of Wengen’s hotels (GS 6:235–42).

83. Benjamin’s claim here goes a long way toward an account of why we are always asked to “smile” at the very moment when our photograph is about to be taken: we are being asked to prepare ourselves to become something else.

84. Balfour makes this point in a discussion of the relation in Benjamin between personification and reification (“Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin’s History),” 645).

85. The necessity that Benjamin appear as another, that his sentences begin to refer elsewhere, is already written into his image of Kafka. In his notes to the Kafka essay, he writes: “Kafka leaves no process undistorted. In other words, everything that he describes makes statements about something other than itself. The continuous visionary presence of the disfigured things corresponds to the inconsolable seriousness, the despair in the gaze of the author himself” (GS 2:1204).

86. The passage in "Short History of Photography" reads as follows:

> This was the period of those studios which, with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels, occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room, and to which an early portrait of Kafka bears distressing witness. There the boy stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a tight, almost humiliating child’s suit overloaded with trimmings, in a kind of winter garden landscape. Palm fronds stand staring in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and oppressive, the subject holds in his left hand an oversized, broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear. He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for the immensely sad eyes, which dominate this landscape predestined for them. (OWS 247 / GS 2:375)

Benjamin reworked the passage in a version closer to that of the *Berliner Kindheit* in his 1934 essay on Kafka. There, in "A Childhood Photograph," the passage reads as a kind of *Vorbild* of the *Berliner Kindheit* passage, especially in its last image:

> There is a childhood image of Kafka. Rarely has the “poor, brief childhood” been so movingly imaged. It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios that, with their draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, stood so ambivalently between a torture chamber and a throne room. At the age of approximately six the boy is presented in a kind of winter garden landscape, wearing a tight, almost humiliating child’s suit, overloaded with trimmings. Palm fronds stand staring in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and oppressive, the model holds in his left hand an oversized, broad-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape predestined for them, into which the aura [the shell] of a big ear listens. (I 118–19 / GS 2:416)

To my knowledge, Anna Stüssi is the first critic to register Benjamin’s identification with Kafka here. See her *Erinnerung an die Zukunft*, especially pages 189–92, which are entitled “Photoatelier—die Folterszene.” Witte also makes this identification,
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