Experience and the Crisis of Tradition:

History, Memory and Practice in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin

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Abstract

This thesis examines the notion of *experience* in the philosophy of Walter Benjamin. It focuses on the relationship between its constructive and disruptive features in four facets of Benjamin's work, starting with the early writings dedicated to history and tradition and then moving towards different analyses of the reception of the work of art in modernity. Chapter I examines Benjamin's early characterisation of experience on the basis of the transmissibility of tradition and suggests that the constructive character of experience manifests in the historical development of knowledge and truth in language. Chapter II is dedicated to *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* and the shift towards an examination of the development of language from the perspective of the moments of rupture, forgetting and those deviations inherent in the transmissibility of tradition. I argue that experience appears immanently in the momentary suspension or interruption of the transmissibility of tradition: *origin* and *allegory* serve to characterise the double movement of concentrating the totality of tradition and suspending its objectivity. The 'shattering of tradition' that Benjamin regards to be the hallmark of modernity in his later writings is located within this dynamics. This shattering undermines the conditions for understanding the conflict out of which the present emerges, thereby producing a historiographic crisis which unsettles experience. Chapter III examines modern epic narration and the resources it develops to contests the *forgetting* which informs late capitalism. I specifically discuss the method of montage and the fragmentary memory associated with it to suggest that Benjamin looks at history from the standpoint of memory rather than from the perspective of tradition. Chapter IV discuses the radicalisation of the *forgetting* informing modernity and the possibility of developing, though momentarily, an equilibrium or interplay between technology and sensibility by means of long-term practice formed according to technical reproducibility and the principle of montage. It is finally argued that despite Benjamin's constant emphasis on its destructive character, experience necessarily entails a cumulative or constructive dimension which Benjamin reformulates throughout his authorship in terms of *tradition*, *memory* and *practice*.

Acknowledgments

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Preface

The Destructive and Cumulative Character of Experience

I

This thesis is dedicated to examine four different yet interrelated presentations of the notion of *experience* in the work of Walter Benjamin. In these facets of the philosophy of Benjamin both *experience* and the concrete forms through which it is secured change according to the specificities of the present in which it is attained. Benjamin frames his investigation into the notion of experience within the context of the effects that modernity at large has on our ability to recognise the marks of the totality of history in our concrete relation to the present. However, the characterisation of modernity and the way in which the relation to the present is enacted is recast in different formulations. This thesis aims then to explore the historicity of experience as a problem that is in itself open to change in Benjamin's works.

In distinguishing between the German terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* to refer to two different forms of experience, Benjamin contests vitalists and phenomenological formulations of *Erlebnis* or the lived moment as an immanently meaningful form of perception or intuition opposed to the conceptual or scientific articulation of *Erfahrung*. Benjamin rather conceives of *Erlebnis* as the ephemeral moment which bears no meaning by its own unless it is associated or related to a 'cumulative' articulation of knowledge.[1] He thus refers to the latter as *Erfahrung*, which includes yet also exceeds scientific knowledge. In referring to *Erfahrung* as *spiritual*, *absolute* or *higher experience* in different writings and unfinished fragments, Benjamin also distinguishes

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[1] Martin Jay, 'Experience Without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel', in *Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Marcus, Laura and Nead, Lynda (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999), pp. 194–211 (p. 195).

experience from the concrete realms of knowledge pertaining to specific sciences and from the general concept of scientific knowledge encompassing those specific sciences.[2]

Erfahrung has its roots in the verb *fahren* or *travelling* and in the prefix *Er-* which might mark the beginning of a process, its repetition or its conclusion. The prefix *Er-* thus associates the meaning of a long-term process or its repetition and conclusion with the developmental character inherent in *fahren. Erfahrung* acquires, therefore, the inflection of a temporally extended form of sensibility that relates the lived, ephemeral moment of the present to a 'cumulative' configuration of knowledge. The questions that Benjamin addresses with regard to the notion of *experience* (*Erfahrung*) concern the ways in which its 'cumulative' character is constructed and the multiple ways in which it manifests itself in concrete, lived moments (*Erlebnis*). Regarding the lived moment as lacking in proper meaning, Benjamin understands the continuous repetition of lived moments as bearing no further significance, acquiring in most contexts a negative connotation diversely associated to *alienation*,[3] the interrelated process of *innervation* and *enervation* of the anaesthetised body,[4] and to what Beatrice Hanssen calls an 'irrationalist ''experience of cult'''.[5] These expressions of the sensibility are marked by an amnestic relation to the present which in turn must be suspended to attain experience. In this context, an alternative basis to sustain experience is needed beyond the continuous influx of sensory impulses or stimuli.[6]

The distinction between *experience* and the *lived moment* rises questions on how the lived moment came to be the dominant form of sensibility in modernity and how

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[2] Benjamin refers to *spiritual*, *absolute* and *higher experience* respectively in 'Experience' (1913), 'On Perception' (1917) and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (1917-8). See respectively: *Early Writings 1910-1917,* ed. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 116; hereafter *EW*; and *Selected Writings* 1, 1913-1926 ed. by Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA., & London, Harvard University Press, 1996): 94; and 102. Hereafter *SW* followed by volume and page.

[3] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht, (New Edition)*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Bostock, Ana (London: Verso, 2003), p. 1. See also: Ernst Bloch , "'Entfremdung, Verfremdung': Alienation, Estrangement", *TDR*, 15 (1970), 120-125. Hereafter *UB*.

[4] Buck Morss, Susan, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October*, 62 (Autumn 1992), 3–41.

[5] Beatrice Hanssen, 'Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work', *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Ferris, David S. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 77 (fn 2).

[6] Referring to Benjamin's interest in Brecht's *Verfremdungseffeckt*, for instance, Jürgen Habermas suggests that Brecht operated as a 'kind of reality principle', showing that the estrangement produced by epic drama suspends the alienated form of sensibility. Although Habermas' reference to reality is problematic it serves to emphasise that *experience* counteracts the logic of the lived moment. Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique*, 17 (1979), 31.

experience might be secured in this situation. It is within this context that Benjamin formulates different answers that vary according to his characterisation of the present in which experience is attained. If the mark of substantive experience is its cumulative character (i.e. its capacity to concentrate history in itself) Benjamin offers different characterisations of the ways through which history can be gathered in the double process of interrupting the lived moment and relating the present to the past. Throughout his authorship Benjamin reformulated the relation between the ephemeral and transient character of experience and the traces of a totality that remains open to further transformation. Whether as *spiritual*, *absolute*, or *higher experience*, the notion of *experience* carries an emphatic meaning which gives weight to the concrete relation to the present in ways which turns the present into a substantive relation to history. For Benjamin, *experience* brings forth the totality of history in concrete spatio-temporal moments.

Critical to Benjamin's notion of experience are two features. Experience is secured firstly through the interruption or suspension of the current relation to everyday life. It is, first, a form of suspension or interruption. In a unpublished fragment from 1931 Benjamin calls this the 'destructive character'.[7] Experience is thus produced, as Howard Caygill suggests, through 'indirectly, tortuous and even violent forms' of interrupting or suspending the cumulus of lived moments.[8] On the other hand, if experience is secured through the interruption of the current relation to the present, the concrete forms in which it manifests itself change according to the *present* which it suspends. The meaning of this hypothesis is twofold. First, if each generation *gathers* the totality of history in different moments of history, both the *concrete moment* in which experience appears and the *totality of history* are subject to change historically. Then, both the notion of experience and the task of giving a systematic account of the *indirectly, tortuous and violent* forms in which it is produced are, therefore, historicised. Second, although Benjamin addresses the notion of experience in the context of his broader analysis of modernity, he also discusses the notion of experience in the specific contexts of the baroque period and early modernity in *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* (1916- 1928)[9] and late capitalism in his essays on film, photography, radio and artistic

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[7] Walter Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character', *SW* 2: 441-2.
[8] Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 2.
[9] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London, Verso, 1998). Hereafter *OGT*.

production in the age of technical reproducibility and in the unfinished *Arcades Project* (a period which is normally considered to begin in 1924 and which extends to the end of Benjamin's authorship).[10] To some extent, this thesis addresses the multiple *presents* in Benjamin's authorship in which the *destructive character* suspends the lived moment and opens the possibility to produce the *cumulative* dimension that is necessary to attain experience.

This thesis is divided in two main parts respectively divided in two chapters. While the first part addresses the notion of experience in Benjamin's early writings and the book on the baroque, the second part is dedicated to the analysis of experience in the context of the technical reproducibility of the work of art. I suggest that while the early writings and the book on the baroque look at the cumulative character of experience in terms of the totality of history concentrated in tradition, the latter works look at the totality of history from the standpoint of divergent notions of memory. Tradition and memory are then different media to construe or concentrate the totality of history. They are also different forms of giving the conditions to contest the amnestic present of modernity. Tradition and memory are, therefore, different forms of naming the totality of history which substantiates experience.

The preliminary distinction between the destructive and cumulative character of experience may help to motivate the approach to Benjamin's writings sketched above. As most interpreters, Martin Jay explains the cumulative character of experience from the perspective of Benjamin's more emphatic presentation of the distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, namely, the twofold characterisation of the loss of the tradition of storytelling that affects both the communicability and transmissibility of experience (as it is presented in 'Experience and Poverty' and 'The Storyteller'),[11] and the 'shattering' or annihilation of tradition produced by the emergence of technical reproducibility (as it is formulated more strongly in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' and other essays on photography, film and epic drama).[12] The cumulative character of experience is thereby associated with the work of tradition, language and memory on the one hand, and with the historical process of cultural transmissibility of the work of art on the other. In both cases, the cumulative character

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[10] *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, MA. & London, The Belknap Pres of Harvard University Press, 1999). Hereafter *AP*.
[11] See respectively: *SW* 2: 731-6; *SW* 3: 143-65.
[12] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility', *SW* 3: 101-133.

of experience is negatively presented from the perspective of the loss of the conditions that make it possible in the first place. It is in this context that the loss of tradition means the loss of the medium through which experience is produced and transmitted, or the loss of the medium through which experience *accumulates* its own history.

From the perspective of its loss, the cumulative character of experience is explained *negatively*: Benjamin offers an account of the conditions that are necessary to produce substantive experience within a context in which those conditions are no longer operative (i.e. modernity). By contrast, the early writings on Kant and language and the book on the baroque offer an alternative account of the transmissibility of experience by means of tradition. This account may be interpreted as a *positive* account: it explains the transmissibility of experience by means of tradition less from the perspective of its loss or absence than from the perspective of the intrinsic tension informing the transmissibility of experience by means of tradition (and language). The early works on Kant, language and the baroque still assume the existence of the conditions for the transmissibility of experience by means of tradition —although the transmissibility of experience is marked by the presence of an internal conflict that threatens the very process of transmission, as I will discuss later.

This contrast does not suggest that the earlier writings deny the crisis of tradition and experience. Rather, in bringing these discussions together it can be appreciated that the crisis of experience is continuously reformulated throughout Benjamin's writings. If the earlier writings and the book on the baroque stage the crisis of experience in terms of the internal tension of cultural transmissibility in modernity at large, the later writings provide an account of the further radicalisation of the crisis of tradition in industrial capitalism. It may be suggested that Benjamin traces the historical origins of the crisis of tradition back to the philosophical and theological conflicts (or contradictions) of the baroque period —and in the philosophical solution which appears latter in Kant's distinction between what is cognisable (and attainable) and what is an object of faith (an only partially and obliquely conceivable). The relevance of reading these two general characterisations of experience together lies in the fact that the early writings and the book on the baroque provide the elements for a more complete characterisation of what Benjamin means by experience based or grounded in the transmissibility of tradition and the conditions for the gathering of the totality of history which are ultimately shattered in late capitalism.

From this perspective, the effects that the shattering of tradition has on experience may be understood in a more complete way: not only the medium for the transmission of experience is brought into crisis in late capitalism but also the possibility of comprehending the conflict from which the present emerges. This thesis examines the transition from Benjamin's analysis of experience in a context where tradition maintains its *living efficacy* to an analysis of experience in which its operative character is brought into crisis.[13] It is against the background of the former that the transformation which experience undergoes in the latter context is better explained. Critical to this transition is the problem of what the cumulative character of experience consists of in light of the 'shattering' of tradition; or how experience gathers its own history when the medium through which it is articulated is unsettled. In this perspective, the loss or annihilation of tradition does not imply the impossibility of attaining experience as Benjamin shows through his analysis of different notions of memory. Memory is in turn seen as an alternative medium to ground or sustain experience in late capitalism.

II

One way of thinking of the relationship between the cumulative character of experience and its destructive character consists of the distinction between the *cosmological* and *phenomenological* notions of experience that Susan Buck-Morss introduces in her presentation of the 'revolutionary time' of the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century, specifically, of the Russian avant-gardes of the time of the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917.[14] Her distinction between *cosmological* and *phenomenological* experience *partially* maps the distinction between the 'cumulative' and the 'destructive character' of experience. She associates the avant-gardes with *cosmological* experience and brings into question what she understands to be a reduced conception of the temporality of the avant-gardes: the temporality which, according to

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[13] Benjamin refers to the *living efficacy* of the storyteller to concentrate the conditions that make possible the transmissibility of experience by means of tradition in ''The Storyteller'' (*SW* 3: 143). These formulation is further discussed in Chapter III.

[14] Susan Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde', in *Perception and Experience in Modernity*, ed. by Helga Geyer-Ryan, Paul Koopman, and Klaas Yntema, Benjamin Studies / Studien 1 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 209–25 (p. 220). Also: Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp 49-50.

her, Peter Osborne attributes to them in terms of a 'Benjaminian temporality of interruption, estrangement and arrest' (i.e., a *phenomenological* experience).[15] At stake here is not only the temporality of the avant-gardes, but also Benjamin's notion of *experience* and the interrelated work of its destructive and cumulative dimensions.

Although Buck-Morss agrees on that Benjamin's concept of revolutionary time consists of a 'phenomenally lived rupture' or an 'interruption of daily life' which we can now associate to the destructive character,[16] she contests the possibility of identifying this moment of rupture with *experience* in particular and with the project of the *historical* avant-gardes in general. She therefore suggests that Benjamin's concept of experience cannot be related to the latter without undergoing a further reformulation.

What is left aside from the *phenomenological* understanding of experience as mere interruption is, according to Buck-Morss, the *cosmological* dimension of experience. This manifests in the project pursued by those avant-gardes which aimed not only at interrupting specific forms or configurations of everyday life but which also sought to contribute towards the progress of history, thereby endorsing 'the idea of history as progress'. By *cosmological* experience Buck-Morss refers then to an understanding of the avant-gardes and political revolutions as world-historical events, i.e. the culmination of a process of transformation which (albeit discontinuous) claims to be a sort of 'historical destination'.[17] The opposition staged by Buck-Morss introduces the question of whether the destructive character of Benjamin's notion of experience provides the conditions for securing an alternative, constructive dimension which may contribute towards an understanding of those radical practices which aimed to exceed the phenomenological moment of interruption. For Buck-Morss, despite its own radicalism, the phenomenological experience of breaking through everyday life is ultimately an ephemeral moment that might remain congealed in the *now* of its occurrence. This suggests that in spite of its force the destructive character may be just an ecstatic affirmation of the lived moment. In spite of being an 'enlightened', disruptive and

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[15] Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time...': 221; *Cf.* Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London and NY: Verso, 2011), pp. 50–52.

[16] Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time...': 219.

[17] Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time...': 220. Buck-Morss continues by identifying the idea of history as progress with cosmological experience and the historical project of the avant-gardes. She writes that the idea of history as progress 'led radical cultural producers to assume that political revolution and cultural revolution must be two sides of the same coin'. ('Revolutionary Time...', p. 219).

critical gesture, this affirmation may nonetheless remain as a 'barbarism' which embodies a merely negative form of nihilism.[18]

The positions of Buck-Morss and Osborne are not antithetical. Not least because both of them seek for an alternative, secured long-term experience beyond the 'ecstatic' moment of interruption. The problem is that Buck-Morss' account of the twofold notion of political and cultural *progress* conflates different meanings and becomes too broad, including both the avant-garde movements which by the mid 1920's followed the Party politics in the Soviet Union and those which came to be condemned as 'counter-revolutionary' (despite having being initially regarded to be part of the revolutionary movement of *progress*). This general notion of *progress* identifies the avant-gardes with those artists who made the 'fateful decision, in facing forward rather than backward, of moving triumphantly into the future alongside of political power'. To maintain that the avant-gardes abandoned the Benjaminian temporality of interruption while moving *forward* (alongside historical progress and political power) undoes the differences between specific avant-gardes and, furthermore, between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary practices. Not only may this argument attribute a progressivistic inflection to Benjamin's work. With this, both cultural expressions are collapsed under the *cosmological* notion of experience according to which the avant-garde would be that which (reversing Osborne's formulation) 'is historically more advanced', or that which 'has the most history behind it': in sum, the movement which has made the major progress in history in terms of a linear accumulation of events.[19]

Within this context, both the cosmological and phenomenological notions of experience become problematic. The former becomes a name for the prejudice of history-as-progress. The latter is rendered irrelevant insofar as it confronts or contests the course of history without providing any alternative to it (being romantically stripped of any political efficacy). It is, however, within the context of the radicalisation of the

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[18] 'The Destructive Character', *SW* 2: 441-2. On Benjamin's affirmation of a positive nihilism, see also 'Theological-Political Fragment', *SW* 3: 305. For a discussion of this method see: Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, 'Walter Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment* as a Response to Ernst Bloch's Spirit of Utopia', *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, Volume 47, Issue 1, 1 January 2002, pages 3–19; and Eric Jacobson, 'Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment' *Jewish Studies Quarterly* Vol. 8, No. 3 (2001), pp. 205-247. Also, Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 29-33, and Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), specially Chapter 4, pp. 144-160. James McFarland offers some insights into the nihilistic basis of Benjamin's thought in Chapter 5 of *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 208-248.
[19] Osborne, *The Politics of Time,* p. 150. *Cf*: Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time', p. 220.

cosmological notion of experience (informed by an unorthodox, critical or inverted idea of history-as-progress) that Benjamin turned his attention to those specific movements that aimed to contest the Party politics of the Soviet Union from the mid 1920s (radicalised latter in the 1934 congress of Soviet writers and the adoption of Social Realism as official line). In this context, the concept of experience associated with *rupture*, *interruption* or *suspension*, turned to be critical for his approach to the debates on the avant-gardes both in the East and the West.

This does not mean, however, that —in Buck-Morss' vocabulary— Benjamin did not formulate his own particular conception of *cosmological* experience. On the contrary, he did intend to articulate the constructive dimension of the *totality of history* with the destructive character of *interruption*. It is the relation between these two different features what Benjamin brings together in divergent formulations of the notion of experience throughout his authorship —and what ultimately brings Buck-Morss' position closer to Osborne's. In his writings dedicated to the avant-gardes, Benjamin formulates a *cosmological* form of experience which manifests immanently in the moment of interruption that Buck-Morss identifies with *phenomenological* experience. In other words, the cosmological dimension of experience is articulated by means of the phenomenological interruption of everyday life. Cosmological experience is immanently developed in the phenomenological interruption of given configurations of social life. In this perspective, to stage the opposition between the *cosmological* and *phenomenological* as adjectives supplementing two differentiated forms of experience is possible only on the basis of reducing the latter to its 'ecstatic', nihilistic character. The *cosmological* and the *phenomenological* refer, rather, to elements or features of one single notion of experience, one in which its cosmological (constructive/cumulative) dimension is immanently construed by means of the phenomenological (destructive/nihilistic) interruption of the lived moment. Then, more than referring to two different forms of experience, the *cosmological* and the *phenomenological* are better understood as features or hallmarks of one single form of *experience* (i.e. no experience is attained in the absence of one of these features).

One Way Street (1928), Benjamin's most experimental piece of writing, concludes precisely with an intimation of a cosmological experience. This is formulated *negatively* by means of the interruption of the current relation to technology in daily life. The *negative* presentation of experience is critical to Benjamin's critique and inversion of

the idea of history-as-progress. According to Benjamin, in order to respond to the extreme situation of technological warfare which emerged with World War I a radical gesture of interruption is needed. This gesture is formulated in terms of an ecstatic process of innervation or 'ecstatic trance' which suspends the distorted relation between sensibility and technology, which thereby opens the opportunity for a substantive, long-term form of perception, subsequently identified with *experience*: an equilibrium between humanity and technology in a 'cosmic experience'.[20] It is in this context that Benjamin equates the measure of humanity's ability to attain such a 'cosmic experience' with the 'proletarian's capacity' to intervene in the real world in order to suspend the destructive effects of the technological organisation of sensibility.[21] The constructive (cosmological) character of experience is then a discrete outcome of the destructive (phenomenological) interruption of the lived moment.

The 'Theses on the Concept of History' (1939) reveal one of the central features of this form of substantive experience, namely, its relation to the totality of history. According to this fragment, experience is to some extent that which has *the most history behind it.* In describing the potential that each generation has to suspend the destructive social relations that make of history a history of catastrophes, Benjamin writes in thesis II: 'our coming was expected on the earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim'.[22] As Howard Caygill comments on this fragment, 'as the Messiah of past generations, it is we who are expected to redeem the past and to avenge their suffering'.[23] Here, the gesture of *gathering* the past is understood as a condition of possibility for producing or attaining substantive experience.[24] *Experience* is thus the result of a twofold process in which the moment of interruption concentrates the *history behind it,* albeit in order to open history to unknown futures rather than to claim (or predict) the arrival to an alleged destination. Looking at the past while searching for alternative futures renders this conception of experience into a form of *historical experience*, one which bears the marks of a weak Messianism rather than structure of utopian visions anticipating historical destinations. *Experience* is thus produced by the

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[20] *One Way Street*, *SW* 1: 486.
[21] *SW* 1: 486-7.
[22] *SW* 4: 390.
[23] Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance* (London: Boomsbury, 2013), p. 144.
[24] Howard Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000).

totality of history concentrated in the moment of interrupting the lived moment. It gathers the past in a concrete moment in the present and opens it up to discrete, divergent possibilities to come in the future. It consists therefore in the recognition of history as open to change with the present being embedded with multiple futurities.

<center>III</center>

This thesis is divided in two main parts which address different presentations of the gathering of history by means of the interruption of the lived moment. The first part addresses the notion of experience in Benjamin's early writings and the book on the baroque. It examines the relationship between experience and tradition and considers the latter to be the medium through which the former attains its constructive or cumulative character. It pays particular attention to Benjamin's identification of the transmissibility of tradition with the unfolding or development of language, for which the constructive dimension of experience is consequently identified with the eschatological conception of language. For this, language is moving towards its own completion. The second part of this thesis is dedicated to the analysis of experience in the age of the technical reproducibility of the work of art and the shattering of tradition it produces. It argues that Benjamin entertains divergent notions of memory as alternative media for the articulation of the constructive character of experience, making the gathering of the totality of history possible in light of the crisis of tradition.

In this general scheme Chapter I examines the notion of experience in three main moments. Firstly, it offers an account of the notion experience in Benjamin's early writings (1913-1917), according to which experience consists in recognising history as open to change and transformation. Secondly, it relates the transformability of history to Benjamin's attempt to formulate a *doctrinal* philosophy of history, one which must be able to give a systematic account of experience as a unity that remains open to change. This serves to explain Benjamin's understanding of *doctrine* (*Lehre*) in its double meaning of *teachings* and *religious doctrine* transmitted on the basis of tradition, and Benjamin's attempt to capture the technical sense that *Doktrin* has in the Kantian system (as that part of philosophy which catalyses the *critical* method and drives it

towards the unattainable completion of a productive metaphysics). Thus, Chapter I shows that Benjamin offers a double account of the nature of experience and the conditions for giving a systematic explanation of it: if experience is open to transmission and transformation, (doctrinal) philosophy must consists also of an open system able to *present* experience as subject to change.[25]

The final section of Chapter I is dedicated to the relationship between tradition, experience and language. Although Benjamin argues for an examination of this relationship in the concluding sections of 'On Perception' (1917) and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (1917-8), this problem is developed in the essays on language (1916) and translation (1921). In the section on language I emphasise the limits that the essay on translation sets upon his eschatological conception of language and meaning introduced in the earlier essay on language.[26] Although Benjamin argues that language develops towards the full completion of meaning in the process of translation between languages, he also maintains that such a completion is unattainable, leaving open a space of indeterminacy which is indeed critical to support the thesis of the eschatological unfolding or growing of language. As Beatrice Hanssen argues, Benjamin understands the transformability of experience within the context of a general understanding of history as 'history of language' and, furthermore, of 'history as language'.[27] This view locates the cumulative character of experience in the historical development of knowledge and truth *in* language. As Hanssen also notes, there is a specific shift in the essay on translation which allows for a closer examination of the 'growth of language'.[28] I suggest, however, that it is *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* (1928) which offers the conditions for a proper understanding of the

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[25] Although most interpreters recognise the centrality that the double meaning of *Lehre* has for Benjamin's reading of Kant, less attention has been given to his emphatic reading of *Doktrin* and the role that the *ideas of reason* play in the configuration of a philosophical account of the unity of experience. See: Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 5-13, 23-29; Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 153–55; Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin. A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 131–36; Beatrice Hanssen *Walter Benjamin's Other History. Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 28–30. Bram Mertens, *Dark Images, Secret Hints: Benjamin, Scholem, Molitor and the Jewish Tradition* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007): Chapters 4-5.

[26] Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*: 15. Also: Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History:* 34-5.

[27] Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History:* 34. On the 'abstract' tendency of the essay on language see: Ilit Ferber, 'Lament and Pure Language: Scholem, Benjamin and Kant', *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 21.1 (2014), 42–54 (pp. 47–49). Ferber also reads the essay on translation as marking a shift towards the 'historical dimension' of language. However, she explores the continuity towards a pure, abstract language rather than the historical movement or transformation of language: Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 154–55. I will return to this point in Chapter I.

[28] Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*: 34. *Cf*: 'The Task of the Translator', *SW* 1: 255-6.

growth of language and its relation to tradition. This allows for an analysis of the moments of rupture and oblivion informing (and conditioning) the eschatological aspiration to completion in language and meaning upon which the essays on language and translation elaborate.

Chapter II examines *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play*. The book on the baroque is not explicitly concerned with the notion of experience in general but with the experience associated with reception of the literary work. In this context, the book on the baroque provides a more detailed account of two central elements of the notion of experience developed in the earlier writings. Firstly, its 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' explains the gathering of the totality of history and its opening up to alternative futures in the reception of literary works by means of the concept of *immanent critique*, a form of criticism which operates through an *immersion* or *digression* in history. I argue that the 'historical configuration' on which doctrinal philosophy must be based is better understood as *tradition*.[29] Secondly, the book on the baroque develops the thesis of the historical growing or unfolding of language yet advances an important shift. Rather than looking at the historical development of language from the perspective of its movement towards completion, immanent critique is orientated towards the past in order to pattern the irregular rhythm informing the development of those concepts which have been utilised to characterise the literary work which is criticised (i.e. the baroque mourning-play or *Trauerspiel*). The unfolding or growing of language is understood, therefore, as an irregular movement marked by cycles of memory and forgetting, interruptions and deviations. To grasp the totality of history in the reception of the work means to pattern or determine the irregular rhythm informing the history of those concepts which have been used to grasp, for example, the 'essence' of the baroque *Trauerspiel*. The peculiarity of the baroque *Trauerspiel* —its exceptionality as literary genre and its resistance to be subordinated to literary and aesthetic theories and methodologies for genre-definition— serves to reveal that this irregular process is ultimately shaped by the conflict of multiple interpretations of the work, marked by what I refer to as the *violence of critique*. The history of those concepts construes a tradition which *violently* negotiates the essence of the literary work.

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[29] *OGT*: 37.

Immanent critique juxtaposes contrasting interpretations of the baroque *Trauerspiel*, gathering its total history yet also revealing the conflict which informs its development. To some extent, immanent critique makes recognisable both the history concentrated in the work's afterlife and alternative interpretations of it that never came into being. It liberates meanings which are concealed in the history of the reception of the work, opening then the opportunity to recover its total yet incomplete history. The constructive character of experience is then situated in the possibility of grasping the total yet incomplete history of the work of art delivered by multiple chains of tradition in conflict. The transmission of the work by means of tradition is thus understood in terms of the conflict between different positions *negotiating* the work's essence.[30]

The second part of this dissertation examines the crisis of tradition and the problem of confronting the work of art by means of immanent critique in this new context. If the shattering of tradition produces a 'historiographic crisis', as Osborne suggests, this crisis is double.[31] It is not only the transmissibility of experience what is unsettled but, also, the possibility of grasping the conflict which is inherent in the process of transmission. The present is deprived of its own past and of the conflict out of which it emerges. Chapter III examines the transition from immanent to materialist critique as a means of confronting the crisis of tradition in the age of technical reproducibility. Materialist critique specifically points out the mnemonic character of modern epic narration by focusing on two main problems. Firstly, it examines the relationship between modern epic and film on the basis of the principle of montage which the former takes from the latter. Secondly, it examines the possibility of securing an alternative form of experience by means of the technique of montage. Montage operates then as the medium through which modern epic narration suspends the historiographic crisis of modernity and relates the present to the past. In the light of the crisis of tradition, modern epic narration suspends the reduced relation to the present lived moment by bringing it together with memories coming from the narrator's past. This transition is also formulated in the unfinished project on the *Arcades* and the demand for a 'Copernican revolution of remembrance' on which a new historiography must be

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[30] Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to His Work and Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 130.
[31] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, p. 136-7.

based.[32] I suggest that the mnemonic character that Benjamin attributes to the technique of montage in the essays on epic narration offers an alternative medium for the configuration of the cumulative character and the suspension of the lived moment.

Critical to modern epic narration is the distinction between divergent notions of memory which in turn differentiate between i) totalising and fragmentary forms of memory and between their ii) individual and collective foundations. With these distinctions, Benjamin associates modern epic narration to a fragmentary memory bearing a collective dimension. In opposition to the totalising *remembrance* (*Erinnerung*) based on the individual, subjective closure embodied by the novel, modern epic narration grounds experience by suspending the cumulus of lived moments and relating the present to a collective past that emerges as fragmentary *reminiscence* (*Gedächtnis*). Chapter III examines the concept of *reminiscence* which Benjamin intimates in the essays on Gottfried Keller (1927-9) and Alfred Döblin (1931), and which he develops in 'The Storyteller' (1936) and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939). The constructive character of experience is thus explained in terms of the interruption of the lived moment by means of the work of fragmentary memory and its capacity to relate the collective past to the present. It will be argued that, by means of the mnemonic character attributed to the method of montage, modern epic narration counteracts both the historiographic crisis produced by the shattering of tradition and the illusory response given to this by means of different narrative forms (the totalising closure of the novel and the amnestic repetition of information).

By emphasising the turn towards memory this thesis avoids the antinomic readings of Benjamin's work, according to which the essays on epic narration and other writings mourn the loss of tradition and aim at its recovery, while the essays on the new technologies (mainly the essay on reproducibility) affirm the annihilation of tradition or any remnant of it as a condition of possibility for new forms of experience, mainly associated with the lived moment and the *shock* of modern, urban experience.[33] This thesis argues that by means of different concepts of memory Benjamin explains a new

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[32] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Belknap Press, 2002): [K 1,1] - [K 1,2]. Hereafter *AP*.

[33] John Joseph McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3, 18, 21–30; Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 119. Also: Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 531, 643; and Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 80–83, 103, 116–7.

realm of experience which does not depend on the recovery of tradition nor on the ecstatic affirmation of the lived moment. Memory, it will be argued, configures the cumulative character of experience in light of the absence of tradition. In this reading, the transition from the early writings and the book on the baroque to the essays on modern epic narration and technical reproducibility is presented in terms of different configurations of the constructive character of experience by means of tradition and memory.

Finally, Chapter IV explains the constructive character of experience by distinguishing two uses of the notion of montage. If the essays on epic narration introduce montage as the technique or method of composition of the literary work, the third version of the essay on technical reproducibility understands montage as the principle or law (*Gesetz*) configuring film and, more broadly, the work of art in the age of technical reproducibility. With this generalisation of the method of montage as a principle or law, Benjamin characterises any form of visual and literary presentation (such as epic drama, for example) as a construction that precludes the totalising closure associated with the novel and with subject-centred cinematographic and photographic narratives. Critical to the principle or law of montage is therefore its openness and fragmentariness. It is the recognition of these elements what sustains the possibility of reaching an equilibrium between sensibility and technology, one which, however, remains suspended in the subordination of technical reproducibility to the logic of capitalism.

The distorted form which reproducibility has in capitalism produces, therefore, a double effect: it brings the transmissibility of tradition into crisis and precludes the realisation of the equilibrium between sensibility and technology on the basis of which a new form of experience *had emerged*. This thesis examines the conditions on which the principle of montage both inaugurates a new realm of experience (which remains suspended) and the conditions for its fragmentary or momentary actualisation. It will be argued that this fragmentary actualisation depends on a suspension or interruption of second order or, as Irving Wohlfarth has argued, a 'distortion of a distortion'.[34] Having the potential of technical reproducibility been suspended or distorted in capitalism, its further actualisation can only be attained through the subsequent interruption or annihilation of capitalism.

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[34] Irving Wohlfarth, 'Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation', *New German Critique*, 1979, 70–98 (p. 80).

This thesis finally emphasises the relationship between montage and repetition in the essay on reproducibility and other writings on photography and epic theatre. The phenomenological character of experience is framed within its cosmological character: the destructive character of montage gains meaning within the possibilities it offers for a constructive configuration of experience by means of *practice* or *training*, consequently regarding film as the *Übungsinstrument* of modern experience. If montage interrupts the lived moment by means of a juxtaposition of divergent elements, a continuous repetition of this process of interruption is required in order to train human sensibility in the equilibrium or interplay with the new technologies. The disruptive character of montage is therefore framed in the process of training human sensibility in a long-term process of habit-formation in which technology becomes *second nature*. It is finally argued that despite Benjamin's constant emphasis on it destructive character, experience necessarily entails a cumulative or constructive dimension, one which is reformulated throughout his own authorship in terms of *tradition*, *memory* and *practice*.

First Part

Experience and the Transmissibility of Tradition

Chapter I

To Make Room for History

On October 22nd 1917, Walter Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem about his plan to work on Kant and his philosophy of history during the coming winter. He explained the reasons behind this project in the following words:

> I recognise that the ultimate reason that led me to this topic, as well as much as that is apropos and interesting: the ultimate metaphysical dignity of a philosophical view that truly intends to be canonical will always manifest itself most clearly in its confrontation with history; in other words, the specific relationship of a philosophy with the true doctrine [*Lehre*] will appear most clearly in the philosophy of history; for this is where the subject of the historical transformation of knowledge that doctrine reveals will have to appear.[1]

In this fragment, Benjamin delineates the series of relations that informed his approach to Kant in a group of writings dating from this period. In this letter Benjamin understands history as grounding the dignity of 'canonical' philosophy. Furthermore, it is in its confrontation with history that philosophy enters into an 'specific relation' with the 'true doctrine'. Two elements are critical for this relation. The first one concerns the content of philosophy in its canonical or doctrinal form: 'the historical transformation of knowledge'. The second one is the structure of the canonical or doctrinal philosophy: this is no longer a philosophy but a 'philosophy of history'. To some extent, Benjamin aims to explain the mediating role that history plays in the 'specific relation' between the transformation of knowledge and doctrine. The aim of this chapter is to examine the

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[1] *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 98-99. Hereafter *CBW*. *Briefe*, eds. Gershom Scholem & Theodor Adorno, (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag 1978), pp. 151-2.

role that Benjamin ascribes to history in his interpretation of Kant and in the further reorientation of the Kantian system.

It is not my intention to affirm that the aim of such a reorientation is to produce the doctrinal philosophy of history which Benjamin anticipated in the work of Kant. I rather suggest that the unfinished project of developing this doctrinal philosophy of history offers a point of entry to Benjamin's reformulation of the Kantian system delineated in 'On Perception' (1917) and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (1917-8), in which Benjamin respectively argues for 'absolute' and 'higher' notions of *experience* that were latent yet undeveloped in Kant.[2] This reformulation of the Kantian system is further developed in the writings that followed Benjamin's own 'disappointment' with Kant's writings on history, which he confirmed to Scholem in January 1918.[3] It is critical to mention, however, that 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' do not explicitly refer to the problem of history as it is formulated in the passage quoted from Benjamin's correspondence. They do refer to *doctrine* (*Lehre*) in order to explain the systematic unity that philosophy can attain on the basis of the 'absolute' or 'higher' notions of experience they argue for. From this perspective, the doctrinal philosophy of history that Benjamin entertains in his correspondence with Scholem offers the possibility to think of the systematic unity of philosophy delineated in the fragments of the same epoch *as* a philosophy of history which remains only partially sketched out.

This chapter is divided in two main parts. The first one offers an introduction to the relation between history and experience in Benjamin's early writings, specifically, in 'Experience' and 'Thoughts on Gerhart Hauptmann's Festival' —written in 1913.[4] This analysis will serve to examine the context in which Benjamin approaches the relationship between history and experience when he turns his attention towards Kant's philosophy of history. This section indicates some of the problems which Benjamin first formulated in his earlier writings and then aimed to systematise in his more programmatic texts on Kant. The first section of this chapter concludes with an examination of the correspondence with Scholem and the relationship between

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[2] 'On Perception', *SW* 1: 93-97. Also: 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', *SW* 1: 100-110.
[3] *CWB*: 103-5; *Briefe*: 156-9, 161. Scholem recollects this debate in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review Books, 1981), pp. 73–75. Scholem's letters to Benjamin from these months are lost.
[4] 'Experience', in *EW*: 116-119. Also, 'Thoughts on Gerhart Hauptmann's Festival', *EW*: 120-125; *GS* II: 56-60.

philosophy and doctrine that Benjamin had anticipated yet ultimately failed to find in Kant. As he reported to Scholem in December of the same year, his expectations for Kant's writings on history 'met with disappointment' given the scientific form of observation posited in *Ideas for a Universal History*. Despite this disappointment Benjamin nevertheless maintains that an alternative philosophy of history might be developed out of Kant's 'ethics' and the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[5]

The second section of this chapter examines Benjamin's reformulation of the Kantian system in 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', arguing that the philosophy of history that he anticipated yet failed to find in Kant offers a broader context for the discussion of the 'absolute' or 'higher' notion of experience. It is particularly Benjamin's use of the notion of *doctrine* and the centrality that he attributes to the *ideas of reason* for the systematic completion of philosophy and the unity of experience what illuminate the productive elements which he thought were latent yet undeveloped in Kant's work. It is critical to stress that Benjamin's essays on Kant do not examine the role that history plays for the systematic completion of philosophy or the development of a doctrinal philosophy (which in principle was identified with a philosophy of history in the correspondence from October 1917). The closest approximation to the historical character of experience consists of the final remarks in the two essays, where Benjamin affirms that experience and knowledge must be considered with reference to their linguistic dimension. In quoting Johan Georg Hamman's *Metacritique* (1780) Benjamin suggests that this linguistic dimension must be disclosed in terms of its historical transformation. The second part of this chapter thus presents the central arguments of the essays on Kant through an examination of the Kantian concept of doctrine to finally turn towards the linguistic character of language. The main goal of that section is to identify the affinities between Benjamin's interpretation of *doctrine* and the historical transformation of the linguistic character of experience and knowledge.

Critical to this argument is the notion of *doctrine*. In the second part of this chapter I argue that while Benjamin refers to doctrine as *Lehre* in its double meaning of *religious doctrine* and *teachings* (as most commentators have underlined), his use of the term also

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[5] *CWB*: 103–5; *Briefe*: 156-9, 161. Scholem's letters to Benjamin from these months have not survived. He recollects this debate in: Scholem, Gershom, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review Books, 1981), pp. 73–75.

captures the meaning that Kant ascribed to the technical concept of *Doktrin. Doctrine* (*Lehre*) then serves to link Benjamin's initial interest in Kant's philosophy of history (which Benjamin understands as a doctrinal philosophy) and the reorientation of the Kantian system (which must be supplemented with such a doctrinal element). In this sense, the doctrinal philosophy of history that Benjamin develops brings together the double meaning of *Lehre* and the technical use of *Doktrin*. This chapter concludes with an examination of the linguistic character of experience and knowledge in light of Benjamin's interpretation of *doctrine*. I suggest that his notion of *doctrine* concentrates both the systematic drive for completion and unity in philosophy and the always hypothetical, open character of such completion. This will be more evident in Benjamin's understanding of the nature of meaning as a process of completion subjected to historical transformation, as Benjamin argues in 'On Language as Such and on Language of Man' (1916) and 'The Task of the Translator' (1921). I will conclude, however, that this tendency towards completion, which Eli Friedlander calls the 'eschatological' conception of meaning, is more fully developed in the doctrine of ideas (*Ideenlehre*) of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*.[6]

While the essays on language and translation focus on the unfolding of language towards the expression of its full meaning, the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' focuses on the moments of rupture and interruption informing the same process of unfolding. Thus, although the essays on language and translation already argue that the unfolding of language towards its own completion remains necessarily open, the 'Prologue' to the book on the baroque emphasises the breaks and ruptures in this process, consequently paying close attention to the elements which maintain the process of completion open to further transformation and, specially, to multiple, unknown futures which history does not necessarily follow. The 'Prologue' conceives of these elements as moments of *emergence* and *disappearance,* or cycles of memory and oblivion in the history of language which reveal alternative historical paths that were partially lost. From this perspective, the first chapter of this thesis examines the conception of history operating

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[6] 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, tr. by John Osborne (London-New York: Verso, 1998), p. 27. Hereafter *OGT* followed by page number. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften. Werkausgabe* Vol. I (Frankfurt am Main: Surkhamp, 1980), p. 226. Hereafter *GS*1. Rendering *Trauerspiel* as *Tragic Drama*, the English translation misses Benjamin's critical distinction between *Trauerspiel* and *Tragödie*. *Mourning-Play* is the most accepted rendering of *Trauerspiel*. In this thesis I will translate *Trauerspiel* as *Mourning-Play* both in the main text and in the amended references to the title of Benjamin's 1928 book.

in Benjamin's reorientation of Kant, while the second chapter discusses the further radicalisation of this project in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' and the effects this has on the notion of experience.[7]

1. The Struggle to Conceive Doctrine

The philosophy of Walter Benjamin is marked by the continuous attempt to formulate a notion of *experience* capable of securing the conditions for knowledge and the conceivability of the transformation of history. One of the earliest formulations of this problem appears in the brief review 'Thoughts on Gerhart Hauptmann's Festival', published under the pseudonym of 'Ardor' in the student-run journal *Der Anfang* in 1913.[8] The review introduces some of the central concepts of Benjamin's authorship and serves to establish the relationship between history, experience and philosophy which this chapter discusses. Influenced by the ideas of the 'Free Students Association' of the German Youth Movement, the opening of the review confronts a series of concepts which, albeit transformed, mark Benjamin's entire authorship: '[h]umanity has not yet awakened to a steady consciousness of its historical existence. Only from time to time has it dawned on individuals and peoples that they were in the service of an unknown future, and such illumination [*Erleuchtung*] could be thought of as a historical sense [*historisches Sinn*]'.[9] The review aims to delineate what Benjamin refers to as *historical sense* and the conditions under which the consciousness of an unknown future can be attained. This is explored by means of a brief discussion on the presentation of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Festspiel in Deutschen Reimen* (1913) in Breslau for the commemoration of Germany's War of Liberation in 1813.

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[7] The radicalisation of this project is also related to Benjamin's reformulation of the doctrine of ideas in Platonic rather than Kantian terms, shifting from the problem of knowledge to the problem of truth. When Benjamin writes that 'truth provokes pursuit of the intellect' he also recognises that truth permanently eludes the intellect and the specific realms of knowledge, therefore exceeding the limits of the intellect and knowledge. See *OGT*: 30-31; *GS I*: 210-211.

[8] 'Thoughts on Gerhart Hauptmann's Festival', in Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings, 1910-1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 120–25. Hereafter *EW*; *Gesammelte Schriften* II, pp. 56-60. Hereafter *GS. Gesammelte Schriften* II, pp. 56-60.

[9] *EW*: 120; *GS* II: 56. Also: *CWB*: 32, 37–38.

Hauptmann's *Festspiel* was a polemical play that looked at the German past without triumphalism or sentimentalism, for which it was regarded as an unpatriotic work. Its exclusion from the official celebrations of the 1813 War was symptomatic of the rise in nationalism which ultimately contributed to the explosion of the First War.[10] The review introduces Hauptmann's presentation of historical events from different yet interrelated perspectives which ultimately serve to characterise two contrasting forms of understanding history and historical change. These perspectives are distinguished along three main axes: the first one differentiates between the presence or absence of the 'consciousness' of humanity's 'historical existence'; the second one distinguishes the continuity and discontinuity in the sequence of time; and the third one discerns the generational *dispositions* towards history and time held by 'mature citizens' and youth, which are either *timeless* or bear *actuality*.

While 'consciousness' of the 'historical sense' is enacted through the interruption of the sequence of events in the play, in a *disposition* associated with the youth represented by the character of Philistiades, the disposition of the adult expresses itself through their 'indifference' towards history and the acceptance of a future already determined. These oppositions are not presented as clear-cut delimitations. Indeed, the youth's disposition towards history can be mastered by the adult and, more specifically, by the educational system and the age's 'lack of historical sense'.[11] It is against the background of the latter, which had become the norm for the educational systems of Benjamin's generation, that the review regards Hauptmann's work as a 'liberator' for the young who felt themselves 'alienated and powerless'. Benjamin then develops the oppositions concentrated in the opening lines of the review by contrasting the potential age marked by the consciousness of its own historical sense and his own present —a time that he describes as particularly 'poor in ''historical ideals''', dominated by 'utopias' founded on 'eternal laws of nature'.[12] Two years later, in 'The Life of Students' (1915) Benjamin presents this conception of history as 'the infinite extent of time' which concerns 'itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which ''progress'' is reached'.[13] In the context of the review the consciousness of an unknown future is presented as a form of

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[10] *EW*: 120; *GS* II: 56. See: *The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann*, ed. by Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: Huebsch, 1917). Also: Warren R. Maurer, *Understanding Gerhart Hauptmann* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 116–21.
[11] *EW*: 120; *GS* II: 56-7.
[12] *EW*: 120; *GS* II: 56-7.
[13] 'The Life of Students', *SW* 1: 37.

understanding or cognition which will only 'succeed' by 'liberating the future from its deformed existence in the womb of the present',[14] thereby turning the task of philosophy towards the opening of alternative futures embedded in the present and in the past.

The scheme sketched out in the Hauptman review juxtaposes the humanity which *has not yet awakened* to its *unknown future* and Benjamin's own present, dominated by naturalised conceptions of history. The opposition is staged in terms of 1) the *conditioned* and the *unconditioned*, 2) the *given* and the *projected* and 3) the future *ideals* contained in the laws of nature and the unknown, open future that grounds the possibility for *action*. The review maps these distinctions throughout different moments of Hauptmann's *Festspiel*, staging the oppositions presented above in the interruption of a sequence of events enacted by the young Philistiades: 'Philistiades comes forward and interrupts history. What does this mean? Is it a ''clever idea''?'.[15] In the confrontation of the younger generation (regarded as 'immature schoolboys' by the more 'mature citizens') with the adults and schoolteachers ('inert, insensible' 'without any fire' from the schoolboys' perspective), Benjamin extrapolates two conceptions of historical time:

> School makes us indifferent; it would have us believe that history is the struggle [*Kampf*] between good and evil, and that sooner or later the good prevails. So one need be in no hurry to act. The present moment itself, so to speak, has no actuality —time is infinite [*Die Gegenwart, sozusagen, ist nicht aktuell —die Zeit is unendlich*]. To us, however, history seems a sterner and crueler struggle. Not for the sake of values already established [... but] for the very possibility of values [...] constantly threatened, and for culture, which lives in perpetual crisis.[16]

This passage introduces some of the central concepts that will resound throughout the rest of Benjamin's authorship. It also establishes the dynamics of his own philosophy of history in terms of the opposition between two different forms of understanding history: one which leaves no room for action and is based on a progressivistic conception of historical change for which the future is determined by utopian visions; and other which seeks for the actuality of the ephemeral moment concentrated in the possibilities embedded in the conflict of the present. For the latter, the future is latent in the present yet remains *unknown* and open to infinite, discrete possibilities that can be *illuminated* if

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[14] *SW*1: 46.
[15] *EW*: 121; *GS* II: 57.
[16] *EW*: 123; *GS* II: 59-60.

the present is understood or presented as a crisis. In this scheme, Benjamin's emphasis on interruption turns action into a moment which suspends the current relation to history in order to open an opportunity to transform it. The consciousness of the unknown futures embedded in the present, their *illumination*, is the hallmark of what Benjamin calls *historical sense* in the opening of the review: the suspension of the *distorted* relation to history as progress on the one hand, and to the future as the natural overcoming of the crisis of the present, on the other. As Irving Wohlfarth has noted, Benjamin's call for breaking with the progressivistic conception of history can therefore be understood as a 'distortion of a distortion'.[17] The consciousness of the historical sense consists then of an interruption of second order which, in the Hauptman review, suspends the lack of historical sense and the dominance of utopian visions that already had suspended the possibility for action.

The historical sense is then situated in the space delimited by three main axes: i) the opposition between timelessness and actuality, ii) the generational conflict between inherited ideals and opportunities to act in order to transform the course of history and iii) the continuous sequence of events and their interruption or suspension. The interruption of the timeless image of history inaugurates opportunities to act which were originally suppressed by the distorted image of history-as-progress. In an ecstatic presentation of these dichotomies, Benjamin finally affirms that history is the struggle between 'the spirited [*Geistiges*] and the inert, between those oriented towards the future and those oriented toward the past, between the free and the unfree', in order to affirm that freedom is not a programme but 'the will to such a disposition' enacted by interruption —even if the 'actions' motivated by such a will appear in forms that others might call 'confused'.[18]

If in the Hauptmann review youth concentrates the force of humanity that is yet *to be awakened*, in a future-oriented conception of history that resists inherited views of culture and education, the brief paper 'Experience' problematises different forms of cultural transmission which reveal divergent forms of *experience* associated with the relation to the future. Benjamin begins by defining the awakening of youth as the

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[17] Irving Wohlfarth, 'Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation', *New German Critique*, 1979, 70–98 (p. 80). See also: Wohlfarth, 'No-Man's Land: On Walter Benjamin's ''Destructive Character''', *Diacritics*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer, 1978), pp. 47-65.
[18] *EW*: 123-4; *GS* II: 59-60.

'struggle' or 'battle' with 'someone who is masked'.[19] This mask is the mask of 'experience' (*Erfahrung*) that adults use to devalue the ideas and dispositions of the young. This is, however, an experience which is 'expressionless, impenetrable, ever the same'.[20] Thus, the 'well-meaning, enlightened adult' devalues the 'years that [the youth] will live' by reducing them to episodes which the adult has already lived (*erlebt*), thereby pushing the youth into the 'drudgery' of adult life.[21] Benjamin regards this form of experience 'meaningless and devoid of spirit' (*Geist*); yet it is only thus for those who are 'spiritless' (*geistlos*). He thus opposes this experience to that of those with spirit, the youth: the most 'beautiful, untouchable and immediate' experience as long as the young *remain* young.[22] Those adults who are marked by the presence of the spirit of the young are 'compassionate', while the spiritless adult will by contrast remain 'intolerant'.[23] With this attitude towards the notion of *spirit* (*Geist*) it is clear that *spiritual experience* is not associated with a specificity in age but with a disposition towards history which aims to *act* in history. Benjamin's subsequent investigations into the concepts of experience and history aim to bring together an alternative form of experience which opposes the *timeless* present and the notion of history based on the transmissibility of tradition, thereby directing his attention not to the ecstatic future determined by the *will* to affirmation but to the transformation of history in the moment of its transmission in each concrete moment of the present.

Benjamin thus aims to give the conditions for the cognisability and transformability of history, which he encompassed under the notion of *illumination*. The concepts provided in the early writings (such as the *awakening of humanity* and the *drudgery* of life) and the images of multiple, discrete futurities embedded in the present and the confrontation of generations or historical epochs in terms of interruptions or moments of rupture in the continuity of historical change, will be reoriented however. At the same time as Benjamin aims to make room for action, actuality and the transformability of history by means of an interruption of the distorted experience of history, he also constrains the imprints of any future-oriented philosophy by means of divergent characterisations of history and the way it is grasped or presented in the present. In his subsequent writings,

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[19] 'Experience', *EW*: 116-9; *GS* II: 54-56.
[20] *EW*: 116; *GS* II: 54.
[21] *EW*: 116; *GS* II: 54.
[22] *EW*: 116; *GS* II: 54.
[23] *EW*: 119; *GS* II: 56.

Benjamin reformulates the dynamics under which the notions of *illumination*, *present* and the *unknown future* stand, in order to read historical change through the problem of *tradition* and divergent conceptualisations of *history* and *memory*. The future is illuminated in the present and traced back to the past in opportunities to act which went lost or in alternative *unknown* futures which never came into being

1.1 The Structure of Tradition: *Lehre* and *Doktrin*

In his correspondence with Gershom Scholem from early September to October 1917, Benjamin elaborates upon the relation between experience, education and history as intimated in his earlier writings, yet now in terms of the role that *Tradition* and *Doctrine* (*Lehre*) play in the double relationship between *experience* and *education* on the one hand, and *experience* and *history* on the other. Critical to this analysis is the notion of *Doctrine* or *Lehre* in its double meaning of *religious teachings* and *doctrine* in a more philosophical sense (referring to the systematic completion of a philosophical corpus of knowledge that exceeds specific realms of knowledge). The double meaning of *Lehre*, rendered by the English translator mainly just as *teachings*, mediates between the notions of *experience* and *education* based on the oral transmission of tradition (the model of religious teachings in the Jewish tradition): experience is grounded in the transmissibility of the totality of a tradition which surpasses the individual or the specific generation in which the tradition is taught. *To experience* means here to gather in the concrete, specific and ephemeral moment which the present is, the totality of history concentrated in the tradition that one generation hands down to the other. In this way experience is tantamount to *historical experience*, or the possibility of experiencing the totality of history in the ephemeral moment of the present. However, like any living tradition, this totality remains open to change and further transformation. This meaning is supplemented by the philosophical concept of doctrine which Benjamin finds in Kant's view on the systematic unity of philosophy and its account of the unity of experience and knowledge. From the standpoint of Benjamin's philosophy, tradition becomes doctrine. This means that tradition exceeds a collection of religious ideas and teachings, and stands as a form of doctrinal knowledge which exceeds specific realms of knowledge (particularly the modern regime of philosophical disciplines and sciences).

In his letter to Scholem from early September 1917 Benjamin characterises the place which *Tradition* occupies in education by means of the distinction between the *example* and *Lehre* (teachings or instruction). He develops this thought in his letter from 22nd October, where he maintains that Kant's *Lehre* (doctrine) has to be seen as a *tradendum*: the content delivered to others in the process of 'transmission' or 'handing down' to which *Tradition* refers in its Latin roots of *traditio* and *tradere*. In both discussions, Benjamin maintains that the task of both *teaching* and *doctrine* is to preserve the 'integrity' of their contents, emphasizing the medium by which this integrity is secured: *tradition*. With this emphasis on the medium of transmission, Benjamin understands experience from the perspective of the relation of the present ephemeral moment to the past which is delivered as *Lehre* by means of tradition (regardless of whether *Lehre* refers to *instruction* or *teachings* in the discussion on education or to *doctrine* in the discussion on Kant). *Lehre*, therefore, points less towards the contents it transmits in its double meaning of *teachings* and *doctrine* than to the medium of transmission in which its contents are delivered and preserved: tradition. As I will comment upon, the process of transmissibility is also marked by the transformability of the content transmitted.[24]

In his discussion on education, Benjamin writes to Scholem in early September on the 'learning that has evolved into *teaching*' (*Lehre*) which he sees as a particular relation which undoes the hierarchies criticised in his earlier writings yet without ecstatically

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[24] In a different context of Benjamin's authorship, Andrew Benjamin has emphasised the transformation inherent in the process of transmissibility in tradition. Transmissibility involves a process of 'retaining and repeating'. Nevertheless, the latter is 'not simply the repetition of the same' but a repetition in which 'the same is never the same' since it is 'supplemented by its own repetition'. Howard Caygill radicalises the process of transformation inherent in tradition and discloses other meanings of *tradition* which coexists with 'delivery' and 'handing down', namely, 'betrayal' and 'surrender': '''Tradition'' was further defined as the ecclesiastical crime of surrendering sacred texts in a time of persecution — delivering them over to destruction by unbelievers. One guilty of the crime of ''tradition'' was a ''traditor'' or, in later usage, a ''traitor'''. I will later return to the different emphases on the changes that tradition brings about along with transmission and continuity. See respectively Andrew Benjamin, 'Tradition and Experience: Walter Benjamin's "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"', *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 124–25, 127, 130; and Howard Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000) pp. 12–15, 20–21. Philip Simay elaborates upon the risks of forgetting that discontinuity is critical to tradition in his analysis of the tradition of the oppressed, which always may be absorbed by those who conceive of themselves as the oppressed of the present and therefore assume the right to speak on behalf of such a tradition as if it were made of pure continuity. This is the risk of reincorporating the historicist views which are aimed to be rejected by Benjamin. See: Simay, 'Tradition as Injection: Benjamin and the Critique of Historicism', in Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and History*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

affirming the *will* to action: 'I am convinced that *tradition* [*Tradition*] is the medium in which the person who is learning continually transforms himself into the person who is teaching, and that this applies to the entire range of education. In the *tradition* everyone is an educator and everyone needs to be educated'.[25] In relation to Kant's *doctrine*, Benjamin writes on October 22nd of the same year that 'anyone who does not sense in Kant the struggle to *conceive doctrine* [*Lehre*] *itself* and who therefore does not comprehend him with the uttermost reverence, looking on even the least letter as a *tradendum* to be transmitted (however much it is necessary to recast him afterwards) knows nothing of philosophy'.[26] In both cases *Tradition* maintains *Lehre* alive and open to multiple configurations. Tradition, therefore, is conceived as the medium which preserves the integrity of the contents which it delivers by opening them up to further transformations in the same process of transmission.

Although the arguments in both letters unfold in parallel ways with respect to the relation of tradition to *Lehre*, each discussion adds important remarks on the notions of experience and history which Benjamin aims to bring together. The first letter regards tradition as the medium by which students become educators and educators become students. In latter writings —such as 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), 'The Storyteller' (1936) and the essays on Kafka (1934-8)— the collective character of tradition appears as a necessary condition for experience and its transmissibility, illustrated in the tradition of telling stories from one generation to the next. The letter discussed above already understands tradition as the medium through which a community of students and educators is built by blurring the distinctions which originally organised the hierarchies criticized in the Hauptman review, 'Experience' and 'The Life of Students'. Rather than staging the process of education in terms of the confrontation between generations which embody divergent forms of understanding historical change, this letter points towards a model of education in which collective activity gives the conditions for substantive experience and blurs the distinction between generations (students became educators and educators students).

This model of education also relates the ephemeral present to the totality of history, concentrated and delivered by means tradition. The letter also stresses the openness of

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[25] *CWB*: 94; *Briefe*: 145-6.
[26] *CWB*: 98; *Briefe*: 150.

history which Benjamin understands to be the hallmark of tradition: the process of teaching points towards the possibility of students becoming educators for future generations. But, more importantly, this process reveals the opening up of the very moment of transmission to further revision and transformation of the contents transmitted, a moment in which educators become students in order to find anew the *teachings* (*Lehre*) delivered by *tradition*. In securing the openness or transformability of *Lehre,* tradition is the medium through which *Lehre* unfolds and attains its dignity.[27]

In a further radicalisation of this view on the relation between experience, *Lehre* and tradition, Benjamin turns towards Kant's philosophy of history in order to understand the very process of the unfolding of philosophical doctrine (*Lehre*) as *tradendum,* or the content transmitted by means of tradition. In the same letter from October 22nd 1917, Benjamin refers to *Lehre* in order to characterise the multiple elements upon which the Kantian system should be developed and transformed. Firstly, Benjamin affirms that the 'metaphysical dignity' of the truly 'canonical' philosophy emerges from the confrontation of philosophy with the 'true doctrine' (*Lehre*), and suggests therefore that philosophy is in its most complete expression *doctrinal* philosophy. For Benjamin the relation between doctrine and philosophy appears 'most clearly in the philosophy of history', where the 'historical transformation' or becoming (*Werden*) of knowledge is revealed.[28] Benjamin thus regards the true doctrinal philosophy to be a philosophy of history, one which reveals the historical transformation of knowledge. Although this philosophical doctrine must be seen as *tradendum* or the object transmitted by tradition, Benjamin did not disclose the notion of *tradition* in the letters discussed. This problem is also absent in 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', in which he introduces his programme for the further development and reorientation of the Kantian system. In the remaining letters dedicated to Kant in this period, as in the two

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[27] As Gershom Scholem recollects, Benjamin was already interested in the concept of *Lehre* and its religious dimension by those years: 'In those years -between 1915 and 1927- the religious sphere assumed a central importance for Benjamin that utterly removed from fundamental doubt. At its center was the concept of *Lehre* [teachings], which for him included the philosophical realm but definitely transcended it. In his early writings he reverted repeatedly to this concept, which he interpreted in the sense of the original meaning of the Hebrew *torah* as instruction' (*The Story of a Friendship*: 55-6). Although the centrality of the religious meaning of *Lehre* must be emphasised, the further meaning of *Lehre* as a philosophical doctrine (in the sense that Benjamin attributes to it in the context of the Kantian system), allows for an alternative reading of *Lehre* in this passage, in which *Lehre* does not transcend the philosophical realm but rather supplements it with the specificities of the medium in which religious *Lehre* unfolds: *tradition*. To this extent, I will argue, Benjamin tries to explain the Kantian concept of *doctrine* in terms of the model of tradition, determined by its historical transformability and *openness*.
[28] *CWB*: 98; *Briefe*: 151-2.

essays mentioned above, Benjamin concentrates his arguments on what may be regarded to be the content of tradition, a *doctrinal philosophy* which must be developed out of the recasting of the Kantian system.[29]

It is from this perspective that the relationship between *tradition* and *doctrine* remained undeveloped in this moment of Benjamin's authorship and, with it, the deeper exploration of the role that history plays as the catalyst which makes philosophy attain its doctrinal form. As part of his particular interest in Kant's writings on history, by the end of October 1917 Benjamin finally confirmed that his own expectations 'had only met with disappointment'. Benjamin specifically refers to the 'scientific mode of observation and method' posited in the introduction to *Ideas for a Universal History* as the basis for a reduced conception of history that is 'less concerned with history than with certain historical constellations of ethical interest'. On the basis of this notion of history, 'the ethical side of history' is 'inadequately represented', he concludes.[30] Although Benjamin affirms in his letter of February 1st 1918 that it is 'impossible to gain any access to history' from the standpoint of *Ideas for a Universal History*, he also considers that it 'would be different if the point of departure were [Kant's] ethics', thereby suggesting that an alternative philosophy of history might be possible for Kant even if he 'did not travel this path'.[31] Bringing together both Benjamin's original interest in Kant's struggle *to conceive doctrine* and his final remarks on history offered in the 1917-1918 correspondence, it can be said that for Benjamin the concept of *doctrine* that he had hoped to find in Kant was latent yet undeveloped in Kant's own writings. Although Benjamin did not develop the *Kantian* philosophy of history which he failed to find in Kant he offered a critical reorientation of the Kantian system in 'On Perception' (whose composition has been dated to late 1917) and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (from early 1918, written thus in light of Benjamin's disappointment with Kant's philosophy of history).

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[29] For a brief presentation of the notion of *tradendum* see: Richard Eldridge, *Images of History: Kant, Benjamin, Freedom, and the Human Subject* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 109–11. Also: Bram Mertens, *Dark Images, Secret Hints: Benjamin, Scholem, Molitor and the Jewish Tradition* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007). In spite of his detailed presentation of the sources of Benjamin's concept of *tradendum* and *tradition*, Mertens' discussion of Benjamin's 1918 program for the coming philosophy in Chapters 4 and 5 largely omits the problem of the Kantian formulation of this concept.

[30] *CWB*: 103–5; *Briefe*: 156-9.

[31] *CWB*: 116; *Briefe*: 161.

In the following sections I will examine the arguments of these two texts in order to trace the place that *doctrine* occupies in Benjamin's reading and further reorientation of the Kantian system. I understand this analysis as a way to examine the openness and transformability of history or the *struggle to conceive doctrine*.

2. The Higher Concept of Experience

The previous section introduced Benjamin's interest in Kant and history from the perspective of Kant's *struggle to conceive of doctrine* and the role that history plays as a catalyst for philosophy in the process of attaining the form of *doctrinal philosophy*. Although 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' do not refer explicitly to the problem of history —as formulated in Benjamin's correspondence with Scholem—, they do introduce the concept of *doctrine* in order to refer to a philosophy which aims to reach systematic unity and maintain the openness for its further transformation. Both texts offer an account of the systematic unity of philosophy in terms of its capacity to explain the unity and continuity of experience and knowledge.

'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' depart from the constrains that the Kantian system mandates for any development of an 'absolute' or 'higher' concept of experience, yet both texts also maintain that the Kantian system contains the elements which allow for the development of this concept. In this way, both 'On Perception' and 'On the Program' give the conditions for the reformulation of the Kantian system in order to develop a substantive notion of experience. 'On Perception' explains the reduced concept of experience in relation to the *critical* moment of the Kantian system and its opposition to pre-critical metaphysics, giving the conditions by which 'On the Program' presents a higher notion of experience in terms of Kant's *doctrinal* philosophy. In Kant's attempt to achieve a systematic unity Benjamin sees the reformulation of the pre-critical concept of experience: if the critical moment constrains the basis on which pre-critical philosophy aims to explain the unity of experience and knowledge, the doctrinal part of philosophy goes further and reformulates such unity.

Thus, while 'On Perception' presents the Kantian critical moment, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' addresses its doctrinal development.[32]

In 'On Perception' Benjamin argues that the pre-critical concept of experience was an *absolute* concept based on the 'speculative knowledge' of God. Such absolute experience was possible for pre-Kantian metaphysics insofar as knowledge and experience were founded on a relation of continuity with God. Knowledge and experience were 'speculative' knowledge and speculative experience deducible from the 'supreme principle'. It is in the continuity of the deducibility of experience that the critical moment intervenes: 'in the interest of apriority and logic Kant discerns a sharp discontinuity at the very point where, from the same motives, pre-Kantian philosophers sought to establish the closest possible continuity and unity'.[33] In other words, Kant breaks down the 'connection between knowledge and experience' which pre-critical metaphysics established 'through a speculative deduction of the world'.[34] Thus, while the 'exalted' concept of experience was in 'varying degrees' 'close to God and [the] divine',[35] the modern concept of experience no longer needed to prove the deducibility of the world nor the 'empty, godless experience'.[36] The pre-critical concept of experience is thus reduced to an 'empty' or 'lower' notion of experience which 'required no metaphysics', as Benjamin notes in 'On the Program'.[37]

It is here that the tensions of the Kantian system emerge, as Kant did not 'deny the possibility of a metaphysics' for the emerging concept of experience. This is the point of departure of 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy'. Once Benjamin distinguishes Kant's rejection of pre-critical metaphysics he poses two alternatives, i.e.

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[32] In his presentation of these texts Peter Fenves emphasises the differences between the two fragments. Rather than understanding the two texts as presenting different formulations of the same argument (as most interpreters argue), he defends that there is a shift towards a more constrained position in 'On the Program'. This would focus on the 'higher' rather than on the 'absolute' concept of experience. See: Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time. The Messianic Reduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 160–61. Other differences that must be mentioned are the references to the *ideas of reason* and the emphatic use of *doctrine* in 'On the Program'. It has to be noted that some of the central theses of the text are also nuanced in its 'Addendum'. This difference may suggest that the 'Addendum' was likely written after Benjamin's disappointment with Kant's philosophy of history. If this is true, the transition from the 'absolute' ('On Perception') to the 'higher' notion of experience which Fenves notes may be complemented by the transition, internal to 'On the Program', from the main corpus of the text to its more restricted presentation in the 'Addendum'.

[33] 'On Perception', *SW* 1: 94.

[34] *SW* 1: 94.

[35] *SW* 1: 95.

[36] *SW* 1: 102.

[37] 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' *SW* 1: 102.

either offering a metaphysics for the empty, reduced concept of experience 'taken from the sciences' or developing a productive metaphysics which exceeds the realm of science to explain the unity of experience and knowledge without advancing to a pure continuity with the first principle. To illustrate these alternatives Benjamin elaborates upon the different projects of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) and the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, further revised in 1787). While the former takes the concept of science as its object (specifically mathematical physics), the second elaborates on a notion of experience which 'was never identical with the object realm of that science'.[38] Although it is stripped from its 'proximity to God', modern metaphysics does not renounce the aim of grounding the unity of knowledge and experience. In Kant, Benjamin writes, this aim is discernible in the 'universal power to tie all experience immediately to the concept of God, *through ideas*', by which Benjamin refers to the *ideas of reason*.[39]

For Benjamin, the continuity of knowledge and experience which Kant denies to pre-Kantian metaphysics ultimately informs Kant's own '*ideas upon which* the unity of

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[38] *SW* 1: 101.

[39] *SW* 1: 105. My emphasis. Although Benjamin does not quote any passage from the *Prolegomena*, his distinction maps Kant's own presentation of this work and its divergence from the first *Critique*. In the 'Preface' Kant writes that the *Prolegomena* and the *Critique* respectively follow the 'analytic' and the 'synthetic method'. The former does not inquire whether an object of knowledge is possible or not. This is taken as *a priori* so that what is consequently required is an explanation of *how* it is known. The later, on the contrary, must prove the possibility of the object of knowledge. See: Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (Second Edition) And the Letter to Marcus Herz, February 1772*, trans. by James Wesley Ellington (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2001), pp. 7–8; see also, pp. viii-ix. The distinction is critical to Benjamin's criticism of Hermann Cohen in 'On the Program' (*SW* 1: 101) and its further development in his references to Cohen in the book on the baroque. By following the method of the *Prolegomena* to sustain his own interpretation of the first *Critique* and of the concept of experience in *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1877/85)*,* Cohen collapsed the methods traced by Kant himself, thereby leading to his theory of the 'fact of science' for which the present state of science is taken as given and what must be proved is *how* it is true. This in turn reduces the explanation of experience to proving the current state of science as the most developed presentation of truth, leaving the task for its scientific status be proven. This sort of scientific progressivism bears the mark of a reduced Hegelianism operating throughout his reception of Kant (specially in the second version of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, the one which Benjamin and Scholem discussed in 1918). For Cohen, the formal conditions of experience are basically identified with experience as such, as the former 'generates' the latter, (*Theorie der Erfahrung*: 27). This is what became the principle of Cohen's Marburg School, as Konkhe argues, the production of the object and the question for its logical *origin* (*Ursprung*), which Benjamin problematises in the book on the baroque. See: Klaus Christian Kohnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy Between Idealism and Positivism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 180-81, 188, 198, 199. See also Sebastian Luft (ed), *The Neo-Kantian Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), specially Chapters 5, which reproduces Cohen's account of the synthetic principles. Also: Adrea Poma: *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1997) for an exploration of the genesis and transformation of Cohen's major interpretation of Kant. For a critique of Cohen's politics of citation from Kant's works, see Manfred Kuhn, 'Interpreting Kant Correctly: On the Kant of the Neo-Kantians', in Rudolf A. Makkreel and Sebastian Luft, *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009).

experience rests'.[40] In this way, Benjamin's programme focuses on the possibility of developing the unity of experience by means of the work of *ideas*: 'For the deepened concept of experience continuity is almost as indispensable as unity, and the basis of the unity and continuity of that experience which is not vulgar or only scientific, but metaphysical, *must be demonstrated in the ideas*. The convergence of ideas toward the highest concept of knowledge must be shown'.[41] 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' delineates then the conditions for a notion of experience capable of bringing the unity of knowledge and the metaphysical completion of philosophy, albeit in a way other than the deducibility from the first principles of pre-critical metaphysics. It must be noted that Benjamin rejects both the possibility of establishing the pure deducibility of experience and knowledge from God, but also the reduced Neo-Kantian programme of developing the concept of experience out of the exact sciences, based on the model of the *Prolegomena*.

Along parallel lines, 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' relate the unity of experience to the unity of knowledge, and the latter to the notion of *doctrine*. In the former text, Benjamin affirms: 'Doctrines of perception, as well as of all manifestations of absolute experience, belong in the ''philosophical sciences'' in the broader sense. *Philosophy as a whole, including the philosophical sciences, is doctrine* [*Lehre*].'[42] In 'On the Program' Benjamin writes:

> [T]he demand upon the philosophy of the future can ultimately be put in these words; to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, of which knowledge is the teachings [*Lehre*]. Such a philosophy in its universal element would either itself be designated theology, or would be subordinated to theology to the extent that it contains historically-philosophical elements. Experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge.[43]

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[40] *SW* 1: 107. My emphasis.

[41] *SW* 1: 107. My emphasis.

[42] 'On Perception', *SW* 1: 96. My emphasis.

[43] 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' *SW* 1: 108. The translators of the English edition have rendered *Lehre* as *teachings* in this passage. This of course captures the religious meaning of *Lehre*, which is clearly present in the fragment when it affirms that 'philosophy has to be designated theology or be subordinated to it'. However, the passage also offers an insight into the completion of the systematic corpus of philosophy. Such a completion makes philosophy become theology or, at least, be subordinated to it. It is this meaning of doctrine which, I suggest, Benjamin derives from Kant's struggle *to conceive doctrine*. On the notion of theology at work in Benjamin's philosophy, Bolívar Echeverría writes that this 'does not appear to understand a treatise on God, but the determinate use of a discourse which pursues a rational explanation for the occurrences of the world; a use that does not require departing from the annulment of chance, but, to the contrary, recognises in chance the contingent foundation of necessity and order that are its own horizon of intelligibility': Echeverría: 'Historical Materialism and The Angel's

In both passages, Benjamin relates the problem of the unity of experience to the problem of *doctrine* (*Lehre*) as a way of recasting the metaphysical completion of both pre-critical dogmatic metaphysics and Kantian anti-dogmatic metaphysics. If the former proceeds by means of the deduction of knowledge and experience from God as a first principle and the latter constrains such a possibility by achieving instead unity by means of the *ideas of reason* (the ideas of God, freedom and the immortality of the soul), Benjamin's coming philosophy would attain such unity in the *doctrinal* part of philosophy that coincides with the totality of knowledge historically articulated according to the model of the transmissibility of tradition. This doctrinal philosophy would include and exceed the knowledge of the specific realms of scientific knowledge. From the perspective of the notion of *doctrine*, these passages conceptualise the unity and continuity of experience and knowledge as the task of the coming philosophy. Through its completion philosophy would attain the form of doctrinal philosophy.

The concluding lines of both 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' affirm that the unity and continuity of experience can only be proved through language. There are however significant differences in the formulation of this task in both texts. While 'On Perception' affirms that philosophy 'is absolute experience deduced in a systematic, symbolic framework as language', 'On the Program' formulates the relation between experience and language in terms of the 'linguistic nature of knowledge': such 'reflection' on the nature of knowledge would 'encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize. The realm of religion should be mentioned as the foremost of these words'.[44] In this context, 'On Perception' is still concerned with the deducibility of the 'absolute' concept of experience *as* language. The latter text, by contrast, could be read as entertaining the possibility of articulating the 'higher' notion of experience through the work of the *ideas of reason*, in the unity of experience and the totality of knowledge (produced by the interrelated work of sensibility and the understanding). Experience, Benjamin concludes in the main body of 'On the Program', is 'the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge'. This systematic and continuous unity will ultimately *be demonstrated in the ideas*.[45] The higher concept of

Gaze', translated by Andrés Saenz De Sicilia, *Arcade Materials: RED*, edited by Sam Dolbear and Hannah Proctor, (Forthcoming, 2018).

[44] *SW* 1: 108.

[45] *SW* 1: 107. My emphasis.

experience is then understood in terms of the unity and continuity of knowledge granted by the ideas of reason. However, the ideas of reason are not understood as principles orientating the construction of a coherent articulation of knowledge. They are rather understood in terms of the historical transformation of those concepts which serve to construct such a unity. The unity and continuity of experience (initially identified with the unity and continuity of knowledge) extends to the realm of ideas and their historical transformation. Benjamin's doctrinal philosophy attains its systematic unity only by means of relating experience and the totality of history.

The emphasis on the linguistic nature of the unity and continuity of knowledge ultimately turns Benjamin's programme towards the linguistic character of the unity of knowledge. This opens up two different lines of argumentation. While most interpreters have noted that the linguistic nature of experience and knowledge is one of the central problems addressed in 'On the Language of Mankind and Language as Such' (1916) and 'The Task of the Translator' (1921); the relation of the linguistic nature of knowledge to the *ideas* is fully explored only until the formulation of the *doctrine of ideas* (*Ideenlehre*) in the final version of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' (1928) to *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*.[46] In the essays on language and translation, the transformability of the unity of experience and knowledge is framed in the transformability of the unity of language by means of *translation* and the unfolding of human language. In the 'Prologue', the transformability of the *concepts* which serve for the construction of knowledge embodies the movement of what Benjamin calls *constellations* of *ideas*, in which ideas and concepts stand together in a relation of mutual determination: there, ideas are presented in concepts while concepts are organised in contextual relations by ideas.

Before exploring the linguistic nature of language in the essays on language and translation and the further development of the relation between ideas and language in the 'Prologue' (which I will discuss in the second chapter), I will examine the divergent notions of unity which Benjamin associated with *doctrine*. For it is as doctrine that philosophy can explain the unity of experience as unity of knowledge, and it is also as doctrine that philosophy is able to attain its own completion. Here, the Kantian source

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[46] *OGT*: 27; *GS* I: 226.

of doctrine is necessary in order to understand the project of developing a doctrinal philosophy, one which brings together its 'critical and dogmatic parts'. In this context, it is important to emphasise that while Benjamin refers to *Lehre*, Kant largely labels his doctrinal philosophy as *Doktrin*. In this sense, Benjamin's *Lehre* captures, yet also exceeds, the use of *Doktrin* in the Kantian system. The struggle *to conceive doctrine* (*Lehre*) which Benjamin first appreciated in Kant becomes apparent in the first *Critique* and its struggle to bring to completion a systematic philosophy which is, however, constrained by the critical method. To some extent, the first *Critique* enacts the tension between the negative or destructive critical moment of Kant's method and its positive, constructive doctrinal philosophy. As it will be explained in the following section, despite the limits set on it, it is doctrine what catalyses the critical method and moves the general system towards its own completion, regardless of the hypothetical state in which such a completion remains. Indeed, it is because this completion remains hypothetical that philosophy is open to further transformation.

2.1 The Dynamics of Doctrine: Unity and Openness

In the standard English translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* the term *Doctrine* translates the German terms *Doktrin* and *Lehre*. *Doktrin* appears more frequently in technical contexts in opposition to *critique*, the *canon of the understanding* and the *discipline* of the pure use of reason. By contrast, *Doktrin* is related to the *organon* of reason and the drive for the completion of the systematic unity of knowledge, which makes reason confront questions which 'burden' yet 'transcend' the limits the interrelated work of the faculties of the sensibility and the understanding.[47] *Doktrin* is also used with the general meanings of *logic* and, more broadly, of *theory*. In this case *Doktrin* is synonymous to some uses of *Lehre*.[48] For example, when Kant refers to the *canon* of the understanding as 'general but pure logic', he refers to this canon as 'a proven doctrine [*Doktrin*]'.[49] With the same general sense of logic or theory, *Lehre* appears as part of the main titles which divide the *Critique* into the *Elementarlehre* and

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[47] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul, Guyer and Allen, Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): (Aviii, and A 53/ B77 - A54/ B78). See also: (A 795/B 823). Hereafter *CPR*.
[48] *CPR*: (53/ B77 - A54/ B78).
[49] *CPR*: (A 53/ B77 - A54/ B78).

the *Methodenlehre*. Here, *Lehre* respectively bears the meanings of 'general' and 'applied logic'.[50] Lastly, defining the 'discipline of pure reason' in the opening of the 'Doctrine of Method', Kant contrasts *discipline* with 'culture' and 'doctrine' (*Doktrin*), relating the former to 'correction' and the latter to teaching (*Belehrung*) and instruction (*Unterweissung*). Kant thus emphasises that in spite of being regarded as equivalent terms in common language, *discipline* and *doctrine* should not be confused in philosophy. For Kant, discipline makes a 'negative contribution' in the formation of talents as it provides a 'correction' to (dogmatic) metaphysics. By contrast, culture and doctrine have 'a positive' contribution as 'teaching'.[51] Kant uses this distinction in order to stress that the second part of the *Critique* is concerned with *discipline* or the correction of the method of cognition from pure reason. In this way, the distinction between the discipline of reason and the notions of *culture* and *teaching* serves to clarify the technical distinction between *critique* and *doctrine* in the Kantian system.[52]

In its more technical use, the *Critique of Pure Reason* introduces *doctrine* (*Doktrin*) in opposition to *critique* in order to refer to the knowledge which is built upon the basis *negatively* demarcated by *critique*. In section VII of the B 'Introduction', Kant presents the critique of pure reason as a 'special science', one which produces a *canon* of pure reason or the 'sum total of all those principles in accordance with which all pure *a priori* cognitions can be acquired and actually brought about'. Nevertheless, Kant immediately restricts the scope of his *critique* as science in order to delimit it as an 'estimation of pure reason, of its sources and boundaries', a '*propaedeutic* to the system of pure reason'.[53] From the perspective of the limits of his own programme, Kant affirms that the special science which he advances as *propaedeutic* would not be able to reach the

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[50] Paul Guyer and Allen Wood introduce this distinction in their 'Introduction' to the *Critique* (*CPR*: 3).

[51] *CPR*: (A710/B738). Guyer and Wood follow Giorgio Tonelli's analysis in *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason within the Tradition in Modern Logic* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994*)*. Tonelli traces the development of the notions of *origin*, *canon*, *discipline* and *doctrine* in Kant (See specially Chapters 1 and 2). Also: Tonelli, 'Organo, Canone, Disciplina, Dottrina in Kant (1765-1780)', *Studi Kantiani*, 1, January 1995, Vol.8, pp.11-30.

[52] This sense of *doctrine* might be the one that Friedlander refers to when he writes that: '[f]or Kant, doctrine is that part of philosophy that can be transmitted and forms the basis of a tradition that can be passed from one generation to the next'. Following Benjamin, Friedlander refers however to *Lehre* rather than to *Docktrin*, as he largely omits any comment on Kant's own terminology. The point which he makes serves nonetheless to frame Benjamin's project: 'If Kant justifies his critical project in terms of the sense that metaphysical systems confront each other as on a battleground, the instauration of metaphysics as doctrine gives it the form of science. Benjamin's problem, from this perspective, would be to free the Kantian notion of doctrine from its scientific mold and make it into the highest determination of his idea of philosophy'. Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin. A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 32.

[53] *CPR:* (A11/B25).

form of '*doctrine*' but only of '*critique*'. Its 'utility' is therefore 'negative', serving 'not for the amplification' but for the 'purification' of reason.[54]

This distinction between *critique* and *doctrine* recasts the *negative* and *positive* 'utility' ascribed to metaphysics in the preface to the first *Critique*. In the B 'Preface' Kant maintains that the argument of the *Critique* has a *negative* function since it teaches us 'never to venture with speculative reason beyond the boundaries of experience'. Yet this *negative* utility, if understood from the perspective of the practical use of reason, has a positive use implicitly embedded in its own rationality: *critique* limits the speculative use of reason while removing 'obstacles that limit or even threatens to wipe out the practical use of reason'.[55] The distinction traced by the 'Preface' grounds the difference between *cognizing* 'things as appearances' and *thinking* 'things in themselves', necessary to explain how one might assume the *ideas* of freedom, God, and the immortality of the soul 'for the sake of the necessary practical use of reason', while simultaneously depriving the speculative use of reason of its 'pretension' to cognize these *ideas* as objects of experience.[56]

It is in the second part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'The Transcendental Doctrine of Method', that Kant's *struggle to conceive doctrine* becomes more evident. This struggle is manifest in the work of reason which provides methodological principles and *ideas* for the organisation of knowledge produced by the interrelated work of the sensibility and the understanding. The work of reason also orientates practical action in spite of the limits of theoretical reason. While *critique* embodies the *negative* moment of the demarcation (the discipline or purification) of the limits of sensibility, understanding and reason, *doctrine* has the *positive* function of extending and articulating the unity of knowledge by orientating the multiple pieces of knowledge and the various realms of science towards a systematic corpus of knowledge (a corpus which Benjamin partially identifies with unintentional *truth* or *Wahrheit* in his early writings). If this function is permanently constrained by the critical moment, it nonetheless catalyses and orientates the search for completion which is impossible to attain exclusively by means of *critique*.

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[54] *CPR:* (A11/B25 - A12/B26). Giorgio Tonelli traces back the medical inflection which critique originally had and which it stills maintains in Kant's lifetime. This manifests in Kant's explanation of critique as the 'purification' of reason. See Tonelli, '''Critique'' and Related Terms Prior to Kant: A Historical Survey', *Kant-Studien*, 1978, Vol.69 (1), pp.119-148

[55] *CPR*: (BXXV).

[56] *CPR*: (BXXX).

In the second part of the *Critique*, Kant continues with what some interpreters have called the 'rehabilitation' or 'vindication' of reason and the defence of its contribution towards a productive (non-dogmatic) metaphysics.[57] Although the vindication of reason is normally explained in terms of reason providing *ideas of reason* for the theoretical organisation or completion of knowledge produced by the interrelated work of sensibility and understanding, the *ideas of reason* also play a fundamental role in moving knowledge towards completion by means of practical interests rather than by merely offering methodological tools for the organisation of knowledge —however hypothetical this unity is from the perspective of the theoretical use of reason.[58]

Although a largely forgotten concept in the scholarship on Kant, as Gary Benhamn and Dick Howard affirm, *doctrine* has a positive contribution towards the unity or completion of knowledge and experience and, by extension, towards the unity of philosophy as systematic research.[59] From this perspective, although *doctrine* is initially introduced in terms of its opposition to *critique*, the completion it intends to bring about marks the dynamics of reason through which humanity gives itself the infinite 'task' of positing and trying to answer questions that 'burden' yet also 'transcend every capacity of human reason'.[60] In emphasising the role that Benjamin attributes to *doctrine* in Kant's attempt to ground the unity of experience, it can be seen how the project of recasting the reduced into a higher notion of experience aims to bring forth the unity of the critical and doctrinal elements of philosophy as the basis for an open-ended and systematic philosophy. Here Benjamin's emphasis resides in the *struggle to conceive doctrine*. It is a struggle insofar as the completion of such a system is *conceivable* yet *unrealisable* in its entirety. This tension is the hallmark of Benjamin's understanding of

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[57] Contemporary interpreters of Kant emphasise the *rehabilitation* or *vindication* of reason in terms of practical reason *taking over* metaphysics in the sense of 'dogmatic metaphysics' but also in terms of building up or constructing on the basis of Kant's metaphysics of pure theoretical reason. Accounts of this kind can be found in Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3-28; 66-81, and Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 3, 11–12, 27–35.

[58] In their 'Introduction' to the first *Critique*, Paul Guyer and Allan Wood also refer to Kant's 'constructive doctrine' (though in a rather broader sense which includes the 'Transcendental Analytic') as replacing the ontology of dogmatic metaphysics. They later provide a more accurate use of the term when describe doctrine as the 'positive practical use' of the 'canon' of pure reason, although no mention to the *organon* accompanying this positive use is made (*CPR*: 5, 65).

[59] Gary Banham, *Kant's Practical Philosophy: From Critique to Doctrine* (New York: Springer, 2003), pp. 5–7. Also: Dick Howard, *The Politics of Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 89–90.

[60] *CPR*: (A viii).

the Kantian notion of doctrine. As result, Benjamin's own doctrinal philosophy remains always open to change and transformation, perpetually deferring the possibility of bringing philosophy to absolute completion.

The *struggle to conceive doctrine* is open to a continuous development just like the unity of experience is open to multiple and discrete futurities. This struggle is particularly concentrated in the 'Transcendental Doctrine of Method'. There, Kant addresses the tension between two elements of the faculty of reason: the 'humiliating' fact that human reason 'accomplishes nothing in its pure use' and must therefore be disciplined 'to check its extravagances', and the 'propensity' of the nature of reason which '*drives*' (*trieben*) it 'to venture the outermost bounds of all cognition by means of mere ideas in a pure use', seeking then 'to find peace only in the completion of its circle in a self-subsisting systematic whole'.[61] In the 'Doctrine of Method' Kant brings together both the limits of reason and the nature of its driving or striving (*Bestrebung*), which moves it to go beyond them in order to attain completion. By means of the distinction between the theoretical and practical use of reason, Kant maintains that if only the former were available no further action would be possible, for which *human tasks* would be dogmatically resolved as pure commands or sceptically abandoned in fear of error or mistake.[62] It can be appreciated that the struggle to conceive doctrine emerges from the drive towards a completion which nonetheless cannot be attained. Nevertheless, it is philosophy's very openness to such completion which maintains the force of *doctrine* and catalyses its movement towards a systematic unity, however hypothetical each stage of its completion remains.[63]

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[61] *CPR*: (A797/B824-A798/B826).

[62] On the collaboration of *doctrine* (*Doktrin*) and *critique* Kant writes in respect to the antinomy of the cosmological ideas that one can derive a 'true utility, not dogmatic but critical and doctrinal utility [*kritischen und doktrinalen Nutzen*], namely, that of thereby proving indirectly the transcendental ideality of appearances' (A 507/B 535). In section IX of the same part of the first *Critique,* Kant formulates the collaboration between critique and doctrine in terms of the transformation of that which otherwise would be 'dialectical' into 'doctrinal' principles (A517/B545). In both cases it is clear how the problematic metaphysics which Kant rejects under the labels of 'dogmatism' and 'dialectics' is different from the *doctrinal* part which orientates the unity of experience and the systematic completion of philosophy.

[63] Andrew Benjamin has recently argued for the affinity between Kant and Benjamin in terms of the notion of *striving* as it is respectively used in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and in the 'Notes to a Study on the Category of Justice' (1916). Kant affirms: 'What belongs to duty here is only the *striving* to produce and promote the highest good *in the world*'. W. Benjamin writes: 'Justice is the striving *to make the world* into the highest good'. Andrew Benjamin departs from this notes to elaborate on the affinity ('an affinity that at the same time can be brought into question') between Benjamin and Kant in terms of the 'possible actualization of justice as the state of the world' which opens up an opportunity for the *othering* of the world: Andrew Benjamin, 'The World of Striving', *Anthropology & Materialism. A Journal of Social Research*, 2017, pp. 3, 10–11.

Benjamin's reading of the struggle to attain unity and completion is directed towards the open-ended unity of experience which catalyses philosophy in order to reach the form of a dynamic and transformable *doctrine*. In the *struggle to conceive doctrine* Benjamin observes a complementary process to the initial breaking down of the 'continuity' in the unity of experience that the negative moment of the Kantian method introduced while rejecting dogmatic (pre-critical) metaphysics. In the *struggle to conceive doctrine*, metaphysics is still possible for Kant as it is also for Benjamin. For Kant, it is the *drive* for the completion of philosophy what maintains open the questions for metaphysics: insofar as doctrine does not provide fixed concepts or answers to human questions, but principles of orientation and ideas which organise the multiplicity of knowledge and practical action, it provides the basis from which new theoretical and practical problems emerge. For Benjamin, the continuous transformation of the unity of knowledge grounds the 'higher' (*doctrinal*) concept of experience.[64] In quoting Johan Georg Hamann's dictum according to which language is both the 'organon and criterion of reason', Benjamin presents the open-ended unity of doctrine in terms of the problem of its development and transmission through the medium of language. Following Hamman's principle that reason cannot be thought 'independently of its transmission', 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' argues for an interpretation of the transformation of knowledge and its drive for completion in the historical unfolding of language.[65] The struggle to conceive doctrine appears thus in terms of the theoretical and practical completion of knowledge which is ultimately realised through the transformation of language. This conception of language understands its transformation as a movement towards completion.

3. Language as History

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[64] It is important to emphasise that the 'continuity of experience' is not the merely a 'methodological' correction to 'guide empirical research' as Fenves maintains. It also provides the basis for practical action. *Cf*: Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*: 159. The higher notion of experience may be read as maintaining experience as beiing always open and transformable without assuming that its absolute form is attainable. This might explain the transition from 'On Perception' to 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' which I commented upon in previous sections.

[65] *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 207–8.

Benjamin develops the problem of the completion of knowledge in linguistic terms in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916) and in 'The Task of the Translator' (1921). In these works he considers that language is the medium through which the *creative* and *receptive* character of humanity manifest. This principle is captured in what Benjamin refers to as the 'essential law of language' in the former work. According to this, 'to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same thing'.[66] Benjamin then explores how the essential law of language is related to knowledge according to the distinction between divine language and human language. This strategy allows him to characterise a profane view on language and to examine whether it is possible to attain full meaning and complete expression in this imperfect, limited condition. Benjamin introduces the distinction between divine and human language throughout the essay on language, while in the essay on translation he addresses the interrelated work of *creativity* and *receptivity* in the process of translating a literary work from one language to another. Although these essays are not explicitly concerned with the concept of doctrine nor with the role of the ideas of reason in the completion of the philosophical system, they do offer an insight into the problem of the *historical transformation* of knowledge, which is ultimately the object of his doctrinal philosophy as the essays on Kant and the correspondence from October 1917 argue. In the next section I offer a brief reconstruction of the general argument on language in order to relate it to the problem of *doctrine* elaborated above. Following on the presentation of the historical unfolding of language, Chapter II will examine the shift towards an understanding of the development of language from the perspective of the moments of rupture or interruption that emerge in the continuity or unfolding of language, relating the tension between rupture and continuity to the notions of *doctrine* and *ideas* that Benjamin brings together in the *Ideenlehre* he offers in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to the book on the baroque.

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[66] *SW* 1: 65. Benjamin uses here the verbs *aussprechen* and *ansprechen*.

3.1 Profane Language and Indeterminacy

In 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' Benjamin maintains that the linguistic nature of creation lies in the fact that 'God invested man with the gift of language' and therefore 'elevated [him] above nature' by endowing him with the capacity to 'name' nature.[67] Although this gift elevates humanity over nature, it is not spontaneously nor arbitrarily used since nature is also a divine creation which expresses herself through her own language. *In* language humanity continues the creation of nature by allowing nature to express her own essence. In the act of naming, both the essence of humanity and the essence of nature come together as divine creations. In the scheme outlined by Benjamin, to name nature means to complete the creation of nature by being receptive to the essence of nature. This means for Benjamin *to know* the essence of nature. Human languages, therefore, name 'things according to knowledge', and humanity becomes 'the knower in the same language in which God is the creator',[68] thereby completing the task of God's creation of nature by *knowing* nature. This is the task of Adam, whose naming of nature is both expressive and receptive in the pure continuity of the language of God. Thus, for Benjamin naming consists of translating 'the language of things into the language of man'.[69] In Adamic language man and nature meet each other as *created* beings: Adam's language is creative insofar as it is receptive to the essence of nature. Here, Adam's gift is twofold: he *names* nature according to the *knowledge* he receives from nature.

The continuity of the language of God in which nature and man partake is concentrated in Adam's act of naming, which is nonetheless interrupted with the Fall and the emergence of the multiplicity of languages. In this context, the context of human language, knowledge of things cannot be thought of as the pure continuity of different languages partaking in divine language. However, they do partake in language *as such* (*Überhaupt*) which works as the *medium* through which human language and the language of things communicate. The word, Benjamin writes, is forced to 'communicate something other than itself' distinct from the essences it was able to express in 'the pure

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[67] 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' in *SW* 1: 68.
[68] *SW* 1: 68.
[69] *SW* 1: 69.

language of names'.[70] Lacking thus an immediate relation to nature, the word becomes a 'mere sign' arbitrarily related to the world. The continuity of translation and the immediacy of divine language are nevertheless shattered, for language —as Eli Friedlander notes— is no longer the 'medium' of 'self-expression of true nature' but 'a means to express something else'.[71] Rather than being receptive of nature, human language over-names nature.[72]

The 'Fall of the spirit of language' marks the emergence of the instrumental use of language in which knowledge is guided by an interest in nature rather than by the openness or receptiveness towards nature's expressive capacity.[73] This does not mean, however, that the immediacy of language is lost, although it might not have the same immediacy as divine language. It is here that the essay on translation finds its point of departure, for if divine language is an expression of the unity of God's creativity and the unity of nature as essence, the multiplicity of languages which follows the Fall is, as Benjamin suggests elsewhere, the 'storehouse' of a multiplicity of essences.[74] To reveal this essences it is necessary first to suspend the instrumental use of language. Once again, the double process of suspension or interruption appears in Benjamin's argumentative structure: the instrumental use of language suspends the potential of the interrelated work of human creativity and receptivity towards nature's expressive capacity; the suspension of the instrumental use of language becomes then necessary in order to recover (if however partially and momentarily) the potential of human language.

In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin understands the exercise of translating from one language to another in terms of the dialectic of continuity and interruption which is

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[70] *SW* 1: 71.

[71] Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*: 16. Ilit Ferber's presentation of the continuity of divine language might illuminate this point, when she suggests that the 'chain of creation is also a *chain of expression*': Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013) p. 26. This provides a precise presentation of the relation between creation and language, yet only with regard to divine language. A problematic element in Ferber's account of Benjamin's conception of language is that she transposes this relation of continuity to the realm of human language, thereby downplaying the limits that human language faces in the process of unfolding towards full meaning or expression which, I argue, remains unattainable. I will comment upon this problem in the following chapter and the emphasis that the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to the book on the baroque gives to the moments of rupture and discontinuity in the development of language.

[72] *SW* 1: 73.

[73] *SW* 1: 71.

[74] 'Doctrine of the Similar' (1933), *SW* 2: 697.

the hallmark of post-lapsarian language. He understands translation not in terms of its usefulness for the readers of the work which is originally written in a foreign language, nor in terms of the transmission of the contents or the information of the original into another language. Rather, the law of translation is that of *translatability*.[75] With this term Benjamin names the immediacy which pertains to human language and is hidden in the instrumental use of language, recasting the creative and receptive character of language yet in a profane context. Translatability is 'an essential quality of certain works', writes Benjamin, to refer to the openness of the literary work to the act of translation, or to its openness to encounter itself with another language (the language of the translator). The translatability of the work refers, therefore, to the possibility of the translation transplanting 'the original into a more definitive linguistic realm', one in which different languages 'supplement each other' and contribute towards the completion of a pure language by means of their intentions.[76] The interrelated work of different languages is their 'natural' or 'vital connection'.[77] Here, Benjamin understand the process of translation as the continuous growing of language or the unfolding of each language in the direction of a *pure language*. This view is determined by the model of divine language which, as Friedlander remarks, considers names as expressions of essences 'whose end is full significance'.[78]

However, while divine language is pure knowledge, the coming together of multiple languages into translation raises the original language into a 'higher and purer linguistic air' in which it cannot permanently live however. Indeed, the translation cannot 'certainly' reach this higher and purer linguistic realm 'in its entirety'.[79] Translatability, therefore, points towards a pure language which nevertheless remains an 'inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages'. The most complete or complex linguistic realm is always open and renewed in subsequent translations.[80] *Translatability* refers then to the openness of the work to its 'continued life' or 'afterlife', its openness to a more complete form of expression which, nevertheless, finds no ultimate form.[81] It is in this sense that Beatrice Hanssen describes the *eschaton* of this teleological

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[75] 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', *SW* 1: 254.
[76] *SW* 1: 258.
[77] *SW* 1: 254.
[78] Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*: 15.
[79] *SW* 1: 254.
[80] *SW* 1: 258.
[81] *SW* 1: 254.

conception as the *aspiration* to 'pure language', resembling the infinite yet unsolvable task which the Kantian drive towards a systematic unity of knowledge and practice posits for human reason.

Although this serves to characterise the *eschatological aspiration* of language, its tendency to completion or full significance, the restoration of the *original* logos avoids both the search for an *original* in the sense of a first, lost meaning that must be recovered in order to attain meaning, and the future-oriented eschatology of fulfilment and salvation (which for Benjamin manifests itself in visions of history determined by utopian visions). As it will be discussed in the next chapter, in the 'Prologue' to the *Origin of the German Mourning-Play, origin* (*Ursprung*) and *originary* (*Ursprungliche*) are distinguished from both Hermann Cohen's own use of *origin* (*Ursprung*) and Benedetto Croce's *genesis* (*Entstehung)*. With these distinctions Benjamin points out, firstly, two different philosophical methods: Cohen's logical idealism and a proper 'historico-philosophical' investigation. Secondly, in an internal distinction to the latter form of investigation Benjamin differentiates between his own *Ursprungphilosophie* and Croce's *genetic lineage* as two divergent historiographic methods or forms of writing history. In regard to the eschatological conception of language, Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophy* turns towards the past, looking at the unfolding of language from the perspective of the breaks and ruptures in the process of translation.[82]

If translatability is first introduced as the continuous transformation of language in a recasting of the continuity of divine language, the essay on translation then brings the limits and the historicity of each language together by means of the incomplete quality

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[82] See: Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History. Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels*: 34–35. For the opposition between Benjamin and Cohen in terms of their conceptions of the messianic as being respectively directed towards the past and the future, see: Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, 'The Ties Between Walter Benjamin and Hermann Cohen: A Generally Neglected Chapter in the History of the Impact of Cohen's Philosophy', *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy,* 13 (1) (2004):127-14; and Deuber-Mankowsky, 'Hanging Over the Abyss. On the relation between knowledge and experience in Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin', in Reinier Munk, *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism,* (Dordrecht, Springer, 2005) pp. 161-190. An alternative reading of Cohen which may weaken the opposition traced by Deuber-Mankowsky (by avoiding to label Cohen's messianism as future-oriented) is offered in the same collection by Andrea Poma, 'Suffering and Non-Eschatological Messianism in Hermann Cohen', pp. 413-427; Chapter 11 in *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*; and Chapters 6 and 15 in *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006). Julia Ng's argument on Benjamin and Cohen is closer to Deuber-Mankowsky's in 'Kant's Theory of Experience at the End of the War: Scholem and Benjamin Read Cohen: A Commentary' *MLN* German Issue: *Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and the Marburg School*, Vol. 127, No. 3, (April 2012), pp. 462-484 (468-70).

of each translation. It ultimately considers both the translated language and the language of the translator as 'fragments of a greater language'. Indeed, the only way in which translation may bring the language translated to a higher level is by recognising that its 'ways of meaning' are different to those of language of the translator.[83] By recognising this difference, the translator brings the two languages together. Thus, if the first part of the argument points towards the recasting of the continuity of divine language into human language, the second part emphasises the fragmentariness of human language as the condition of possibility for the recreation of the work in translation. It is because each language remains incomplete that they can always be risen to a higher level by means of translation. Translation ultimately produces a new work which benefits from (and enriches) two languages yet which also remains undetermined and open to further revision.

The language translated and the language of the translator enrich and complement each other. Here, the argument takes another turn, ascribing to the translator the task of releasing through his or her own language the 'pure language that is exiled among alien tongues'.[84] The translator's task is thus marked by its creativity but also by its receptivity towards the medium of language as such. Recognising the limits of both the object- and subject-language, the translator identifies a space of 'essential indeterminacy' towards which both languages point.[85] Here, the openness of the translator resides in 'allowing' his or her own language 'to be affected' and transformed by the foreign language. In this shift, Benjamin ultimately understands translation in terms of the unfolding of languages towards a pure yet unattainable language within which history is embedded.

Two final remarks on the essay on translation will relate Benjamin's concept of language to *the struggle to conceive doctrine* and the completion of knowledge. These will serve as a conclusion to this chapter. Firstly, in conceiving of the movement of language and the connection between languages as the process of completion of pure language, Benjamin understands the work that is translated in terms of its 'afterlife', consequently seeing the work not merely as the 'the setting for history' but as

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[83] *SW* 1: 260.
[84] *SW* 1: 261.
[85] Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*: 74.

something which has a 'history of its own'.[86] Benjamin understands the unfolding of the work not as an element of the history of language; rather, unfolding *in* language, history comes closer to its own completion via the completion of pure language. Benjamin refers then to the concept of 'revelation' in order to explain this movement towards completion in terms of the dynamics of nearness and distance between all languages and pure language. Considering the notion of pure language it can be seen 'how far removed' the hidden meanings of language is 'from revelation' and 'how close [revelation] can be brought by the knowledge of its remoteness'.[87] For Benjamin translation offers a double insight into nearness and distance: by bringing together the multiplicity of languages in translation, the process of translation comes closer to revelation (allowing language to express itself), and yet at the same time translation reveals the remoteness of ever completing such a process.

The teleological or eschatological conception of language understands the movement of history as the movement of language, and the unfolding of history as the completion of pure knowledge in language. This realm of pure knowledge is, however, presented under two different guises in the essays on language and translation. While the former understands pure knowledge in terms of the continuity of divine language, the essay on translation attempts to formulate the possibility of this continuity in the realm of human language; this process remains, however, incomplete. Here, the continuity of pure, divine language mirrors the pure continuity of knowledge which 'On Perception' attributes to dogmatic, pre-critical metaphysics, i.e. the 'Leibnizian *lex continua*'.[88] In this sense, Ferber's understanding of language as a *chain of creation* that is at the same time a *chain of expression* serves to present the continuity of pure divine language.[89] The continuity introduced in the essay on translation could be seen to be closer to the continuity of knowledge and experience formulated in 'On Perception' and, mainly, in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' in terms of the unity of experience and knowledge which is open to transformation and revision through their own process of completion and transmission. In the passages on Kant's critical philosophy and profane, human language, the unity of experience and knowledge is a conceivable yet unattainable task. What this chapter has stressed by means of an emphatic reading of

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[86] *SW* 1: 253.
[87] *SW* 1: 262.
[88] Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*: 159.
[89] Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*: 131.

what Benjamin understands as Kant's struggle *to conceive doctrine*, is the *openness* that at the same time constrains and catalyses the dynamics of completion.

This chapter opened with a brief presentation of a selection of fragments from Benjamin's early writings in order to show his interest in the transformability of history and the problem of its *presentation*. To this end the Hauptmann review offered an insight into the different ways of staging historical change, either as a continuous unfolding of natural events or as a process that can be interrupted and opened up to multiple, *unknown* outcomes. The letters on education, history and tradition bring into question the future-oriented *will* that permeates the confrontation between different forms of experience in the 1913 essay 'Experience'. If the transformation of history is understood in terms of the interruption of a distorted image of history (*spiritless experience*), Benjamin turns the task of philosophy towards the presentation of the transformability of history in order to make visible the possibilities for such an interruption. In the correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem, the transmissibility of tradition keeps open future possibilities for such a transformation. In its confrontation with history, philosophy attains its doctrinal form as a philosophy of history. The correspondence reveals multiple problems nonetheless. On the one hand, it raises the question on the form of such a doctrinal philosophy (the philosophy of history) and its contents (the transformation of knowledge); on the other, it asks how this doctrinal philosophy can bring forth the transformability of history to present history as open to multiple, unknown futures. In 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', Benjamin maintains that the reorientation of the Kantian system consists in developing a systematic philosophy capable of explaining the unity of experience as the unity of knowledge in its linguistic transformation. Thus, in order to make room for history Benjamin transforms the struggle to conceive doctrine in the task of understanding the historical unfolding of knowledge in language.

On the basis of the characterisation of the role of doctrine in Benjamin's texts on Kant, this chapter considered the Kantian concept of doctrine in order to argue that Benjamin's *Lehre* brings together the religious dimension of *Lehre* (marked by tradition and transmissibility) with Kant's technical use of *Doktrin* (marked by openness and its drive towards completion). In the revision of Kant, this chapter showed that doctrine brings the Kantian critical method into completion by means of regulative principles and the ideas of reason, regardless of how hypothetical this completion remains from

the perspective of the critical method. This hypothetical status is, however, necessary in Kant for the development of the critical method insofar as its orienting principles guide the articulation of the multiplicity of knowledge, providing a coherent (if partial) articulation of the theoretical and practical use of reason. To some extent, doctrine catalyses critique towards its own development.

The *struggle to conceive doctrine* is twofold. Firstly, doctrine is always constrained by the critical method and, therefore, its results are always hypothetical. Secondly, in its permanent drive for completion, doctrine moves the philosophical system towards a coherent yet partial account of the unity of experience. Through this characterisations of doctrine, we returned to one of the central formulations of 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', namely, that the unity of knowledge must be explained in linguistic terms. We showed how the unity of experience and knowledge changes according to its linguistic nature and the difference between its total completion in divine language and its unattainable completion in human language —despite the latter's continuous unfolding towards a 'higher linguistic realm'. Here, the emphasis on the dynamics of completion and incompletion informing Benjamin's reading of *doctrine* illuminates the task of articulating a philosophy which aims to attain its own totality by means of concentrating the total yet incomplete history of its objects: the unity of experience, the unity of knowledge, the unity of meaning, and the totality of history.

In order to make room for the transformability of history, Benjamin turns towards a doctrinal philosophy capable of presenting the unity of the total yet incomplete history of experience, knowledge and meaning. The problem of historical change remains, however, an abstract formulation subordinated to the continuous unfolding of experience, knowledge and language towards unattainable completion. The essay on translation offers, nevertheless, an important turn towards a more explicit form of presenting the transformability of history by understanding the work in terms of its 'afterlife'. If this notion concentrates the history of the work, in terms of its unfolding towards a higher linguistic realm, Benjamin opens up an opportunity to look more closely at the process of unfolding in order to discern its moments of rupture and diversion. As Hanssen suggests, 'The Task of the Translator' advances a 'shift' 'to the

history of language and to history as language';[90] it can be added that as result of this shift history becomes the condition for the actualisation of meaning.

Although this shift opens the opportunity to examine the dynamics of continuity and ruptures which is inherent in history, this opportunity is nonetheless explored not in the essay on translation but in *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* and its 'Prologue'. In the book on the baroque the continuous transformation of the work is examined from the double perspective of its unfolding and its subordination to multiple interpretations which, as translations, modulate or liberate the force of the original language of the work or its 'echo', as Benjamin calls it.[91] As the next chapter will discuss, *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* understands the afterlife of the original work not as a continuous unfolding towards pure language, but as a violent process informed by moments of disappearance and re-emergence of the work and the force of its language. To pattern this rhythm requires to conceive of language as history, yet looking backwards to trace the conflict informing the growth of language for which translation is 'the very *organon* or medium'.[92] The book on the baroque focus less on the unfolding of language towards completion than on the breaks and ruptures marking the historical development of language.

In this way *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* turns from the teleological or eschatological reading of knowledge and meaning towards a concept of criticism which traces the moments of rupture in the unfolding of the work's afterlife, searching particularly for what is lost in such a development. Here, *doctrine* plays a critical role. The 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' maintains both its contribution towards the systematic unity of philosophy and its *transformability* and *transmissibility* by means of language. As an extension of this idea, the next chapter argues that the presentation of *doctrine* in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' radicalises the formulation of its *transformability* by explicitly relating it to the *past* in search of moments of rupture which reveal lost opportunities for the production of an alternative present. In the 'Prologue', Benjamin

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[90] Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*: 34. The *limits* for the shift towards history in the essay on translation are related to the attempt to relate human language to pure language after the fall despite the limits that Benjamin himself set for this relation. On the 'abstract' tendency in the essay on language see: Ilit Ferber, 'Lament and Pure Language: Scholem, Benjamin and Kant', *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 21.1 (2014), 42–54 (pp. 47–49). In *Philosophy and Melancholy*, Ferber also reads the essay on translation as marking a shift towards the 'historical dimension' of language:154-55.

[91] *OGT*: 48; *GS* I: 228-9.

[92] Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*: 34.

writes that in its ultimate form philosophy will 'assume the quality of doctrine' based on a 'historical configuration' rather than on the 'mere power of thought'. In the 'Prologue' the continuous unfolding of knowledge in language is indeed regarded as the 'objectivity with which history has endowed the principal formulations of philosophical reflections'.[93] As I will explain in the course of the next chapter, doctrine aims to bring together the total history of these *reflections* in order to discern the irregular rhythm informing their historical transformation. Thus, the book of the baroque addresses the irregular rhythm of the transmissibility of tradition.

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[93] *OGT*: 37; *GS* I: 217

Chapter II

Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie*:

From the Historical Configuration of the Doctrine of Ideas

to the Weight of Tradition

In the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* (1928) Benjamin elaborates upon the relationship between philosophy and doctrine formulated in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy'. In the 'Prologue', Benjamin addresses specifically the role that *ideas* have in philosophical investigation and the ability of the latter to attain the unity of doctrine. In the opening of the 'Prologue' Benjamin affirms that in its 'finished form' philosophy will 'assume the quality of doctrine', adding that 'philosophical doctrine is based on historical configuration' (rather than on the 'mere power of thought').[1] Benjamin understands doctrine in the specific sense of 'doctrine of ideas' or *Ideenlehre*.[2] With this formulation, he brings together the notions of *doctrine* and *ideas* which were critical to the interpretation (and recasting) of Kant's *struggle to conceive doctrine*. This chapter will focus on two main topics related to the unfolding of doctrine *as* doctrine of ideas. First, the 'historical configuration' on which this doctrine is based and, second, its relation to the concept of *tradition*. From this perspective, the aim of this chapter is twofold: first, to examine the historical configuration under which philosophy acquires the status of *doctrine of ideas* (*Ideenlehre*) and, second, to

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, tr. by John Osborne (London-New York: Verso, 1998), p. 27. Hereafter *OGT. Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften. Werkausgabe* Vol. I (Frankfurt am Main: Surkhamp, 1980): 207. Hereafter *GS*1 followed by page number. In this thesis I follow the most accepted translation of *Trauerspiel* as *Mourning-Play* in the main text and in the amended references to the title of Benjamin's 1928 book since rendering *Trauerspiel* as *tragic drama* misses Benjamin's critical distinction between mourning-play and tragedy.
[2] *OGT*: 27; *GS* I: 226.

characterise this 'historical configuration' as the *weight of tradition*, as Benjamin will retrospectively refer to it in the 1936 version of the essay on technical reproducibility.[3] I will suggest that the *doctrine of ideas* approaches history and historical change from the standpoint of the concept of *tradition*, considering the latter as the condition for securing the substantive experience of history or the recognition of its transformability. When Benjamin problematises the crisis of tradition in his writings on technical reproducibility, he raises the question on the possibility of attaining experience in light of the absence of the medium through which it is configured.

As it was anticipated in the previous chapter, the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' makes explicit the breaks and ruptures informing historical change in order to discern moments in which alternative futures could have come into being, thereby producing a more radical interpretation of the transformability of both history and doctrine than the one formulated in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', its supplements and the essays on language and translation. Illuminating those moments of rupture Benjamin's doctrinal philosophy also reveals the alternative paths that history did not follow. In its explicit engagement with the past, *doctrine* brings forth the transformability and openness of history, giving then the conditions under which those alternative, missing futures can be fragmentarily actualised to suspend or interrupt the given order of the present.

The aim of this chapter is, thus, to examine the transition of Benjamin's doctrinal philosophy towards a *doctrine of ideas* marked by a 'historical configuration', and to which Benjamin refers in different ways as 'philosophical history' and 'science of origin'.[4] Throughout this chapter I will argue that the best way to comprehend this group of concepts is by following John Pizer's reading of Benjamin's philosophy as *Ursprungsphilosophie,* a radical 'philosophy of origin'.[5] This radical philosophy of

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[3] 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility', *SW* 3: 103.
[4] *OGT*: 47; *GS* I: 227.
[5] John David Pizer uses the term *Ursprungsphilosophie* to characterise those philosophies of history which have at its core an '*open-ended*' concept of *origin* (one which includes but exceeds historical *genesis* and change) and remain, therefore, invulnerable to poststructuralists critiques of *origin* as referring to 'fixed' moments, phenomena, or regard it to be a 'rigid' concept. In English, Pizer prefers to refer to these philosophies as *radical* theories or philosophies of *origin* to stress the peculiarity of the German term *Ursprung* which is normally lost in its English translation. *Toward a Theory of Radical Origin: Essays on Modern German Thought* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), specially the Introduction and Chapter II.

origin encompasses three main elements: the *doctrine of ideas*, the *immanent* notion of critique and its method of *digression*. This chapter is divided in three main parts. The first part offers a brief account of *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* to characterise its general project and to situate the contribution of its 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. The second part discusses Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* and what Samuel Weber (alluding to Carl Schmitt's political theology) called Benjamin's *methodological extremism*,[6] which I further disclose in two sections respectively dedicated to what might be called the *principles of exceptionality* and *immersion*. These sections explain the doctrine of ideas in terms of its object ('truth bodied forth in ideas'), its method ('digression') and the medium in which the latter *presents* the former (the 'treatise form' or the 'philosophical essay'). These sections argue that 1) in order to present *truth* or the movement of ideas in philosophical writing, the method of digression searches for the *exceptional* in the transformation of the ideas by means of a historical *immersion*; 2) for which the *exceptional* is what makes the recognition of both *ideas* and *truth* possible.

Finally, in the third part of this chapter, I will relate the doctrine of ideas to the notion of allegory by means of the formulations of *critique* and *synthesis* offered both in the 'Prologue' and in the second section of the book, '*Trauerspiel* and Allegory'. The aim of the third section is to show the affinity between Benjamin's method for the study of the baroque (which he extends as his philosophical method) and the baroque itself, focusing on allegory or allegorical synthesis as the baroque's device of signification or expression. Critical to this affinity is that Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* and baroque allegory attain signification or expression by means of a synthesis that Benjamin characterises as *tregua dei* (the temporary suspension of conflict) in opposition to perpetual peace (*pax dei*), and from which conflict always emerges anew. This notion of synthesis as *tregua dei* informs the model of cultural transmissibility formulated in the 'Prologue' to which Benjamin retrospectively refers as the *weight of tradition.*

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[6] Samuel Weber, 'Taking Exception to Decision', in *Benjamin's -Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 176–78.

1. The Baroque and The Task of the Critic

Opening with the dedicatory 'Conceived 1916. Written 1925. Then, as now, dedicated to my wife', *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* concentrates the development of Benjamin's early philosophy. As Howard Caygill writes, the book marks 'a point of collision between the various tendencies which were working themselves through in Benjamin's thought'.[7] Among the divergent *origins* of the book, the most explicit line of development is the distinction between the literary forms of Classic Greek tragedy and the German mourning-play or *Trauerspiel* of the German baroque from the seventeenth century.[8] Benjamin had traced this distinction in two fragments from 1916, '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy' and 'The Significance of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', to distinguish, out of these literary forms, the understanding of time and death in Classic Greek culture and modern, Christian Europe. While the former is marked by 'mythic', 'fulfilled time' for which death is the moment of completion of life and praise (the fulfilment of 'fate' and destiny in the death of the tragic hero),[9] the latter consists in an empty, 'earthly time' of 'repetition' for which death marks the moment of 'mourning' for eternally deferred fulfilment.[10] With this distinction, Benjamin argues for the 'autonomy' or 'the right to exist' of the *Trauerspiel* as a literary genre distinct from Classic tragedy.[11] The distinction is further elaborated in *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* and the division, internal to the Christian tradition, between the Protestant and Catholic expressions that the mourning-play reached in the works of Shakespeare and Calderón. Paying attention to the specific development of Protestantism and its critical role in the emergence of modernity, the book on the baroque is closely related to the discussions on political theology, sovereignty, violence and law articulated in 'Capitalism as Religion' and 'Towards a Critique of Violence',

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[7] Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*, (London: Routledge, 1998): 52.

[8] In the first part of the book on the baroque Benjamin discusses mainly the works of Georg Philip Harsörffer (1607-1658), Andreas Gryphius (1616-1664), Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635-1683) and Johan Christian Hallman (1640-1716).

[9] Benjamin, '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', *SW* 1:. 56-57.

[10] Benjamin, 'The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy', *SW* 1: 60.

[11] Ferenc Feher, 'Lukács and Benjamin: Parallels and Contrasts', *New German Critique*, 1985, 125–38 (p. 125). John Pizer also discusses this formulation in '*Ursprung*'s Destructive/Redemptive Rhythm: Walter Benjamin', in *Toward a Theory of Radical Origin: Essays on Modern German Thought* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 41–42. See also Pizer, 'History, Genre and "*Ursprung*" in Benjamin's Early Aesthetics', *The German Quarterly*, 60.1 (1987), 68–87. In a similar way, Weber refers to 'the lack of sovereignty' of the *Trauerspiel* and the *Trauerspiel*'s 'need for sovereign attitude'; see Weber, 'Taking Exception to Decision', in *Benjamin's -abilities*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 180-1.

both from 1921.[12] These discussions left their mark mainly in the first part of the book, '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy'. Benjamin argues there that the distinctive character of the *Trauerspiel* consists of its profane conception of time which transforms history into the setting for political conflicts and sovereign violence, incarnated in the figures of the Sovereign, the martyr, the tyrant and the intriguer who engage in the struggle for a denied authenticity that is reserved for the tragic hero. As Benjamin writes in *The Origin of the Mourning-Play,* both the content and the structure of the *Trauerspiel* are rooted in 'historical life'. Unlike Classic tragedy, the object of the *Trauerspiel* is 'history, not myth'.[13] Subject to earthly and profane time the characters of the baroque drama confront their finitude and the loss of eschatology through mourning and melancholy, in a setting delineated by the problem of sovereign decision in early modernity.[14]

Two other tendencies which converge in the 1928 book are the characterisations of *symbol* and *allegory* as distinct devices of signification or expression for Classic tragedy and the baroque *Trauerspiel*, as well as the methodological discussion on the role that *ideas* play for the understanding of literary genre and 'art forms' —the question that ultimately the *doctrine of ideas* of Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* must answer. The first tendency comes from Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919), and the essay *Goethe's Elective Affinities* (1919-1925).[15] This argument is the critical contribution of the second part of the book, '*Trauerspiel* and Allegory'. Contrary to multiple readings of allegory which maintained that it is an *expressionless* device of signification (therefore unable to attain signification), Benjamin argues that allegory is both expressive and meaningful if, however, it does not attain signification in the same way than Classic and Romantic conceptions of the symbol. It is also by means of allegory that the mourning-play

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[12] *SW* 1: 236-252 and 288-291.

[13] *OGT*: 62; *GS* I: 242-3.

[14] It is in this sense that history breaks through the aesthetic presentation of traditional or classic drama to produce the *Trauerspiel*, in opposition to Schmitt's latter understanding of the *Trauerspiel* as self-enclosed literary work which bears no relation to the historical world. For Schmitt, the exceptionality of *Hamlet* consists in the intrusion of time in the play: the disturbance that historical time (or historical violence) produces in the 'unintentional character of the play' which, nevertheless, makes possible for the character of Hamlet 'become a true myth'. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, trans. by David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust (New York: Telos Publishing Press, 2009), p. 44. Also: Victoria Kahn, 'Hamlet or Hecuba: Carl Schmitt's Decision', *Representations* 83 (Summer, 2003), p. 69.

[15] *SW* 1: 116-200, 297-360.

presents the concept of time of the baroque period. In opposition to the symbol that relates the eternal moment to the ephemeral, allegory opens up the ephemeral to its own transience or transformability, subject to perpetual change and decay. Transience and decline, however, do not preclude the possibility of producing an *allegorical synthesis* which is necessary to attain expression (if only momentarily), as it will be discussed in the final sections of this chapter.

The other tendency marking the book on the baroque is the discussion of the *doctrinal philosophy* ('On the Program of the Coming Philosophy') and of its own historical development in linguistic terms ('On Language as Such...' and 'The Task of the Translator'). As it was explained in the previous chapter, Benjamin argues that 1) philosophy achieves its doctrinal form only as a philosophy of history which 2) systematically explains the historical transformability of experience as the development of language by means of *translation*. The book on the baroque approaches the unfolding of language from the perspective of the interruptions and ruptures which preclude any continuous, linear or progressive narrative of such transformation. Benjamin's philosophy of history is thus focused on the critique of progressivistic approaches to historical change from the perspective of those breaks in history which might be forgotten or misunderstood by dominant narratives. Emphasising the irregular rhythm of historical change, which the book on the baroque encompasses under the term *Ursprung* or *origin*, Benjamin's philosophy of history is better understood as *Ursprungsphilosophie*. It is in this context that the book on the baroque offers an account of the development of the 'art forms' (i.e. the *Trauerspiel*) from the standpoint of their *origin* or the irregular rhythm of their own historical transformation.[16]

The multiple argumentative lines converging in *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* are synthesised in two passages from two different versions of Benjamin's *Curriculum Vitae*. According to these the task of the book was 'the philosophical significance' of allegory which had been '*forgotten* and *misunderstood*',[17] showing as well the 'affinity' that exists between this and 'the literary form of the *Trauerspiel*.[18] These two remarks serve to orientate the multiple discussions of the main two parts of

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[16] *OGT*: 45; *GS* I: 226.
[17] 'Curriculum Vitae' (III), *SW* 2: 77-78.
[18] 'Curriculum Vitae' (IV), *SW* 4: 382.

the book and to introduce the contribution of its 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. On the one hand, while the first part of the book explains the temporality of 'profane', 'historical' time in the *Trauerspiel*, the second establishes the *affinity* between *Trauerspiel* and *allegory* as its device of signification by showing that the latter is concerned with the passing of time as 'natural history'. On the other hand, the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' addresses the methodological problems that made possible the *forgetting* and *misunderstanding* of both the *Trauerspiel* and allegory (as well as of their interrelation) by 'historico-literary' and 'philosophical' studies; thereby providing the conditions for their further recovery. From this perspective, following on from the essays from 1916, *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* develops the distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* on the basis of the conceptions of time and death in Classic Greek culture and modern, Christian Europe. The novelty of the book resides in its approach to the *forgetting* and *misunderstanding* of the *Trauerspiel* in subsequent literary, historical and philosophical studies, consequently arguing for a methodological correction that might recover both the autonomy of the baroque and its affinity with allegory as device of signification or expression.

Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* does not search for an ultimate definition of the baroque as literary form. It rather aims to defamiliarise accepted discussions on genre definition. Furthermore, in departing from the *forgetting* and *misunderstanding* of the baroque in existing methodologies Benjamin develops his own concept of *immanent criticism* in terms of the recovery of what he calls the baroque's 'historical resonance' (*historische Nachhall*),[19] or the recovery of those features of the baroque which were forgotten or misrepresented in Neo-Classical, Romantic and Neo-Kantian aesthetics. Although this task is accomplished against the tendencies of the multiple attempts to define the baroque, *immanent critique* understands those incomplete definitions as the medium through which the baroque was delivered from its moment of emergence in the seventeenth century to Benjamin's own present. With this insight into the problem of cultural transmission, Benjamin examines the historical transformation of the *Trauerspiel* from the perspective of the transmissibility of tradition in its double meaning of *transmission* and *betrayal*.[20]

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[19] *OGT*: 48; *GS* I: 228-9.
[20] Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000) pp. 12–15,

The task of recovering the resonance of the baroque mourning-play cannot be understood, therefore, as the recovery of a phenomenon that went lost in the history of literary genres. A 'fashionable' object of study in post-war Germany, the baroque was not simply a 'marginal heterodox region' for German culture in the twentieth century, as Jane O. Newman has argued. Benjamin's generation found itself 'celebrating' the contribution of the baroque to German culture rather than discovering or 'inventing' this allegedly 'obscure' and 'degenerated' period as an object of study.[21] However, to use Newman's vocabulary, although it is true that Benjamin was not 'discovering' or 'inventing' a new phenomenon, it is more precise to say that he was interested in the multiple historical *inventions* of the *Trauerspiel*. Juxtaposing this divergent and even opposite *inventions* immanent critique suspends their methodological efficacy and opens the *Trauerspiel* to new conditions of reception. Immanent critique might be read then as Benjamin's response to the *over-determination* of the baroque by different methodologies in conflict. In terms of the 1916 essay on language, those methodologies were not receptive to the baroque's nature, consequently 'over-naming' (rather than *naming* or *translating*) its essence.[22] To suspend those methodologies is the first step towards the undoing or destruction of such over-determination, giving thus conditions for the *recognition* (*Wiederkennen*) of the baroque. In this context, Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* aims to give the conditions under which the baroque's resonance can be grasped against the grain of previous ways of modulating its force. It is in this sense that recovering the resonance of the baroque is produced in *indirectly*, *tortuous* or *violent* forms (as Caygill suggests in regard to the production of substantive

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20–21. From the standpoint of the problem of periodisation and the construction of historical narratives, Newman argues that Benjamin was amid a series of discussions on what 'should be *understood* and what should be *forgotten*' in regards to the different literary genres that were seen as the foundational moment of modern European culture. See: Jane O. Newman, *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 2. For Benjamin, however, the problem appears in the interstice of these two problems, namely, in how some forms of *understanding* the baroque *forgot* its distinctive elements by subordinating them to other dramatic forms in the history of literary genres, consequently missing the fact that it was an autonomous genre. Newman offers the most detailed account on the sources of Benjamin's book on the baroque and of the multiple discussions both on the genesis of the *Trauerspiele* and their subsequent reception. However, her approach lack of a comprehensive engagement with Benjamin's overall project of formulating a philosophy of history for which the notion of *origin* and the doctrine of ideas are critical. This problem manifests in the absence of a detailed discussion of the methodological concerns of the 'Prologue' beyond the problem of periodisation of the baroque and in the use of *genesis* as *origin* in some passages of the initial chapter.
[21] Jane O. Newman, *Benjamin's Library*: 25–27. *Cf*: Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 55 (fn. 10).
[22] 'On Language as Such and On the Language of Man', *SW* 1: 73.

experience).[23] To grasp the force of the baroque demands first to *undo* or *destroy* the methodological constrains historically set upon it.

Here, Benjamin's immanent criticism comes closer to the notion of translation formulated in 'The Task of the Translator' (1921). There Benjamin maintains that the task of the translator consists in finding the position in which his or her own language can produce 'the echo of the original'.[24] Translation, he adds, unlike the work of literature, is not 'in the middle of the forest of language but on the outside, facing the wooded ridge'. Taking some distance from this forest, the translator is 'aiming' to find 'that single spot where the echo is able to give' 'the reverberation of the work'.[25] From this perspective, the concept of criticism developed throughout the book on the baroque consists of a linguistic intervention that creates the conditions for the baroque's force or resonance to reach the present. If translation is a *cognitive* act in the 1921 essay, *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* regards the task of criticism as that of producing the conditions under which the works from the past resonate in the present. To produce these conditions is what Benjamin calls *recognition* or *Wiederkennen*.[26] In order to produce these conditions and to recognise the resonance of the work, Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* operates by means of a historical *immersion* in search for the (forgotten and misunderstood) *exceptional* through the method of *digression*.

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[23] Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*: 2.
[24] *SW* 1: 258-9.
[25] *SW* 1: 258-9.
[26] *OGT*: 46; *GS* I: 227.

1.1 Philosophical History

The presentation of the method of digression is one of the central contributions of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to Benjamin's authorship. Its application is more evident in the first of the two main parts of the book, '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', in which he confronts the different readings that subordinated the mourning-plays of the seventeenth century to other literary forms, whether forms of tragedy that reached their highest expressions in the past (Classic Greek tragedy and Renaissance drama) or forms of tragedy that would find their most fulfilled expression in the coming centuries (eighteenth century neo-Classic drama). In light of the former, the mourning-play represented a moment of decline in the history of narrative forms: it was considered a tragedy unable to achieve its highest form and remained, therefore, an imitation of more advanced or developed cultural forms. In light of the latter reading, the mourning-play had not achieved its true *tragic* form, consequently being an incomplete, unfinished anticipation of neo-Classic tragedy. Whether in decline or in a process to be completed, the mourning-play was viewed as an imperfect form whose overcoming was necessary for tragedy to attain its authentic expression. What is common to both views is that they regarded fifteenth-sixteenth century Renaissance and eighteenth century neo-Classicism to be the true inheritors of Classic culture, actualising and developing the Greek ideal of reason which modern Europe retrospectively constructed as its own foundational moment. In both views, the political and theological tensions informing the baroque remain obscure and dependant cultural expressions which are either in decline or in wait to be overcome by more advanced cultural forms.

As different interpreters have noted, Benjamin's critique of the mourning-play amounts to a defence of its autonomy as a literary genre, a defence of its '*right to existence*'. This defence is articulated in two distinct yet interrelated ways. First, Benjamin discerns the specific differences between the mourning-play and those forms of tragedy on the basis of which the former was interpreted and, consequently, *misrepresented* or *forgotten*. These differences are explained according to both the historical context in which the *Trauerspiel* emerged and the theological and political problems to which it gave

expression.[27] This examination of the *Trauerspiel* is complemented by a critique of the methodologies that subordinated the *Trauerspiel* to divergent concepts of tragedy as a way of proving that they inadequately dealt with the drama of the seventeenth century. Here, Benjamin roughly parallels 'historico-literary studies' with inductive methods of research and 'philosophical' aesthetics with deductive methods for genre definition.

Historico-literary studies depart from the revision of divergent works which they consider to be examples of tragedy in order to produce a general concept against which other forms of drama are measured or contrasted. Using this method, Benjamin argues, the investigator only proves a pre-conceived concept of tragedy, one which is based mainly on generalisations of his or her psychological reactions to specific plays which are taken as norms that validate or discriminate those which do not produce the same effect. This method ultimately recedes into a form of 'psychologism'.[28] There is, however, a positive feature in this method, namely, the rejection ('a productive scepticism') of abstract, fixed, or eternal concepts that bear no relation to the concrete work.[29] Nevertheless, the radicalisation of this positive insight in historico-literary analyses concluded with a description of literary genres in linear evolutionary terms for which so-considered minor genres are either mere imitation or anticipation of other genres. Although this method rightly privileges the work over general abstract norms, it offers no account of the conflict which informs the history of the works and the complex process of deviations from which they emerge.

By contrast, 'philosophical' or 'conceptual' treatments of genres 'succumb' to the temptation of departing from general concepts in order to examine concrete works. Although Benjamin ultimately explains that the general concept is inductively constructed (consequently reducing this method to the unrestricted psychologism discussed in relation to historico-literary studies), he refers to those aesthetics that transformed Classic tragedy into an abstract norm against which modern forms of drama are compared without even enquiring 'whether the tragic is a form which can be realized at all at the present time', thereby excluding any interest in the 'history of [art] forms'.[30] Against this background, Benjamin brings together both the closer *historical*

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[27] In '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy' Benjamin had already noted that the 'tragic marks out a frontier of the realm of art at least as much as of the terrain of history' (*SW* 1: 56).
[28] *OGT*: 38; *GS* I: 21.
[29] *OGT*: 38; *GS* I: 21.
[30] *OGT*: 37-38, 50; *GS* I: 220.

examination of the concrete work in historico-literary studies and the *philosophical* interest of general aesthetic theories in the most general concepts. This *Ursprungsphilosophie* is thus considered a *philosophical history* which aims to offer an account of both the historical transformation of *genre* and the construction of concepts to systematise their critical features. This philosophical history does not relies on general concepts as *ideals* but, rather, it aims to construct *ideas* open to further transformation. *Ideas* concentrate their own history and reveal the interruptions and deviations marking their own unfolding. To this end Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* provides a doctrine of ideas or *Ideenlehre*.

To illustrate these debates it is worth quoting at length two passages from the first part of *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play*. The first one relates to the subordination of the paradoxical figure of the baroque sovereign to one-sided interpretations of its multiple dimensions: '[f]or the ''very bad''' there was the drama of the tyrant, and there was fear; for the 'very good' there was the martyr drama and pity. This juxtaposition of forms appears strange only as long as one neglects to consider the legal aspect of the baroque princedom. Seen in ideological terms they are strictly complementary. In the baroque, the tyrant and the martyr are but two faces of the monarch.'[31] In divergent directions the *drama of the tyrant* and the *martyr drama* radicalised elements which permanently inform the baroque playwrights. Assuming either of these forms of drama as the exemplary form of modern tragedy the baroque sovereign is consequently seen as an *imperfect* character which precludes the mourning-play from attaining an allegedly *tragic* authenticity. From the perspective of the drama of the tyrant, the indecisiveness of the baroque sovereign reduces the figure of the prince to a martyr lacking in authority. From the perspective of the martyr drama, the baroque sovereign lacks the determination to accept his own suffering and thus fails to reach the moment of martyrdom, being then a tyrant. Thus, to assume either the tyrant or the martyr drama as true modern tragic forms leads to *forgot* one of the antinomic components of the baroque sovereign and to *misunderstand* the twofold nature of the *Trauerspiel*. What the juxtaposition of these two negative interpretations of the *Trauerspiel* shows is two extreme presentations which inadequately deal with the paradoxical nature of the baroque. Each one *betrays* a critical element of the baroque. Only through their juxtaposition is the exceptionality of the baroque recognisable.

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[31] *OGT*: 69; *GS* I: 249-50.

The second passage confronts the place given to the baroque in divergent historical narratives:

> Classicist schemes are predominant: ''Gryphius is the undisputed master, the German Sophocles, and behind him Lohenstein, the German Seneca, takes secondary place; only with certain reservations can Hallman, the German Aeschylus, be placed alongside them'' (Paul Stachel). And there is in the dramas undeniably something which corresponds to the Renaissance-facade of the poetics. Their stylistic originality thus much be said in advance- is comparably greater in the details than in the whole. This possesses a certain ponderousness and yet a simplicity of action which is distantly reminiscent of the bourgeois drama of the German Renaissance.[32]

In *Seneca and German Renaissance Drama* (1907) Paul Stachel understood the baroque as a modern version of classic tragedy, therefore grounding its legitimacy in its (limited) potential to attain the value of Classic culture. In *German Baroque Poetry* (1924) Herbert Cysarz explained the baroque literature as preceding the 'true German Renaissance' in eighteenth century Weimar Classicism, reducing it to a proto-configuration of the true German values. As Newman notes on the previous passage, Benjamin's critique can be read as a twofold critique of Stachel and Cysarz, defending the baroque 'as an interruption of the Baroque-as-Renaissance construction and as a supersessional narrative of its own, which christens the Baroque tragic drama as new ''*origin*'' of what Benjamin calls the ''un-Renaissance-like'' tradition of ''modern German Drama'''.[33] Although Newman makes a problematic use of the notion of 'origin' in this passage, she rightly points out Benjamin's critique of those readings that subordinated the exceptionality of the *Trauerspiel* to other forms of drama in both its pre- and post-history. The critical element I want to comment upon is the *exceptionality* that becomes visible or recognisable in Benjamin's philosophical history. The recovery of the *Trauerspiel*'s force does not proceed by means of an investigation allegedly capable of tracing the primordial, unique and stable essence of the baroque. On the contrary, the *idea* of the *Trauerspiel* is revealed precisely in its capacity to resist to multiple characterisations that failed to deal with its complexity, consequently subordinating it to other forms or drama. The *Trauerspiel*'s exceptionality is appreciated against the grain of those conceptualisations that ultimately modulated its force or resonance. In this way, the *idea* of the *Trauerspiel* is not discovered but constructed by means of a historical immersion that brings together the divergent and opposite

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[32] *OGT*: 59; *GS* I: 239-40.
[33] Newman, *Benjamin's Library*: 35.

characterisations under which the *Trauerspiel* has been presented in the history of its reception.

What Benjamin ultimately shows is the role that the *exceptional* or the *extreme* plays in divergent methods of research: historico-literary studies bring together extremes in evolutionary, linear terms, considering the extreme as an imitation or anticipation of other genres without recognising its proper value; for 'philosophical' studies, extremes are necessary to construct the concept of genre, yet the historical process from which they spring forth is 'merely virtual'.[34] Benjamin's *methodological extremism* looks at the extreme or the exceptional through the phenomenon's resistance to be subordinated to given norms or concepts which in turn forces new interpretations to emerge.

In the 'Prologue' Benjamin discerns the singularity or specificity of the baroque in the work's *historical* 'necessity to be there'[35] and in its quality as a 'document in the life of language and evidence of its possibilities at a given time'.[36] This is, to some extent, the content of the first part of the book, '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', in which he explores the violent context within which the baroque emerged and which, more importantly, became the concept of history (profane history) around which the playwrights were organised. However, the singularity of the baroque is more evident in the contrasting conceptualisations which were unable to grasp its singularity. The mourning-play's *right to exist* is recognisable in the conflict staged by different methodologies that are unable to explain it with the concepts available to them, consequently making the mourning-play dependant on *given* concepts of *tragedy*. The *exceptionality* of the baroque is made visible in the totality of its own history, including its moment of genesis and its further presentation in divergent methodologies, or what Benjamin calls its afterlife or after-history.[37]

Benjamin's *immanent critique* points towards what might be called the *violence of critique*: the subordination of that which is exceptional to inherited conceptual schemes, confirming thereby the very scheme rather than challenging its ability to deal with works that escape the norm. Whether a deviation from the 'average' tragedy or an imperfect manifestation of the 'ideal' embodiment of tragedy, literary and philosophical

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[34] *OGT*: 30; *GS* I: 218.
[35] *OGT*: 52; *GS* I: 233.
[36] *OGT*: 49; *GS* I: 230.
[37] *OGT*: 47; *GS* I: 227-8.

criticism subordinated the exceptionality of the baroque to given norms.[38] To explain the alternative method for the construction of the idea of the *Trauerspiel* developed throughout *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* is the task of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. This method is the method of *digression* or *Umweg*.

2. 'Method is a Digression'

The 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' explains Benjamin's *philosophical doctrine* as *Ursprungsphilosophie*, a radical philosophy of origin which encompasses the *doctrine of ideas* with the notion of *immanent critique* that, correspondently, operates through the method of *digression* or *Umweg*. The first sections of the 'Prologue' (I-VI) argue precisely for the necessity of this method in terms of its capacity to do justice to the *doctrine of ideas*.[39] To some extent, the method of digression is dependent on the reformulation of the concepts of *doctrine* and *ideas* that Benjamin introduces in his discussion on Kant, and which he latter develops in the book on the baroque in terms of the *doctrine of ideas*. In this new context, *truth* gains predominance over *knowledge*. Unlike 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' and its supplements, the doctrine of ideas is no longer related to the problem of the unity of experience in terms of the unity of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), but to the 'higher' concept of truth (*Wahrheit*) and its recognition (*Wiederkennen*) in the 'movement of ideas'.[40] In this change, substantial experience does not come from the confrontation of the ephemeral with the totality of knowledge, but from the *recognition* of 'timeless' truth in the movement of ideas organising and giving significance to specific phenomena.

Benjamin does not abandon the aim to relate the ephemeral or transient character of experience to the totality or the unity of doctrinal philosophy. He rather addresses the problem of experience from the point of view of the encounter with the literary work (or, more generally, the work of art). It is in the *critique* of the work that the ephemeral is related to the totality of history, and where the transformability of history becomes visible or recognisable in the movement of *ideas*. To make this totality recognisable,

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[38] *OGT*: 35, 44; *GS* I: 216, 225.
[39] *OGT*: 27-9; *GS* I: 226.
[40] *OGT*: 28-30; *GS* I: 208-10.

ideas must be approached with the method of historical *digression*. Benjamin opens the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' with the following lines:

> It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of presentation [*Darstellung*]. In its finished form philosophy will, it is true, assume the quality of doctrine [*Lehre*], but it does not lie within the power of mere thought to confer such a form. Philosophical doctrine is based on historical configuration.[41]

This passage distinguishes two main problems. First, it establishes the relationship between philosophy and philosophical writing as form of *presentation* (*Darstellung*). While the former is, in its finished form, doctrine (echoing 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy'), the latter can only respond to this form by means of a *historical* form of *presentation* or *configuration.* The 'Prologue' must prove the relation between *philosophical doctrine* and its *method*. The second problem is the distinction between *pure thought* (*bloßen Denken*) and *doctrine*. In strict sense, these are not analogous concepts which allow for a comparison. *Doctrine* refers to a specific form of philosophy, while *pure thought* refers to a specific faculty distinguished from others (such as sensibility and understanding in the Kantian and neo-Kantian systems). The distinction nevertheless serves to specify that *pure thought* is not the medium by which philosophy reaches its ultimate *doctrinal* form, thereby emphasising the role attributed to history and historical change. Here, Benjamin distances himself from Kant but, more importantly, from Hermann Cohen's *Logic of Pure Knowledge*.[42]

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[41] *OGT*: 27; *GS* I: 207.

[42] *System der Philosophie, Erster Teil: Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* [*System of Philosophy. First Part: Logic of Pure Knowledge*], Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1902. For Cohen experience becomes identical with the laws of logic or pure thought. As Nickolas Lambrianou notes, the concept of *origin* (*Ursprung*) remains within the neo-Kantian discussion on 'objectifying/originating' facts. As Cohen's famously asserts in his *Logic*: '... Thinking is thought of origin. Nothing can be given to origin. Principle is precisely and literally foundation. Ground must become origin. Accepting that thought must discover being in origin, then this being cannot have any other ground than that which thought is able to give it. *Pure thought only becomes true as thought of origin*' (*Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*: 36, my emphasis; cited in Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*: 88-89). If there is a given fact in Benjamin's argument, it is the historicity of the ideas or the objectivity articulated in their historical transformation, which cannot be apprehended as *pure thought* as Benjamin maintains in the opening of the Prologue. It is important to stress, as Poma does, however, that *Origin* is open to unattainable completion in Cohen, for which it remains an open task yet to be pursued. For this reason it is more a problem than a concept whose solution (or production/generation) requires an 'indirect route' or *Umweg* (*Logic*: 84/Poma: 95). See: Nickolas Lambrianou, 'Neo-Kantianism and Messianism. *Origin* and *Interruption* in Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin', in *Walter Benjamin. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Peter Osborne (New York: Routledge, 2005), Vol. I, pp. 85–86. Also: Werner Flach, 'Cohen's *Ursprungsdenken*', in Munk, *Cohen's Critical Idealism,* pp. 41-67, for a discussion of the *continuity* in thought that Cohen aims to articulate in a reformulation of Lebniz. On Benjamin's reception of Cohen

As discussed in the previous chapter, for Kant the doctrinal philosophy results from the work of reason upon the interrelated work of the sensibility and the understanding, orientating this towards a systematic account of knowledge and experience that exceeds the specific realms of knowledge. While Cohen privileged the work of logic in the generation or production of ideas, for Benjamin philosophy achieves its doctrinal form by means of a *historical* configuration rather than by means of thought, whether as Kant's *reason* or as Cohen's *pure thought*. Following the distinction between the object and the method of philosophy, the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' develops the affinities between *truth* and historical *digression*. Firstly, Benjamin conceives of truth not as an 'external' element which secures the unity of multiple realms of knowledge or specific sciences. Truth is rather internal to the movement of ideas and resists being presented or 'projected' in specific 'realm[s] of knowledge'.[43] Truth, Benjamin writes, is 'bodied forth in the dance of presented ideas'.[44] If truth is neither projected in specific realms of knowledge nor in their systematic unity, it is however *presented* in the movement of *ideas.* Being the object of philosophy subject to change, transition and movement, the philosophical method required to present it must recast its own dynamics. Benjamin argues that the method enacted by the *treatise* or the *philosophical essay* is the most appropriate to grasp such movement: 'Its method is essentially presentation. Method is a digression (*Umweg*). Presentation as digression. Such is the methodological nature of the *treatise*.'[45] The question is how the method of digression presents the movement of ideas in which truth is embodied. This question requires an explanation of the kind of movement that *ideas* and *digression* follow and to determine how they mirror each other. Both explanations are given in terms of irregular *rhythms*, one developing in history and the other in writing. These are interrelated insofar as the method of digression presents, in the irregular rhythm of the treatise or 'the philosophical essay', the irregular rhythm of the historical movement of *ideas*.

It is necessary to emphasise three main aspects of Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* which have been developed so far. First, its doctrine of ideas considers truth to be the

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and his reading of Leibniz, see also: Paula Schwebel, 'Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's reception of Leibniz and its Sources', *MLN*, Vol. 123, Number 3, April 2012 (589-610).

[43] *OGT*: 28, 29; *GS* I: 208-9.

[44] *OGT*: 29; *GS* I: 209.

[45] *OGT*: 28; *GS* I: 208.

object of philosophy. Second, truth is embodied in the irregular movement of ideas. Third, digression, with its own irregular rhythm, is the method for the presentation of the irregular movement of ideas. What I have stressed is that the necessity for the method of digression is grounded in the object it approaches: it is a method marked by irregular movement insofar as its object of study is irregular movement, i.e. the movement of ideas. When Benjamin affirms that 'ideas are the object' of 'philosophical investigation',[46] it must be added that this is the case insofar as truth is embodied in the ideas' movement. To this extent, the characteristics attributed to the method of digression map out the characteristics of the movement of ideas.[47]

The method of digression is paradoxical. While *method* means the *way towards*, digression means *detour*, *diversion*, or the *un*doing or reversing of the way made through. This negative moment, marked by the German prefix *Um-(weg)*, brings continuous movement to a halt. *Digression*, notes Benjamin, consists of the absence of an 'uninterrupted purposeful structure', which thereby opens up opportunities for 'new beginnings', 'roundabouts' and 'continual pausing' in the presentation of the object of study.[48] This pausing or suspension allows for the discovery of 'new meanings' or, more precisely, for the discovery of the object of study anew.

Benjamin illustrates the irregular rhythm of digression by means of a comparison with the act of viewing a mosaic, thus introducing the fragmentary character in which the objects under examination appear to digression. Two main elements establish the affinity between configuring the image of the mosaic which is observed and the rhythm of digression. Firstly, both are determined by the 'the distinct and the disparate', for which the 'value of the fragments of thought [*Denkbrüchstucken*] is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea'. Secondly: 'the relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through *immersion* [*Versenkung*] in the most minute details of the material-content'.[49] The comparison establishes the fragmentary quality of the object of research as well as the irregular rhythm with which the fragments must be addressed via the method of research. The

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[46] *OGT*: 29; *GS* I: 209.
[47] Paradoxically, the 'Prologue' opens with the method required to grasp the movement of ideas to then move on to an explanation of the ideas' movement. This form of presentation might respond to the necessity of showing that both the method and object of investigation immanently inform each other.
[48] *OGT*: 27-28; *GS* I: 207-8.
[49] *OGT*: 28-29; *GS* I: 208-9. My emphasis.

emphasis on the act of perceiving the mosaic introduces two elements for Benjamin's method and the doctrine of ideas which might be called the principles of *immersion* and *exceptionality*.[50]

On the one hand, the value of the image articulated by the observer of the mosaic *is all the greater the less direct* their fragments are related to it. Naturally, each fragment of the mosaic is related to the image which the mosaic constructs. However, the act of grasping the image is of greater value the more disparate the mosaic's elements are. Here, Benjamin privileges the *extreme* or the *exceptional*. It is the exceptional fragments (i.e. those with the less obvious relation to the overall image) which enrich the experience of looking at the mosaic in order to attain its final image. The exceptional resists being subsumed to the image, thereby deferring the images' final configuration. It forces the viewer to stay in front of the mosaic and to *immerse* him or herself in its fragments once and again. The value of the fragments ('distinct and disparate') resides in their capacity to force the viewer to pause and to begin anew the process of active examination. The value of the exceptional does not originates in its own contribution to the configuration of the final image but in its contribution to the unfolding of the process of *immersion.* The exceptional resists to be subordinated to the final image and forces the image to change according to the discovery of the mosaic's details anew. The exceptional then opens the image to multiple transformations. Thus, truth-content (the image of the mosaic or truth embodied in ideas) is only attained by means of an immersion into the material-content (the tiles of the mosaic or the ideas); in an immersion which the exceptional makes all the more significative.

Returning to the method of digression and philosophical writing, Benjamin writes that the 'prose form' of the treatise or the philosophical essay forces the reader to 'stop' and 'restart with every new sentence', and is at its most successful when the reader is forced to 'pause and reflect', and not when he or she is carried with or inspired by enthusiasm. As corollary Benjamin writes: '[t]he more significant its object, the more detached the reflection must be'.[51] The comparison with the reception of the mosaic brings to the forefront of Benjamin's doctrine of ideas what Samuel Weber calls Benjamin's

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[50] Contrary to Ferber, I suggest that in interpreting the immersion into the mosaic in terms of the observer's act of viewing the mosaic (rather than in terms of the intentional arrangement of the parts of the mosaic by its creator as she does) 'Benjamin's figure of the mosaic' complies 'with Benjamin's understanding of configuration'. See Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*: 178-80.

[51] *OGT*: 29; *GS* I: 209.

methodological extremism, which I will explore in terms of the principles of *exceptionality* and *immersion* in the following sections. To grasp the movement of ideas requires their complementary operation. Only on the basis of their interrelated work can philosophical writing operate *as* digression and, therefore, be able to recast the movement of ideas (and the truth they embody). In order to prove this, however, an examination of the irregular rhythm of the movement of ideas is required.

2.1 Methodological Extremism

As Samuel Weber notes the affinity between Benjamin's concepts of the *extreme* or the *exceptional* and the political theology of Carl Schmitt is twofold. Benjamin himself recognised this in a letter to Schmitt from December 1930. On the one hand, *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* 'owes' to Schmitt's work 'in its presentation of the seventeenth-century of sovereignty'. On the other, Benjamin affirms that he 'confirmed' his own method of investigation in 'matters concerning the philosophy of art' in the political works of Schmitt, specifically in *Dictatorship. From the Beginning of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class Struggle* (1921).[52] As Weber argues, the methodological affinity to which Benjamin refers is concentrated in the centrality ascribed to the *extreme* or the exceptional in their methods of investigation, which Weber describes as their shared *methodological extremism*.[53] Although Weber rightly points out the methodological character of the extreme both in Schmitt and Benjamin, he elaborates mainly upon Benjamin's 'confirmation' of his philosophy of art in the political theology of Schmitt. However, taking 'the question of sovereignty' as the central element of Benjamin's 'philosophy of art', Weber focuses on the theory of sovereignty that Benjamin takes (and reformulates) from Schmitt's political works rather than on the exploration of the extreme which *had confirmed* Benjamin's own *method* of research. This exploration would rather show the divergent effects that the extreme has for Schmitt's theory of *concepts* (*Begriff*) and Benjamin's *doctrine of ideas*, and the consequences that this divergence respectively has in Schmitt's theory of

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[52] *GS* I: 887.
[53] Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*: 179-80.

sovereign decision and in Benjamin's recasting of the role of the sovereign and the state of exception in the *Trauerspiel* book and the late *Theses on the Concept of History* (1939).[54]

Weber articulates the notion of *methodological extremism* by reading Schmitt's characterisation of the *extreme* in his *Political Theology* (1922) together with the opening of the first part of *The Origin of German the Mourning-Play*. Schmitt writes that 'the normal proves nothing, the exception proves everything; it confirms not only the rule: the rule lives only from the exception'.[55] Benjamin opens the analysis of the baroque by announcing that his study is directed towards 'the extreme, taking to account the baroque drama' by bringing the 'diffuse and disparate together'.[56] Although Weber addresses the limits of this affinity by discussing Schmitt and Benjamin's interpretation of the concept of sovereignty in the baroque, he does not distinguish their differences at the methodological level, considering the role played by the extreme in the very process of configuring norms (Schmitt) and ideas (Benjamin).

The methodological consequences of understanding the 'state of exception' as an extreme or exceptional phenomenon eluding any definition illustrates the difference between the two thinkers. Schmitt opens his *Political Theology* with the affirmation that the 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception', thereby foregrounding the concept of sovereignty as being grounded on a 'borderline concept' ('the state of exception') that refers to a 'borderline case' ('the extreme emergency').[57] For Schmitt, the exceptional resists any conceptualisation, opening up a space for decision and action: the sovereign is he or she who decides 'whether *there is* an extreme emergency as well

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[54] Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*: 181. This issue is the subject of a specific scholarship on Benjamin which has increased since the publication of the letter in Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften I* (1974), originally omitted by Adorno and Scholem in *Briefe* (1966). See especially Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (Standford: Stanford University Press, 1995); and *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For Agamben's most detailed discussion on Messianism: *The Time That Remains: A commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans, Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). David Pan discusses Agamben's reading of Schmitt in 'Carl Schmitt on Culture and Violence in the Political Decision', *Telos* 142 (Spring 2008), pp. 49-72; and 'Against Biopolitics: Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben on Political Sovereignty and Symbolic Order', *The German Quarterly* 82.1 (Winter 2009), pp. 42-62.
[55] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty,* translated by George Schwab (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 15.
[56] *OGT*: 58; *GS* I: 238.
[57] Schmitt, *Political Theology*: 5. Also: Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Beginning of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class-Struggle*, trans. by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), pp. 14–15.

as what must be done to eliminate it'.[58] The exceptional or borderline case thus opens the space for practical decision-making: 'the decision [to declare whether there is an extreme emergency] frees itself of every normative restriction and becomes in an authentic sense absolute'.[59] For Schmitt, the space for practical action inaugurated by the extreme emergency grounds sovereign decision, a moment of absolute affirmation that calls for the 'state of exception' and for the solutions that would allegedly lead to its dissolution. By contrast, for Benjamin, the exceptional forces a historical revision leading to an understanding (in Schmitt's vocabulary) of how the exceptional came to be a borderline case eliciting a borderline concept. Hence, rather than opening the space for practical action or grounding the moment of sovereign affirmation, Benjamin turns his *methodological extremism* towards the past and the task of recovering the conditions for the recognisability of the extreme as a phenomenon that has been historically construed as exceptional, producing rather the opportunity to momentarily suspend the given order of things. In contrast to Schmitt's sovereign, Benjamin understands the sovereign's task as preventing the state of exception from happening or 'to avert it'.[60]

For Benjamin, the centrality of the exceptional is revealed in its value or contribution towards the configuration of ideas and the construction of a 'philosophical history' or *Ursprungsphilosophie*. In showing the historical contingency of the norm or the idea, Benjamin temporally suspends their efficacy without grounding the (practical) necessity of Schmitt's sovereign or absolute affirmation. The exceptional forces the destructive character of philosophy to emerge, catalysing the destruction of given conceptions which elude the complexity of that which is exceptional or extreme.

If there is a moment of affirmation or creation in Benjamin, this follows the destructive moment that calls for a truce or for the temporary suspension of conflict. The divergences in the *methodological extremism* in Schmitt and in Benjamin lead their conceptions of the 'state of exception' to different answers regarding the question on

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[58] Schmitt, *Political Theology*: 6. My emphasis.
[59] Schmitt, *Political Theology*: 12.
[60] *OGT*: 65; *GS* I: 245 Regarding the differences in the conception of sovereign decision in Benjamin and Schmitt, Weber writes: 'Schmitt had construed the theological-political analogy in terms of a relationship of fundamental similarity; the sovereign transcends the state as God transcends the creation. By contrast, Benjamin's notion of secularization stresses precisely the incommensurability of the change it entails' (*Benjamin's -abilities*: 188). It should be added that in the incommensurability that breaches the analogy between God and the sovereign takes place the suspension of the 'legal' or 'mythical' violence by that which Benjamin calls 'divine violence' in 'Towards a Critique of Violence' (1921). It is by means of such suspension that the space for political action is created (establishing now an analogy between the divine and the human which grounds Benjamin's profane, weak Messianic conception of political power).

sovereign decision. For Schmitt, the task of the sovereign is to determine whether there is an exceptional emergency and thus declare the state of exception, while for Benjamin the task of the sovereign is to avert the state of exception. In contrast to the immediate, direct affirmation of Schmitt ('analogous to miracle in theology'),[61] Benjamin's calls for an interruption of the given order of things, one which might bring momentary solution (*Lösung*) but never complete redemption (*Erlösung*) to human problems.[62]

Benjamin's inversion of the function of Schmitt's sovereign is more clearly reflected in the *Theses on the Concept of History* (1939), where he affirms, in thesis VIII, that the task of historical materialism is to make the catastrophe informing historical change apparent and to understand that 'the ''state of exception'' we live in is the true norm', for which the task for the true materialist thinker is thus to find the conditions for producing 'the *true* estate of exception'. Benjamin continues deploying Schmitt's vocabulary yet in order to define the critic's task in opposite terms. Reversing the gaze of history towards the past to illuminate alternative futures, Benjamin's methodological extremism suspends the moment of sovereign decision to actualise the messianic force of the past in the present. It is within the logic of this inversion that the state of exception is not a 'miraculous ''decision''' but the catastrophe as 'process of thought and representation revealing the archaeological foundations of modernity'.[63] The

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[61] Schmitt, *Political Theology*: 38.

[62] Benjamin differentiates *solution* from *redemption* in terms of those secular answers responding to human problems and of the aspiration to religious fulfilment in the baroque period (recasting the fulfilment reserved for the tragic hero). He then maps the difference onto the opposition between *Trauerspiel* and *tragedy*: 'solution' as 'redemption' 'resounds in the conclusion of tragedy' but in a 'limited form' constrained to the individual 'tragic hero' (*OGT*:79, 116-7; *GS* I:258; 296). Unlike tragedy, the *Trauerspiel* perpetually defers *redemption* and leaves its character with secular *solutions*. Benjamin draws this distinction first in the essay on violence (1921) to introduce the multiple forms of violence, force and power that the German term *Gewalt* encompasses. There, he affirms that neither 'solution to human problems' (*Lösung*) nor the 'redemption' of humanity (*Erlösung*) are 'conceivable' if *Gewalt* is excluded in principle. (*SW* 1:247; *GS* II.1:196). The emphatic reading of the distinction between *Lösung* and *Erlösung* presented above parallels Caygill's distinction between 'fulfilment *in* historical time and fulfilment *of* historical time' ('Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition': 10). As interruption of the given order of things *Lösung* occurs *in* historical time. It opens the present to change, although it also opens this chance for change to the possibility of a counterrevolutionary outcome. For a discussion on the different temporalities of suspension or 'cessation of ordinary time' in Schmitt and Benjamin, see: Horst Bredekamp, 'From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, Via Thomas Hobbes', in *Walter Benjamin. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Peter Osborne (New York: Routledge, 2005), Vol. I, pp. 454–55.

[63] Christine Buci-Glucksman, *Baroque Reason, The Aesthetics of Modernity*, tr. Patrick Camiller, (London and California: SAGE Publications, 1984), p. 66. Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956) might be read as a further inversion of Benjamin's own inversion of Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922). It attempts to 'restore the vitality' that Benjamin had allegedly 'evacuated from the Baroque sovereignty' — which ultimately reduces the sovereign to the melancholic figure of Hamlet. See: Jennifer R. Rust and Julia Reinhard Lupton, 'Schmitt and Shakespeare', introduction to *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. xxix. *Cf*: fn. 14 in this chapter.

exceptional then grounds two different conceptions of *concepts* and *ideas* both in Schmitt and Benjamin, leading consequently to two different views on practical political action in regard to the affirmation or suspension of modern sovereign decision.[64]

2.2 Ideas and Exceptionality

The task of Benjamin's philosophical history is to articulate a notion of *idea* which is able to explain the extreme or the exceptional. His formulation of the notion of *ideas* follows an irregular path in the 'Prologue'. He first explains the value of the ideas in the work of Plato and then recasts them in terms of Adamic names. Echoing the 1916 essay on language, he distinguishes the role of ideas in the continuity of divine and human language guaranteed by God before the Fall and the role of ideas in post-lapsarian language, thereby defining the historical character gained by ideas in a secular, profane context. Through this transition, Benjamin brings together 1) the essential character that the ideas have for Plato, 2) the continuity between divine and Adamic language and 3) the historical *presentation* of the transformability of the ideas in post-lapsarian language. This *presentation* is ultimately compared with a Leibnizian monad which reinforces the aim to attain continuity yet this time in profane language. This Leibnizian continuity works as an ideal, however. It is an unattainable model in the realm of profane language. The emphasis on the irregular, discontinuous rhythm informing

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[64] *GS* I:697. This discussion on the interruption of the given order of the present (understood as the state of exception which has become the norm) opens an opportunity to reflect on Caygill's conclusion on 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' and the *violent* or event *tortuous* forms in which experience is attained. For Caygill, 'On the Program...' grounds the conditions for 'alternative concepts of freedom in rhythms as well as the warps and distortions of experience'. However, he explains this in regard to the essay on Violence (1921) and 'Naples' (1924). On the former, he affirms that 'the ''metaphysical realm'' through which the concept of experience is changed by the concept of freedom' offered in the 'On the Program...' is finally 'revealed to be a realm of violence' in which the 'laws and categories of experience issue not from an act of self-legislation but from a decision to call a truce in a condition of violence' (*The Colour of Experience*: 26-7). What I am suggesting is that Caygill's argument on freedom is compatible with the emphasis given here to the process of interruption. Although this emphasis on interruption appears first in 'On the Program' and is also present in the 1921 essay on translation, it is fully exploited in the essays on violence and in the 'Prologue'. Ferber advances a similar argument in respect to the 'Prologue' when she writes that it is in the 'caesuras', in the 'cracks and hindrances that emerge from within the wholeness of the [*Trauerspiel* book's] argument'; 'these caesuras are the openings through which truth can reveal itself': Ferber, 'Interruptions in Brecht and Benjamin', *Assaf: Studies in the Theatre*, 2005, 35–53 (pp. 36–37). More importantly, this argument serves to stress that the 'true' state of exception that suspends the catastrophe which has become the norm consists of a temporary interruption of such catastrophe, a *solution* rather than *redemption* or a *truce* rather than *eternal peace*: a *counter-*resistance which by means of a destructive moment brings such a catastrophic history to a halt.

history marks one of the critical differences between the early essays 'On Language as Such' (1916), 'On Perception' and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (both from 1917) on the one hand, and 'The Task on the Translator' (1921) and the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' (1928), on the other.[65]

Benjamin opens the discussion on *ideas* by presenting the 'supreme metaphysical significance' they have in the Platonic system as essences. In this sense, Benjamin understands ideas as 'unities' which are given 'to be reflected upon', and whose unity is not a 'conceptual unity'.[66] With this first approach to the concept of *ideas* Benjamin traces the difference between truth, ideas and concepts. While truth is embodied in ideas, it has no direct relation to concepts. Concepts have, rather, a *mediating role* which 'enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas'.[67] In this way, Benjamin establishes a series of relations in which truth is embodied in ideas, while ideas, by means of concepts, are related to phenomena. The mediating role of concepts has a double function: firstly, they divide phenomena into their parts and relate them to ideas; secondly, in the same movement they make the idea *visible* through the relations that concepts establish between phenomena and their components:

> Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas. It is this same mediating role which fits them for the other equally basic task of philosophy, the presentation of ideas. As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too the presentation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not presented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept; as the configuration of these elements.[68]

Here, Benjamin recasts the Kantian system in which ideas of reason give unity to knowledge formulated through the combined work of the sensibility and the understanding. On the basis of this unity, new concepts emerge and practical action is guided. The central difference consists in the fact that Benjamin addresses the ideas from the perspective of their historical transformation rather than from their contribution towards a coherent orientation of speculative and practical reason towards

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[65] Despite their remarks on the profane context within which the continuity of language operates in Benjamin, John Pizer and Richard Wolin maintain that the *telos* of the 'Prologue' (and of the essay on language) is the 'recuperation' or 'restoration' of the 'pure language' which 'allowed man for the perfect condition of the external world'. See: *Toward a Radical Theory of Origin*: 42; *An Aesthetics of Redemption*: 43.

[66] *OGT*: 30; *GS* I: 210.

[67] *OGT*: 34; *GS* I: 214.

[68] *OGT*: 34; *GS* I: 214.

the future. With this difference Benjamin turns towards the historical articulation of ideas. The mediating role attributed to concepts enables both the idea to be presented or to bear actuality and phenomena to be organised: 'Ideas are [phenomena's] objective, virtual arrangement. Their objective interpretation'.[69] In this way, Benjamin introduces the best known characterisation of his notion of ideas: 'Ideas are to objects as constellations [*Sternbilder*] are to stars'.[70] Although commonly used to synthesise Benjamin's notion of *idea*, this analogy is problematic insofar as it suddenly blurs the centrality ascribed to the mediating role of concepts. In an almost Kantian correction, Benjamin affirms: '[ideas] are neither the concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas'.[71] Just as Kant maintained that ideas do not produce empirical knowledge but, rather, provide unity to the multiplicity of cognitions related to the sensible, Benjamin dissociates the ideas from the task of producing knowledge about phenomena. *Ideas* rather relate to concepts which systematise phenomena by breaking them down into different elements and by establishing relations between the elements of different phenomena. Ideas have, therefore, a second-order function which is missing in the analogy of the *Sternbilder*. Ideas give an objective interpretation of phenomena by providing the 'virtual arrangement' of the concepts which organise phenomena and establish their contextual relations:

> Ideas are timeless constellations [*Konstellationen*], and by virtue of the elements being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed, so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best explained as the presentation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart.[72]

Here Benjamin recasts the principle of exceptionality, regarding *concepts* as the elements which construe an specific idea. The most extreme or exceptional concepts enrich the idea by extending or amplifying its scope. Constructing constellations of concepts, ideas organise or virtually arrange phenomena yet only by means of organising concepts in contexts or systems of relations. Like the mosaic, the richer the constellation, the less direct the relations between its discrete elements. As Ferber

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[69] *OGT*: 34; *GS* I: 214.
[70] *OGT*: 34-5; *GS* I: 214-5.
[71] *OGT*: 34-5; *GS* I: 215.
[72] *OGT*: 34-35; *GS* I: 215.

explains: the extreme 'demarcate(s) yet enrich the idea's borders'.[73] The extreme negotiates the limits of the idea. The empirical or the phenomena, on the other hand, can be 'the most properly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme'. Benjamin thus affirms that the idea is not the 'average' but the 'general' or the most comprehensive (*Allgemaine*).[74] Then, he concludes, *concepts* produce 'at one single stroke' the 'salvation [*Rettung*] of phenomena and the presentation of ideas'.[75] In this way the idea neither produces the unity of divergent concepts nor stands as their 'average'; rather, it brings together the multiplicity of concepts into an order which gives them meaning as contextual relations. Yet this meaning is only significant if the concepts that are gathered together include extreme concepts (i.e. if the group of concepts collects borderline concepts for borderline cases).[76]

On the previous point Weber stresses that an idea is construed as 'a function of that which it is not'.[77] This has a twofold meaning. The idea has to include both exceptional phenomena and their exceptional conceptualisations. This is finally explained by Benjamin in terms of the contribution that the extreme or the exceptional has for the synthesis that ideas produce: ideas 'perform a service that they are not able to perform as concepts'; 'they do not make the similar identical, but they effect a synthesis between extremes'.[78] In the opening of '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy' Benjamin confirms that his study is directed towards a 'synthesis' of 'diffuse and disparate' 'extremes' which he

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[73] Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*: 64.

[74] *OGT*: 34-35; *GS* I: 215.

[75] *OGT*: 35; *GS* I: 215.

[76] In a polemic formulation, Witte maintains that Benjamin's 'historically based genre concept' is 'not a synthesis constructed of historical data but an immediate experience derived from language of what the tragic drama is, its ''origin'''. A more accurate presentation is offered by Tiedemann, for whom an 'artistic genre becomes an idea as originary phenomenon'. Tiedemann emphasises the constructive character of Benjamin's doctrine of ideas rather than an allegedly immediate experience of what the literary phenomenon is. Similarly, Friedlander notes: '[f]or, since nothing in experience would constitute the embodiment of the idea, it can become manifest only by using the phenomenal material not for what it is in fact, but so as to express something over and above it'. What Witte, Tiedemann and Friedlander do not elaborate upon is the role that concepts play as the medium through which phenomena are related to *ideas*. See respectively: Bernard Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), p. 77; Rudolf Tiedemann, *Studien Zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlangsanstalt, 1965), p. 58; and Eli Friedlander, 'The Measure of the Contingent: Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Image', *Boundary 2*, 35.3 (2008), 1–26 (p. 10, 12-13).

[77] Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*: 179. Andrew Benjamin has emphasised a similar element in his discussion of the essay on Violence and the critique of law in a way that can be generally applied to Benjamin's concept of *critique*. He writes that if 'there is a recourse to ''history''' in critique this is 'the recourse to that which undoes the already determined', for which critique (of law) 'demands' that which stands 'outside'. This 'outside' can only be 'furnished by a historico-philosophical view of the law'. It is this 'outside' which opens up the opportunity to conceive what A. Benjamin calls the 'world's othering' as a possibility: Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 10, 105–12.

[78] *OGT*: 41; *GS* I: 221.

ultimately associates with 'allegorical' synthesis in the second part of the book, which he thus opposes to the synthesis produced by the symbol in political terms as *tregua dei* or the temporary suspension of war in truce.[79] Such a synthesis does not transform the *idea* into a more general concept of a higher order than those it gathers. It rather brings the multiplicity of concepts and their oppositions together into 'contextual relations'. However, the mere gathering together of similar elements or concepts does not articulate an idea. There is no need for a context or a system of relations to make sense of what is merely different unless it includes the extreme or the exceptional just as in Kant ideas are necessary to orientate what otherwise would remain as contradictory points of view: the standpoints of mechanical causation and moral freedom or the speculative and practical uses of reason.

The principle of exceptionality radicalises the concept of ideas formulated in the 1917 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy'. In the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', the drive for unity and systematic completion is catalysed by the exceptional. The principle of exceptionality however does not explain the historical transformation of ideas. Considering that ideas are not among the given elements of the world of phenomena, the opening of the sixth section of the 'Prologue' asks then for 'the manner in which they are in fact given'.[80] It is this question which Benjamin aims to answer by means of his revision of ideas as Adamic names and of their historical transformation in post-lapsarian language. The principle of immersion as historical digression complements the work of the principle of exceptionality.

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[79] *OGT*: 58; *GS* I: 238.
[80] *OGT*: 35; *GS* I: 215.

2.3 Ideas and Historical Immersion: the Rhythm of *Origin*

In tracing the linguistic element of ideas as contextual relations between concepts, Benjamin ultimately searches not for principles that might orientate the multiplicity of knowledge towards a complete unity in the future but, rather, for the *origin* of this unity and its discontinuous historical transformation. In this way, Benjamin opens this unity to its own lost *futurities*. The *giveness* of the ideas is not explained, therefore, in terms of the operation of reason (providing regulative principles) or pure thought (giving logical principles), but in terms of their presence and transformation in the medium of language. This is not, Benjamin writes, all that far removed from 'Platonic anamnesis' or 'remembering'.[81] However, the task is not to grasp the essence of the ideas but to understand their transformation as the process through which they are both communicated and forgotten. Rather than Plato, the model is Adam, whose 'act of naming' releases the *ideas* that in the Platonic system have to be remembered or restored.

In Adamic language, ideas and names coincide. The name captures the essence of the object as it is both creative and receptive to the language of God. There is no subordination of the object to the name: in naming, Adam completes the object and accomplishes God's act of creation. In the 'Prologue' this ideal model serves to characterise the language of philosophy and its historical transformation, echoing the earlier argument on divine language made in the essays on language and translation. While divine and human language are connected through a relation of continuity before the Fall, history consists of the 'continuous struggle' for the presentation of ideas in which discontinuity and interruption are intrinsic to the process of historical transformation.[82] Benjamin's characterisation of language towards a more explicit formulation of its discontinuity marks the entry into the concept of *origin*. In the context of this *struggle*, Benjamin changes the focus of Platonic redemption, transforming the remembering of original forms of perception into the 'restoration' of the conditions which make visible the totality of the historical development of ideas as the condition for both their communication and forgetting. More than remembering unique, primal, and stable essences, redemption means here to recover ideas' history as the history of

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[81] *OGT*: 36-7; *GS* I: 217.
[82] *OGT*: 37-8; *GS* I: 217-8.

the transformation of concepts. It is to this end that Benjamin writes in section VI that it is *this* Platonic anamnesis which makes the idea 'absorb' the totality of its historical formulations.[83]

The first appearance of the notion of origin or *Ursprung* in the 'Prologue' follows the critique of deductive methods for the definition of literary genres and Croce's reduction of history into the systematisation of 'genetic' (*genetische*), linear change. In this context, *origin* provides the conditions for a substantive concept of history which is open to conflict and to infinite, discrete configurations. What Benjamin suggests is that a history of the change in artistic forms is not incompatible with an *Ideenlehre* able to explain the 'art forms in the problem of *origin*'.[84] Although an 'entirely historical category', Benjamin writes, *origin* 'has nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]' as it does not describes the process of the emergence of a phenomenon ('the process by which it came into being') but, rather, 'that which emerges from [its] process of becoming and disappearance'.[85] *Origin* then refers to the total history of the phenomenon, including its moment of emergence but also its multiple transformations throughout the course of history. Benjamin emphasises here those moments of disappearance or *forgetting*. He adds two remarks on the process of historical becoming which supersedes the moment of factual emergence. Firstly, *origin* is 'the stream of becoming', and its 'rhythm' 'absorbs the material of emergence' (*Entstehungmaterial*). Secondly, the *originary* (*ursprüngliche*) character of phenomena never 'appears in the naked and manifest existence of the factual' but instead manifests itself as a 'rhythm that is apparent only to a dual insight': *restoration* and *imperfection*.[86] Before discussing the last two terms I want to emphasise the centrality which Benjamin places on the double *rhythm* of *origin*. *Origin* does not refer to a specific moment of history (as emergence or genesis do), but to the transformation of a specific phenomena in the course of history. To grasp the *origin* of a phenomenon is to grasp the rhythm of its transformation, from the moment of its emergence to its multiple moments of disappearance and re-appearance in history. This is why Benjamin refers to *origin* as the *stream* or current of becoming. The becoming of phenomena is a process of transformation marked by interruptions, folds and moments of suspension. It is also

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[83] *OGT*: 36; *GS* I: 215.
[84] *OGT*: 45; *GS* I: 225.
[85] *OGT*: 45; *GS* I: 225.
[86] *OGT*: 45; *GS* I: 225.

critical to note that to reveal the phenomenon's origin, it 'must undergo a process of destruction', as Ferber emphasises.[87] To gather the history of phenomena means to suspend the form in which phenomena are immediately given to us.

To explain the dual insight of restoration and imperfection Benjamin writes that looking at a phenomenon as *originary phenomenon* (*Ursprungsphänomen*) 'determines the form [*bestimmt sich des Gestalt*] in which an idea constantly confronts [*sich auseinandersetz*] the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history'.[88] To assume the point of view of *origin* (rather than the perspective of historical emergence or genesis) means to search for the rhythm with which an idea has confronted the world in order to reveal the idea's meaning in the totality of its own history. Such confrontation makes visible the phenomenon's process of becoming as an irregular and discontinuous transformation, marked by interruptions and moments of disappearance and reappearance. Only in the recovery of its total history, and especially in their moments of oblivion, may phenomena be seen as *originary phenomena* and their *ideas* be *presented*.

Critical to Benjamin's doctrine of idea is that *origin* provides a standpoint from which every phenomenon can be seen *as* an originary phenomenon: the 'task of the investigator' is to regard the phenomenon as 'certain until its most innermost structure appears to be so essential as to reveal it as an origin', as the 'object of discovery' or the object of 'recognition' (*Wiederkennen*).[89] To recognise phenomena as originary requires a change in the *standpoint* from which phenomena are viewed, from standpoint of their *genesis* to that of their *origin*. From this standpoint 'philosophical history' reveals 'the configuration of the idea' in the 'remotest extremes and apparent excess of the process of development' of phenomena: 'the sum total of all possible meaningful juxtaposition of opposites'.[90] Although Benjamin did not identify the originary phenomenon with its idea, it seems that the configuration of the idea consists of looking at the phenomenon as originary phenomenon. Yet rather than blurring the distinction between the phenomenon and its idea in the moment of recognition, the phenomenon is seen in relation to the totality of the conceptualisations which have been formulated to present

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[87] Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*: 64.
[88] *OGT*: 45-6; *GS* I: 226.
[89] *OGT*: 46; *GS* I: 227.
[90] *OGT*: 47; *GS* I: 227.

its idea.[91] Here, the principle of exceptionality explored in the previous section is related to the principle of immersion, for which the search for the exceptional elements which configure the idea can only be realised in the process of immersing oneself in the history of those elements, thereby producing the *sum total of all possible meaningful juxtapositions of opposites*:

> The presentation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored. Virtually, because that which is comprehended in the idea of origin still has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which have befallen it. Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and can it therefore be described as the pre- and post-history [*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*] of this being.[92]

The exceptional has to be searched for in the pre- and post-history of the phenomenon, in the totality of its historical development. Benjamin then reformulates the task of what he has referred to as his 'philosophical history' and 'science of origin': 'to establish the becoming of phenomena in their being', which is not satisfied until the phenomenon has 'absorbed all its history'. On the basis of the identification of the being of phenomena with their total history, Benjamin warns that the 'real world' (or an 'objective interpretation of the world') 'could well constitute this task'. Becoming its own total history, the 'idea' is ultimately a *monad*: the 'purpose of the presentation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world'.[93] With this further understanding of ideas as monads, Benjamin brings together both the ephemeral (each concrete phenomenon) and the absolute or universal (the total history of the phenomena and the task of presenting the world).

The *monadological* character attributed to ideas as abbreviations of the world aims, therefore, to guarantee the continuity of experience from the ephemeral and transient to the totality of history and the world. In the concrete experience of the ephemeral Benjamin aims to read the totality of history, thereby transforming the ephemeral

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[91] The moment of recognition would consist in comprehending the phenomenon as originary and, consequently, as embodying its own idea (the totality of the multiple, extreme forms in which the phenomena has been historically presented). It is a *re*-cognition in the sense that the phenomenon is presented anew, as concentrating the totality, however incomplete, of its own history, but also in the sense the re-establishment (*Wiederherstellung*) of the phenomenon in its totality.

[92] *OGT*: 47; *GS* I: 227.

[93] *OGT*: 47-48; *GS* I: 227-8.

moment into substantive experience. However, this Leibnizian moment should not detract attention from the emphasis which Benjamin puts on the moments of rupture, interruption, disappearance and forgetting in history, all of which produce an irregular rhythm in historical change and the transmission of tradition. These moments of rupture and discontinuity constitute the reason why restoration, remembering and, ultimately, the doctrine of ideas are necessary. Leibnizian continuity operates, therefore, as the ideal model which is however unattainable. For this reason the task of making phenomena to absorb the totality of their history remains incomplete and eternal, an infinite task. Although the reference to Leibniz could suggest the possibility of attaining the continuity of experience in terms of pre-critical metaphysics (which Benjamin entertained but did not follow in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy'), the totality of history concentrated in the idea remains however incomplete. Absolute experience consists, therefore, in recognising phenomena as *originary* phenomena, namely, as embodying the totality of their own history as a conflict open to change: the *struggle* of divergent and even opposite concepts for the presentation of their ideas.[94]

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[94] Hence, the monadic structure of the idea points towards one of the horizons of the dual insight of *origin*: restoration and re-establishment constitute the eternal task that cannot be achieved in history, just as the pure continuity of translation is possible only before the Fall and within the context of the pure deducibility of experience from first principles in pre-critical metaphysics. The discontinuity of profane, historical time and its irregular rhythm of repetition, disappearance and re-emergence points towards the other horizon of the dual insight of Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* (incompletion and imperfection), thereby forcing complete restoration and re-establishment to remain *out* of history. Benjamin emphasises 'the discontinuous structure of the world of ideas' and regards 'discontinuity' to be 'a characteristic of the essences', to finally warn that the ignorance of this 'discontinuous finitude' has 'frustrated' attempts to renew the theory of ideas (*OGT*, 33, 37-38: *GS* I: 212, 218). Ferber offers, however, an alternative reading in which the Leibnizian continuity is privileged over the moments of rupture in Benjamin's account of *origin*. *Philosophy and Melancholy*: Chapter 4.

3. Immanent Critique and Allegorical Seeing

In the previous sections I explained that Benjamin's doctrinal philosophy is a philosophy of history that might be specifically understood as *Ursprungsphilosophie*. This radical philosophy of origin encompasses a doctrine of ideas for the determination of the idea of specific phenomena by means of an immanent critique of its *origin* through the method of digression. The method of digression demands the interrelated work of the principles of exceptionality and the principle of historical immersion. I also explained that both the method and object of critique inform each other continuously, so that they 'take shape immanently'.[95] Having explained the method that the book on the baroque follows for the critique of the *Trauerspiel* (the determination of its idea through its *origin*) this section elaborates on one of the critical features of the *Trauerspiel* as object of research: allegory as the *Trauerspiel*'s device of signification.

If the objects of critique are collected from their processes of historical transformation, the criteria formulated by immanent critique are developed through the historical revision of the object of critique. This section explains Benjamin's immersion into the history of the conceptualisation of allegory in order to discern its extreme formulations, so that its idea is ultimately constructed in their juxtaposition. This is how Benjamin addresses the significance of allegory in the second part of *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play*, 'Allegory and *Trauerspiel*'. The historical path which he follows is clear. He starts with the 'speculative' and undeveloped concept of *allegory* in Classicism to then show its influence in the opposition between *symbol* and *allegory* in Romanticism. From this revision Benjamin extracts the partial comprehension of allegory as 'technique of illustration' (Classism), which due to its 'conventionality' or arbitrariness is opposed to the 'necessity' of the symbol (Romanticism). This undermining of allegory's expressive capacity anticipates the negative characterisation of allegory as 'ambiguity' and 'extravagance' in the neo-Kantian aesthetics of Hermann Cohen and Carl Horst. Against the grain of the history of reductive conceptions of allegory Benjamin shows that allegory is expressive although in a different way than the symbol.

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[95] *OGT*: 44; *GS* I: 225.

It is critical to note that Benjamin's revision of Romanticism is all the more significant in so far as it stands in a double relation to allegory. It roughly parallels the opposition of Classicism to allegory by regarding the latter to be an imperfect means of signification, failing then to note the marks of allegorical thinking which its own characterisation of symbol bears. Stressing the affinities between the Romantic symbol and allegory Benjamin undoes the linear narrative of allegory as imperfect means of signification or expressionless technique. Allegory is as effective as the symbol is in attaining expression (*Ausdruck*), although this expression is of a different nature given their divergent relations to time and history.[96] The affinity that Benjamin rediscovers between symbol and allegory turns the Romantic conception of allegory into the extreme or exceptional formulation in the apparently linear history running from Classicism to Romanticism and neo-Kantianism, opening allegory to a renewed interpretation whose central problem is the question on allegorical expression or 'allegorical synthesis'. Allegory is thus presented by means of its multiple conceptualisations in order to make it absorb its total history, including those elements that, resisting such conceptualisations, were forgotten or misrepresented (i.e. allegory's expressive capacity). These interpretations or conceptualisations of allegory fail to appreciate that allegory (like the Romantic symbol) has the capacity for 'expression' and produces a 'synthesis' which (unlike the Romantic symbol) is open to change and conflict.[97]

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[96] *OGT*: 187-8; *GS* I: 364-3.

[97] In showing that Romanticism has in common with Classicism the opposition to allegory Benjamin proves that it is the baroque the 'sovereign opposite' to Classicism, not Romanticism as it has been historically maintained. Stressing the affinities between symbol and allegory in Romanticism (both are forms of expression) Benjamin points to the distance between Romanticism and Classicism. Bearing an allegorical imprint, the Romantic symbol deviates from Classical symbol. However, it is the baroque which really attains allegorical expression, thereby being the true opposite to Classicism.

3.1 Allegorical Synthesis

Benjamin traces the *origin* of allegory through its constant fluctuation over the course of history. First, he refers to the Romantic conception of symbol as further development of the Classicist principle of the apotheosis of individual concrete existence, placed 'within a progression of events' towards the 'infinite', the 'redemptive' and the 'sacred'. Within this logic, the religious symbol appears as the concrete 'manifestation' of an 'idea', or the unity between the 'material' and the 'transcendental' which relates the individual to the divine as part of an 'unbroken whole'.[98] Although Classicism developed a profane concept of symbol, the notion of allegory remained only as its 'speculative' counterpart. This means that no theory or definition of allegory was provided. In consequence allegory was construed merely as the 'dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out'.[99] Then, both Classicism and Romanticism regarded allegory as a 'technique' which bears no capacity for *expression* but only for partial illustration or oblique 'designation'.[100] Allegory is thus defined by the vague character that makes it unable to synthesise specific contents and attain meaning.

In this way, Benjamin's task consists of recovering the specific sense in which allegory is a *form of expression (Ausdrucksform)* rather than a mere technique of illustration (*Bildertechnik*).[101] For Benjamin, allegory is not the conventional sign or mark which 'refers to other things than itself'. It is rather the *embodiment of an idea*, albeit not the absolute or religious idea 'incarnated' in the symbol.[102] In opposition to the common identification of allegory and conventional sign on the one hand, and symbol and expression of essential being on the other, Benjamin aims to explain allegory as a substantive form of expression which, nevertheless, escapes from the relation of continuity between the absolute and the ephemeral presented by the symbol (the incarnation or embodiment of the divine in the earthly world). This might illustrate what Samuel Weber formulates, although in a different context, as the relation between the

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[98] *OGT*: 160; *GS* I: 336-7.
[99] *OGT*: 161; *GS* I: 339.
[100] *OGT*: 162; *GS* I: 339.
[101] *OGT*: 162; *GS* I: 339.
[102] *OGT*: 164; *GS* I: 341. This definition is given by Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik Und Mythologie Der Alten Völker, Besonders Der Griechen* (Leipzig, 1819), p. 118; cited in *OGT*: 164; *GS* I: 341.

baroque and transcendence: the baroque excludes 'transcendence by *incorporating it*'.[103]

Benjamin cites Joseph von Görres in order to introduce one of the first forms of understanding allegory which distinguishes allegory from symbol without reducing it to the conventional, incomplete or imperfect mark: 'the one [symbol] is a sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated and which steadfastly remains itself, while recognizing the other [allegory] as successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic image which has acquired the very fluidity of time'.[104] In this secular comparison between symbol and allegory, the former presents a fixed, finished or complete totality, while allegory captures movement and progression, change and historical transformation. The former presents the eternal instant, the latter the passing of time. They stand in relation to each other (continues Görres) 'as does the silent, great and mighty natural world of mountains and plants to the living progression of human history'.[105] Symbol and allegory are thus marked by two different forms of presenting or articulating time. While the former idealises the 'face of nature' 'in light of redemption', in allegory 'the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified, primordial landscape'. Here, Benjamin emphasises the profane concept of history which is brought about by 'allegorical seeing' (*allegorische Betrachtung*). This presents history as the Passion of the world, although focusing on the 'stations of its decline' rather than on the ultimate goal of salvation.[106]

This reconstruction of the 'allegorical way of seeing' situates allegory and symbol as divergent forms of presenting ideas, rather than merely considering allegory to be expressionless. Here, Benjamin emphasises the mode in which allegory presents change and historical transformation. In this sense, allegory also presents or embodies a totality, yet not the absolute, divine totality that descends into the symbol as much as the totality of history concentrated in the image. However, to make transience visible elicits a medium of presentation that is not the complete or whole unity. It is instead the incomplete fragment or the ruin (the *torso*) from which the 'false appearance of totality

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[103] Weber uses this expression to describe the baroque attitude towards the sovereign: *Benjamin's - abilities*: 187.
[104] *OGT*: 165; *GS* I: 342.
[105] *OGT*: 165; *GS* I: 342.
[106] *OGT*: 166; *GS* I: 343.

is extinguished' which best serves the presentation of the idea of history.[107] Critical to both the ruin and the fragment is that they concentrate the totality of history, yet not as the 'false appearance' of a finished unity but as the process of change and continuous transformation.

It is because of the ambiguity of the allegorical way of seeing, which oscillates between the dissolution of false totalities and the concentration of the totality of history, that allegory was 'mistrusted' by different theories of signification. Benjamin refers to the rejection of allegory in the neo-Kantian philosophies of Hermann Cohen and Carl Horst. Cohen regards the richness of meaning in allegory as an 'extravagance' which opposes and exceeds the 'law of economy' that bounds together nature and mechanics, and claims that the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning attributed to allegory precludes the 'clarity and unity of meaning' pursued by philosophy.[108] Horst elaborates on this comparison by regarding allegory as 'intrusion' or, even, as the 'violent crossing' or assault on the borders of meaning: 'a harsh disturbance of the peace and a disruption of law and order of the arts'.[109] In response Benjamin explains that the synthesis produced by allegory is 'not so much [a synthesis] in the sense of *peace* as a *tregua dei* between the conflicting opinions', thereby opening up the state of peace to further conflict.[110] It is the opposition between two forms of 'synthesis' what guides Benjamin's historical digression on allegory and the resulting characterisation of allegorical seeing. The synthesis produced by allegory constructs a temporary, unfixed meaning, in opposition to the eternal synthesis pursued by the symbol, whether in its Classic, neo-Classic, Romantic or Neo-Kantian variations. For this reason, allegorical synthesis resembles a *truce* or *tregua dei*, the temporary suspension of conflict, rather than the aspiration to perpetual peace or *pax dei*.

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[107] *OGT*: 176; *GS* I: 352.

[108] Hermann Cohen, *Aesthetik Des Reinen Gefühls. System Der Philosophie, 3* (Berlin, 1912), p. 305; cited in *OGT*: 176; *GS* I: 353.

[109] Carl Horst, *Barockprobleme* (Munich, 1912), pp. 39–40; cited in *OGT*: 176; *GS* I: 353.

[110] *OGT*: 177; *GS* I: 353. Benjamin refers here to two legal forms used in to control feuds and private warfare in the first half of the 11th century. *Tregua Dei* consisted of a temporary and voluntary suspension of war at specific times and holy days, a *truce*. *Pax Dei* refers to perpetual peace or the eternal suspension of conflict promoted by the Christian Church as an 'instituted Peace'. By means of the *Pax Dei* movement the Church 'superseded the King as a guardian of law and order': Bruno Aguilera Barchet, *A History of Western Public Law: Between Nation and State* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), p. 165 (fn. 25); A. Vauchez, R. B Dobson, and Michael Lapidge, *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, Edited by Vauchez, B. Dobson and M. Lapidge; translation by Adrian Walford, (Cambridge: James Clarke, James Clarke & Co, 2000).

The political notions that Benjamin introduces serve to understand allegorical synthesis in terms of the continuous tension between conflict and peace, or the dynamics of resistance and counter-resistance. This continuous tension enables the conditions for attaining temporary peace upon which conflict always begins anew. In the same way, allegorical synthesis attains an unfixed meaning which is always open to change. It is the lack of eschatology, the abolition of the 'hereafter', which determines allegory as a device of signification in continuous movement. If Benjamin named the symbol as the 'usurper' which 'came to power' in the chaos that followed the 'wake of romanticism',[111] allegory is the truly *intriguer* which catalyses the struggle for perpetual yet unattainable peace. Allegory embodies the violence of critique, continuously dissolving and establishing new rigidities, thereby deferring the possibility of attaining perpetual meaning. As Benjamin writes, in the *Trauerspiel* 'history wanders onto the stage' though only through the 'historical activity' catalysed by 'the corrupt energy of the schemers'.[112] Thus, allegory concentrates only the 'multiplicity of historical contingent forms' (as Max Pensky rightly suggests), but it also opens history to its own contingency: allegorically seen, the present is open to multiple outcomes rather than to a sum of moments moving towards perpetual peace.[113]

The second part of *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play* suggests a turn from *allegory* to *allegorical seeing*, which makes explicit that images can be seen from the perspective of either 'symbolic gaze' or 'allegorical seeing'. This responds to what Benjamin calls the antinomies of allegory, specifically, the antinomy of allegory being continuously informed by the extremes of the elevated and the profane, eternity and transience, wholeness and fragmentariness.[114] Allegory faces the double risk of being reduced to one of its essential features. Allegory might be understood as exclusively related to the elevated and be consequently transformed into the symbol. Yet it might also be equated (as neo-Classic, Romantic and neo-Kantian aesthetics did) with the ruin and the store of images which 'signify death and damnation', thereby being reduced to

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[111] *OGT*: 159; *GS* I: 332.

[112] *OGT*: 92, 88; *GS* I: 271, 267. As Weber notes, 'the exemplary figures of subjectivity in the baroque are the allegorists and the plotter. The plotter, or the intriguer, like the allegorist, is the ''master of meanings''' (*OGT*: 210; *GS* I: 384.); Weber, 'Genealogy of Modernity. History, Myth, and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*', *Benjamin's -abilities*: 162.

[113] Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 92.

[114] *OGT*: 174-6; *GS* I: 350-1.

the image of the 'heap of ruins'.[115] In identifying allegory with ruins or fragments the researcher focus exclusively on that which is transient and ephemeral, falling into the 'frenzy of destruction' and setting limits upon 'allegorical contemplation' which dominate over its 'ideal quality'.[116] Here, Benjamin attempts to relate the concrete, ephemeral character of the reception of the work to the lasting character of the absolute, even though the absolute is transformed into the totality of history concentrated in the image of the ruin, 'the supposed infinity of a world without hope'.[117] This double insight is precisely what allegorical seeing brings to the fore: allegorically seen, ruins reveal the totality of the history in the passing of time rather than pure transience.[118]

From this perspective, Benjamin discerns two different forms of criticism, one respectively based on allegorical seeing in opposition to another based on the Romantic 'gaze'. While the Romantic 'symbolic gaze' awakens the dead fragment into a living work, allegorical seeing seeks for the historical process accumulated in the 'dead' object, the transient history sedimented in the ruin. *Critique* is presented, therefore, in terms of the mortification of the work which destroys the 'false appearance [*Schein*] of totality' of the object, offering an entry point into the totality (however incomplete) of history. It provides neither a final synthesis nor a system, but a point of reference for systematic orientation in the transformation of history. Reading the passing of time as

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[115] *OGT*: 232; *GS* I: 405.

[116] *OGT*: 232; *GS* I: 405.

[117] It is worth quoting at length Benjamin's conclusion on those one-sided readings of the antinomical nature of allegory (here, the allegory of resurrection): this kind of reading 'solves the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed. Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope'. *OGT*: 232; *GS* I: 405.

[118] On this point, Ferber offers an interpretation of allegory which follows one side of the antinomy. Ferber writes: 'One of the most important features of allegorical form, for Benjamin, is its unique structure of meaning, unstable and fluctuating, in a constant state of deferral —the complete opposite of self-sufficient meaning. Such unsteadiness similarly marks the allegorist's essentially melancholic state of mind, as he constantly searches for a way to stabilize meaning and control its turbulent, inconstant nature'... 'Instead of providing an integral relationship between signifier and signified, it treats meaning as arbitrary and chaotic. In other words, it resists meaning rather than constructs it.' Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*: 86. The problem with this reading is that even if allegory is unstable Benjamin offers the conditions under which an allegorical synthesis occur, one which attains signification even if only in a temporary way. The reading pursued in this thesis is closer, therefore, to Friedlander's and T. J. Clark's arguments against the 'fetishization of incompletion' as Benjamin's 'method'. Friedlander argues against this problem in regard to Benjamin's broader notion of 'dialectical image' while Clark argues specifically on 'montage' and the *Trauerspiel*. See: T. J. Clark, 'Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?', *Boundary 2*, 30.1 (2003), 31–49 (p. 42), and Eli Friedlander, 'The Measure of the Contingent: Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Image', *Boundary 2*, 35.3 (2008), 1–26 (p. 5: note 5). Burkhardt Lindner argues that in showing incompletion allegory however also accumulates different meaning positions, for which rather than fluctuation there is a process of sedimentation (which cannot be merely translated to the context of the avant-gardes as some interpreters do): Burkhardt Lindner, 'Allegorie' in Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamins Begriffe* I, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), pp. 52-53.

constitutive of allegory prepares the work for a 'rebirth' in which the external appearance of the object, 'its ephemeral beauty', is 'stripped of' and the fragment is *negatively* transformed from 'historical content' into 'truth content'.[119] *Negatively,* insofar as allegory relates the work to its own history by showing its incompletion in the present.[120]

3.2 The Weight of Tradition

Allegory produces 'the irregular rhythm of the constant pause' that informs the *Trauerspiel*, its 'sudden change of direction, and consolidation into new rigidity'.[121] Once again, *irregular rhythm* appears as hallmark in Benjamin's book on the baroque. Yet this time it serves to reveal the way in which allegory attains meaning through the process of dissolving and creating new rigidities, or suspending and configuring new meanings. Having explained the relationship between Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* and the method of *digression* for the recognition of the *origin* of phenomena in the first three sections of this chapter, the analysis of allegory in the previous section serves to show the affinity between the standpoint of *origin* and *allegorical seeing*. The digression pursued by Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* is an allegorical practice of *seeing* or reading history. Both *origin* and *allegorical seeing* coincide in the transforming *synthesis* they produce out of the dissolution or suspension of given concepts or images that reify history, thereby opening history to new configurations.[122]

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[119] *OGT*: 182; *GS* I: 358.

[120] In her presentation of the mortification of the work of art Ilit Ferber affirms that *loss* is a 'condition of possibility for a work to become legible'. This principle could be applied not only to the specific sense of criticism as the mortification of the work of art, but also to the more general notion of immanent critique that operates by means of a historical immersion searching for the extreme, whose force or resonance has been partially lost or *forgotten*. Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, p. 26. The *destruction of the image's false appearance of totality*, the *loss* and *mortification* of the work avert the 'reconciliation' which is elicited to attain the 'totality' of the symbol: Burkhardt Lindner, 'Allegorie', p. 68. This must be read in the context of the *distortion of distortion* (I. Wohlfahrt) or the *interruption of interruption* discussed previously in Chapter I.

[121] *OGT*: 197; *GS* I: 373.

[122] This is partially suggested in Buci-Glucksmann's title 'Baroque: Allegory *as* Origin' (*Baroque Reason*, p. 63. My emphasis). It would be more precise to say then that Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* sees history allegorically through the concept of *origin*. If allegory is *the formal principle in modern aesthetics* (Burkhardt Lindner, 'Allegorie', pp. 52-53), *origin* is its theoretical counterpart in the construction of a critical historiography.

Although this process has a positive moment in the creation of significance and in the consolidation of 'new rigidities' from which change starts anew, the emphasis is given to the momentary suspension or destruction of inherited concepts or images that reduced the complexity of phenomena (i.e. the divergent conceptualisations of the baroque allegory in aesthetic theories). This emphasis then relates the standpoints of origin and allegorical seeing to the destructive character of experience which clears the space for new meanings, images and actions to emerge. However, Benjamin focuses on the process of destruction that inaugurates new possibilities rather than in advancing the possible outcomes of this process, which are yet to be discovered, created or experienced. Such outcomes might be read as borderline cases which cannot be anticipated without running the risk of subordinating them to inoperative conceptual schemes, therefore reducing their force.

Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* thus directs the task of philosophy and critique towards the past in order to recover alternative presents and futures which became lost, finally producing a substantive experience of history in the recognition of those alternative futurities that might be actualised in the present. The standpoints of origin and allegorical seeing destroy the false appearance of the totality of concepts and images, thus revealing them incomplete. Illuminating the total history in which they are embedded, immanent critique opens them to new meanings. The image of history as conflict is, as I have argued, the contribution of *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* to Benjamin's doctrinal philosophy —intimated yet undeveloped in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' and the essays on language and translation. Three remarks are necessary to concentrate this trajectory. 'On the Program...' regards philosophy as having the task of achieving its doctrinal form as philosophy of history. The essays on language and translation pursue this philosophy of history as an investigation into the historical transformation of language, an inquiry into profane, post-lapsarian language which points out to the transformation of language and obliquely illuminates the moments of rupture and breaks within the latter. The book on the baroque illustrate such brakes and deviations, presenting in its 'Prologue' *immanent critique* and *digression* as the methodological tools that provide their most significative account. By means of digression immanent critique patterns the phenomena's emergence and their *origin*: their process of emergence, disappearance and reappearance in divergent cycles of memory and oblivion.

Critical to both immanent critique and allegorical seeing is thus the focus on the double insight of continuity and forgetting that marks historical transmissibility, which makes accessible the double meaning of tradition as transmission or handing down and betrayal or surrendering. The objects that tradition delivers or passes on are transformed or shaped in the same process. Tradition thus negotiates the limits of the contents it transmits in cycles of memory and oblivion. Patterning this irregular rhythm is the task of Benjamin's *Urprungsphilosophie*. As *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* argues*,* ideas are presented only by means of the history of concepts that have served to characterise phenomena, or what Benjamin refers to as the *struggle for the presentation of ideas* in concepts (organising and redeeming phenomena). In this context, Benjamin writes that concepts are 'endowed' with the objectivity of history.[123] To present the idea of an specific phenomenon means to recover the historical struggle for its conceptualisation. It is from this perspective that Benjamin retrospectively refers to the objectivity with which history and tradition endow phenomena as the phenomena's *historical testimony* or the *weight of tradition*. In consonance with the book on the baroque, Benjamin notes in the 1936 version of the essay on technical reproducibility:

> *The authenticity* [*Echtheit*] *of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin* [*Ursprung*] *on, ranging from its physical duration to its historical testimony* [*geschichtliche Zeugenschaft*]. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. *And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition*. What withers is the aura of the artwork. The technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. *Mass existence actualizes* [*actualisiert*] *what is reproduced.*[124]

This passage echoes the definition of the authentic in the 'Prologue': the 'authentic [Das Echte] -the hallmark of origin [*Ursprungssiegel*] in phenomena- is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition [*Wiederkennen*]'.[125] The critical difference between the two presentations of the objectivity with which history endows phenomena consists of the standpoint from which the book on the baroque and the Artwork essay look at this process. Both agree

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[123] *OGT*: 47; *GS* I: 217.
[124] 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility', *SW* 3: 103; my emphasis. In this thesis I mainly follow what is now known as the third version of the essay on reproducibility according to the publishers of the new critical edition of the complete works of Walter Benjamin (*Werke und Nachlass. Kritische Gesaumtausgabe, Band 16*), previously known as second version both in the German edition of *Gesammelte Schriften* and the English collection of *Selected Writings.*
[125] *OGT*: 46; *GS* I: 227.

on the transmissibility of tradition being the medium through which phenomena are endowed with objectivity or with the historical testimony they carry with them. However, the book on the baroque looks at the internal conflict of the transmissibility of tradition in terms of the dialectics of transmission and betrayal presented in the previous sections while the Artwork explores the consequences of the shattering of the medium of transmissibility in the age of the technical reproducibility of the work of art. The former introduces immanent critique as the method that looks at history from the standpoint of tradition (operating by means of historical immersion in search for the exceptional); the latter raises the question on whether immanent critique is still effective while confronting the technically reproducible work of art which makes visible both the shattering of the *weight of tradition* and the loss of the work's *historical testimony*.

If Benjamin's *Ursprungsphilosophie* proposes digression as historiographic method for patterning the irregular rhythm of the transmissibility of tradition, the Artwork essay reveals the historiographic crisis inaugurated in late capitalism with the emergence of the technically reproducible work of art. This historiographic crisis is ultimately presented as the crisis of experience or the undermining of the conditions under which the substantive experience of history is attained. The second part of this dissertation focuses on the crisis of experience which emerges out of the shattering of tradition, tracing the different strategies that Benjamin developed in order to explain the possibility of grounding substantive experience in this new context.[126] The following chapters examine divergent strategies to ground experience in light of the shattering of tradition in order to examine the possibilities for transforming the ephemeral, lived moment (*Erlebnis*) into substantive, historical experience (*Erfahrung*). I argue that in facing the crisis of tradition as historiographic crisis Benjamin grounds experience in memory, moving then from the perspective that looks at history from the standpoint of tradition to another perspective shaped by the work of individual and collective

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[126] Before advancing some elements to open up this discussion, it is critical to emphasise that the lines from the Artwork essay should not be read as suggesting that prior to the crisis of tradition inaugurated by capitalism and technical reproducibility, the transmissibility of tradition was secured. This chapter has stressed that the process of transmissibility consists in the struggle of different chains of transmission in which the violence of critique becomes apparent in the subordination of the exceptional to inherited conceptual schemes without a further revision of that same conceptual scheme. This process produces moments of oblivion or forgetting for which a philosophical history is indeed needed in order to ground substantive experience. In terms of the 'Prologue', even if the rhythm of *origin* 'swallows' the 'material of the process of emergence', it does not collapse it into a single line of development nor into a unified conceptual scheme: *OGT*: 45; *GS* I: 226.

memory. In light of the crisis of tradition, memory becomes the ground for a new historiography, one which recasts the allegorical way of seeing in the principle or law of montage that Benjamin appropriates from avant-garde artistic practices (which, in turn, radicalise the constructive character of early photography and cinema). In the light of the crisis of tradition, the allegorical undoing of reduced inherited conceptualisations of specific phenomena is recast in the suspension of the image's appearance of totality by means of montage.

Second Part

Experience in the Light of the Crisis of Tradition

Chapter III

Experience and Memory: Epic Narration and Montage

The second part of this dissertation examines the notion of experience formulated by Walter Benjamin in his writings from the mid 1920's onwards, specifically, in those concerned with the changes in the production and circulation of the work of art associated with the emergence of technical reproducibility. This discussion is disclosed in two main parts, dedicated to the realm of experience in epic literature on the one hand, and epic theatre, photography and film on the other. These different realms of artistic production have, according to Benjamin, a common ground since they concentrate the tensions of the transformation of the structure of experience which results from what Benjamin calls the 'shattering of tradition' and the crisis of collective transmissibility brought about by modernity, ultimately radicalised in late capitalism.[1]

In these two chapters I argue that what characterises Benjamin's account of epic narration and theatre, film and photography, is their potential to secure an alternative concept of experience. This notion of experience neither attempts to recover the conditions for the tradition that is shattered nor pursues the annihilation of any further remnant of tradition — which leads to the ecstatic affirmation of reduced forms of sensibility (*Erlebnis*) and the further impossibility of grounding substantive experience (*Erfahrung*). Rather, in the light of the shattering of tradition Benjamin argues that an alternative ground for experience might be found in the work of memory. Looking for an alternative notion of experience in the absence of tradition this reading eludes what John McCole and others have called Benjamin's antinomic conception of tradition.

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[1] 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', *SW* 3: 104; *WuN*: 100.

McCole refers to Benjamin's *antinomies of tradition* as the opposition between two different tendencies: one that nostalgically mourns the lost tradition and aims at its recovery and *conservation*, and other that aims to annihilate or *liquidate* what ultimately becomes an 'oppressive tradition as such'.[2] McCole's formulation serves to distinguish two different sides of the notion of experience respectively marked by the mourning of an irretrievable past and the progressivistic conception of technology. Reading the notion of experience from one of its two antinomic components leads to one-sided, *conservativist* or *liquidationist* interpretations of Benjamin. Although some interpreters challenge McCole's presentation they ultimately affirm the existence of this antinomy in order to show how it can be overcome. Uwe Steiner, for example, regards the positions of 'The Storyteller' and the Artwork essays as 'obviously' 'so incompatible' that they 'serve to confirm the perception of Benjamin's Janus-faced nature', one face looking backwards at the impossible recovery of tradition and other directed forwards to the affirmation of technological change. Indeed, he considers each text as the extreme poles of Benjamin's thought.[3] Although Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings affirm that reading the 'The Storyteller' from the 'impression of Benjamin as a nostalgic for the way things used to be' and attributing an 'unwarranted optimism' to the Artwork essay neglects Benjamin's 'uncanny ability to turn almost any assignment to his own end', they finally regard the Leskov essay as a 'rather nostalgic assumption of a living transmission informing a precapitalist artisanal community' and, therefore, of the structure of experience it passes through in 'counsel' and 'stories'.[4]

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[2] John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3, 18, 21–30. An alternative formulation of this antinomic thinking is offered by Irving Wohlfarth's characterisation of Benjamin's thinking through an 'ontology of extremes'. See: Wohlfarth, 'The Measure of the Possible, The Weight of the Real and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin's Actuality Today', in (ed.) Lauda Marcus and Lynda Nead *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), pp. 13-39 (p. 16). Also: Wohlfarth, 'No-Man's Land: On Walter Benjamin's ''Destructive Character'', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, *Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000), pp. 155-82.

[3] Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to His Work and Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 119.

[4] Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 531, 643. An exemplary case is recent scholarship that assumes the antinomic distinction is the work of Miriam Bratu Hansen, who explicitly uses McCole's terminology to introduce her argument as an attempt to 'question the liquidationist tenor' of the Artwork essay and its reception. She argues that in showing this tenor she may ultimately expose the 'liquidationist agenda' and the 'culturally conservative strand' which the Artwork essay conceals. Although she does not present her own argument in terms of the *conservation* of tradition, Hansen nevertheless formulates a critique of the progressivistic elements in the essay by means of a defence of the concept of *aura* which is the hallmark of tradition in the essay on reproducibility. In her argument, Hansen ultimately recasts the opposition between aura and the Brechtian elements of Benjamin's film theory to restrict the latter in favour of the former. I will return to this argument in the next chapter: Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p. 80–83, 103,

In contrast to these readings, I will argue that by means of divergent concepts of memory Benjamin is able to confront the crisis of tradition by offering an alternative ground for experience; one that neither aims to recover the lost tradition nor to affirm its further liquidation. I will focus, specifically, on the mnemonic character of the principle of montage which governs the relation between narration and theatre, photography and film. This relation is presented in different forms throughout this period, having one of its clearest formulations in the 'Program for Literary Criticism' (1929-1930). There, Benjamin claims that the relation between literary and film criticism should be reversed. If film criticism normally imitates literary criticism produced according to the model of the novel, in the age of technical reproducibility literary criticism *should learn* from film criticism.[5] Although the new 'Program' does not develop the relationship between film and literature in detail, it does establish the relationship between film and literary criticism in terms of the notion of 'materialist critique': a form of critique composed of 'the critical gloss and the cite', 'consisting entirely of quotations'.[6] What determines the character of materialist critique as a construction made up of fragments is the fragmentary character of its objects of critique: epic literature and drama, photography and film.

Instead of looking at historical experience from the standpoint of tradition, materialist critique looks at it from the standpoint of fragmentary memory. Benjamin generalises this method in the *Konvolut N* of the *Arcades Project,* where he refers to his investigation as developing 'the art of citation without quotation', for which his own philosophical practice is then 'intimately related to that of montage' (N1, 10). This *art* is then referred both as the method and principle of his historical materialism, when he first writes: 'Method of this project: literary montage' (N1a, 8). Secondly: for the 'realisation of the Marxist method' the 'principle of montage' has to be carried over (N2, 6).[7] This passage refers then to historical materialism's 'construction of history as such'. Later, in the 'Thesis on the Concept of History' Benjamin refers again to 'construction' in thesis XIV and to the 'principle of construction' of materialist

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116–7. A contemporary *liquidationist* reading of Benjamin may be found in the comparison that Maria Gough draws between Benjamin and Tretiakov in 'Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde', *October* (2002), 53–83 (pp. 55, 77).
[5] 'Program for Literary Criticism', *SW* 2:294.
[6] *SW* 2:291.
[7] *Arcades Project*: 458, 460, 461. On these passages see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing,* (Cambridge, MA. and London: MIT Press, 1999), 71-77.

historiography in XVII.[8] What these notions of construction have in common is the task of *presenting* or *configuring* history by means of the montage of fragments. The question is to what extent these forms of presentation offer conditions for attaining historical experience in the absence of tradition. We will answer this question by means of a discussion on the historiographic form of montage and the concept of experience associated with it in literary and visual montage.

The fragmentary character of the principle of montage is presented from three different perspectives regarding epic narration, epic drama, and photography and film. First, from the standpoint of literature, the essays on Franz Hessel (1927-9) and Alfred Döblin (1930) refer to their epic character of their work as the result of the principle of montage.[9] In relation to Brecht's epic theatre, the 'The Author as Producer' (1934) presents its structure by sketching a comparison between epic drama and the photographic montages of John Heartfield,[10] whilst the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1931 and 1939) explore Brecht's theatre from the standpoint of its 'episodic value' and its affinity with the film strip.[11] From the standpoint of photography and film, the 'Small History of Photography' (1931) explains the principle of *construction* or the *constructive* character of photography in terms of the Brechtian recognition (*Erkentnnis*) which is attained by *building up* something artificial, from fragments, in order to contest the reified image of reality as totality.[12] In a further radicalisation of the principle of construction, the third version of the essay on technical reproducibility (1935) regards the principle of montage as the *law* (*Gesetz*) that organises film and the emerging work of art.[13]

What epic narration and theatre, photography and film all share is the structure of montage as principle of construction of literary, dramatic, photographic and cinematographic *presentation* (*Darstellung*).[14] This principle is further developed in terms of its inner, fragmentary structure, but also in terms of its capacity to present

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[8] 'Theses On the Concept of History', *Illuminations*: 261, 262.

[9] 'Review of Hessel's *Heimliches Berlin*', *SW* 2:70; 'The Crisis of the Novel', *SW* 2:301.

[10] 'The Author as Producer', in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Ana Bostock (London: Verso, 2003), p. 94–6.

[11] 'What is Epic Theatre?' (First and Second Versions) *Understanding Brecht,* pp. 6, 16.

[12] 'Small History of Photography', in Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, ed. & trans. by Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), pp. 91–92. See also Leslie's comments on this fragment in her introduction to this volume: p. 24-9.

[13] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

[14] Benjamin continuously refers to *Darstellung* in the essays on narration, photography and the Artwork. See respectively: *SW* 2:299; *GS* III:230; *On Photography*: 99; and *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

modern experience through its own fragmentariness. The fragmentariness of the principle of montage corresponds to the fragmentariness of experience in late capitalism. This is made clear in the multiple comparisons of the work of art with the conveyor belt or the assembly line that organises the life of workers and city-dwellers. In contrast to the image of the traditional stage actor, for instance, the essay on reproducibility regards the image of the film actor not as a 'unity' or 'integral whole', but as an assemblage of multiple performances that responds to the needs of the machine, which cuts down the actor's interpretation into 'mountable episodes' (*montierbarer Episoden*).[15] As Benjamin affirms in the second essay on Baudelaire (1939), the sensibility of the audience, on the other hand, is also marked by the rhythm of film just as modern perception is 'conditioned' by the rhythm of the 'conveyor belt'.[16]

Considered an inherent element of the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility, montage recasts the fragmentary character of modern sensibility. In this context, the principle or law of montage organising the work of art *presents* the characteristics of what Benjamin calls *shock-based perception* (*chockförmige Wahrnehumung*), a form of sensibility formed according to the technologies of reproduction in urban life.[17] Both montage and modern sensibility are fragmentary configurations formed according to the necessities of the new apparatus. In these configurations, however, Benjamin reads multiple possibilities, attributing to this new sensibility the opportunity to either recede into a form of reduced perception, namely, the *lived moment* (*Erlebnis*), or to ground substantive *experience* (*Erfahrung*) in spite of the shattering of tradition. This distinction points out divergent forms of sensibility. The former consists in a more immediate response to the present, one that manages the shocks produced by urban life through a protective mechanism which is both amnesic and —as Susan Buck-Morss has argued— *an*aesthetic.[18] The latter is a form of sensibility which is fully attained in an *equilibrium* or *interplay* with technology and its principle of montage. Experience (*Erfahrung*) consists then in the actualisation of the potentiality of technology in which technology and its products (i.e. photographic and

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[15] *SW* 3:110, 112-3; *WuN* 16:119.
[16] 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Michael Jennings, trans. by Eiland, Howard and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 178. Hereafter the 1939 essay on Baudelaire will be cited as *OSMB*
[17] *OSMB*: 191.
[18] Buck Morss, Susan, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October*, 62 (Autumn 1992), 3–41.

cinematographic presentations) are addressed as fragmentary constructions which attain no completion regardless of the appearance of totality they might achieve. This equilibrium or interplay would give form to a new *physis* or 'second nature' marked by the liberation of both technology and human nature from its subordination to capitalism.

In opposition to both the shattering of tradition and the amnesic relation of the lived moment to the present, it will be argued that memory becomes the basis for substantive experience. What I want to emphasise here is the specific relevance these concepts have in Benjamin's characterisation of the potentiality of the new technologies in three moments that frame the discussion on the work of art. First, in 'To the Planetarium', the final section of *One Way Street* (published in 1928)*,* Benjamin introduces what might be considered his most ecstatic characterisation of the constructive and destructive potential embedded in the new technologies. If Benjamin entertains the possibility of cosmic experience being attainable by means of modern technology, in a form of 'ecstatic trance' or 'experience' that produces knowledge of what is 'nearest' and 'remotest to us' (but 'never of one without the other'), he also recognises the effects that technological warfare produces in its attempt to master such 'cosmic powers'. If, as the first astronomers intended, cosmic trance put humanity in connection with the universe, it is war what more radically altered the modern landscape with the 'multitudes, gases... electric forces, high frequency currents' deployed on the battlefield in the spirit of technology. Thus, although technology bears the potential for the emergence of a new *physis* that could have enlarged human nature on both the macro and microcosmical level, so that it was no longer tied to that 'tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call Nature', the nights of war and annihilation imbued humanity with feelings that 'resembled the bliss of the epileptic', unleashing revolts that attempted 'to bring the new body under its control'. Against the background of the distorted potentiality of technology to attains cosmic experience, Benjamin identifies the 'power of the proletariat' with the 'measure of the convalescence' of the new, shaken body.[19] Here, Benjamin presents the potentiality of technology in terms of its distortion by the logic of capitalism and fascism. In this context the revolutionary capacity of humanity consists in its capacity to actualise the originary potential of the new technologies. Thus, substantive experience is attained through the double process of interrupting the distorted relation between humanity and technology in capitalism and

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[19] *One-Way Street*, *SW* 1: 486-7.

producing an equilibrium between them. Given the subordination of technology to the logic of capitalism, the possibility of securing substantive experience is thus mediated by the 'revolt' which interrupts the logic of capital. This revolt is nonetheless unable to recover the potentiality with which modern technology once emerged. Once this potentiality is distorted or suspended, its actualisation cannot be but fragmentary and momentary.

Technically reproducible art inaugurates new forms of sensibility that remain suspended or distorted in the capitalist expression of modernity. Their reactivation by means of the interruption of such distortion is the task of Benjamin's theory of experience and the politicization of art. In his essay on technical reproducibility, Benjamin maintains the double process of distortion of the new realm of experience and the further interruption of this distortion, although this time he contrasts what he first called cosmic experience with the lived moment: 'Humanity, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point in which it can live through [*erleben*] its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticization of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art*'.[20] As it will be explained in the following sections, the politicization of art is understood within the logic of a revolutionary 'innervation', one which accelerates the 'adaptation' to technology yet only by interrupting the *lived moment* (*Erlebnis*) as the dominant form of sensibility in capitalist modernity. In this process of interruption, new opportunities emerge for humanity to expand its *space for play* or *action*, creating a space in which humanity must train itself to learn how to inhabit it. This new space is open to multiple, unknown outcomes and futures, both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary.

A further development of the notion of experience and its opposition to the lived moment can be found in Benjamin's 1939 essay on Baudelaire. This work associates experience to the 'structure of memory'. Experience is regarded to be the product less of 'facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than that of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*]', thereby distinguishing between totalizing and fragmentary memory.[21] Experience is thus grounded in a long-term form of sensibility which opposes both the amnesic immediacy of the lived

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[20] *SW* 3:122; *WuN* 16:128. Translation amended.
[21] *OSMB*: 172.

moment and the robust notion of memory, being thus fragmentary and unstable. In the light of the crisis of tradition, unconscious, short-lived memory or *reminiscence* (*Gedächtnis*) becomes critical in order to secure experience. Although the relation between experience and memory is already anticipated in the essays on epic narration, dedicated to Hessel and Döblin (1927-30), as well as in the discussion of epic storytelling and narration in 'Experience and Poverty' (1933) and 'The Storyteller' (1936), the essay on Baudelaire confirms this relation by discussing Baudelaire's lyric poetry and his attempt to ground experience on the basis of the lived moment. To some extent, Baudelaire's ultimate recourse to the mnemonic device of *correspondences* to ground experience reveals the insufficiency of the lived moment to secure experience and the limits of Baudelaire's own project.

The following sections explore the interrelated work of the principle of montage and the work of memory in the specific sense of reminiscence or *Gedächtnis*. I will argue that under the crisis of tradition experience is grounded in this specific form of memory, configured through the principle of montage in epic narration. My approach towards the interrelated work of montage and memory begins by exploring the transition from immanent to materialist critique in Benjamin's 'Program for Literary Criticism' as a immanent critique of his own method as Howard Caygill suggests. Against Benjamin's own characterisation of this transition, based on the limits of immanent critique, I suggest that the two forms of critique operate following the same principles yet confronting different contexts, one in which tradition is available for critique and other in which tradition is absent. Then I explore the specific value that epic narration has for his views on literature and argue that it is epic narration which recasts the transmissibility of tradition (that modernity brings into a crisis) in the work of memory by means of the principle of montage. Distinguishing different formulations of memory (*memory*, *remembrance* and *reminisence*) in the essays on Gottfried Keller, Franz Hessel and Alfred Döblin and Nikolai Leskov, I trace the relation between experience and reminiscence in epic writing back to epic storytelling. To some extent, the mnemonic character of epic written narration consists in its capacity to reinstate the epic value of storytelling. I finally turn towards Benjamin's 1939 essay on Baudelaire and his lyric poetry. Although this works does not relate properly to the epic, it indirectly proves the relationship between experience and reminiscence or *Gedächtnis* while it examines the limits of Baudelaire's lyric poetry. Although Baudelaire aims to ground

experience out of the ecstatic affirmation of the lived moment as hallmark of modernity and attempts to do so in lyric poetry, his ultimate recourse to a mnemonic device (such as *correspondences*) proves that substantive experience elicits memory as condition of possibility. Thus, if the conclusion that Benjamin draws is directed towards the value of the lyric poetry of Baudelaire, the structure of his argument indirectly confirms the interrelatedness of experience and memory.

Critical to the characterisation of the lived moment in the essay on Baudelaire is the organisation of modern urban perception by means of the assembly line. The essay then addresses the fragmentariness of modern shock-based perception which the method of montage critically conveys in different regimes of presentation. In the final chapter of this thesis I return to the principle of montage yet from the standpoint of the essays on photography, cinema and epic theatre, which understand montage as the law (*Gesetz*) that organises the technically reproducible work of art.

1. The Crisis of Criticism

Howard Caygill and Uwe Steiner make a lucid case for the relevance that epic written narration has in Benjamin's writings from the late 1920's onwards, specifically, with reference to his understanding of contemporary forms of sensibility and the production of experience. Benjamin's project to *reinstate* the epic as narrative form contests the shattering of tradition and the crisis of collective transmissibility in modernity and late capitalism.[22] To some extent, the value of the originary potential of the epic resides precisely in its collective dimension, as Fredrich Jameson argues in regards to Brecht's own formulation of the epic.[23] For Benjamin, as for Brecht, the epic is concentrated in the ancient art of storytelling and the dynamics produced by the '*fabric*' or '*wave of life*' that maintains the practice of handing down stories from one generation to the next, and which thereby grounds both the collective dimension of experience and the possibility of its transmissibility which exceeds or negotiates the limits of the subject or the

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[22] See: 'Modernism: From Immanent to Strategic Critique', in Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 61–79. and 'The Reinstatement of Epic Narration', in Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*: 126-137.
[23] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 55–73.

individual in favour of commonality.[24] Benjamin's attempt to reinstate the force of the epic is therefore directed towards the recovery of the collective dimension of experience that is lost when the art of storytelling comes to an end. This loss reveals the crisis of tradition and the absence of conditions for the collective transmissibility of experience.

In the 'Program for Literary Criticism', written between 1929-1930 as introduction to the unfinished *Collected Essays on Literature*, Benjamin maintains that literary criticism should learn from film criticism.[25] Although he does not offer a detailed account of the affinities which bring literature and film together onto common ground he problematizes the conditions for literary criticism from the standpoint of the collective dimension of experience. In the new 'Program' Benjamin traces the roots of the crisis of criticism back to the emergence of public and private literary circles, which emerged with the widespread circulation of books and the printing culture of the Enlightenment. While the former aims to attain entertainment and animation the latter 'regards books as books of life, as sources of wisdom', albeit leading to a 'sectarianism' that breaks free from 'ritual complexes'.[26] Book circulation in small circles 'releases the body from traditional collectives' but fails however to 'reinsert' it in new collective configurations. Here, the absence of collective activity is even regarded as the cause of 'symptoms of madness'.[27] To some extent, the crisis of literary criticism is intrinsic to the emergence of criticism itself and the book culture which detached the individual from the collective. This crisis became more evident in light of the opportunities that technical reproducibility opened up for the emergence of new forms of art that could be collectively experienced, yet that were received and experienced with the individualistic model of book form. This tension is at the core of Benjamin's reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz' review of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 *Battleship Potemkin* (published in March 1927 in *Die literarische Welt*).

Premiering first in Moscow on January 18th 1926 and then in Berlin three days later, *Battleship Potemkin* immediately became the object of debate among critics on divergent sides of the political and artistic spectrum. In March 1927, *Die literarische*

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[24] *SW* 3, p. 146; *GS* II, 442.
[25] Along with essays on Keller, Hessel and Döblin, the *Collected Essays on Literature* had included works dedicated to Robert Walser, Karl Krauss, Julien Green, Marcel Proust and André Gide, and the essays 'Novelist and Storyteller', 'Surrealism', 'The Task of the Critic' and 'The Task of Translator'. The contract with the titles of the collection is reproduced in Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography* (Verso, 1996), p. 183.
[26] *SW* 2: 290.
[27] *SW* 2: 290.

Welt grouped together a series of responses to the film, including pieces by Schmitz and Benjamin. In his review, Schmitz accused *Potemkin* of lacking any artistic value due to its immersion in the *collective* rather than in the *individual* —'the differentiated humanity from which art grows'.[28] By contrast, Benjamin's response situates the film within the debates on the new realm of experience inaugurated by cinematographic technique and its capacity to open a '*new realm of consciousness*' that resists to any form of individualization which may ultimately deem the collective as '*unfree*'.[29] Benjamin's reply brings to the fore his argument on the potentiality new technologies have for the production of new forms of experience which nonetheless remain constrained if addressed from categories corresponding to other forms of sensibility. What the review reveals is precisely the model of film criticism that imitates subject-centred positions such as those assumed by literary critique in relation to the novel. It is by virtue of the collective dimension embedded in new technologies that literary criticism must undertake new directions and abandon those positions that detach the individual from the collective. Otherwise: criticism undermines the very potentiality of cinema. Cinematographic technique is explained in terms of tension between the destructive and creative possibilities which revolve around the formation of *political tendencies (politische Tendenzen)*:

> But just as the deeper rock strata emerge only where the rock is fissured, the deep formation of ''political tendency'' likewise reveals itself only in the fracture points of artistic development; it is there that the different political tendencies may be said to come to the surface. In every new technical revolution the political tendency is transformed, as if by its own volition, from a concealed element of art into a manifest one.[30]

The geological image in this passage presents cinema as the *fissure* that opens new futurities in the present, concentrated —or liberated— within the 'spaces of the immediate environment' of the 'prison-world'. It is this world that cinema 'exploded with the dynamite of its fractions of a second'.[31] Extending space and time by means of a process of irruption, just as geological events transform the given landscape, film offers humanity the opportunity to undertake 'extended journeys' in the 'widely

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[28] Oscar A. H. Schmitz, 'Potemkin and Tendentious Art', Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 356.
[29] *SW* 2: 17-18.
[30] *SW* 2: 17.
[31] *SW* 2: 17.

scattered ruins' of this prison-world.[32] Film, thus, contests the possibility of grounding critique in the subject position associated with the novel but also reveals a new realm of experience that emerges with the technologies of reproduction and the disruption they cause into sensibility on a broader scale.[33] Although Benjamin brings into question the notions of *consciousness* and *political tendency* elsewhere, his reply to Schmitz points out the new realm of experience to which humanity may have access and which, like a fissure, opens or enlarges the space for collective experience. The collective dimension that may crystallise in new political tendencies is the hallmark of film from which literary criticism should learn. In order to grasp the collective dimension inaugurated by film and the technologies of reproduction Benjamin maintains that a further programme of literary criticism is needed, one in which the concept of immanent critique previously introduced in his book on the baroque must be developed into materialist critique.

1.1 From Immanent to Materialist Critique

The 'Program for Literary Criticism' takes the relationship between literature and film as the basis for the transition into a new materialist concept of literary criticism opposed to immanent critique and different expressions of deductivism.[34] The opening lines of the fragment set out the context of the crisis of criticism. They affirms that 'annihilatory criticism' [*vernichtende Kritik*] has 'degenerated into sheer exhaustion and harmlessness' and thus calls for the return of criticism to the 'level of consciousness' [*Bewußtsein*].[35] To some extent, Benjamin argues that criticism must recover its force. He opposes the notion of materialist critique to 'immanent criticism' which 'improvises the criteria [*Maßstäbe*] it applies', and which 'can lead to satisfying results in individual cases'. The new program is characterised as 'a detour through materialist aesthetics, which would situate books in the context of their age'. Such criticism would lead to a

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[32] *SW* 2: 17.

[33] Steiner calls attention to the following fragment from 1935 in order to support the transition from the epic to film, rather than the relation that is established in the 'Program': 'Film rather than narration' (*GS* 3:1282). It is clear that Benjamin did not abandon his interest in the epic. Indeed, the second version of 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1939) testifies to this by crediting Brecht's theatre as the recovery of originary elements of the epic.

[34] *SW* 2: 294; *GS* VI: 166

[35] *SW* 2: 289. *GS* VI: 164

new, dynamic, 'dialectical aesthetics'.[36] Although Benjamin stages his argument in terms of a critique of immanent critique, the new materialist critic is consistent with the concept of immanent critique formulated in the *Trauerspiel* book both in their method of research and in their opposition to deductivism. Regarding the rejection of the application of external criteria to the work of art, the new 'Program' affirms that 'the starting point of criticism must be the perception that aesthetic categories [*Kategorien*] (criteria) are completely devalued'.[37]

In contrast to both immanent critique and deductivism, Benjamin defines 'materialist critic' in terms of a montage-like construction composed 'of at most two elements: the critical gloss and the cite'. It is a notion of criticism, he claims, that 'should be developed entirely of quotations'.[38] Indeed, this notion of materialist critique can certainly be seen as an 'immanent critique of immanent critique', as Caygill argues.[39] This immanent critique unfolds the earlier notion of immanent critique and its rejection of deductivism in the book on the baroque. Nevertheless, understanding this critique as a transition from immanent to materialist critique overlooks the paradoxical strategy of contrasting the emerging concept of materialist critique with a weak formulation of immanent critique, which in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' indeed had the potential to make the work *absorb its history* in order to *fulfil its idea*.

It is paradoxical too, that against Benjamin's strategy of presenting a weak formulation of immanent critique in order to motivate his new materialist programme, Uwe Steiner regards the former as being marked by a 'metaphysical tendency', one which ultimately embeds the notion of criticism within 'the doctrine of the autonomy of art' and for which the baroque book is still 'caught up in metaphysics'.[40] Steiner's position summarises what has become the dominant reading of the transition from the book on the baroque towards a materialist critique or from Benjamin's first to his second 'cycle of production',[41] in which the former embodies a metaphysical philosophy that is later transformed into a materialist critique of culture. In this opposition, the radicalism of the

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[36] *SW* 2: 294. *GS*, VI: 166.
[37] *SW* 2: 290; *GS* VI: 164.
[38] *SW* 2: 290. *Cf. OGT*: 41-43 for Benjamin's critique of deductivism.
[39] Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 63-66.
[40] Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*: 88, 96.
[41] *CWB*: 322.

latter —'characterized by a political commitment'— is proved against the backdrop of immanent criticism as the bearer of metaphysical, dogmatic residue.[42]

Benjamin's problematic strategy allows for a different interpretation of the transition from immanent to materialist critique. The relation of literary criticism to film criticism offers a tentative solution: '[t]he relation of book criticism to film criticism is the reverse of what it should be. Book criticism should learn from film criticism. Instead, film criticism mainly apes book criticism'.[43] Emphasising the affinities between immanent and materialist critique in terms of their methods (the immersion into the material content) and their objects (glosses, cites and quotations), the transition from immanent to materialist critique can be explained in terms of the material they work through rather than in the opposition staged by Benjamin himself (and the interpretations of Steiner and Caygill). Immanent critique requires a further development precisely because the object of critique undermines the possibility of looking at history from the standpoint of the transmissibility of tradition. The novelty and radicalism of materialist critique consists in recognising the shattering of tradition for which an alternative medium for the development of criticism is needed. In this way, the critical difference between immanent and materialist critique consists of the media through which they operate. Immanent criticism works through the retrospective digression which reconstructs and suspends of the multiple chains of transmission which deliver the object of critique from the past to the present (the multiple conceptualisations of the *Trauerspiel*); materialist critique operates in the light of the shattering of tradition and the unsettling of experience that the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility produces. Unlike the baroque which is confronted through its transmissibility by tradition, technically reproducible works of art are unable to bear the *historical testimony* of their own *origin* (*Ursprung*). As Benjamin writes in the Artwork essay: 'The authenticity [*Die Echtheit*] of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin [*Ursprung*] on, ranging from its physical duration to

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[42] Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*: 110-2. As Steiner himself recognises, the materialist 'critique of the concept of cultural history' is later developed in the Fuchs essay (1934-1937), which resorts more fully to the concept of *origin* in the *Trauerspiel* book and the idea of the 'continued life of artworks'. Standing alongside Steiner is Osborne's claim that Benjamin's materialist aesthetics is marked by a distance from the metaphysics of the theory of ideas in the *Trauerspiel*, i.e. the 'timelessness' of Benjamin's *ideas*, which constrains the historical-philosophical project that the book aims to unfold under the notion of *allegory*: Peter Osborne, 'Small-Scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*: 58.
[43] *SW* 2: 294.

its historical testimony'.[44] While immanent critique operates by immersion in tradition, materialist critique confronts the technically reproducible work that bears no historical testimony. Both notions operate through similar principles: the immersion into the material content of the work and its organisation by means of glosses and cites. In addition, they complement each other in their accounts of different literary forms: if immanent critique offers an account of the problem of transmissibility of tradition, materialist critique confronts the shattering of tradition as the radicalisation of the problem of transmissibility as historiographic crisis.

The relation between immanent and materialist critique is thus twofold: while the book on the baroque characterised the eruption of modernity from the standpoint of different notions of historical time in tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, the essays on literature explore late capitalism from the perspective of those genres that bear the marks of the loss of tradition and memory, most notably the story and the novel. Therefore, while the *Trauerspiel* shows that modern experience is marked by the loss of certainty in any eschatological future, the essays on literature present modern experience as being permeated by the loss of the traces of the past from which it emerges. With no future and past at hand modernity concentrates itself on the problem of the new. This twofold loss is embodied in the emergence of *information* and the almost pure transience of the newspaper, which 'lives' only at 'the moment in which it is new'.[45] From this perspective, the essays on literature and film present the crisis of experience as a historiographic crisis that verges on the risk of reducing the present to the mere cumulus of lived moments. In the light of the shattering of tradition both the work of art and critique must respond to the crisis of experience by other medium than tradition in order

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[44] *SW* 3: 103.

[45] *SW* 3: 148. In the essay on reproducibility, Benjamin entertains the possibility of a productive self-alienation based on mass actualisation which had substituted actualisation by means of tradition: 'By replicating the work many times over it, [technical reproducibility] substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced': *SW* 3:104; *WuN* 16:101. I will discuss the temporalities of the essay in the next chapter. However, it is important to emphasise here that this form of *actualisation* is suspended by the logic of capitalism and fascism, for which only the interruption of such logic can (momentarily) actualise such possibility. In this way, the productive self-alienation based on mass actualisation that Benjamin entertains remains as a counterfactual formulation rather than as a descriptive claim that might lead towards a progressivistic account of history and technology, as some interpreters assume. This is the case of Adorno's first response to Benjamin in their correspondence from 1935 and the discussion on Benjamin's alleged progressivism in regard to the essay on reproducibility which had lead to Benjamin's surrender to the method of montage in the *Arcades Project*. *CWB*: 495-503; 579-585. See also Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*: 192.

to secure substantive experience. In modern epic narration, this crisis is contested with a turn towards memory as basis for experience.

2. Epic Narration

Benjamin's essays on the works of Gottfried Keller, Franz Hessel and Alfred Döblin, written between 1927 and 1930 for the unfinished *Collected Essays on Literature*, develop the affinity between epic narration, memory and the new technologies of reproduction. In these works *montage* is the medium that brings forth the collective dimension of the work of art and the mnemonic character that contests both amnesic *information* and the historiographic crisis of modernity. For Benjamin, Hessel's epic 'is technically close to photomontage'[46] while Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is 'governed' by the 'stylistic principle of montage' to which film 'at its best moments [...] has made us accustomed to'.[47] Benjamin adds that Döblin's novel has 'placed' montage 'at the service of narrative' for the first time. The affinity between epic and film is also confirmed in Benjamin's writings on Brecht's epic drama. In the first version of 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1931) he maintains that '[t]he forms of epic theatre correspond to the new technical forms of cinema and radio [...] the modern level of technology.' In its second version (1939) Benjamin reaffirms that epic theatre 'proceeds by fits and starts, in a manner comparable to images film strips', as 'intervals' that 'destroy illusion' and which the mirror the 'dialectical structure of film'.[48]

Benjamin attributes a mnemonic character to epic narration, one which counteracts the amnestic character of modernity brought about by the shattering of tradition. Although this relation is more fully developed in the two essays on Hessel and the review of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, some elements for the analysis of the epic are first introduced in the 1927 essay dedicated to the publication of Keller's *Complete Works*. In his reading of Keller, Benjamin maintains that the 'epic setting' of his stories provides one of their critical qualities. This observation points to the 'unromantic nature' of his work, which

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[46] 'Review of Hessel's *Heimliches Berlin*', *SW* 2:70.
[47] *SW* 2: 301.
[48] *UB*: 6, 21. 'The formula in which the dialectical structure of film finds expression runs as follows. Discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence. A theory of film would need to take account of both of these facts.' (*SW* 3:95).

indeed anticipates Keller's 'essential contribution of the post-Romantic age in Germany' and confirms his own exceptionality.[49] The epic setting is configured by the interpenetration of 'the narrative and the poetic [*Des Erzählerischen und des Dichtirischen*]', being the centrality of the narrative element in the literary work what Benjamin deems as original.[50] Two descriptions of this feature highlight its contribution to the articulation of the epic setting. Firstly, it is the 'homesickness for his native Switzerland' and its landscape what animates Keller's work and produces in turn the 'echo' of a 'yearning for distant ages', rendering the Swiss Alps into 'a distant image' which, like that of 'Ithaca for Odysseus', 'remain[s] beautiful, remote...'.[51] Secondly, the epic setting is configured by means of *describing* [*Beschreiben*]: in the 'sensuous pleasure' of 'describing' 'the object returns the gaze of the observer' and captures 'the pleasure with which two gazes seek and find each other.'[52] In Keller, the epic is informed by the narrative element that, however, remains caught up in the yearning for the past. This combination of elements transforms the present Swiss landscape into a 'Homeric Switzerland' which nonetheless incorporates 'the most mundane activities of the characters' and the 'rounded, canonical, sensuous reality that they must have had for a Roman'.[53] The 'unsentimental' elements which are distinctive of Keller's epic remain intertwined with the poetic. The subsequent essays on Hessel and Döblin explore the narrative element of the epic in terms of an alternative relation to the past in which the present is freed from yearning and the past transforms the present lived moment into substantive experience. The liberation of the narrative from the poetic is attained by means of the radicalisation of the principle of montage.[54]

Two reviews dedicated to Hessel illustrate the liberation of the narrative element of the epic from the yearning that marks Keller's works. Benjamin explains this in terms of the

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[49] 'Gottfried Keller. In Honour of a Critical Edition of His Works', *SW* 2: 55, 57.

[50] *SW* 2:57. Benjamin's reading of Keller as an exceptional example in the Romantic tradition, one which bears the marks of the 'post-Romantic' generation, confirms Benjamin's interest in that which breaks into inherited artistic realms and runs the risk of remaining unrecognised in its own epoch and even the possibility of not being transmitted to the future. In a similar fashion, Steiner affirms that as Post-Romantic, Keller is the present's prehistory and anticipates the works of Döblin, Kafka and Leskov and the last surviving examples of the storyteller (Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*: 99).

[51] *SW* 2: 55. *GS* II: 289. Translation amended

[52] *SW* 2: 56.

[53] *SW* 2: 55, 57.

[54] Caygill reads this transition in different terms: the late essays explore 'the consequences of the destruction of the experience of the movement of recognition that made up the quality of Keller's work' (*The Colour of Experience*, p. 65-66). In this thesis the later essays are read as a variant of the epic, one in which narration dominates over the poetic and suspends the equilibrium which maintains the 'quality' of Keller's epic setting that is caught up in a nostalgic yearning for the past.

transition from historical distance towards the distance of memory. In his 1927 review of *Heimliches Berlin*, Benjamin affirms that the book 'is technically close to photomontage': 'housewives, artists, fashionable women, businessmen, scholars are all intercut contrastively with the shadowy outlines of Platonic comic masks'.[55] Yet the source of these images is an 'unknown' or 'secret' Berlin, one which appears as 'the stage of an Alexandrian *Singspiel*' and reveals the narrator's own 'mysterious talent for investing the tiny territory described in his story with such a sense of spatial and temporal distance'.[56] The 1929 review of *Spazieren in Berlin* confirms the modern city as the site from which the narrator 'journeys into the past'.[57] Nevertheless, here Berlin is the site of the narrator's childhood rather than the image of a distant epoch for which the narrator years. The construction of historical distance in Hessel's montage-like epic is therefore substituted with the distance created by the work of memory in *Spazieren in Berlin*. Thus, the writer moves from Berlin being the stage of an Alexandrian *Singspiel* to the Berlin of his childhood memories:

> The account of a city given by a native will always have something in common with memoirs; it is no accident that the writer has spent his childhood there. Just as Franz Hessel has spent his childhood in Berlin. And if he now sets out and walks through the city, he has nothing of the excited impressionism with which the travel writer approaches his subject. *Hessel does not describe, he narrates* [*Hessel beschriebt nicht, er erzählt*]. Even more, he *repeats* what he has heard. *Spazieren in Berlin* is an *echo of the stories the city has told him* ever since he was a child —an epic book through and through, a process of memorizing [*memorieren*] while strolling around, a book for which memory [*Erinnerung*] has acted not as the source but as the Muse. It goes along the streets in front of him, and each street is a vertiginous experience. [...] *The city as a mnemonic* [mnemotechnischer] *for the lonely walker: it conjures up more than his childhood and youth, more than his own history*.[58]

This passage from 'The Return of the *Flâneur*' marks a series of transitions in Benjamin's characterisation of the epic. Firstly, the emphasis on the narrative element underlines its liberation from the equilibrium or intertwinement with the poetic in Keller's epic setting. Secondly, Hessel's epic narration moves from history to memory as the grounds for experience. In Hessel's work, epic narration consists in grasping the *echo* that comes from the past in order to transform the events of the present into *vertiginous experience,* rather than in investing the present with the beautiful

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[55] 'Review of Hessel's *Heimliches Berlin*', *SW* 2: 70.
[56] *SW* 2: 70.
[57] 'The Return of the Flâneur' *SW* 2:263.
[58] *SW* 2: 263. My emphasis.

appearance of the past for which the writer yearns. Rather than nostalgically mourning an irretrievable past, narration makes the past citable and grounds substantive experience in memory (*Erinnerung*).[59]

The muses from Magdeburger Strasse illustrate the 'return of the gaze' as the moment in which the objects encountered by the *flâneur* appear as memory, as something other which exceeds the history of the observed physical material.[60] Benjamin thus introduces a critical distinction for his later works: 'The lived instant [*Erlebnis*] wants the unique and the sensation; experience [*Erfahrung*] the eternal return'.[61] Benjamin's detour via the works of Hessel is therefore marked by the transition from description to narration, and from the distance of history to the distance created by the work of memory in narration: the return of the past in narration by means of the work of memory transforms the present lived moment into experience. It suspends the amnestic relation to the present in the lived moment but also contests the reified nostalgic image of the past. In epic narration, the past disrupts not as historical distance or as the object for which the writer yearns, but as memory (*Erinnerung*). Experience emerges on the basis of a long-term form of sensibility in which the ephemeral is related to the past by memory without getting caught up in nostalgic yearning. The principle of montage in epic narration works then as the mnemotechnic device that contests both amnestic and nostalgic relations to the past and the present.[62]

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[59] See: *OSMB*: 201-2; *GS* I: 642. The formulation of *experience*, as the listening to the *echo* that comes from the past brings this reflection closer to the methodological discussion of the *Trauerspiel* book, in which the task of grasping the resonance of the baroque is the answer to methodologies which have subsumed the baroque's force under particular conceptual schemes. In both cases, experience and critique create the conditions which enable the echo (or the force of the past) to reach the present. In the essay on Hessel, there is an emphasis on the work of memory rather than on the transmission of tradition, and a turn away from looking at history from the standpoint of tradition towards the standpoint of memory itself.

[60] *SW* 2:264-5.

[61] I follow here Caygill's translation (*The Colour of Experience*: 68). The original reads: 'Erlebnis will das Einmalige und die Sensation, Erfahrung das Immergleiches': *GS* III: 198.

[62] As Brecht recognises, the principle of construction operating in Döblin's works makes possible the idea of an '*un*tragic hero' (my emphasis). Döblin's synthesised his own method as *Kinostil,* for which 'the narrator has no place in the novel. One does not tell, but builds.' See: Heidi Thomann Tewarson 'Alfred Döblin und Bertolt Brecht: Aspekte einer literarischen Beziehung', in *Monatshefte*, Vol. 79 No. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 172-185. Tewarson quotes an entry from Brecht's diary from 1920. Also: Michael Jennings, "Of Weimar's First and Last Things: Montage, Revolution, and Fascism in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *November 1918*", *Politics in German Literature*, ed. by Beth Bjorklund and Mark Cory (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1998); and Jennings, "Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-Garde", in David Ferris, *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Three main points are critical to this argument. First, in Keller, description brings the landscape forward as a distant, auratic image in narration; second, in Hessel, the historic distance created through the description of Berlin as the stage of a *Singspiel* is subsequently transformed into the distance created by memory in narration. In *Spazieren in Berlin*, narration juxtaposes the past and the present, working therefore as a catalyst which interrupts the lived moment and opens up an opportunity to ground experience. Third, although the second review of Hessel intimates the fragmentary memory (*Gedächtnis*) that Benjamin associates with the figure of the epic narrator in 'The Crisis of the Novel' and 'The Storyteller', the review still refers to it as *Erinnerung*, which is later defined as the originary memory which grounds the ancient epic from which both the novel and epic narration are born. The distinction between modern epic and the novel enables us to trace, therefore, the mnemonic character of montage in epic narration, firstly introduced as *memory* (*Erinnerung*) and later specified in the concrete sense of short-lived *reminiscence* (*Gedächtnis*).[63]

'The Crisis of the Novel' and 'The Storyteller' develop what Osborne calls Benjamin's own 'novelistic narrative of [the epic] evolving forms'.[64] This narrative cannot be rearticulated reading Benjamin's own writings chronologically. While the 'The Crisis of the Novel' confronts the novel with oral and written narration and reads both as epic forms, 'The Storyteller' goes one step further and situates both the novel and oral and written epic narration under the unity of the 'original' epic. According to 'The Storyteller', the *original* epic consisted in the unity of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and reminiscence (*Gedächtnis*) in an originary memory (*Erinnerung*). The latter developed into two different forms of history-telling (*Geschicht-Erzählen*) or 'temporalizations of history' respectively associated with the novel and the *modern* epic.[65] The emergence of the novel marks the split of this unit with the novel embodying totalizing remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and the *new* modern epic embodying fragmentary reminiscence (*Gedächtnis*). For Benjamin, the *new* epic narration attests to the persistence —however

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[63] Sigrid Weigel argues that Benjamin's theory of memory is based on *Erinnerung*. Although she comments on the relevance that *Gedächtnis* have in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' and elaborates upon the *Gedächtnisraum* or 'memory-space of the collective' which serves her to motivate her 'topographical representation of memory', she develops her analysis of memory manly from the standpoint of the 'first phase of work on the *Passagen*' from 1927- 1929. Her argument is therefore closer to the language of the period of the second Hessel review that to the 'The Crisis of the Novel' and 'The Storyteller'. See: *Body-and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 109–12; 118–27.
[64] Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories... ': 78.
[65] *SW* 3: 154; *Cf*: Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories...': 77. Also Peter Osborne, *Politics of Time*: 134–38.

weak— of the mnemonic and collective character of the original epic in storytelling. Its radical actualisation is the task of materialist critique.

Thus, the novel and epic narration are both written prose forms that oppose each other in terms of totalizing remembrance and fragmentary reminiscence, while storytelling and epic narration are two different forms of articulating reminiscence by means of oral and written media. The first distinction differentiates two forms of memory; the second distinguishes two forms or media configuring one specific form, i.e. reminiscence. By means of reminiscence epic written narration then recast the force of epic storytelling and opposes both the totalizing remembrance of the novel and the amnestic *information* linked to western, bourgeois journalism. Indeed, epic reminiscence makes apparent that totalizing remembrance is a deceptive answer to information as narrative form of modernity. Neither of them grounds transmission, being thus marked by different forms of *forgetting*. With this brief sketch of Benjamin's history of narrative forms, I will turn now to 'The Crisis of the Novel' and 'The Storyteller' in order to explore the principle of montage operating in epic written narration and the fragmentary notion of memory it organises.[66]

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[66] The affinity traced between materialist and immanent critique in the first section of this chapter serves to understand the parallelism between the analysis of the temporalities of tragedy and *Trauerspiel* on the one hand, and the temporalities informing the divergent notions of memory in the novel and the epic on the other. Both the *Trauerspiel* and the epic elude any fixed closure or the moment of absolute completion, whether in its eschatological form (fulfilled time in Classic tragedy) or in its illusory expression in *modern* tragedy and the novel. Critical to the *Trauerspiel* and epic narration is that they preclude the moment of completion by means of allegory and montage as devices of signification and organisation of the work of art. It is on the basis of this affinity that most interpreters read montage as allegorically meaningful. *Cf*: Burkhardt Lindner, 'Allegorie' in Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamins Begriffe* I, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000). In 'The Storyteller', Benjamin also explores the *chronicle*, which is concerned with history as history of salvation or what Benjamin calls the 'drama of salvation' in the book on the baroque. The complete argument maintains that the different narrative forms are rooted in epic storytelling or the original historiographic form. The epic is embedded with multiple and divergent forms of narrating history as 'white light bears to the colors of the spectrum' (*SW* 3:152). He regards the different forms of presenting historical change as colour spectrums which allow for a continuum or gradation of infinite values with neither specific definitions nor fixed ranges. Benjamin's argument thus takes the narrative forms discussed above as reference points which may orient us in this subtle gradation, offering no fixed rules or determinate universals under which particular or specific cases must be arranged. A further literary form will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, i.e. the lyric poetry through which Baudelaire attempts less to suspend than to affirm the amnestic lived moment and then ecstatically ground experience by means of its intensification as *innervation*.

2.1 Narration, Montage and Reminiscence

In 'The Crisis of the Novel' Benjamin reviews Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a work which he paradoxically regards as an exemplary piece of epic narration and 'the most extreme, vertiginous, the last and most advanced of the old bourgeois *Bildungsroman*'.[67] The tension defining this work is due to two narrative elements which oppose each other: it is a novel whose stylistic principle of montage counteracts the novel form.[68] At stake here is the confrontation of the fragmentary character of any narrative and the novel's totalizing attempt to produce meaning by means of a structure based on the unity of the subject. The radicalization of the principle of montage illuminates the existing tension and precludes the novel's subjective closure. The crisis of the novel emerges, therefore, from the novel's impossibility to reach totality: 'to write a novel is to take that which is incommensurable in the presentation of human existence to the extreme'.[69] For Benjamin, the task of the novel is illusionary and deceptive: it embodies a notion of memory that aspires to a totalizing and unitary closure that is nevertheless unattainable. This is the inner constitutive tension of the novel. It cannot be overcome because in touching upon the incommensurability of experience the novel is revealed to be a fragmentary literary form.

If the novel aims to overcome its own fragmentary character, epic narration radicalises such fragmentariness by means of the principle of montage and stresses its own limits and, therefore, the impossibility of their overcoming. Benjamin follows György Lukács' reading of the novel and Döblin's own theoretical approach to the epic work. For Lukács, the novel is 'the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of life has become a problem, *yet which still thinks in terms of totality*'.[70] The 'transcendental homelessness' or 'metaphysical homesickness' of the subject consists in the inability of the novel to attain a 'closed totality'.[71] It is unable then to recast what Aristotle called the 'magnitude' which

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[67] *SW* 2: 301, 304.

[68] Benjamin's claim about the resistance of the *Trauerspiel* to inherited schemes might serve to highlight the conflict of this novel: '[a] major work will either establish a new genre or abolish it. The perfect work will do both': *OGT*: 44.

[69] *SW* 2: 299. *GS* III: 230.

[70] Gyorg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1971), p. 56. My emphasis.

[71] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*: 33, 60, 61.

tragedy achieves only by means of its *dramatic* form and not through its *narrative* element.[72]

Döblin's own critique of the book and the novel form in 'The Structure of the Epic Work' locates *Berlin Alexanderplatz* under the light of the arguments against literary criticism based on the novel and the demand that Benjamin establishes for literary criticism to learn from the new technologies of reproduction and film criticism. Döblin maintains that the crisis of the novel and the book is advantageous in a double sense: it opens the opportunity for the 'emancipation of the epic from the book' and gives the conditions for the liberation of language which 'the book spells [to] death'.[73] With the 'reinstatement of the epic', Benjamin writes, Döblin 'hurries ahead' of the crisis of the book and the novel and 'makes its cause his own'.[74] Modern epic writing liberates language by recasting the force of oral storytelling, therefore actualising the potentiality of collective experience while precluding the novel's subjective closure.

In the Döblin review Benjamin regards both the novel and epic narration as fragmentary literary forms unable to achieve a closed totality. Both are fragmentary configurations incapable of reaching completion. Both are organised as montages in a general sense: they are constructions made up of assembles incapable of attaining the totality of human existence. However, whereas the novel attempts to overcome the fragmentariness of montage, epic narration radicalises its own principle of construction as a method which precludes the illusory completion of the novel. Benjamin describes the 'purely epic approach of narration' operating in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in contrast to Gidé's 'purely novelistic' writing. It is not a '*dialogue intérieur*' what operates in this work but 'something quite different': 'the stylistic principle governing this book is that of montage'. It 'explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits and clears the way

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[72] *Cf*: Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. by John Baxter and Patrick Atherton, trans. by George Whalley (Montreal; London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 1447b27; my emphasis. The inability to achieve unity affects the capacity of the modern epic to produce the image of the 'hero's life', which is also necessary to attain Aristotelian catharsis. Benjamin expands on this issue in regard to epic drama, which alienates (*verfremden*) the audience from a modern (illusory) recasting of the tragic hero: 'What is Epic Theatre? (Second Version),' *UB*: 18. For a discussion on the appearance of unity in Lukács' understanding of the novel, see Cunningham, David, 'Capitalist and Bourgeois Epic: Lukács, Abstraction and the Novel', and Bewes, Timothy, 'How to Escape from Literature? Lukács, Cinema and The Theory of the Novel', in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, ed. by Bewes, Timothy and Hall, Timothy (London: Continuum, 2011).

[73] *Jahrbuch der Sektion für Dichtkunst* (Berlin, 1929), p. 262; quoted in 'The Crisis of the Novel': *SW* 2: 300.

[74] *SW* 2: 300.

for new epic possibilities'.[75] For Benjamin, Döblin's 'reinstatement' or 'reinforcement' of radical epic' recognises the fragmentariness of any narrative to reveal the limits of the novel and suspend or destroy any appearance of totality.[76] The epic, therefore, offers an alternative to the shattering of tradition, but also to the illusory response offered to this by the novel and the *forgetting* of information.[77]

The principle of montage associated with the epic carries a mnemonic function. Benjamin explains this character in his comparison of the novel and the epic in which he considers their individualistic and collective 'birthplace' and the abilities of their readers to recount the novel and the narration. These differences forge divergent notions of memory. While the birthplace of the novel is the individual who 'has secluded himself from people and their achievements', 'the individual in isolation', narration keeps alive the 'collective dimension' of 'the epic at its purest' which Benjamin identifies with the oral tradition of storytelling, in which the chain of transmission that passes down stories is created by those who collect and recreate them in the act of

[75] *SW* 2: 301. Just as Aristotle considers that 'all the parts of the epic are contained in tragedy but those of tragedy are not to be found in the epic' (*Poetics*, 144b15), the novel includes the essential elements of epic narration (montage, fragmentariness, etc.) but epic narration does not include the essential mark of the novel (the aspiration to totality). The epic and the *Trauerspiel* resist to the completion and universality that tragedy reaches in its classic form, whereas modern epic narration counteracts the completion which the novel aims to bring about as *remembrance*. To borrow an expression from Darko Štrajn, the function of montage is to *de-montage* the subject position associated with the novel's organisation. Again, the affinity between *Trauerspiel* and modern epic becomes apparent in their devices of signification and construction: like allegory, montage destroys the appearance of totality, not of the symbol but of the subject-based closure of remembrance. A more complex dynamics can be set up following the *de*-prefix upon which Štrajn elaborates: the novel resists the fragmentariness of montage while producing an artificial totality to which epic narration in turn resists and, then, *de*-mounts. This parallels the logic of the *distortion of distortion* within which Benjamin's writings are inscribed, as I explained in Chapters 1 and 2. See: Darko Štrajn, 'The Principle of Montage and Literature: Fragmented Subjectivity and as the Subject-Matter in the Novel, Film and in Digital Forms of Narration', *Primerjalna Književnost* (Ljubljana), 37.2 (2014), p. 43. It is worth notice that John J. White refers to the early mention of *montieren* in Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* (1926) in a negative way as *un*montieren. Although Benjamin did not discuss this in his writings on Brecht, this negative use brings into consideration a critical element of montage as *de-mounting* the fetishist montage that aims to *represent* reality. See: Bertolt Brecht, 'On Experimental Theatre', tr. by Carl Richard Mueller, *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vo. 6, No. 1 (Sept. 1961), p. 8; also: White, *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory*, (New York: Camden House, 2004), p. 56.
[76] *SW* 2: 300.
[77] Benjamin's presentation of narration runs counter to that offered by Lukács in 'Narrate or Describe?' (1936). Lukács opposes these principles in terms of their contribution to the unity of the novel (however unattainable this might be in its 'pure form'): the former offers coherence to the 'destines of the characters' while the latter only depicts facts that remain unarticulated and are therefore inessential to the 'whole' of the novel. For Benjamin, narration precludes the novel's closure. It operates from *within* the novel to suspend or interrupt the illusory devices which produce its appearance of unity: Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, ed. & trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 110–12. With regards to Brecht and Döblin, Richard John Murphy affirms that their opposition to Lukács's concept of narration suspends the 'organic whole' of the work by 'defusing... linear organisation' and the plot's 'aura of indispensability': *Theorizing the Avant-Garde, Modernism and, Expressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 21.

telling them to others.[78] Thus, while the novelist is a solitary writer, the epic writer embodies some sort of communality inherited from the ancient art of storytelling. If the former 'dissociates' meaning from the social character of the original epic,[79] the latter negotiates 'the confines of the human subject' in opposition to a purely nostalgic, individualistic absorption.[80]

In 'The Storyteller' (1936) Benjamin relates the divergent characteristics of the novel and the epic to contrasting notions of memory. The aim for a totalizing closure of the novel is grounded in remembrance or *Eingedenken*, while the fragmentary principle of the epic embodies reminiscence or *Gedächtnis*. Benjamin argues that, originally, both the novel and the epic were united in their primal epic form before diverging and heading off in different directions. Such original unity was the unity of memory, *Erinnerung* which encompassed *Eingedenken* and *Gedächtnis*.[81] The shattering of tradition witness to the split of this unity and the emergence of the novel on the basis of *Eingedenken*, thereby revealing a form of memory associated with the subject's solitude. In light of the crisis of transmissibility grounded in tradition, the collective dimension of the original epic which receded into *Gedächtnis* is kept alive by the oral tradition of storytelling and by epic written narration. In this way, the epic is reinstated yet no longer in its original form. The central question is whether the stylistic principle of montage organising epic narration is able to recast the collective dimension of storytelling in light of the absence of tradition, or whether modern epic may make the 'voice of the born storyteller' resonate.[82]

For Benjamin, the storyteller has his roots in the experiences accumulated by travellers who learnt from other's experiences and in those who stayed home and were familiar with local tales and traditions. The aforementioned travellers and 'people of the tribe' were originally 'seamen and peasants' for whom the artisan class 'was their university.' With their inclination 'towards practical matters' storytellers were also able to give 'practical advice.'[83] This double emphasis on the practical dimension of storytelling — with its roots in craftsmanship and the transmission of counsel— constitutes the core of

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[78] *SW* 3: 144, 154.
[79] McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*: 277.
[80] Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*: 162. Hanssen also relates this non-nostalgic approach to the ethical dimension of memory in Benjamin (5-7, 103).
[81] *SW* 3: 154.
[82] *SW* 2: 300.
[83] *SW* 3: 145.

Benjamin's characterisation of this narrative form. Storytelling offers practical advice *in the act* of telling the story to others or in the experience of passing it 'from mouth to mouth': 'After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story'.[84] The experience of listening to the story is complete only until the story is recalled and told to others; until it is *reproduced*. Once the story claims a 'place in the memory of the listener' (*einem Platz im Gedächtnis des Hörenden*) it can be transmitted: 'the more completely the story is integrated into the latter's own experience, the greater will be its inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later'.[85] This process of transmission articulates what Benjamin calls the *fabric of real* or *lived life*: 'Counsel woven into the fabric of real life [*gelebten Lebens*] is wisdom'.[86] In relation to storytelling it is, therefore, the act of transmission what substantiates experience or what gives an experiential element to life. The actualisation of the story occurs in its own *reproducibility*, in the conditions of possibility for it to be recollected and told: the presence of a community of listeners that will transmit the story and which, in turn, dissolves the distinction between storytellers and listeners. Here, *reproducibility* and *transmissibility* are two different ways of naming the conditions of possibility for storytelling. It is precisely in relation to the existence of the community of listeners and their 'interest in retaining what [they are] told' that Benjamin claims that 'memory [*Gedächtnis*] is the epic faculty *par excellence*'.[87] It is in the possibility of recalling and telling the story that the ephemeral moment of listening to the story is related to the tradition weaved by multiple generations passing down the story. When the listener transforms her or himself into a storyteller she or him is waving the fabric of real life, making the ephemeral lived moment absorb the totality of history concentrated in the story. Like the baroque *Trauerspiel*, the epic excludes 'transcendence by *incorporating it*'.[88] Yet at the same time, waving the fabric of real life transforms the story into a collective assemble made up by different generations, blurring the difference between storytellers and listeners.

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[84] *SW* 3: 145-6. By contrast, the Döblin review affirms that the novelist 'himself lacks counsel and can give none' (*SW* 2:300). As Andrew Benjamin notes: 'the novel neither articulates nor continues tradition': Andrew Benjamin, 'Tradition and Experience in ''Some Motifs of Baudelaire''' Andrew Benjamin, *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 125.

[85] *SW* 3: 149; *GS* II: 446.

[86] *SW* 3: 146; *GS* II: 442.

[87] *SW* 3: 153; *GS* II: 453.

[88] As commented in Chapter 1, Weber uses this expression to describe the baroque attitude towards sovereign, divine transcendence: *Benjamin's -abilities*: 187.

Here, the fabric of real life and tradition are two different forms of naming the transmiss*ibility* of the story or the conditions of possibility for substantive experience. In contrast, the crisis of tradition brings about the possibility of having reproducibility without transmissibility, i.e. to bring forth a form of reproducibility marked by *forgetting* as it is the case of *information*.[89]

'The Crisis of the Novel' opposes the rupture between the novel and the original epic in order to maintain the continuity between oral storytelling and epic written narration. Benjamin first distinguishes the birthplace of each literary form and then compares the readers of the novel and the epic. Firstly: 'what distinguishes the novel from all other forms of prose is that it neither originates in the oral tradition nor flows back into it'. Secondly, while the reader of the novel recedes into the 'inner human being', 'duration is the criterion of epic writing far more than of other types of literature. Duration not in time, but in the reader'.[90] The reader of the novel does not ground tradition, the reader of epic narration weaves the *fabric of real life*. The mnemonic character of narration configures experience on the basis of fragmentary memory, thereby grounding *Erfahrung* in *Gedächtnis*. This in turn forces *Erinnerung* to recede into an expression of *Erlebnis*. Paradoxically, the latter remains in a relation to the present marked by *forgetting*.[91]

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[89] A critical element of storytelling is that the story is open to multiple transformations in the process of being recollected and told again. Nonetheless, its 'narrative form' remains, as Andrew Benjamin explains. It is also critical to stress the affinities between the model of transmissibility of tradition in relation to the art of storytelling and the passages discussed in Chapter 1 on the transmissibility of doctrine and the model of religious teachings that continuously transforms educators into students when they transmit the contents of tradition anew. Like religious teachings, the story is always anew when it is recollected and told again. A critical contribution of Andrew Benjamin for an interpretation of the Leskov essay is the emphasis on the relation between the fabric of life and the 'community of listeners' which keeps tradition alive and, by extension, maintain the 'living efficacy' of the storyteller. From this perspective, the decline of storytelling marks the decline of collective experience. (A. Benjamin, 'Tradition and Experience... ': 123-4; 127). In a further development of the Benjaminian concept of the *fabric of life*, Andrew Benjamin formulates the notion of the *fabric of existence* which defines the 'human being in terms of modes of relationality rather than isolated subjectivity'. Although this project does not revolve around the Leskov essay, the relationship between tradition and community informs the negotiated or contested subjectivity and the 'creation of subject positions' in favour of relationality. See: Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin*: 4–5, 20, 95; 110–12.

[90] *SW* 2: 299, 303.

[91] A totalising model of memory, whether based on *Eingedenken* or *Erinnerung* as characterised in 'The Storyteller', may lead to what Martin Jay describes as a 'notion of memory as a ''re-membering'' of that which has been dismembered', an 'anamnestic totalizing of the detotalized' or what might be understood as an anamnestic memory. This totalising strategy looks for a 'new symbolic equilibrium through a process of collective mourning, which would ''work through'' the grief' even when the conditions for collective mourning had been annihilated.' Jay also returns to the Leskov essay in order to illustrate the anti-Hegelian, 'paradoxical call' for 'unforgettable, immortal life' yet 'without monument, without memory.' See: Jay, Martin, 'Walter Benjamin, Remembrance and the First World War', in *Perception*

However weak, the mnemonic character of narration that the principle of montage organises in epic narration *makes the voice of the storyteller resonate*: it avoids both the reader growing silent in the pure present of information and the illusory overcoming the limits of *presentation* by means of remembrance.[92] The mnemonic character of narration also grounds the possibility of transmission in the light of the shattering of tradition. As Steiner writes, this notion of epic narration bodies forth the 'rhythm' 'not of individual but of collective life', one which exceeds the limits of death established by the novel and negotiates the limits of the subject.[93] What the essays on modern epic narration bring to the fore is the actualisation of epic storytelling by means of the principle of montage. Through the radicalisation of montage as the principle of construction of any narrative form, modern epic precludes the totalising closure of the novel, leaving the work open to the discovery of new meanings through the juxtaposition of fragments from the present with the past that appears as reminiscence. In this sense, rather than the totalizing configuration of remembrance, the principle of montage which operates in epic narration acts as a catalyst for the work of involuntary, fragmentary reminiscence or *Gedächtnis*.

Two different lines of argumentation are opened up in the discussion on the relation between experience, the work of memory and the principle of montage. The first one is the further development of the relation between experience and memory in the specific sense of *reminiscence*, which counteracts both the temporality of the lived moment and its illusory overcoming in the novel. The second one follows the characterisation of the principle of montage which organises the work of art and provides the basis for an alternative historiographic form that counteracts the historiographic crisis of modernity. The first argument is indirectly elaborated in the 1939 essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' by means of the analysis of Baudelaire's lyric poetry and his unsuccessful

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and Experience in Modernity, ed. by Helga Geyer-Ryan, Benjamin Studies / Studien 1 (Amsterdam: Rodopi Series, 2002), pp. 185–208 (190–91). Following Wohlfarth, Osborne examines this particular problem through the lens of *Eingedenken* to which film had offered its 'equivalent historiographic form' ('Small-scale Victories...': 78, 101-2). See also: Irving Wohlfarth, 'On the Messianic Structure of Benjamin's Last Reflections', in *Walter Benjamin. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Peter Osborne (New York: Routledge, 2005), Vol. I. The argument pursued in this thesis in relation to memory is closer to that of Andrew Benjamin since he emphasises the relevance of the notion of *Gedächtnis* in the Leskov essay and the process of 'Nietzschean repetition' embodied in *episches Gedächtnis*, which 'involves the always *different*'. Following the English version of 'The Storyteller', A. Benjamin refers nonetheless to this specific case of *episches Gedächtnis* as *epic remembrance*. (A. Benjamin, 'Tradition and Experience...': 124-6, 128).

[92] As Steiner remarks, it is for this reason that Benjamin understood Krauss' journalistic work as 'stuck in a hopeless position, fighting a lost ''battle against the press''' (Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*: 83).

[93] Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*: 130.

attempt to attain experience on the basis of the lived moment, which I will explore in more depth in the next section. The second part of the argument is explored in 'Small History of Photography' (1931), Benjamin's essays on Brecht (1931-1939), 'The Author as Producer' (1934) and in the Artwork essay (1935-9), which will be discussed in the next chapter.

3. Baudelaire and the *Shock-Event*

In a further development of the relationship between experience and reminiscence (*Gedächtnis*) or 'the epic faculty *par excellence*',[94] Benjamin echoes Bergson's *Matièrie et Mémoire* and the affirmation that 'the structure of memory [*Gedächtnis*]' is decisive for the 'philosophical structure of experience [*Erfahrung*]'.[95] Benjamin describes this structure in the following terms: 'Experience is indeed a matter of tradition in collective existence as well as in private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*]'.[96] It is in the context delineated by the relationship between experience and unconscious, short-lived *Gedächtnis* or reminiscence that Benjamin addresses the tension which informs the lyric poetry of Baudelaire.

For Benjamin, Baudelaire aims to ground substantive experience in the lived moment yet ultimately establishes a 'crisis-proof form' of experience by means of *correspondences*, a specific form of sensibility based on memory or recollection (*Eingedenken*). Baudelaire's introduction of a mnemonic medium for the configuration of experience reveals, against his own attempt, that experience cannot be grounded exclusively on the basis of the lived moment. In this sense, the essay on Baudelaire confirms the relationship between experience and memory established earlier in the

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[94] *SW* 3: 153; *GS* II: 453.
[95] *OSMB*: 172. On the poverty of experience in Bergson, see specially: *Matter and Memory*, tr., N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, (New York: Zone Books, 1994) pp. 208–209.
[96] *OSMB*: 172. On the *positive* relationship between the unconscious and memory, and the incomplete or unfulfilled consciousness, see Bergson, *Matter and Memory*: 30–32.

essays on epic narration. Experience reclaims a mnemonic basis which is excluded from the lived moment.

Critical to this discussion is the strategy which Benjamin undertakes in his analysis of Baudelaire. Following the opening of the essay and the claim that experience is related to *Gedächtnis* (short, fragmentary memory or reminiscence), the lived moment is consequently characterised as a form of forgetting. Indeed, Benjamin affirms that the gambler and the passer-by to whom Baudelaire paid homage resemble characters who have seen their 'memories liquidated'.[97] In his final analysis, however, Benjamin maintains that Baudelaire's *correspondences* are related to the work of involuntary memory, albeit veiled by 'tears of homesickness' and, therefore, marked by 'past-experiencing' and 'nostalgia'.[98] From this perspective, Baudelaire's mnemonic basis for experience does not suspend the lived moment but complements it instead. Being unable to break through that deceptive veil it excludes the possibility of vindicating experience.

In his communication with Max Horkheimer on his plan of writing a book on Baudelaire Benjamin argues that the relevance of the French poet resides in him being the first writer to understand the 'productive energy of the individual alienated from himself'. To some extent, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), written as *exposé* of the unfinished book, explores this productive energy as the central topic of *Fleurs du Mal* (1857).[99] This is particularly clear in the first part of the essay, where Benjamin follows Baudelaire's interest in the crowd, the passer-by and the rhythm of the city. The second part of the essay relates to Baudelaire's recognition of the limits of the lived moment and the characterisation of *correspondance* as the medium by which to confront the almost ecstatic rhythm of the urban life. In this way the essay oscillates from the energy of the lived moment to its insufficiency to sustain experience.

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[97] *OSMB*: 193-4.
[98] *OSMB*: 198, 200.
[99] *CWB*: 557.

3.1 Innervation and Recollection.

In the opening sections of the 1939 essay on Baudelaire Benjamin introduces different formulations of an unconscious, short-lived memory in order to show that, in principle, Baudelaire's project consists in the search for other basis for experience than that of memory. Benjamin frames the notion of memory in terms of *Gedächtnis*, articulating the relation between the fragmentary and unconscious elements of memory by means of Proust's *involuntary memory* and Freud's *memory traces*. Both forms of memory are confronted with the work of voluntary, conscious acts of memory which, on the basis of *Erinnerung*, are unable to produce substantive experience. Critical to Benjamin's essay is the double mechanism of consciousness and memory established by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). According to this those events which are consciously registered by the psyche leave no memory traces for which they cannot be recollected by the intellect. It is these events which force the psyche to mobilise energy for the protection against excessive stimuli emerging from the environment, namely, *shocks* which in the process of being confronted and registered by the psyche are transformed into conscious events or 'isolated experience' (*Erlebnis*).[100]

To some extent, the protection against stimuli reduces or undermines the possibility of producing *experience* (*Erfahrung*) in different ways. First, it forces the system of consciousness to react against excessive stimuli and mobilise resources or energy of other systems, thereby exhausting their capabilities for certain periods of time. Benjamin's references to Freud omit this specific part of the mechanism of protection, in which *shock* forces the psyche to spend its energy in parrying the stimuli at the cost of other functions.[101] The first association established by Benjamin between Proust and Freud is the general thesis that substantive experience is related to those events which have not been consciously confronted, thereby leaving their imprint on other parts of the

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[100] *OSMB*: 176-7.

[101] Benjamin quotes mainly from section IV of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to describe the process of innervation or the 'charge of energy' that is produced by an excess of stimuli and the assumption that 'emerging consciousness takes the place of a memory trace' (*OSMB*: 175). Nevertheless, he does not include references to the effects of the 'counter-charge' of energy which paralyses other functions of the system. On the complementary process of 'counter-charge', or anticathexis, Freud writes: 'Cathectic energy is summoned from all sides to provide sufficiently high cathexes of energy in the environs of the breach. An 'anticathexis' on a grand scale is set up, for whose benefit all the other psychical systems are impoverished, so that the remaining psychical functions are extensively paralysed or reduced'. See: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press), XVIII, pp. 30–31.

system, for which they are able to return in subsequent moments as reminiscences or involuntary memories. Here, there is a dialectic of shock and innervation that explains the *energy of the alienated man*: *shock* innervates the body by forcing it to respond with the mechanism of protection albeit at the same time consumes or exhausts the energy required to complete other functions. *Shocks* innervate and debilitate the body at the same time. They trigger the operations that parry the excessive stimuli which impact the sensibility while at the same time anaesthetise the latter.

There is a third notion of memory which Benjamin associates with involuntary, unconscious work and the *shock-event* or *Chockerlebnis*: the time for 'recollection' or 'time for organizing ''the reception of stimuli''' produced by the shock.[102] What these three concepts of memory (i.e involuntary memory, memory traces and recollection) have in common is the momentary suspension of the temporality of the lived moment which opens up the possibility of relating the ephemeral present to the past. These concepts serve to establish the limits of Baudelaire's project. In his immersion into the 'large-scale consciousness' of the amnestic the lived moment in order to secure an alternative notion experience (different from experience associated with the transmissibility of tradition and memory), 'Baudelaire made it his business to parry the shocks, no matter what their source, with his spiritual and physical self'.[103] In this sense, the *exposé* is initially concerned with Baudelaire's paradoxical movement of recognising the crisis of experience and confronting it on the basis of the lived moment.

As Friedlander notes, Baudelaire's 'poetic task' consists in 'facing the transformation of the structure of experience in modernity, with the possibility of making that transformation affirmable'.[104] Benjamin articulates this tension by making explicit the fact that the conditions for the reception of lyric poetry have been unsettled in modernity: Baudelaire 'envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. The introductory poem of *Les Fleurs du mal* is addressed to these readers'.[105] Having established the affinity between Baudelaire and his readers in terms of the crisis of experience marked by the dominance of shock, in which 'only in rare

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[102] *OSMB*: 177.
[103] *OSMB*: 178. Harry Zohn's observation that the *Gedächtnis/Erinnerung* distinction 'is roughly paralleled by the one between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*' does not justify the stronger connection between experience and reminiscence already established by Benjamin in his essays on epic narration, and which is now confirmed in the *exposé*. *Erfahrung* is grounded in *Gedächtnis* while *Erinnerung* recedes into *Erlebnis*. Cf: *The Writer of Modern Life* p. 275 (fn. 7).
[104] Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*: 157.
[105] *OSMB*: 170.

instances does lyric poetry accord with the experience of its readers', Benjamin then goes on to describe the change in 'the structure of experience' that undermines the position of the reader of lyric poetry in terms of the effects of the 'shock experience [*Chockerfahrung*]' which Baudelaire situates 'at the centre of his art'.[106] In this context Baudelaire's *reason of State* is to transform *Chockerlebnis* into *Chockerfahrung*.

For Benjamin, as for Baudelaire, the lived moment corresponds to the perception formed on the basis of shock and its double effect of innervating and exhausting different mechanisms in the sensibility. Elaborating on the reduced experience of the passer-by in the city and the phenomenon of the crowd, Benjamin writes:

> Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, *nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery*. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls this man ''*a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness*''. Whereas Poe's passers-by cast glances in all directions, seemingly without cause, today's pedestrians are obliged to look about them so that they can be aware of traffic signals. This, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of conditioning [*Dressur*]. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock [*Chockförmige Wahrnehmung*] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film.[107]

Here, Benjamin traces the double effect of shock. While the first part of the passage is dedicated to process of innervation or the triggering of nervous impulses by the energy coming from the urban environment, the second part moves to the *conditioning* that this constant flow of energy produces on the human sensorium. Although the passer-by is energised or innervated by the urban crowds and the constant flux of the city, the effects of shock are ultimately compared to those that the conveyor belt has on its operators. The passage marks the transition from the ecstatic presentation of shock-based perception to the enervative results concentrated in the technical conditioning to which the human sensorium has been subjected.

Benjamin discloses the effects of shock by distinguishing between conditioning (*Dressur*) and training or long-term practice (*Übung*). In quoting Marx's *Capital* Benjamin explains shock-based perception in terms of the submission of the worker to

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[106] *OSMB*: 178.
[107] *OSMB*: 191. My emphasis.

the machinery, which stands as the 'technologically concrete form' of the transformation from handicraft practice or training (*Übung*) to unskilled work (*Dressur*).[108] Whereas the former finds 'its proper technical form in *experience* and *slowly perfects it*', the latter has been 'sealed off from experience'.[109] Perception configured by shock is thus antithetic to experience. It remains within the sphere of the lived moment or the shock-event illustrated by the image of the worker and the city-dweller whose movement is determined by the rhythm of the conveyor belt and the crowd. The rhythm captured by these images is concentrated in the dominance of the reflex movement demanded by the machine over long-term *practice* or *training.* In the reflex movement, which resembles the gambler's desire to 'start all over again', each moment is reduced to quick movements deprived of value. *Shock*, as Tim Armstrong argues, becomes the mark or sign of alienation.[110] It is in the accumulation of single moments 'devoid from substance' that Benjamin identifies the common ground which workers, passers-by and gamblers share with those 'fictitious characters who have completely liquidated their memories'.[111]

It is this dimension of shock what Baudelaire confronts by means of *correspondences*, the relationships established between different realms of perception which transform the lived moment into the recognition of meaningful involuntary associations, in which 'scents, colors and sounds respond to one another'.[112] As Benjamin emphasises, correspondences cannot be explained in terms of empirical psychology or mysticism, but only in terms of the structure of memory. Thus, in spite of Baudelaire's homage to the rhythm of the lived moment and the shock-event Benjamin finds in *Les Fleurs du mal* an alternative temporality, one whose 'substance' is 'defined in the notion of

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[108] Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Berlin, 1932), p. 404. Quoted in *OSMB*: 191.

[109] *OSMB*: 192.

[110] Tim Armstrong, 'Two Types of Shock in Modernity', *Critical Quarterly*, 42.1 (2000), 60–73 (pp. 66–67). Armstrong provides a reading which relates Baudelaire's *correspondences* directly to Freud's theory of shock. For Armstrong, '''[t]he acceptance of shocks is facilitated by training in coping with stimuli'' which eventually produces *correspondences*, ''an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form'''. In this context *correspondences* act as counter-charge, for which an explanation of the exhaustion of other functions must be offered. If correspondences are auratic, marked by past-experiencing and homesickness, then they do not counteract the stimuli or shocks but complement them by turning them into the point of entry for an auratic form of perception. Considering *correspondences* as auratic forms of perception, they are unable to interrupt the lived moment, thereby remaining caught in illusory forms of confronting the shattering of tradition. It is rather Baudelaire's allegorical insight what counter-acts the lived moment, as Friedlander suggests (*A Philosophical Portrait*: 152-6).

[111] *OSMB*: 193-4. The relation established above serves to dissociate *shock* from *experience* and thus turn Benjamin's initial formulation of *experience based on shock* or *Chockerfahrung* meaningless, so that only shock event or *Chockerlebnis* remains meaningful in Benjamin's scheme.

[112] *OSMB*: 198.

correspondences'.[113] Correspondences enable Baudelaire 'to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, as modern man, was witnessing', and therefore give the conditions for a kind of 'experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form'.[114] For Benjamin, Baudelaire's correspondences relate the lived moment to the past in the form of ritual. Baudelaire thus affirms the crisis of experience in which the lived moment becomes the dominant form of sensibility yet at the same time reclaims a ritualistic structure which is able to confront it and sustain experience. Unlike the symbol which in one single moment relates the eternal and the ephemeral, correspondences let the 'past murmur' by recognising the passing of time concentrated in the present. With this characterisation of correspondences, Baudelaire ecstatic affirmation of the lived moment is no longer dissociated from the work of memory. Yet in doing so he basically charges the lived moment with a meaningful relation to the past which contradicts his initial characterisation of the shock-event.[115]

In the transition from the analysis of the lived moment to the discussion of correspondences, Benjamin relates the lyric poetry of Baudelaire to the work of

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[113] *OSMB*: 197.
[114] *OSMB*: 197, 198.
[115] As Michael Levine notes, the 'very defence that was supposed to intercept the shocks of urban life itself turns out to be something that must be defended against': Michael Levin, *Writings Through Repression: Literature, Censorship, Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 108–9. On this point, Jay also emphasises the difference between reading Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire as the 'endorsing of the poet's heroic stance' and Benjamin's own warning 'against the risk of such defensiveness' (Jay, 'Remembrance and the First World War': 91). In this thesis I argue for the latter by showing the limits of the former. Considering both sides of Benjamin's arguments, Jennings argues against those readings that charge Benjamin's Baudelaire with a nostalgic aura, and for the need to 'bracket' the nostalgic insights into the concept of aura as a way to remind the reader that the 'great' aspect of Baudelaire's poetry does not lie in this insight but in his poetry, which is 'marked by the disintegration of aura' (Jennings, *The Writer of Modern Life*, pp. 21-24). By bracketing rather than confronting the nostalgic element of the argument as the medium through which Baudelaire establishes his 'crisis-proof' form of experience leads, however, to a sympathetic reading or endorsement of the mechanism of innervation of shock despite its enervative effects. The reading of Baudelaire offered in this section is closer to Jay than to Jennings. Stressing the function of correspondences points out the limits of the lived moment. In a complementary move, in emphasising the auratic character of Baudelaire's correspondences it is also noted that the lived moment is interrupted only by non-auratic configurations of sensibility, thereby attaining experience. To some extent, the antinomy between the liquidation of tradition (and, therefore, the affirmation of shock/innervation) and the conservation of tradition (and, therefore, the affirmation of a nostalgic mourning for the past) is more evident in the readings of the Baudelaire essay. To note that neither of these convincingly ground experience means to recognise that an alternative ground for experience is necessary, one which neither affirms the shock-event nor mourns irretrievable times (McCole). The concept of anaesthetics, developed by Buck-Morss, names what Jay calls the 'risk' of the shock or the enervative reversal of innervation. Buck-Morss affirms that in the crisis of experience the 'cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of anaesthetics', for which the 'system reverses its role' by 'repressing memory'. In this context, the task of the theory of experience is to 'restore' the conditions for 'perceptibility' ('Aesthetics and Anaesthetics...', p. 18). In this way, auratic correspondences complement (rather than suspend) the temporality of the lived moment. They operate as compensatory functions which are, nevertheless, unable to ground experience.

involuntary memory from which Baudelaire was initially dissociated. The 'restorative will' which informs Baudelaire's correspondences is marked, therefore, by the tension between voluntary and involuntary memory.[116] If correspondences are involuntary relations established between different realms of perception (the past and the present; the lived moment and the time of ritual), Baudelaire *seeks* or *pursues* these relationships, consequently filling his work with nostalgia for that which is lost. Benjamin makes precisely this point by quoting Proust's characterisation of correspondences: writing about his own experiences being aroused by the taste of a madeleine, Proust adds that for Baudelaire 'these reminiscences are even more numerous. It is obvious that they do not occur by chance, and this, to my mind, is what gives them crucial importance. No one else pursues the interconnected *correspondances* with such leisurely care, fastidiously yet nonchalantly...'.[117] Following Proust's reflections Benjamin distinguishes between, first, those acts of involuntary memory which occur to Proust and, second, Baudelaire's intentional search for correspondences between what is immediately experienced and that which has been lost. What Baudelaire searches for is the sensation that triggers the relationship between the present and the past: 'Spring, the beloved, has lost its scent'. To some extent, Baudelaire pursues what may trigger a bodily innervation. However, the innervation which was originally aroused by the flow of energy of the lived moment is now reversed, being the innervation process what triggers the correspondence with that which is lost: innervation thus leads to past-experiencing and eludes the pure transience of the lived moment.

Benjamin thus underlines the passing of time concentrated in Baudelaire's correspondences: 'the word *perdu* (*lost*) acknowledges that the experience [Baudelaire] once shared is now collapsed into itself. The scent is the inaccessible refuge of *mémoire involontaire*'.[118] In the ephemeral, Baudelaire searches for opportunities to produce meaningful relations between present and past. The emphasis now turns towards the loss which 'imparts a sense of boundless consolation' and transforms Baudelaire's restorative will into nostalgic 'past-experiencing'. The failure of this restorative will to grasp what is lost is the origin of what Benjamin describes as rage, and which 'explodes

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[116] *OSMB*: 199.
[117] Marcel Proust, *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (Le Temps retrouvé), VIII, pp. 82–83; quoted in *OSMB*: 199.
[118] *OSMB*: 200.

in time to the ticking of the seconds that enslaves the melancholic man'.[119] It is critical to emphasise that Benjamin returns to the lived moment yet from a different perspective. If the first part of his analysis of Baudelaire focuses on the energy and the innervation infused by the lived moment, the second part looks at the lived moment from the perspective of its inability to ground substantive experience. The relation between rage and melancholy marks the recognition, as Friedlander suggests, of the 'incapacity to have (significant) experience', which is 'implied in the primacy of *Erlebnis*'.[120] On the basis of this incapacity Baudelaire 'exposes the isolated experience [*Erlebnis*] in all its nakedness' and watches the 'earth revert to a mere state of nature'. The recognition of the limits of the lived moment ultimately grounds the possibility for the allegorical conception of modernity in Baudelaire: the objects of isolated experience may be imbued with different meanings which negatively reveal the absence of any intrinsic capacity for expression in the world of commodities. These appear in Baudelaire's gaze as transient, modern relics.[121]

The critical contribution of this specific reading of the *exposé* consists of two main conclusions in regard to Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's project of securing experience on the basis of the lived moment. In showing that this project ultimately recurs to correspondences and recollection this chapter argues, first, that in Benjamin's

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[119] *OSMB*: 200.

[120] Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*: 152.

[121] As Tara Forrest suggests, in spite of Benjamin's criticism of Baudelaire, he is able to identify in *correspondences* the 'political significance' which he attributes to 'auratic experience'. 'The opening up of time provoked by involuntary memory' provides a space within which the remembering subject is able to envision the possibility of a different kind of existence' enacting what the 'Theses on the Concept of History' call the 'revolutionary chance' that every moment carries with it. Forrest continues: 'It is precisely these moments —in which the ''empty passage'' of time as *Erlebnis*' is torn to asunder by the experience of the past in the present— that the political significance of Benjamin's delineation of auratic experience manifests itself'. Forrest, 'The Politics of Aura and Imagination in Benjamin's Writings on Hashish' in Dag Petersson and Erik Steinskog, Actualities of Aura. Twelve Studies of Walter Benjamin, (Svanesund: Nordic University Press, 2005), pp. 26-48 (39). Although I agree with the political significance that Benjamin attributes to correspondences (and more broadly to the work of memory), it is critical to underline that in the passage quoted above Benjamin precisely constrains such a significance in Baudelaire by pointing out the 'voluntary' character that still permeates the involuntary memory of his correspondences, and for which Baudelaire's project remains constrained to nostalgic, past-experiencing. In the same collection, see also: David Kelman, 'The Inactuality of Aura: Figural Relations in Walter Benjamin's ''On Some Motifs in Baudelaire''', pp. 123-151. On the differences between the forms of memory operating in Baudelaire, Proust and Benjamin see: Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring 1978), pp. 491-506. With a different argument, one which focuses on the limits of Baudelaire's lyric poetry to convey the fragmentariness of modern experience and therefore produces a sort of belated aestheticism, Peter Osborne also points out the limits that Benjamin identifies in the work of the French poet. Although Osborne does not discuss the mnemonic force of correspondences and the divergent formulations of memory in Benjamin, I consider this argument to be compatible his discussion of Benjamin's Baudelaire in 'Small-Scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*: 59-109.

account it was necessary for Baudelaire to deny the energy of the amnestic and innervating shock-event to make room for experience. This analysis then contributes to an understanding of memory as condition of possibility for experience. Second, this analysis has also stressed that although *recollection* has a mnemonic function it is ultimately defined by a nostalgic yearning for the past. Thus, the *exposé* serves to contrast *recollection* to the notion of *reminiscence* advanced in the previous sections of this chapter. Reminiscence consists of a short-lived, fragmentary memory which suspends the lived moment without introducing an auratic or nostalgic element. Then, both recollection and reminiscence show the relevance that Benjamin attributes to memory in light of the crisis of tradition, yet only the latter is able to secure experience by counteracting the amnestic lived moment and nostalgic recollection.[122]

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[122] Following the more technical terms that Benjamin uses in the *exposé*, the first conclusion of this passage might be recast by affirming that the shock-event (*Chockerlebnis*) is unable to ground shock-experience (*Chockerfahrung*) for which shock is only related to *Erlebnis* while *Erfahrung* is related to memory. The second conclusion might also be detailed by saying that experience or *Erfahrung* has its basis in a specific form of memory, namely, fragmentary and involuntary reminiscence or *Gedächtnis*, and not in others, such as totalising remembrance or *Erinnerung* and voluntary recollection or *Eingedenken*, both of which acquire a nostalgic, auratic veil in the analyses of the novel and lyric poetry respectively.

Chapter IV

Montage as *Übungsinstrument* of Sensibility

The previous chapter explored two different yet interrelated problems in Benjamin's writings on experience. It addressed the essays on modern epic narration, storytelling and lyric poetry in order to examine the mnemonic character which montage has in epic narration and its capacity to interrupt the temporality of the lived moment in order to sustain experience. The previous chapter thus argued for memory, in the specific sense of reminiscence or *Gedächtnis*, as necessary condition for experience. This condition is produced by the work organised according to the principle of montage. With this conclusion, epic narration comes to the fore of Benjamin analysis of both the crisis of tradition and the historiographic crisis it effects, and of the possibilities of counteracting it by means of specific narrative forms or divergent temporalizations of history. The final section of Chapter III, dedicated to Baudelaire's lyric poetry, made the case for the relationship between experience and memory in the specific sense of *Gedächtnis* by showing the limits of Baudelaire's attempt to ground experience in the amnestic lived moment. His recourse to nostalgic *correspondences* marked by past-experiencing (which roughly parallel Proust's own totalizing *recollections*) make those limits apparent. Thus, Benjamin elucidates the ways in which recollections (Proust) and correspondences (Baudelaire) produce a realm of perception marked by an auratic nostalgia for the past that undermines the very conditions of possibility for attaining experience.

This chapter approaches a further development of the tension which informs Baudelaire's work in the 1939 *exposé*. This tension is related to Baudelaire's position on *aura* and his critique of modern technology in general and of film and photography in particular. The revision of this problem serves to examine the notion of experience and

its relation to the technical reproducibility. The question which orientates this chapter is whether technical reproducibility gives the conditions for securing substantive experience under the crisis of tradition or not. In the light of the crisis of tradition which subject-based narrative forms and regimes of presentation fail to contest (the novel, lyric poetry and information), the question of whether photography, film and technical reproducibility offer an alternative basis for experience rises.

In the next sections I will return to the two notions of montage which 'The Crisis of the Novel' discerns and argue that the principle of montage which organises the technically reproducible work of art opens up the possibilities for grounding experience. However, these possibilities remain suspended in the subordination of technology to the logic of capitalism and fascism. It is in this context that the radicalisation of such a principle may momentarily sustain experience.[1] In the context of Benjamin's account of Baudelaire's attempt to attain a 'crisis-proof' form of experience, the 1939 *exposé* relates the notions of *practice* and *memory* to the concept of *aura* and argues that with the decline of long-term practice and involuntary memory produced by the dominance of the lived moment *the experience of aura* is also in decline. Associated with the realms of long-term practice and involuntary memory, aura is constitutive of substantive experience (i.e. there is no experience that does not have an auratic character). Its further disintegration concentrates the transformation in the structure of experience in modernity:

> If we think of the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, seek to cluster around an object of perception, and if we call those associations the aura of that object, then the aura attaching to the object of perception corresponds precisely to the experience [*Erfahrung*] which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice. The techniques inspired by the camera and subsequent analogous types of apparatus extend the range of the *mémoire volontaire*; these techniques make it possible at any time to retain an event -as image and sound- through the apparatus. They thus represent important achievements of a society in which long practice is in decline.[2]

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[1] This illuminates the dynamic of resistance and counter-resistance which marks both the subordination of reproducibility and montage to capitalism and fascism, and the possibility of the momentary interruption of this subordination. It might be said that capitalism and fascism constrain or resist to the potentiality with which the new technologies emerge, for which the latter's actualisation consists in a *counter*-resistance. As I will discuss below, unlike *restoration* (Susan Buck-Morss) and *undoing* (Miriam Bratu Hansen)*, counter*-resistance might convey a more precise meaning in relation to the effects or possibilities which Benjamin ascribes to the destructive character of experience and the process encompassed by *interruption*, *innvervation* and *interplay*. The notion of counter-resistance is developed by Caygill in the first chapter of *On Resistance. A Philosophy of Defiance,* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[2] *OSMB*: 200.

The definition of aura as a cluster of *associations* attached to different objects of perception encompasses two distinct elements. First, *aura* consists of the associations attached to those objects that produce or trigger an involuntary memory. In other words, *aura* is a set of associations that relate the present ephemeral moment to the past by means of involuntary memory or recollection. Proust's 'madeleine' experience and Baudelaire's correspondences illustrate this aspect of aura. Yet *aura* also refers to those associations inscribed in objects which are mastered by means of long-term practice and which have thus become an habitual and unconscious *second nature*. The artisan or craftsman who Benjamin opposes to the operator of the conveyor belt illustrates this sense of *aura*. *Aura* thus names the *origin* of such associations in fragmentary, short-lived memory and long-term practice. The aura surrounding the object consists of the mnemonic and bodily associations which the object of perception triggers. The object can only be seen as having an aura if it had already left a memory trace. The presence of the aura marks the return of the object as recollection or correspondence, which exceeds the object's own materiality. In this process recollections and correspondences fill the present with a meaning or signification that *exceeds* the lived moment. For the 1939 *exposé*, *experience* is, therefore, identical with *auratic experience*. The associations referred to as the object's *aura* relate the present moment of perception to the past when they return as a cluster of bodily reactions.[3]

According to the 1939 *exposé* of the unfinished book on Baudelaire the emergence of technical reproducibility interrupts or suspends the conditions of possibility for the production of these associations. As Benjamin had previously explained in terms of Freud's theory of shock, technical reproducibility enlarges the realm of consciousness by triggering a continuous display of energy which manifests in mechanical or reflex movements. The body focus on parrying stimuli coming from the urban life, which is in turn determined by the rhythm of the conveyor belt and deprives the city-dweller from

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[3]As Fabrizio Desideri suggests, Benjamin's notion of *second nature* is marked by the equilibrium between sensibility and technology and contests the concept of second nature of the 'automatism' of the technological paradigm of *innovation*: Desideri, 'The Mimetic Bond: Benjamin and the Question of Technology', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 110. *Second nature* therefore acquires a positive meaning in Benjamin. It names the counterfactual situation in which sensibility and technology stand in a productive equilibrium which expands the human sensorium in the same logic as in 'The Planetarium' in *One Way Street*. This understanding of second nature opposes Lukács' Hegelian formulation in the *Theory of the Novel*, for which second nature refers to the 'conventional' or 'external' social institutions to which individuals relate in alienated ways. See, *Theory of the Novel*: pp. 62-64, 112. Also Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Livingston, Rodney (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 88–89, 100.

the time that the organisation of stimuli demands. What I want to emphasise is the opposition that Benjamin stages between substantive experience (structured here by involuntary memory, long-term practice and *aura*) and the technologies of reproduction: 'Technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of conditioning [*Dressur*]. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In film, perception conditioned by shock was established as formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film'.[4] In associating film with a form of perception conditioned by the conveyor belt the technologies of reproduction are understood as undermining the conditions for substantive experience, reducing practice (*Übung*) to reflex movement or conditioning (*Dressur*). Eroding the conditions of possibility for long-term associations (whether as recollections or correspondences) the 'space for action of fantasy' (*Spielraum der Phantasie*) is also constrained.[5] Under these conditions Baudelaire argues that correspondences and long-term associations can only be produced in the 'realm of the intangible and the imaginative', in 'the realm of art' and in the illusions provided by the early technologies of reproduction seen from the standpoint of 'the pleasure of [their] degradation'.[6]

Although the opposition between (auratic) experience and the technologies of reproduction is also drawn in other writings (reproducibility annihilates the medium in which aura emerges: memory, practice, tradition, imagination, habits, etc.), Benjamin had not dissociated cinematographic and photographic presentations of reality from the possibility of producing substantive experience. On the contrary, film is regarded in various moments as the *Übungsinstrument* of non-auratic perception on which experience is produced.[7] Benjamin thus conceives of the technologies of reproduction as the medium through which the annihilation of auratic perception occurs, yet also as the medium for the configuration of substantive, non-auratic experience. The annihilation of aura undermines a specific form of perception (nostalgic past-experiencing) without denying experience. For Benjamin, Baudelaire's position towards photography and film leads to an either/or problem in which the technologies of reproduction affect involuntary memory and long-term practice without giving the conditions for new,

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[4] *OSMB*: 191.
[5] Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1859: Le Public moderne et la photographie'. Quoted in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 204.
[6] *OSMB*: 207.
[7] *SW* 3:121; *WuN*:138.

alternative forms of experience. The essay on reproducibility and other writings recognise, however, the possibility for securing experience in spite of the crisis of tradition and the changes it effects on memory and practice. The distinction between *auratic perception* and *experience* becomes therefore critical in Benjamin's theory of experience.[8]

In the essay on reproducibility and other writings the potentiality of technical reproducibility to produce experience is framed in the dynamics of innervation and enervation, or the dynamics of shock and anaesthetics. From the perspective of this dynamics the technologies of reproduction have the capacity to suspend, although momentarily, the anaesthetic, enervative and amnestic effects of shock. This suspension opens the possibility of securing experience. As Susan Buck-Morss and Miriam Bratu Hansen have pointed out, the notions of *shock* and the process of innervation-enervation might be read as giving the conditions on which experience can be *restored,*[9] or the conditions under which the destructive effects of modernity may be *undone*.[10] It is in this context that Hansen conceives of *innervation* as a two-ways process which

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[8] This distinction roughly maps the distinction between shock-event (*Chockerlebnis*) and shock-experience (*Chockerfahrung*) discussed in the final section of the previous chapter. If Baudelaire initially attempted to attain the latter on the basis of the former, Benjamin's conclusion that correspondences articulate a crisis-proof form of experience might be read as suggesting that *shock-experience* is meaningless, i.e. there is no experience based on the shock intrinsically associated with the lived moment. In the same way, if for Baudelaire every experience is auratic experience, Benjamin's distinction may suggests that *auratic experience* is a contradictory term. What exists is *auratic perception* (*auratische Wahrnehmung*) which undermines the conditions for experience (*Erfahrung*). In emphasasing this distinction I ultimately argue against the traditional identification of *aura* with *experience*, or with the possibility of having *auratic experience* which most of the literature does not problematise: Hansen offers the most detailed and updated account of the multiple genealogies of aura in Benjamin's writings in the fourth chapter of *Cinema and Experience*. I comment upon her account later in this chapter (fn. 46). See also: Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry* ,Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 336-375. Also: Josef Fürnkäs, 'Aura' for a detailed of aura in Benjamin's writings prior to the essay on reproducibility and the 1939 *exposé*, *Benjamins Begriffe* I, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000). Also, Sam Webber, *Massmedia Auras-Form, Technique, Media,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 76-106; Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 73-77.

[9] Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered': 18.

[10] Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street', *Critical Inquiry*, 25.2 (1999), 306–43 (p. 317). Although Hansen tries to distance herself from Buck-Morss by affirming that her own reading does not aim to 'restore' 'the power of the senses', she finally understands the therapeutic potential of cinema as its capacity 'to counter, *if not undo*, the sensory alienation inflicted by industrial-capitalist modernity': Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 132, 137, 146, 195. My emphasis. Although *undoing* is not identical to *restoring*, it opens the way for entertaining the possibility of recovering that which has been alienated if the conditions that make such alienation possible are annihilated. Hansen's own warning (marked by the *if-* clause) might serve to distance herself from Buck-Morss, yet she certainly remains close to the logic of restoration she criticises.

suspends the negative effects of shock and produces a 'motoric stimulation' that reactivates the anaesthetised human sensorium.[11]

Critical to Benjamin's theory of experience is to show that experience is possible insofar as it is grounded on the basis of a non-auratic form of perception, for which it is necessary then to elucidate how involuntary memory and long-term practice might be recast without their auratic dimension. What is needed is a form of memory distinct from recollection and its parallel in correspondences. An argument of this kind was offered before in Chapter III in relation to modern epic narration. Modern epic opens up the opportunity for the disruption of involuntary act of memory in the habitual relation with the city. This form of memory is neither caught up in yearning nor marked by past-experiencing. It is less concerned with nostalgically contemplating that which has been lost than with illuminating alternative presents or futures which history did not follow. What I want to emphasise here is that the essays on epic narration and reproducibility present the relationship between experience and technology through a more complex dynamics that the one presented in the 1939 *exposé*. In this context the technologies of reproduction are able to produce experience without its auratic dimension. In terms of the scheme used in the *exposé* it can be said that the essay on reproducibility secures experience while simultaneously interrupting the process of innervation-enervation triggered by the lived moment.

In the same way that Benjamin offers a narrative of the historical transformation of narrative forms, he also offers a narrative of the dynamics of the potentiality of technology. According to this reproducibility emerges with new possibilities to ground experience that nevertheless remain suspended by the logic of capitalism and fascism (the identification of film and the conveyor belt). *Experience* consists less of the

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[11] Hansen expands on the Benjaminian term of *innervation* and refers to the *undoing* of sensory alienation as *mimetic innervation*. With this notion, as I will comment later, she brings together Benjamin's mimetic faculty and the process of innervation which, according to her, *undoes* the shock-effect of industrial capitalism. In this thesis I have preferred the *counter-* prefix to recast what Wohlfarth calls Benjamin's 'distortion of distortion', or what I referred to a second-order suspension or interruption: the suspension of the suspended or distorted possibilities which are latent in modernity. Critical to this *counter-*resistance, *second-order suspension*, or *distortion of distortion* is that what is initially resisted, suspended or distorted by capitalist modernity cannot be retrospectively recovered but only partially actualised. This principle is also evident in the presentation of *Umweg* (digression) as method of investigation in the book on the baroque: more than recovering the emergence-material (*Entstehungsmaterial*) as it initially was, digression suspends inherited views on the baroque to make its force resonate in the present by mapping and juxtaposing its multiple conceptualisations. The distortion of distortion is a *counter-*resistance (Caygill) to capitalism and its negative effects on the human sensorium, yet only offers a destructive moment which does not advances a positive, determinated content.

recovery of forms of sensibility prior to the emergence of technical reproducibility than with the actualisation of the potentiality that remains latent yet suspended in technical reproducibility.

This argument, absent in the 1939 *exposé*, is developed in the works on photography, film and epic drama. In the third version of the essay on reproducibility Benjamin argues for the possibility of attaining an *equilibrium* (*Gleichgewicht*) or *interplay* (*Zusammenspiel*) between the human sensorium and technology. Against the subordination of technology to the logic of capitalism and fascism, he explains this interplay in terms of the *space for action* or *play* (*Spielraum*) that is opened up by means of *revolution* as a process of *innervation*.[12] This reference to innervation is nonetheless broader than the one which Benjamin discusses in the 1939 *exposé*. In this context *revolutions* aim to accelerate the 'adaptation' to technology. They are 'innervations of the collective' or experiments which catalyse the 'new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology'.[13] The link between interruption and the liberating, revolutionary potential of technology is thus given by *innervation* but is demarcated by their *adaptation* to technology.

Critical to the interruption produced by revolution as collective innervation is that is leads less to the automatic actualisation of the potentiality of technology than to the liberation of its concealed presence. In this way, if Benjamin is seen to be developing a 'politics of innervation', as Hansen rightly affirms,[14] this must be framed within a broader process of *adaptation* to technology and the reactivation of its distorted potentiality. As Benjamin writes, '[n]o sooner has the second technology secured its initial revolutionary gains than vital questions affecting the individual —questions of love and death which had been buried by the first technology— once again press for solutions'.[15] The revolutionary process which *innervation* catalyses opens up humanity's *space of action* only to reveal the fact that it does not know yet its 'way around this space'.[16] Innervation and interruption does not answer the questions which emerge in the process of adaptation. These can only be addressed in the long-term process of mastering technology by means of *play*, *habits*, *tests, practice* and *repetition*

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[12] *SW* 3:107; *WuN* 16:108.
[13] *SW* 3:124; *WuN* 16:109.
[14] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 80-82; 111-112.
[15] *SW* 3:124; *WuN* 16:109.
[16] *SW* 3:124; *WuN* 16:109.

to which interruption only offers access. Revolution as collective innervation liberates the suspended potentiality of technology yet is not sufficient to produce substantive experience. It has a destructive character which 'clears the way' and catalyses the transition from a technology subordinated to the logic of capital to other in which it stands in an equilibrium with the human sensorium —from first to second technology.[17] *Innervation* refers then to the re-activation of sensibility against the background of urban life's anaesthetics and the impoverished sensibility associated with the cumulus of lived moments. *Adaptation* brings about substantive (non-auratic) experience in forms yet to be elucidated.

Delimited as it is by *adaptation*, *innervation* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for attaining substantive experience. It opens opportunities for experience to emerge, yet the space for action remains open to multiple outcomes. *Innervation* as interruption of second-order concentrates the temporality of Benjamin's theory of experience. It operates within the broader framework which relates the effects of shock on the human sensorium not only to the shock derived from the urban context, but also to the structure of the work of art. In this way, *innervation* is framed within the characterisation of the reproducibility and *mountability* of the work of art. The essay characterises the work of art as a construct (*Gebilde*) whose principle of organisation or law (*Gesetz*) is that of montage.[18] The technically reproducible work of art is thus organised according to its technical reproducibility and *mountability*. In this context innervation operates to make transparent the *mountability* of the work of art and to show that any image of total unity or completion is artificially constructed. The mastering of this form of presentation of reality dissociated from alienated perception is the mark of *adaptation*, or the *equilibrium* between technology and the human sensorium.

Understanding montage as the principle which organises the work of art Benjamin generalises the concept of montage and its concrete use in avant-garde practices. To some extent, this generalisation had already been anticipated in the discussion on montage in epic narration and the fragmentary character of any narrative form, including both the novel and information. The essays on film, photography and epic theatre discerned two specific notions of montage: montage as the general principle or law organising the work of art, and montage as the specific practice or method

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[17] 'The Destructive Character', *SW* 2: 441-2.
[18] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

radicalising such a law by making it transparent or visible against those practices which aim to overcome it (i.e. the novel form and Schmitz-like criticism). While the second approach to montage has received more attention in discussions on Benjamin (showing his indebtedness to avant-garde practices), the following sections emphasise the general principle of montage as the background against which the more specific method of montage actualises the potentiality of technical reproducibility. The first section introduces the Artwork essay from the perspective of the concept of montage in order to characterise what Benjamin calls the 'new understanding' for which cinematographic montage 'is the most suitable vehicle'. I explain this in terms of the capacity to confront the cinematographic presentation of reality as an 'illusory nature of second degree'.[19] This underlines the contribution of montage towards the configuration of a new sensibility marked by the equilibrium or interplay with the technical presentation of reality. I will argue, however, that such a sensibility remains suspended by the logic of capitalism and fascism, for which the politicisation of art is necessary. This consequently elicits the radicalisation of the principle of montage, which I discuss in sections two and three in relation to photography and Brecht's epic theatre. Critical to the presentation of the interplay between technology and the human sensorium is the distinction of two temporalities through which Benjamin problematically oscillates and which we must discern to differentiate what is conceivable and attainable *in* capitalism and what remains *out* of capitalism. Although Benjamin entertains the idea that the equilibrium between human sensibility and technology is virtually embedded in technical reproducibility, he also maintains that its actualisation in capitalism is achievable only in momentary and fragmentary ways.

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[19] *SW* 3:107; *WuN* 16:108.

1. The Law of Montage

The third version of the essay on reproducibility regards the technically reproducible work of art as a *construct* (*Gebilde*) organised according to a new *law* (*Gesetz*), that of montage. Benjamin introduces these remarks in sections VI and XIV in order to characterise the changes produced on the structure of experience by technical reproducibility. He writes that the artwork has become a *construct* able to produce a 'new understanding' for which film is the 'most serviceable vehicle'.[20] The essay discloses the characteristics of this construction in three main moments. Firstly, Benjamin emphasizes the relationship between reproducibility and montage in terms of film's capacity for improvement which, grounded in the principle of montage, counteracts the uniqueness of traditional art: 'In the age of the assembled [*montierbar*] artwork, the decline of sculpture is inevitable' (VIII). Secondly, while distinguishing between different forms of reproducibility associated with photography and film, Benjamin affirms that unlike photography film does not reproduce objects or actions but multiple *tests*. The point that I want to stress here is that, for Benjamin, film 'emerges on the basis of the montage' of multiple *tests* (X),[21] generalising then the principle of montage normally associated with his interest in Soviet montage cinema and Brecht's epic theatre. Finally, in paragraphs XI and XIV Benjamin introduces two comparisons that illustrate the fragmentary and artificial character of the image on the screen produced by principle of montage. In contrast to the stage actor, the film interpreter is denied the opportunity to 'identify himself with a role' and is thus denied a 'unified whole'. His performance 'is assembled [*montiert*] from many individual performances', or 'a series of *mountable episodes*' (XI).[22] Similarly, opposed to the painter's 'total image', the image produced by the cinematographer is 'widely fragmented [*vielfältig zerstückeltes*]' and its parts are 'put together according to a new law [*Gesetz*]'.[23] Throughout these comparisons *montage* appears in different formulations as the principle or *law* of configuration or construction of film, bearing the fragmentary character of experience: the experience of the actor in front of the apparatus is

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[20] *SW* 3:107; *WuN* 16:108.
[21] *SW* 3:110; *WuN* 16:114: 'Das Kunstwerk [ent]steht hier auf Grund der Montage'.
[22] *SW* 3:111; *WuN* 16:116, '... eine Reihe *montierbarer Episoden* zerfällen'. My emphasis
[23] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

constantly interrupted, the recording of this interpretation cut into parts and then organised or construed in a sequence which juxtaposes multiple episodes or shoots.

This process is presented in terms of a confrontation between the actor and the audience with an apparatus whose technical conditions demand the segmentation of the performance and its reorganisation into a sequence which produces the semblance or appearance of unity. That this unity is technically constructed or conditioned only proves that the 'free-equipment aspect of reality' produced by the cutter is all but illusory.[24] To some extent, the logic of the confrontation with the apparatus by means of *tests* reproduces the relation of the worker with the conveyor belt or the assembly line as the model for the construction of the 'cinematic presentation of reality'. This proves the latter to be the result of 'the most intensive interpenetration of reality with the apparatus'.[25] In this context, the essay on reproducibility stages the transformation of the work of art not only in terms of the massive appearance of the work which brings it closer to broader audiences (i.e. its reproducibility), but also in terms of its *mountability* and the effects it has on the production of a new form of understanding. As Caygill notes, opposed to traditional art and its allegedly 'manifestation of the eternal in time', the law of montage consists of 'continual movement and transformation'.[26] This contrast recast the opposition between symbol and allegory drawn in the book on the baroque, thereby characterising montage as an allegorical device. More importantly, it illuminates the perfectiona*bility* of montage, which gives the conditions for the cinematographic presentation of reality to attain the illusion of being independent from the apparatus.[27]

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[24] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

[25] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

[26] Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*, pp. 100–101.

[27] The dynamic produced by montage as principle or law of construction is supported by what Miriam Bratu Hansen and Tom Gunning call (borrowing from Eisenstein) 'cinema of attractions'. This term refers to the modes of perception forged by early cinema 'feeding on attractions such as the magical and illusionist power of filmic representation, its kinetic and temporal manipulations (not yet subordinated to character movement and the chronological momentum of linear narrative)'. Benjamin's conception of film understands avant-garde art in terms of its capacity to reorganise perception against later developments of linear narratives and the unity articulated by subject-centred modes of storytelling, thereby recasting the originary potential of early cinema and its capacity to transform the perception of reality. Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology', *New German Critique*, 34.Winter (2008), 336–75 (pp. 180–81). See also: Tom Gunning, 'Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, ed. by Tom Gunning, Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), pp. 56–63. In this context, Koepnick argues that fascist cinema is a further development of subject-centred positions articulated in reference to the figure of the dictator in a compensatory logic that unleashed aestheticising presentations

By generalising the concept of montage Benjamin brings the arguments of the Artwork essay closer to the problem of the dynamics of resistance and the subordination of the fragmentariness of narration to the closure or totalizing structure of the novel, as discussed in Chapter III. In section XIV of the Artwork essay Benjamin writes: 'Hence, the cinematographic presentation of reality is incomparably the most significant for people today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with the equipment'.[28] In the same section, Benjamin refers to this intensive interpenetration as a 'special procedure' which consists of the assembling (*Montierung*) of multiple shoots and the making of an equipment-free aspect of reality. The latter is not only the 'highest artifice' of technology but also an 'illusory nature of second-degree'.[29] To some extent, the new understanding to which film is the most suitable vehicle is intrinsically related to the artwork's reproducibility and mass circulation but also to its illusory character governed by the law of montage.[30]

The question is how the new understanding that film produces relates to the double interpenetration between reality and the apparatus on the one hand, and between the cinematographic presentation of reality and human sensibility on the other. In this double interpenetration Benjamin discerns both the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary potential of contemporary sensibility. While the former turns the interpenetration of the apparatus and sensibility into an *equilibrium* or *interplay* in which humanity's *space for action* or *play* is enlarged, the latter reduces this relationship to the anaesthetization of sensibility by means of the enervative effects of

of power: Lutz Peter Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), pp. 126–29.

[28] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.

[29] *SW* 3:115; *WuN* 16:127.

[30] On this point, Koepnick offers an account of the transformation of montage and its capacity to produce two forms of shock which problematise Benjamin's 'rendition of montage as cinema's exclusively emancipatory and empowering principle'. Comparing Walter Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) to Dziga Vertov's experiment with *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Koepnick argues for the ability of montage to adapt itself to uses which 'anesthetize the viewer's critical activity' and thus reveal the 'deterministic elements' of Benjamin's interpretation of avant-garde montage. This deterministic element appears, however, only when montage is denied the 'correctibility' which Benjamin ascribes to it. It is precisely its ability to be corrected which interrupts the illusory nature of second degree constructed by montage. What the law of montage reveals is that its revolutionary and counter-revolutionary potential are open to further transformation. Neglecting the possibility that montage may also be subordinated to the logic of capital produces a progressivistic reading of Benjamin and the Artwork essay, consequently obscuring its critical potential to contest such subordination. See: *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*: 113, 132–33. On the 'correctibility' of montage, see Beatrice Hanssen, 'Benjamin or Heidegger: Aesthetics and Politics in an Age of Technology', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London and NY: Continuum, 2005), pp. 80–81.

shock, producing then a reflex conditioning rather than long-term practice which may transforms technology into second nature. In the Artwork essay, the equilibrium or interplay between sensibility and technology remains suspended or subordinated to the anaesthetization of sensibility, for which only its momentary actualisation is possible by means of what Benjamin calls the '*politicization of art*'. In light of the suspended interplay between technology and sensibility, the illusion of second degree produced by cinematographic presentation appears as reality. Its interruption illuminates, therefore, the technical character and the fragmentariness of the presentation of reality in film.

Reading the Artwork essay from the perspective of the concept of montage contributes to the analysis of the changes in the structure of experience produced by the reproducibility of the work of art. Miriam Bratu Hansen summarises the effects of reproducibility in an scheme organised around two axes: the axis of temporal and spatial *nearness* and *distance,* and the axis of *sameness* and *uniqueness* or repetition and singularity.[31] What this scheme brings together is an interpretation of the essay from the perspective of the *sense for the sameness* grounded in reproducibility, according to which the potentiality of the new technologies resides in their capacity to produce 'a collective and playful (non fatal) innervation of the technologically transformed *physis*'.[32] As organising principle, *montage* brings another axis into play, that of fragmentariness and totality, or *mountability* and unity. From this perspective, the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility not only produces the sense for the sameness by means of its mass circulation in contemporary urban contexts; it also charges this sense for sameness with an illusory nature to which sensibility responds in divergent ways according to its capacity to contest such an illusion of 'second degree'.

What this presentation of the Artwork essay clarifies is that both mechanical repetition and Benjamin's notions of *tests, practice*, and *training* find in the model of the film strip an opportunity for the realisation of two different forms of sensibility, both of which are configured according to the law of montage. If film is the 'battleground' or the 'larger ''force field''' in Benjamin's aesthetics, as Hansen rightly affirms,[33] this is organised according to the dynamics of resistance and counter-resistance in which the force or potentiality of the principle of montage is permanently negotiated so as to either

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[31] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 93.
[32] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 80.
[33] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 79, 85.

maintain its fragmentariness open or to produce a false presentation of an 'equipment-free' reality. It is in the negotiation of the openness of montage that the interplay or equilibrium between sensibility and technology can be actualised, thereby producing a new form of understanding.

2. The Interplay Between Sensibility and Technology

The new understanding which Benjamin associates with modern technology, and for which film is its most suitable vehicle, becomes apparent in the equilibrium or interplay between human sensibility and technology. This new understanding consists less in a theoretical comprehension of the new technologies and media than in their mastery by means of a long-term practice which critically appropriates their potential and turns technology into humanity's *second nature*. Two critical features of the interplay between humanity and technology are addressed in this section. First, the place this interplay occupies in the discussion on different temporalities with regard to what is attainable in capitalism and what remains out of capitalism. Second, the relationship between this interplay and the politicisation of art which Benjamin defends in the final section of the essay and which came to be seen as his critical contribution towards a Marxist, materialist aesthetics. On these topics I suggest that the interplay between humanity and technology (and consequently the new understanding it bodies forth) is unattainable in capitalism for which it can only be momentarily actualised. This momentary, fragmentary actualisation is what I suggest must be understood as the politicisation of art.

The interplay between humanity and technology appears under two different guises in the essay on reproducibility. These map out the temporalities that Benjamin outlines in the methodological opening of essay, where he delimits the conditions within which it is possible to elaborate a prognosis on the future of art, technology and experience. Benjamin distinguishes between discussing the 'proletarian society after its seizure of power' and the critique of the 'developmental tendencies' of society in capitalism.[34] Following this distinction which Marx traces in his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Benjamin locates his investigation within the limits of the tendencies of art,

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[34] *SW* 3: 101; *WuN*: 96.

technology and experience which are discernible *in* capitalism, thereby rejecting the possibility of offering an account of what a post-capitalist society might look like, thereby eluding a lapse into dogmatism.

Peter Fenves explains this distinction in terms of Benjamin's own reference to Marx, but also in terms of the metaphysical questions for which Kantian philosophy defers ultimate answers. For Fenves, the temporalities outlined by Benjamin correspond to the tasks which humanity gives itself according to what it 'is able to solve' (Marx) and those questions which burden human reason and nonetheless 'cannot be answered, for they overstep all power of human reason' (Kant).[35] For Fenves, the distinction drawn by Benjamin makes of the task of actualising the potentiality of technology an unavoidable yet unsolvable task. This consists in humanity's infinite task of adapting itself to 'the absence of a world independent of its ''perceptual apparatus''[36] —an apparatus that is technically conditioned. By considering the question of the state of art, technology and experience in a post-capitalist society to be a metaphysical question, Fenves underlines the limits of both Benjamin's research and the possibility of attaining the equilibrium or interplay between sensibility and technology. At the same time, this argument transforms such an interplay into a principle orientating action.

For Fenves, the problems raised by the subordination of the potentiality of technology to capitalism 'can be answered —*but not by us*: not us engaged in contemplation, still less by ''human reason'', and not even by ''humanity' at large'''.[37] Although he rightly points out the limits within which Benjamin situates his own investigation, it is critical to stress the historical dimension which undermines the conditions for attaining the interplay between technology and humanity, which Benjamin associates with both the subordination of the potentiality of technology to the logic of capitalism and the suspended transition from *first* to *second technology*.[38] Then, although Benjamin's project remains an unsolvable, infinite task, it may be momentarily actualised *in* capitalism by means of the interruption of the conditions that make such subordination possible in the first place, i.e. the conditions which make possible the identification of politics with its aesthetic, technologically organised presentation. In this context,

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[35] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: (Avii - ix) and Peter Fenves, 'Is There an Answer to the Aestheticization of the Political?', in *Actualities of Aura*, ed. by Dag Petersson and Erik Steinskog (Svanesund: SUN Press, 2005), pp. 152–69 (pp. 152–54).
[36] Fenves, 'Is there an Answer...?': 168.
[37] Fenves, 'Is there an Answer...?': 164.
[38] *SW* 3:115-6; *WuN* 16:126-8.

Benjamin's project is concerned less with effectively solving this infinite task than with understanding the different forms in which this task presents itself in the history of the relationship between technology and sensibility. It is on the basis of this understanding that it is possible then to break through the conditions that made possible the subordination of technology to the logic of capital in the first place. The temporalities demarcated in the methodological preface serve to stress the historical transformation of both the aestheticisation of politics *in* capitalism and the multiple answers which, albeit fragmentary, can be given to contest its logic in specific contexts. Thus, in denying the possibility of solving such an infinite task, Benjamin makes room for partial, fragmentary ways of contesting the logic of capitalism in concrete historical contexts.

By exploring the 'tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production' rather than the art of a 'classless society',[39] Benjamin's project is thus concerned with the production of concrete revolutionary configurations of experience. Its aim is not to explain how the completion of such a revolutionary transformation of the present can be fully attained. His theory of experience is then a theory on *revolutionary* gestures of resistance and counter-resistance rather than a theory of *revolution*. In restricting the scope of his own investigation he secures a more solid ground for the critique of experience in capitalism. Benjamin then secures what Caygill calls the 'openness of the future' by means of a critique of the given historiographic presentations of reality (for instance, in historicism), but also by means of restricting the scope of his own investigation while recognising the value of the exceptional and the indeterminate which cannot be anticipated.[40]

Although the temporalities sketched out in the opening of the essay on reproducibility are critical for the characterisation of the interplay between technology and the human sensorium, there are some passages which blur their differences. The first reference to the notions of *interplay* and *equilibrium* appears in the sixth paragraph of the essay. This associates *first technology* to magic and the 'mastery' of nature by humanity and *second technology* to modern technique and the *interplay* between humanity and

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[39] *SW* 3:102.

[40] Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 94. For Caygill, in this notion of experience 'the future subsists in the present as a contingency which, if realized, will retrospectively change the present'. Critical to this formulation is that for him 'the weave of space and time' captured by contingency is 'anything but auratic'.

nature.[41] Benjamin then illustrates the interplay of the technological organisation of experience through the photographic work of Eugène Atget and through film production: while the former announces the dominance of exhibition over cult value (VII), the latter reveals the possibility of improvement of technically reproducible artworks by means of its mount*able* character, which contests the eternal value of traditional art (VIII). The following sections of the essay develop the effects on perception produced by the transition from a form of production oriented towards cult and eternity towards another oriented towards exhibition, transitoriness and perfectibility. The essay thus presents the political character of art in terms of the *Spielraum* and the *optical unconscious* opened up by cinema and the interrelated work of the law of montage and the collective dimension of experience it forges.[42] Although this notion of politics is formulated with excessive confidence in regards to the masses, it is however questioned in paragraphs XII and XIII, in which Benjamin maintains that the 'expropriation of film capital' is 'an urgent demand for the proletariat'.[43] This demand signals both the interruption of the *interplay* or *equilibrium* between humanity and technology in capitalism and the masses' need to *act* in order to actualise its potentiality, introducing what Fenves calls the 'imperative' dimension of the *politicisation of art*.

Paragraph XVI finally states that 'the most important function of film is to establish the *equilibrium* between human beings and the apparatus',[44] explaining it by means of two different yet complimentary processes: 1) the outbreak of mass psychosis which is offered by technology to human beings (XVI), and 2) the development of the *tactile* [*taktish*] quality of perception (XVII) or a form of *reception in distraction* [*Zerstreuung*] which opposes to *optical*, *contemplative reception* (XVIII). For Benjamin, these forms of perception and reception had marked the *interplay* or *equilibrium* with technology. However, as the well-known epilogue concludes, Marinetti's celebratory interpretation

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[41] *SW* 3:107.

[42] In XVI, Benjamin affirms that the camera and its capacity to alter both time and space 'manages to assure us of a vast and unusual field of action [*Spielraum*]'. On the *optical unconscious*, he writes: 'film furthers insights into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups' and by its 'accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects', thereby expanding time and space by means of slow motion and close-ups (*SW* 3:117).

[43] *SW* 3:115. In X, Benjamin had first affirmed: 'For the majority of city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph' (*SW* 3:111; *WuN* 16:117-8).

[44] *SW* 3:117.

of colonial war shows this new realm of experience could never truly be realised as humanity 'was not mature enough to make technology its organ'.[45]

What the concepts of montage and interplay reveal is the tension between two different dimensions in Benjamin's political thought. On the one hand, the transition from traditional to technically reproducible art is explained in terms of the possibilities inaugurated within the realm of experience by technical reproduci*bility* and mounta*bility*. The complete realisation of this realm of experience had marked the transition from first to second technology, from cult to politics, from optical-contemplative to tactile-distracted perception. On the other hand, however, the essay highlights the interruption of such a process by capitalism. It is an interruption that manifests itself as the aestheticization of politics and which grounds the need for the politicisation of art as an interruption of second order. Benjamin's call for the politicisation of art emerges, therefore, from the diagnosis of the suspended transition from first to second technology, from cult to politics, and from contemplation to participation.

The equilibrium between humanity and technology appears then as a discrete configuration of a future which nevertheless remains unrealisable under the present conditions. While this equilibrium remains an infinite task whose completion can only mean a total rupture with capitalism, the politicisation of art aims to actualise it *in* the present. Benjamin's prognosis on the future of art, technology and experience can do no more than maintain the openness of the conflict between two different poles, the subordination of the potentiality of technology to capitalism, and the counter-resistance of humanity to liberate such potentiality by means of different practices. The concepts of *montage* and *interplay* serve then to emphasise the dynamics which informs the conflict around the openness of the fragmentary presentation of reality.

The relation between montage and interplay is further developed in section XI. In this Benjamin affirms that on the basis of the 'most obvious effects of montage' and its most 'paradoxical cases', art has escaped the realm of the 'beautiful semblance'. In these dynamics two different yet interrelated lines of argumentation are opened. The first line discloses the process of interruption produced by the new law of montage, bringing the essay closer to the insights on *recognition* based on the concept of *construction* which

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[45] *SW* 3:121-2.

Benjamin offers in the 'Small History of Photography' and in the essays on Brecht. The second argumentative line explores the new realm of experience opened by this interruption and develops the notions of *space for action* and *optical unconscious* in the Artwork essay. These two sub-arguments can be discerned in section XI, which opposes the law of montage to what Benjamin calls the *beautiful semblance* and its ground in *auratic perception*, and in sections XVI-XVIII, which explore the concepts of *space for play* and *optical unconscious* as two features of the new realm of experience which remains virtually concentrated (and undeveloped) in the current relation to technology. Considering that this realm of experience is unattainable *in* capitalism, the essay can only obliquely illuminate it. There are some fragments of the essay which nonetheless entertain the possibility of film giving complete access to this space, therefore blurring the temporalities demarcated in the methodological opening of the essay. The two sub-arguments finally converge when Benjamin problematically affirms that film has already liberated the potential of *play*. With this assertion not only he conflates the two temporalities outlined in the opening of the essay, but also declares the future which was previously intimated as a *possibility* to have arrived.

2.2 Auratic perception

The first line of argumentation regards *auratic perception* as the *ground for experience* (*Erfahrungsgrund*) of traditional *beautiful* art which, however, has become unable to sustain experience for a contemporary sensibility formed according to technical reproducibility and the law of montage. Critical to this presentation is that the *ground for experience* transforms itself historically, moving away from *auratic perception* in relation to traditional art to *play* in the age of technical reproducibility organised by the law of montage. In this context, Benjamin does not argue for the impossibility of auratic perception in contemporary contexts. Rather, he argues that in the age of the technical reproducibility and mountability of the work of art, auratic perception cannot ground substantive experience but only that which is a reduced form of sensibility, i.e. the *lived moment*. The centrality attributed to film as *Übungsinstrument* in contemporary perception can be rephrased, therefore, in terms of the capacity of film to either train

perception to ground experience or to solely produce an auratic perception that leads to the cluster of *lived moments* which provide no further relation to history.[46]

The opposition between the totality or 'unified whole' of the stage actor and the fragmented (*zerstückeltes*) image of the film actor introduces the notions of *beautiful semblance* and *auratic perception*. The *constructed* image of the actor, organised according to the necessities of the machinery that splits his performance into mountable episodes (*montierbarer Episoden*) and assembles them with the 'more radical forms of montage',[47] is the sign of art having 'escaped the realm of ''beautiful semblance'' [*schöner Schein*] which for so long was regarded as the only sphere in which it could thrive'.[48] Having stated the opposition between *montage* as *construct* and the *beautiful semblance*, it is critical to note that the tension between play and semblance emerges only in the context of contemporary sensibility. Although he considers Hegel's aesthetics to be an exemplary account of the beautiful semblance, Benjamin also maintains that for Hegel aura was not the experiential basis of art since the 'truth content of phenomena' was stripped from the 'semblance and deception of this false, transient world'.[49] If Hegel's aesthetics liberated the opportunities for play from the *coming-to-end* equilibrium between play and semblance, Benjamin understands Goethe's conception of beauty ('the object *in* its veil') as its artificial recasting, one in

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[46] In the fourth chapter of *Cinema and Experience*, Hansen offers a detailed account of the genealogy of *aura* paying special attention to its uses in Benjamin's essays on hashish. She emphasises that aura exceeds the meaning traditionally associated with it as a mere 'aesthetic' notion, referring to the qualities of the work of art (104). She then aims to show that Benjamin 'was able to think salient features of the notion of *auratic experience* as asymmetrically entwined rather than simply incompatible with technological reproducibility and collective reception' (113). Although I largely agree with the argument that aura names a 'temporal disjunction, the shock-like confrontation with an alien self' which Hansen attributes to the mnemonic (and 'daemonic') character of aura, by omitting the distinction between *auratic perception* and *experience* in the discussion on 'beautiful semblance' (113-8) she reproduces the traditional and problematic notion of *auratic experience* that undermines the very possibility of radicalising the possibility of producing such a temporal disjunction on the basis of substantive experience being opposed to forms of (auratic) perception which ultimately respond to belated forms of aestheticism. I agree then with the interpretation of Benjamin's writings on reproducibility as a novel search for the conditions which may produce such a disjunction without necessarily accepting that (against Benjamin himself) they implicitly suppose or argue for the recreation of aura but, rather, for the renewal or even the introduction of new mnemonic capacities. As I suggested in the previous chapter, montage (which remains largely omitted in Hansen's discussion due to its Brechtian inflection) embodies this new mnemonic function and gives the conditions for the temporal disjunction which is necessary in order to sustain experience. As I commented above, montage brings another axis to Hansen's two axes scheme (see fn 31 above). The shock-like confrontation with the self which montage catalyses is ultimately based on memory and, specifically, on remembrance. On this point it is important to remember the 'Copernican revolution of remembrance' (*Eingedenken*) Benjamin calls for in the *Arcades Project* (this call is formulated in a language which partially anticipates the development of the distinction between *Erinnerung*, *Eingedenken* and *Gedächtnis* discussed in Chapter III).

[47] *SW* 3:113; *WuN* 16:119. Translation amended.

[48] *SW* 3:112-3; *WuN* 16:118-9.

[49] *SW* 3:127; *WuN* 16:119-20.

which *semblance* or *appearance* determines the reception of the work of art. Thus, Benjamin affirms that Goethe's work is still 'entirely imbued with beautiful semblance as auratic reality'.[50] In this perspective, technological reproducibility and its law of montage re-opens the opportunity for play being liberated from its artificial relation to semblance, which would in turn extend or amplify humanity's *space for play* or *action*. In this context, the process of production and reception of the work of art is not directed towards the final configuration of the artwork but towards the training or unfolding of new forms of sensibility in its very process of production. Benjamin then contrasts two notions of *equilibrium* and the transition from the i) equilibrium between *play* and *semblance* in traditional art to the ii) equilibrium between technology and sensibility based on the liberated potentiality of *play*. The former comes to its own end with the emergence of technical reproducibility and the principle of montage which open up the *space for play*.

Critical to this argument is the fact that the expansion of the space for play does not define a linear transition from one moment to another. Indeed, the potentiality for play is subsumed under the logic of semblance and produces an artificial and distorted reorganisation of the equilibrium between play and semblance. Once the conditions for this equilibrium are no longer operative, its artificial reorganisation produces a belated aestheticism capable of subsuming the law of montage to illusory presentations of history and authenticity. It is in the context of this aestheticism that fascism constructs its own mythology. To some extent, the opening up of the space for *play* or *action* —on which the equilibrium between technology and sensibility is grounded— contests the artificial reinstatement of the equilibrium between *play* and *semblance*:

> Neither the concept of semblance nor that of play is foreign to traditional aesthetics; and to the extent that the two concepts of cult value and exhibition are latent in the other pair of concepts at issue here, they say nothing new. But this abruptly changes as soon as these concepts lose their indifference toward history. They then lead to a practical insight -namely, that what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spielraum*]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play. The positions which photography had occupied at the expense of cult value have thus been massively fortified. In film, the element of semblance has yielded its place to the element of play, which is allied to the second technology.[51]

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[50] *SW* 3:127; *WuN* 16:119-20.
[51] *SW* 3:127; *WuN* 16:119-20.

For Benjamin, the conflict between semblance and play continuously remerges in contemporary sensibility. This position mirrors his previous arguments regarding the conflict between the fragmentariness of any narrative form and the attempt to attain completion and unity in the novel. Understood from the general concept of construction rather than from the specific practices of montage, this problem reveals the conflictive rhythm that informs the history of the relationship between technology and sensibility. However, the above passage is problematic: although it is critical for the characterisation of the space for play opened up by film, it conflates the two temporalities discerned in the methodological opening of the essay. While the first part of the passage affirms the possibilities for play to be opened up by film (*the age coming to an end... / ...where the space for play is widest*), the second suggests that such space has effectively arrived and *entirely displaced* the value of semblance. The future, latent yet suspended in film, is suddenly declared as having arrived, conflating then the total overcoming of the tension between semblance and play with what may be attained *in* capitalism.[52]

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[52] It is in this sense that Wolin affirms in his classic study that, for Benjamin, film 'effectively abolishes the previous ritual or cultic basis of art and paves the way for the predominance of the political function of art', introducing then a progressivitic reading of Benjamin. On the same issue, Koepnick comments on the Benjamin's allegedly 'rendition' to montage as revolutionary technique as intrinsically revolutionary. See respectively, Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (University of California Press, 1994), pp. 188–90, and Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* pp. 132–33. To some extent, Wolin and Koepnick reproduce Adorno's interpretation of the Artwork essay, attributing to Benjamin a Brechtian 'blind faith on the powers of technique' (*An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 190-1, 196). This reading is partially reproduced by Hansen in her attempt to constrain the Brechtian motifs operating in Benjamin as a way of rejecting the progressivistic elements of the essay, which lead to the *liquidationist* readings of the problem of tradition and the purely negative characterisation of aura, both of which she contests. In the following sections I will argue that although some of these Brechtian motifs must be constrained, especially those developed in 'The Author as Producer' (*interruption*, *innovation* and *progressive techniques*), this can be done by reading the 1935 conference within the broader discussion on Brecht in the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1931, 1939), which in turn emphasises the centrality that the epic has for Benjamin.

2.3 The Politicisation of Art as Infinite Task.

Following the methodological distinctions traced in the opening of the essay Benjamin presents the problem of technical reproducibility in terms of the possibilities inaugurated by photography and film in contrast to other forms of manual reproducibility. Once the problem is demarcated in terms of the technical reproducibility which photography makes possible, sections III to VI present the liberating effects of reproducibility in terms of the works' *authenticity*. Benjamin returns here to the concept of authenticity that he previously introduced in the *Trauerspiel* book, for which the authenticity of the object is given by the configuration of its uniqueness in the process of being handed down by tradition (despite its transformations in the process of transmission): 'passing the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day'.[53] Technical reproducibility, by contrast, 'detaches the object from the sphere of tradition' and takes the work out of the original context for which it was produced, dissociating it from the conditions in which it was intended to be experienced.[54] Detached from its original conditions of production, the work reaches new viewers in *their* 'own situation' or context.

The question is whether the work is *actualised* or not when it is detached from its original context. If the experience of the work was dependant on its transmission by means of tradition, in the context of its technical reproducibility its authenticity is also unsettled. This, however, does not mean that the work cannot be actualised or experienced in a substantive way but, rather, that the conditions for its actualisation have changed: 'In permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced'.[55] With this formulation Benjamin identifies the conditions for reproducibility with the conditions for the actualisation or the substantive experience of the work. Again, he reaches a paradoxical conclusion

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[53] *SW* 3: 103.
[54] *SW* 3:104.
[55] *SW* 3:104; As Friedlander notes, like *origin* authenticity 'is not judged in relation to the point in time in which the work comes into existence' or the moment of production of the object, but from 'the point of view of the experience' of the work. This point serves to emphasise that Benjamin is concerned with the conditions for the substantive experience or actualisation of the work in light of the shattering of tradition and the unsettling of experience associated with its transmissibility. Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*: 148.

according to which the potentiality of technical reproducibility is completely liberated from its subordination to the logic of capitalism and fascism.

There are three key moments which bring into question the identity between the conditions for reproducibility and those for substantive experience. In section V Benjamin writes: 'as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it *has to be* based on a different practice: politics'.[56] Fenves offers two remarks on this passage which help to characterise the political foundation of art in the age of its technical reproducibility (and mountability). First, the formulation of this passage in the imperative form (*it has to...*) stresses the need of politics to *step in* as the foundation of the work, in opposition to the authenticity forged by tradition. With this formulation, Benjamin dissociates technical reproducibility from the conditions for the actualisation of the work. A political foundation *has to be* articulated for the work being actualised or experienced. Technical reproducibility does not offer the foundation which the *imperative* character of Benjamin's argument elicits. Thus, technical reproducibility shatters the conditions for experience which tradition provides without offering other elements to sustain it.[57]

Fenves' second remark relates the *imperative* foundation of art in politics to the task of communism which Benjamin affirms in the final section of the essay. If humanity was once 'an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods it has now become one for itself. Its self alienation has reached the point where it can live through [*erleben läßt*] its

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[56] *SW* 3:106.

[57] The English translation in *SW* 3 transforms the imperative form into the passive form of the simple present. The original reads: 'In dem Augenblick aber, da der Maßstab der Echtheit an der Kunstproduktion versagt, hat sich die gesamte soziale Funktion der Kunst umgewälzt. An die Stelle ihrer Fundierung auf Ritual *hat* ihre Fundierung auf eine andere Praxis *zu treten*: nämlich ihre Fundierung auf Politik.' (*GS* VII:357/*WuN* 16:108). Two comments must be made about this passage. Firstly, as Fenves notes, the formulation of the transition from ritual to politics varies in grammatical forms across the versions of the essay. While the now so-called third version expresses this transition in the imperative form —another 'funding *has to step in*'/'*hat... zu treten*' (*GS* VII: 357/*WuN* 16:108)—, the second version formulates it using the past tense —another funding *stepped in*/*ist getreten* (*GS* I, p. 442/*WuN* 16:61). The fifth version uses the present: *steps*/*tritt* (*GS* I, p. 482/ *WuN* 16:219). Secondly, missing the imperative dimension of this formulation, the English translation of the third version of the essay blurs the differences between this and the fifth version. Two problems arise here. The first is that either this transition is already completed in Benjamin's immediate past or it is taking place in his own present, being therefore open to be completed or interrupted. If the latter is the case, the difference between the present simple and the imperative form distinguishes whether the process is automatically happening or whether it is conceived of as a project to be undertaken, i.e. a new *task*. Here, we need to return to the temporalities which structure the central argument of the essay, which clarify that he politicisation of art is an open process which can only be momentarily actualised under the present conditions of production.

own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticization of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art'.[58] It is on the basis of a reduced form of sensibility (marked by the verb *erleben*) that humanity has reached the point in which the politicization of art becomes a task. Fenves' remark points out the *negative* character of this task, which is twofold. Firstly, it is negative since it consists of the suspension of the aestheticisation of politics or the identity between aesthetics and politics. Secondly, in stressing the temporal, ephemeral character that Benjamin associates with the political foundation of art (*in the instant... /in dem Augenblick*), Fenves underlines that the suspension of the aestheticisation of politics consists in a momentary gesture, one which is marked by what is understood as form of *indeterminacy* in which art —and specifically film— 'can be seen to consist in a massive groping in the dark'.[59]

The politicisation of art consists less in a political programme with specific contents than in the gesture which interrupts the suspension of the potentiality of technology *in* capitalism. For Fenves, however, this consists of an infinite task for which there is no answer.[60] Although this conclusion may be asserted from the perspective of the temporalities discerned in the opening of the essay, Benjamin emphasises the dynamics in which this infinite task transforms itself, thereby characterising both the aestheticisation of politics and the politicisation of art in terms of the ways they present themselves in different historical moments. The question is then how the momentary equilibrium between technology and humanity can be attained or produced. The question for the political and collective dimension of experience must be reconstructed, therefore, from the articulation of the interrupted transition from actualisation by means of tradition to actualisation in the age of the technically reproducible work of art organised by the law of montage.

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[58] *SW* 3:122; *WuN* 141. Translation amended.
[59] Fenves, 'Is there an Answer...?': 168.
[60] Fenves, 'Is there an Answer...?': 168.

3. Non-Auratic Configurations

As Miriam Bratu Hansen argues, the essay on reproducibility is marked by different gestures of progressivism which support the *liquidationist* readings of Benjamin's theory of film. According to these Benjamin had maintained a purely negative conception of aura and semblance and an emphatic affirmation of the technologies of technical reproducibility leading to a certain progressivism. Hansen identifies the progressivism of the essay in two main elements. Firstly, in the negative characterisation of aura developed through the opposition between reproducibility on the one hand, and the beautiful semblance and appearance on the other. Secondly, in the opposition staged in terms of the Brechtian model of interruption which, associated with reproducibility, confronts the illusory nature of the beautiful semblance.[61]

In the previous sections I have argued that the concepts of *montage* and *interplay* serve to highlight that the opposition between *interruption* and *appearance* creates the conditions for experience but only if this interruption is understood as an interruption of second order, one which suspends the illusory nature of the free-equipment aspect of reality. In this reading, I identified the progressivistic moments of the essay with those passages which conflate the two temporalities outlined in the opening of the essay and then blur the distinction which is in turn critical for understanding the politicisation of art and its imperative character. In other words, the progressivistic moments of the essay make the project of politicising art inoperative.

As Fenves suggests, this is an unavoidable yet unsolvable task which may momentarily be solved by suspending the artificial reorganisation of the equilibrium between play and semblance. In emphasising the dynamics of the suspended transition from first to second technology, this infinite task is located in the historical transformation of the aestheticisation of politics, to which the politicisation of art responds. In this reading, the *politicisation of art* works as a *counter-* concept: it consists of an interruption of second-order which in turn suspends the subordination of the potentiality of technology to the logic of capitalism and fascism. By presenting the politicisation of art in these

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[61] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 113-15. See also: Miriam Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema', *Revue Canadienne d'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies,* 13.1 (2004), 2–27, pp. 4–6).

terms, this chapter has emphasised the irregular rhythm that marks the development of the relationship between technology and sensibility.

In this context, *montage* opens up the opportunity for a new form of understanding which confronts the work of art as having an illusory nature of second degree and is, therefore, able to determine its technical conditioning. By contrast, this illusory nature is neither contested nor addressed by the reduced sensibility produced by shock but, rather, affirmed or *lived through* as an object of aesthetic contemplation. This is what the aestheticisation of politics reveals. Benjamin's prognosis on art, technology and experience anticipates both the resistance of capitalism to the liberating potential of technology and sensibility, and illuminates the conditions under which some practices momentarily *counter*act such a subordination.

In the third version of the essay on reproducibility, Benjamin's presentation of the law of montage plays a critical role in bringing together both the decline of auratic perception and the liberation or expansion of the space for play. What remains undetermined, however, is what the new ground for experience consists of in light of the suspended transition from first to second technology. While the essays on epic narration attribute a mnemonic function to montage which suspends the mere accumulation of lived moments and then relates the present to the past by means of memory, an alternative ground for experience is largely absent in the Artwork essay. The concepts of *innervation*, *space for play* and *optical unconscious* refer to the realm of experience that is latent yet suspended in the age of the technical reproducibility of the work of art. Both the space for action and an alternative form of experience are obliquely illuminated according to the characteristics attributed to *play* as a non-auratic configuration of perception which, on the basis of repetition of *tests* and *experiments*, may produce long-term *experience*. Critical to this argument is then the distinction between *auratic perception* and *experience*, a distinction which serves to contest the traditional association between aura and experience according to which Benjamin's views on the decline of aura automatically undermine any possibility for attaining substantive experience.

The attempt to bring together *repetition* and *shock*, *distraction* and *absorption* on the one hand, and *habit formation* and *innervation* on the other, may be one of the central problems of Benjamin's essays on reproducibility. These notions are interrelated in the

reception in distraction which Benjamin regards to be antithetic to contemplation based on *auratic perception*. This chapter will conclude with an examination of two central elements of Benjamin's concept of experience as it is intimated in the essay on reproducibility. The first element is the model of experience based on long-term practice or habit-formation that Benjamin associates with *tactile* perception. The second one is the radicalisation of the principle of montage in different practices or models of experience in photography and epic theatre. Here, tactile perception serves to demarcate the work of innervation. If innervation *reactivates* the sensibility anestheticised by modern urban life (Hansen), it offers no ground for experience unless it is complemented by the process of adaptation to reproducibility. On the basis of the interrelated work of innervation and adaptation or training the illusory nature of presentation produced on the basis of montage is contested. The next sections introduce the tactile quality of perception as the complement to innervation in order to explore the interrelated work of *interruption* and *repetition* in photography and epic theatre.

The tension in Benjamin's account of the reception in distraction may be better appreciated by bringing together the figures or images that exemplify its main characteristics in sections XVII and XVIII. Dadaism, for example, 'guaranteed a quite vehement distraction by making artworks the centre of scandal', producing 'the outrage of the public'. Architecture, on the other hand, is 'the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective'.[62] Both forms of distraction are based on the *tactile* quality of perception which Benjamin opposes to the optical quality that he associates with contemplation: Dadaism seeks for the 'uselessness' of the work as 'objects of contemplative immersion' and turns 'the artwork into a missile'; the reception of architecture 'cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of the traveller' but 'by way of habit'.[63] Thus, while Dadaism anticipated the shock effect that avant-garde film later exploited, architecture, 'since primeval times', has formed *habits* by means of dwelling.

Although both Dadaism and architecture contest contemplation based on auratic distance, they mark different aspects in the creation and actualisation of new opportunities to act. Dadaism embodies the moment of interruption that suspends contemplation and breaks through the lived moment. It operates like the *fissure* that

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[62] *SW* 3:119-20.
[63] *SW* 3:120-1.

breaks through rock strata in the reply to Schmitz' commentary of Eisenstein's *Potemkin*. Architecture offers the model for the formation of habits. i.e. the constructive moment in which humanity *learns to orient itself* in the new, extended space for play or action, which remains suspended in capitalism and wherein humanity had mastered *certain tasks in a state of distraction*.[64] Dadaism enacts the destructive moment of the suspension of the temporality of the lived moment; architecture embodies the constructive moment of habit-formation in which humanity critically inhabits the space inaugurated by reproducibility. Both moments are concentrated in film:

> Reception in distraction -the sort of perception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception- finds in film its authentic training device [*eigentliches Uebungsinstrument*]. Film by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. In this respect, too, it proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called *aesthetics*.[65]

By means of its shock effect, film trains the reception both in the reception in distraction which becomes dominant with technical reproducibility and in the mastering of the principle of montage structuring the work of art and daily life. It creates a fissure in the realm of experience by shattering the qualities of traditional experience and steps in as the medium by which to produce a new, non-auratic reception of the work. As previously mentioned, film becomes the critical object for aesthetics since its capacity to train humanity in non auratic perception might either foster or suspend the transition to second technology. However, if the moment of interruption is not accompanied by the model of habit formation experience cannot be attained. This marks the limit of the notion of *innervation* which —as I argued in the first section of this chapter— is demarcated by *adaptation* and, more specifically, by *tactile perception*.

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[64] While this topic divides interpretations into those who privilege one model over the other, they name two different moments in the process of —momentarily— attaining experience. Fenves and Caygill offer different interpretations based on the tactile quality of perception in 'There is an answer...?' and *The Colour of Experience* (specially Chapter 4, dedicated to the 'porosity of the city'). Margaret Cohen stresses the surrealist features of Benjamin's Marxism, thereby emphasising the disruptive or destructive character of experience. See especially the second chapter of *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). As I mentioned above, Hansen highlights the relevance of innervation in Benjamin's theory of experience, although she contextualises innervation within the broader discussion on the mimetic faculty and formulates the notion of *mimetic innervation*. With this term she emphasises that innervation *undoes* the effects which modern shock has on sensibility, then restoring or reactivating its *mimetic* potential: *Cinema and Experience*, 135-46.

[65] *SW* 3:121; *WuN*:138. Translation amended.

The tactile quality of perception comes to occupy the forefront of Benjamin's argument in the essay on reproducibility: 'The tasks that are posed to the human perceptual apparatus at historical turning points simply cannot be solved by way of mere optics, thus by contemplation. Under the guidance of tactile reception, they are gradually mastered by habituation'.[66] Here, Benjamin reformulates the concept of immersive *perception* as developed in his 1933 short review 'The Rigorous Study of Art'. In this work, he compares the pictorial mode of experiencing architecture with the immersive form of *constructing* the architectonic space.[67] These two forms of perception are considered in regard to the architectural drawings of Carl Linfert. While the former is determined by the distance given in the act of 'seeing' the building or its presentation in the image, the latter is fully articulated by entering the building and being surrounded by the space that that same building configures. Experience appears less as the distant image of the architectonic space (an image-space or *Bildraum*) than the process through which the body ultimately immerses itself in the architectonic, surrounding-space (*Umraum*). The tactile quality of experience is then concentrated in the bodily configuration of space.[68]

This form of immersion or interpenetration recasts the *tactile* or *haptic* perception which Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin formulated in their accounts of aesthetic experience.[69] While Riegl and Wölfflin understand the tactile dimension of perception as a critical element towards the configuration of its optical dimension (with the physical relation to the object contributing to the completion of the image of the object of perception),[70] Benjamin conceives of the tactile as the medium which produces the habituation in which the object of perception is ultimately integrated to human

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[66] *SW3*; *GS VII* 381

[67] *SW* 2:670; *GS* III:369. Benjamin refers to this form of perception with the verb *durchspüren*, which can be translated as *feeling through* or *tactily-perceiving*.

[68] *SW* 2:670; *GS* III:369.

[69] Alois Riegl, 'Late Roman Art Industry', in *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Fernie, E. (London: Phaidon, 1995), pp. 106–26; Heinrich Wölfflin, 'Linear and Painterly', in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. by Vacche, A. D. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 51–56; and Wölfflin, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*, ed. & trans. by Michael Selzer (Architectural Theory Texts, 2016), pp. 4–8.

[70] By inverting the relationship between these two forms of perception Benjamin also reverses the relationship between distance and nearness mapping the distinction between optical and tactile or haptic perception: if the tactile contributes to the optical then nearness is critical for the possibility of articulating the final *form* of what is seen, or the total configuration of the object (which drives the *Kunstwollen* in its continuous 'endeavour' to 'sustain order' in perception). On the notion of *Wollen* as endeavour in the work of Riegl, see: Adi Efal, 'Reality as the Cause of Art: Riegl and Neo-Kantian Realism', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Issue 3 (2010), p. 16. Also: Mark Paterson, 'More than Visual Approaches to Architecture: Vision, Touch, Technique', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12 (2011), pp. 263–81.

sensibility. Dwelling or inhabiting based on bodily organisation offers the model of the constructive character of perception and of the medium through which humanity can adapt itself to new, exceptional conditions. Critical to the model of tactile perception is that the organisation of experience is continuously articulated in the process of immersion, as previously examined in Benjamin's arguments on the immersion required to experience the mosaic in his methodological discussion on immanent critique, examined in Chapter II. As Alina Payne notes, the tactile character of experience develops 'cumulatively, over time, in an endless sequence' and ultimately denies any sense of 'completeness to the apprehension of architecture'.[71] It is according to the model of habit-formation based on dwelling that the body may master the exceptionality to which it is exposed in the age of technical reproducibility. Tactile perception opens the path to produce the interplay between technology and sensibility. It complements the process of innervation which interrupts the temporality of the lived moment and enlarges the space for play or action within which humanity must learn to orient itself. To this extent, tactile perception transforms the space for play or action (*Spielraum*) into an immersive space (*Umraum*) in which sensibility may dwell. To momentarily attain this means to counteract the auratic configuration of perception.

3.1 Photography: Construction and Recognition

In the 'Small History of Photography' (1931) Benjamin understands the persistence of aura as a symptom of the suspension of the revolutionary potential of the new technologies. To make this potential visible against the grain of new auratic practices requires, however, a revision of those conditions that motivate its persistence as *simulacrum*. It is at this point that Benjamin's own views can be turned into a nostalgic interpretation of the history of perception mourning the decline of aura. With the *simulation* of aura appearing as a protest against the conditions of capitalism, its persistence might convey a moment of truth which, nevertheless, obscures the fact that

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[71] On the basis of Wölfflin's notion of architecture's *corporeality* (*Körperlichkeit*), Payne characterises architecture as 'Janus-faced'. For her, Benjamin's concept of distraction is an endless but also fragmentary experience, opposed to the completeness required by contemplation (based on the image quality of architecture): Alicia Payne, 'Architecture: Image, Icon or Kunst Der Zertstreuung?', in *Das Auge Der Architektur. Zu Frage Der Bildlichkeit in Der Baukunst*, ed. by Beyer, A., Burioni, M., and Grave, J. (München: Vilhem Fink, 2011), pp. 60–61.

it does not provide the necessary conditions for experience. Indeed, the risk of turning the recovery of the originary potential of technology into a mourning for a mythical, non industrialised world is illustrated in Benjamin's closing remarks in the essay. Writing on his own investigation into the constructive character of pre-industrial photography, Benjamin affirms that with 'the illumination of these sparks the first photographs *step forward so beautifully and unapproachably from the darkness of our grandfather's days*'.[72] Paradoxically, Benjamin's own investigation into the non-auratic conditions which photography is able to produce acquires an auratic veil. However, rather than providing an account of the enlightening features of an almost mythical phenomenon against the darkness of its afterlife, Benjamin illuminates the continuous tension between the critical potential of photography and its regressive subordination to a *belated* auratic perception. Thus, he explores the alternative paths that history did not follow in the dynamics produced by the *creative* and *constructive* dimensions of photography. The task of his history of photography is to give the conditions for the *recognition* of those opportunities that went lost.[73]

Although the text does not refer to the *equilibrium* or *interplay* between sensibility and technology, it does make use of a vocabulary which points towards the development of these notions. Benjamin maintains, for example, that 'Bernard von Brentano was right to suspect ''that a photographer from 1850 ranks equally with his instrument''— *for the first time and, for quite a long period, the last*'; or that in 'those early days, object and technology *correspond* just as precisely as they diverge in the following period of decline'.[74] The essay on photography explains the decline of photography in terms of the appearance of *aura*. The aura surrounding the image witness to the interruption of the *correspondence* which existed between the photographer and the camera in relation with earlier (proto-)photographic practices. The emergence of aura then witness to the subordination the photographer's technique to a fetishist notion of art which obscures the space inaugurated by the experimentation with photo-sensitive materials. What is noticeable is that *aura* is not a property of the first photographic plates and

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[72] 'Small History of Photography', p. 94. Hereafter *SHP*. My emphasis.
[73] On the belated aestheticism of aura, see: Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 104-113. Also: Graeme Gilloch, 'Fabricating Aura: The Face in Film', Catherine D. Dharvernas, 'The Aura in Photography and the Task of the Historian', and Erik Steinskog 'The Decay of Aura / The Aura of Decay', collected in Dag Peterson and Erik Steinksog, *Actualities of Aura. Twelve Studies of Walter Benjamin*, (Svanesund: Nordic University Press, 2005); Maria Gough: 'Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde', *October* (2002), 53–83; and Costello, Diarmuid, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 179–80.
[74] *SHP*: 59, 72, 80. My emphasis.

daguerreotypes but, rather, the technical construction produced by more advanced techniques in both pre-industrial and industrial photography. The regressive character of this simulation is therefore double, with the more advanced pre-industrial photography imitating the 'old tradition of portrait' in painting by means of producing a *pictorialist* atmosphere and, later, with industrial photography imitating the already regressive effects of pre-industrial photographic *pictorialism*. This twofold process of subordination outlines the 'decline of photography' against the background of the original potential it had for expanding the photographer's space for action.

It is within this framework that non-auratic configurations of the image appear under the rubrics of Eugène Atget and August Sander. These non-auratic configurations are delimited in Benjamin's account by the notions of *creativity* and *innovation* introduced by László Moholy-Nagy (quoted towards the end of the essay). For Benjamin, the work produced by Atget in the early twentieth century was the first which 'fumigate[d] the stifling atmosphere that conventional portrait photography of the epoch of decline had propagated', producing then 'the liberation of the object from the aura'.[75] The discovery of Atget in the mid 1920s was more than a mere anticipation of Surrealist photography, which Atget indeed made look like a 'literary refinement' of the motifs that he had earlier discovered while wandering around Paris, encountering that which 'had gone missing or was cast off' and then sucking 'the aura of reality like water from a sinking ship'.[76] So it is that in the 'Small History of Photography' Atget represents both the annihilation of the aura that had artificially suffused the photographic image and the intimation of new forms of perception. The latter are marked by an inclination towards similarity that contests the beautiful semblance of what seems to be unique: '[s]tripping the object of its husk, the disintegration of the aura is the hallmark of a perception whose inclination towards similarity in the world has grown such that it even takes pleasure in the singular by means of reproduction'.[77] Ultimately, Benjamin relates Atget's images ('empty', 'lonely', 'without atmosphere') with the space of an apartment in a city that 'has not yet found a new tenant',[78] which offers an image of the space for play and immersion (*Umraum*) in which humanity must learn to orient itself or inhabit by means of tactile perception.

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[75] *SHP*: 82.
[76] *SHP*: 83.
[77] *SHP*: 84.
[78] *SHP*: 84.

In regards to the work of August Sander, Benjamin explores the construction of non-auratic configurations of the human image. In opposition to Atget's empty space, Sander's work is composed of a series of images that capture the human face —'like the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin'— with 'a new and immense significance' as if the image on the plate 'was not a portrait any longer'.[79] Rather than lending 'fullness and certainty' to the gaze, Sander's book is 'an atlas of exercises'.[80] Benjamin's views on Atget and Sander bring together a general notion of productive space opened up by non-auratic perception. In Atget the liquidation of aura opens a new space for sensibility which tends towards similarity rather than uniqueness, while Sander offers a series of exercises with which humanity may become accustomed to new opportunities in the representation of the human face offered by the new technologies.

The relationship between pre-industrial photography and the practices of Atget and Sander enables Benjamin's critique to acquire a new dimension, one that is framed in his essay by a passage cited from László Moholy-Nagy's *Malerai, Fotografie und Film* (1925): 'The creative possibilities of the new are in the main only slowly disclosed by these old forms, old instruments and fields of creativity which burst into euphoric flowering when the innovation which has been in preparation emerges at last'.[81] Although Benjamin explicitly rejects the language of 'creative' art and photography, the words from Moholy-Nagy substantiate his own views on the veiled potentiality of photography that is retrospectively discovered in the past, or the process of *recognising* an originary force that becomes legible with the passing of time. Benjamin is closer to the distinction established by Moholy-Nagy between the 'reproductive' and 'productive' capacities of photography and new media, i.e., the *re*-production of the given conditions for artistic production on the one hand, and their renewal in order to actively engage human perception in new tasks.[82]

The notion of *recognition* is briefly presented in opposition to the *saleability* of 'The World is Beautiful' —the motto of Albert Renger Patzsch's *New Objectivity*. Benjamin affirms that the *New Objectivity* 'can fit any tin can into the universe but can grasp none of the human relationships in which it appears, and which thereby, even in its most

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[79] *SHP*: 80.
[80] *SHP*: 79, 87.
[81] *SHP*: 90; *GS* II:382.
[82] László Moholy-Nagy, 'Production-Reproduction', in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. by Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 80–82.

dreamlike subjects is merely a harbinger of its *saleability* rather than its *recognition* [*Erkentnnis*]'.[83] To the subordination of technology to aesthetic principles Benjamin opposes the 'exposure or construction' of photography, which catalyses the recognition of the relations concealed in the technical configuration of the image.[84] Benjamin thus follows the remarks offered by Brecht in his *Threepenny Trial* (1931), for whom 'less than ever ''the reproduction of reality'' expresses something about reality' and thus reduces the presentation of 'actual reality' to its 'functional', instrumental dimension, thereby concealing and reifying the human relations that produce it. Reification becomes a form of oblivion. In order to produce the recognition of reality rather than its illusory, amnestic reproduction, Brecht affirms that something 'artificial' needs 'to be built up'. Benjamin then goes on to present two models which illustrate the interrelated work of *construction* and *recognition*, contesting then what he calls 'creative photography'. They are Surrealist photography and Soviet montage film on the one hand, and the 'strident resistance' of Antoine Wiertz and Baudelaire to the usurpation of photography by 'artistic photography' on the other.[85]

Although Esther Leslie and other interpreters have rightly emphasised the link between the artificial object, which must be constructed, and the practices of montage in Brecht's epic theatre and John Heartfield's practice of photomontage, it is critical to note that the contest between the creative and constructive dimensions of photography appears as the result of a continuous conflict of resistance and counter-resistance between two poles which are historically represented by different movements and practices.[86] Wiertz and Baudelaire serve here to illustrate the confrontation between the constructive character of photography and the alleged capacity of early photography for the 'reproduction of Nature'. If Brecht contested the illusory and aestheticised 'reproduction of reality' in the industrial world, Wiertz and Baudelaire had already contested the capacity of photography to represent nature in any direct, transparent way. The constructive

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[83] *SHP*: 91; *GS* II:383.
[84] *SHP*: 91.
[85] *SHP*: 91.
[86] Esther Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin and the Birth of Photography', in *Walter Benjamin. On Photography*, ed. & trans. by Leslie, Esther (Glasgow: Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 26. In her analysis of the temporal disjunction of *involuntary memory* Miriam Hansen problematizes a similar characterisation of the relationship between photography and film: 'This relationship should not be understood simply as a historical, let alone teleological trajectory, in the sense of still photography being at once foundational to and superseded by film. Rather, in its reference to flipbooks as precursors to cinema, Benjamin's conceit invokes the dialectical relation of still frames and moving image in the process of *défilement*, that is, the filmstrips' simultaneous production of and negation by the projected illusion of movement. We might read this configuration as an appeal to cinema's forgotten future': *Cinema and Experience*: 112.

character of photography is not reduced to specific practices which contest the capacity of this medium to *re*-present reality (whether as nature or as industrial, urban life). On the contrary, it also undermines those specific practices which maintain any aspirations to provide a legitimate, immediate access to reality. What Brecht's and Heartfield's montages enact is the radicalisation of this constructive dimension in order to 'conjure up' 'clichés' that transform themselves historically and maintain the aspiration of becoming ways to *reproduce* reality (whether nature or industrialised life). Conjuring up a *representation of reality* which conceals the technical conditioning of the image, the radicalisation of the constructive character of photography brings the 'viewer's association mechanism' to a standstill.[87] By contextualizing *recognition* within a broader interpretation of 'construction' as the principle that organises the work, it may be appreciated that though *recognition* might interrupt the fetishistic presentation which conceals the human relations that produce the object, it does not offer any direct access to those relationships (i.e. the reality free from the apparatus, as Benjamin affirms in the Artwork essay).[88] Rather, *recognition* illuminates the technical organisation of experience, or the technical conditioning of the photographic *presentation of reality*.

For Benjamin, Brecht's principle of *construction* unfolds what Moholy-Nagy calls the *critical possibilities of the new*. What I want to stress here is Benjamin's emphasis on the critical possibilities of construction as something that is constantly negotiated in the irregular rhythm of the history of photography. Understanding the artificiality of the work of art in a broader sense than montage as stylistic method, it is possible to *recognise* the constructive character of those photographs which *step forward so beautifully and unapproachably from the darkness of our grandfather's days* (as Benjamin claims in the opening of the essay on photography).[89] The *recognition* produced by *construction* illuminates, first, the history that is concentrated in relation to technology, one which is marked by the discontinuous rhythm of its resistance and subordination to the concepts of *art*, *creativity, beauty, singularity* and *appearance*. It is in this context that Benjamin later claims in 'The Author as Producer' that in Brecht's 'use of the method of montage', montage itself '*ceases* to be a modish technique and becomes a human event'.[90] This claim reveals i) the subordination of the principle of

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[87] 'The Author as Producer', Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 94–6. Hereafter *AaP*.
[88] *SW* 3:116; *WuN* 16:128.
[89] *SHP*: 91.
[90] *AaP*: 100. My emphasis.

montage to regressive practices aiming to attain singularity at the cost of a reified, amnestic image of reality, and ii) the need for the further radicalisation of montage as specific method or stylistic device. This *need* is a necessary condition for making sense of the *imperative* character of the politicisation of art.

In 'The Author as Producer' *Brechtian* montage is presented as an example of the *Umfunktionierung* or *refunctionalisation* of technique. The notion of *re-functionalisation* emphasises the interruption of the distorted relation to technology presented in 'Small History of Photography' by means of the *Um-* prefix (which alternatively plays a critical role in the method of *Umweg* or *digression* in the book on the baroque). Although 'The Author as Producer' famously calls for technical *innovations* and the development of *progressive techniques*, these are characterised in terms of the *re*functionalisation of the system of production. These consist of techniques which are directed towards the suspension of *given* functions, concepts and distinctions which make the current use of technology operable or functional. Benjamin writes that by refunctionalising the conditions of theatre, epic theatre 'succeed in altering the functional relationship between stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor'.[91] *Refunctionalisation* constrains then the affirmation of *innovation* and *progress* in Benjamin's reading of Brecht, therefore precluding a lapse into progressivism.

It is by means of the refunctionalisation of theatre that Brecht's plays 'enter in a dialogue' with the 'new means of communication', 'matching the present development of film and radio' and their technique of montage. However, it is through this dialogue that Brecht also 'went back to the most fundamental and original elements of theatre'.[92] Furthermore, it is the process of interruption associated with montage which 'entitles Brecht to describe his theatre *as epic*, always working against creating an illusion in the audience'.[93] What this notion of interruption emphasises is that *innovation* and *progress*, associated with the refunctionalisation of technique, are not orientated towards the *new* but towards the suspension of the current relation to technology. This interruption then allows the originary potential of technique to re-emerge. In this context, refunctionalisation consists less in the aim to produce new developments in technique and technology than in liberating their concealed potentiality.

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[91] *AaP*: 99.
[92] *AaP*: 99.
[93] *AaP*: 99. My emphasis.

3.2 Epic Theatre: Interruption and Repetition

In underlining the *epic* character of Brecht's theatre and the centrality which the epic has for Benjamin's understanding of montage, this characterisation of interruption precludes the identification of refunctionalisation with a progressivistic programme. The emphasis on the epic character of interruption also avoids what Hansen understands to be Benjamin's dissociation of Brechtian motifs from 'distraction' and other forms of 'perceptual engagement drawing on unconscious or at very least subconscious energies'.[94] For Hansen, these Brechtian motifs must be restricted in order to allow a proper theory of distraction and perception be formulated. She argues that the Brechtian elements informing the Artwork essay (especially its version from 1939) contribute to the 'liquidationist agenda' which brings the function of cinema closer to an enlightened Barbarism than to forms of innervation that emerge from the *space for play* opened up by the technologies of reproduction. On the basis of the opposition between those Brechtian motifs and the enlightened barbarism, on the one hand, and innervation and the space for play on the other, Hansen constructs a further opposition between the *masses* and *aura* which reveals what she calls the 'conservative strand' in Benjamin's thinking: 'with the undialectical surrender of the auratic image in favour of reproduction, it could be argued, Benjamin denies the masses the possibility of aesthetic experience, in whatever form or medium.'[95]

Even if the Brechtian elements that Benjamin appropriates are essentially anti-auratic, as Bratu Hansen rightly claims, they do not produce the effects she argues they have in Benjamin's scheme. (i.e. denying the *masses* the possibility of substantive experience). On the contrary, experience is intimated in the interruption of what Benjamin calls *auratic perception*, for which 'critical distance and reflection' produced by means of interruption are not at odds with distraction and play, as Hansen seems to suggest. Refunctionalisation may be but one strategy to produce the space for action in which distraction and play intervene to orient humanity's task by means of tactile perception.

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[94] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 101-3.
[95] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 103. By *conservative* Hansen refers here to the 'segregation of the critical intellectual from the masses as object of formation'. This position 'like the communist cultural politics [Benjamin] opposed, risks leaving sensory-affective needs to be exploited by the right'.

It is at this point that Hansen's argument serves to relate a series of concepts which are more fully developed in the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1931- 1939). Contextualising the remarks on Brecht offered by Benjamin in 'The Author as Producer' within the reflection on the epic in the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?', refunctionalisation may be understood as an interruption of second order rather than as the ecstatic interest in the new technological configuration of sensibility. Refunctionalisation operates by means of a double movement: it suspends the current relation to theatre and the given regime of presentation, yet allows for the *originary* elements of theatre to emerge. Paradoxically, the dialogue to which epic theatre enters with the most advanced techniques in film and radio allows epic theatre to recover the *fundamental* elements of theatre. Refunctionalisation, therefore, innovates by bringing the present state of technique and technology to a halt and by allowing the force of the epic resonate in the present. It is less a transformation of technology oriented towards the future than a transformation which allows for the subordinated potentiality of technology to come to the surface.

Brecht's refunctionalisation is thus directly related to the principle of construction previously examined in relation to photography: it radicalises the artificiality of the medium of presentation in order to reveal all forms of presentation as technically conditioned. Just as the constructive character of photography is not constrained to avant-garde practices but to the whole realm of photography (i.e. including preindustrial proto-photography), refunctionalisation shows the artificiality of any form of theatrical presentation. This section will conclude with a brief examination of the epic character of Brecht's theatre as a way to provide a broader context for the presentation of the interruption enacted by the technique or method of montage. Critical to this presentation is the relation between interruption and repetition, citation and habit-formation as a way of proving the relation between interruption and tactile perception established in the previous sections.

The first version of 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1931) opens with a discussion on the differences between the organising functions of the stage in traditional and epic theatre. The former is marked by the distance of the orchestra pitch which separates the public from the actors and creates a 'magic space' (*Baumraum*) which has nevertheless 'lost its sacral function'. While traditional theatre aims to maintain this function, epic theatre assumes the task of transforming the stage into an 'space for exhibition'

(*Austellungsraum*) in which the illusionistic effects of both commercial and political theatre created for bourgeois audiences and proletarian masses are revealed to be technically conditioned. [96]

It is in this way that traditional and epic theatre diverge in the configuration of space. In regard to the presentation of time, 'epic theatre is gestural': 'this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture'. One of the characteristics of epic theatre is the constant process of interruption: 'the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain'. Finally: '[i]t is the retarding quality of this interruptions and the episodic quality of this framing of action which allows gestural theatre to become epic theatre'. Episodic time is therefore opposed to the 'entirely illusionistic' unfolding or developing of actions through which naturalist theatre attempts to 'portray reality'.[97] It is because of its 'episodic quality' —the value attributed to each moment 'besides the value it has for the whole'— that epic theatre has no 'latecomers'.[98] It is through its episodic value (not of the 'sequence of scenes in time') that the dialectic of epic theatre is enacted.[99]

The gesture as unity with value is, at the same time, the basis for the sequence and the medium for its interruption. It produces the 'dialectic at standstill': '[f]or just as, in Hegel, the sequence of time is not the mother of the dialectic but only the medium in which the dialectic manifests itself, so in epic theatre the dialectic is not born of the contradiction between the successive statements or ways of behaving, but of the gesture itself'. The gesture, therefore, is constitutive of the dialectic which Benjamin explains by means of Brecht's notion of *recognition* (*Erkenntnis*):

> Yet the process of recognizing [*Erkenntnis*] of which we speak [the gesture] is itself a pleasurable act. The simple fact that man can be recognized in a certain way creates a sense of triumph, and the fact, too, that he can never be recognized completely, never once and for all, that he is not so easily exhaustible, that he holds and conceals so many possibilities within himself (hence his capacity for development) is a pleasurable recognition [*Erkenntnis*] [....] Not of course is man viewed as something mechanical, something that can be put in a slot, something

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[96] 'What is Epic Theatre?' (First Version), *Understanding Brecht (New Edition)*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Ana Bostock (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 1-2. Hereafter *EP*(I).

[97] *EP*(I): 3-4.

[98] *EP*(I): 6. Frederic Jameson calls this episodic value 'autonomization', in which each part has value in itself and can 'descend into the smallest unities of the narrative, potentially making the individual sentences autonomous as well': Jameson, pp. 55–56.

[99] *EP*(I): 12.

lacking resistance, as happens today under the weight of certain social conditions. Astonishment, which must here be inserted into the Aristotelian formula of the effects of tragedy, should be considered entirely a capacity. It can be learned.[100]

The dialectic at standstill is a process of Brechtian *recognition*. If the gesture brings the sequence to a standstill in order to give proper value to each component, its value then resides in the process by which it is *recognised* that every component conceals discrete possibilities in itself and that these are inexhaustible. *Recognition* thus enacts the interruption of the temporality of the lived moment. Contrasting the epic value of Brecht's theatre to the temporality of tragedy which modern theatre unsuccessfully imitates, Benjamin illuminates the multiplicity of futures contained in each gesture as opportunities to act. The 'stream of life' is now open to multiple futures which are virtually embedded in each moment of the episodic structure.[101] Benjamin's characterisation of *dialectics* and *recognition* (in terms of *standstill*, *detention*, and *retarding effects*, or in *unities* with *multiple* yet *inexhaustible* possibilities, not to mention the image of the river or the flux) echoes the discontinuous rhythm of *origin* in the book on the baroque (which patterns the total yet incomplete history of the work of art making the work absorb its *idea*).

According to the 'Prologue' to *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play*, the determination of the *idea* of the work of art suspends the operative efficacy of given interpretations of the work, opening it up to new configurations. In a similar fashion, *recognition* interrupts the play and illuminates divergent courses of action virtually embedded in each episode. The episodic quality is therefore marked by the relationship between sequence, continuity and unfolding on the one hand, and unity, discontinuity and interruption on the other. With its emphasis on the latter epic theatre precludes the illusion of pure continuity and development associated with traditional theatre. If the latter brings history as a continuous chain of events, epic theatre illuminates alternative paths in each episode. What this rhythm of discontinuous transitions brings about is the experience of the interruption of the plot which Benjamin extrapolates to the interruption of history, in which actors and audience become producers of historical change. The fact that this process of interruption might be learnt is critical for Benjamin: its pedagogical character consists not in the transmission of knowledge but in

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[100] *EP*(I): 13.
[101] *EP*(I): 13.

training forms of sensibility which negotiate the limits of the subject in favour of the collective. The pedagogical character of montage consists then in the 'alienation effect' which dissociates the play from the mere production of stimuli.[102]

The second version of 'What is Epic Theatre?' is composed of eight brief sections dedicated to the main features of epic theatre. It eludes, however, any reference to the *dialectic at standstill* and *recognition* and omits the images of rivers, fluxes and streams which made echo of the book on the baroque. By contrast, more emphasis is given to the centrality of the episodic structure. This version dedicates the first two sections to the elements that bring epic theatre closer to epic narration and the art of storytelling, in opposition to the unity of the novel and tragedy. The opening of the 1931 version dedicated to the configuration of space is considerably abbreviated, appearing only in the final section of the new version essay (section VIII). This in turn gives more weight to the articulation of time than to the configuration of space, stressing then *interruption* and *repetition* (IV), and the *citability of the gesture* (V).

The 1939 version explains interruption against the background of Aristotelian catharsis and the 'purging of emotions through identification [*Einfühlung*]'.[103] Arousing astonishment by means of the *un*covering of conditions, epic theatre *de*familiarises the audience from the process unfolding on the stage. This uncovering interrupts the sequence of the play by means of gestures. A novel element of the second version of the essay is the way in which this interruption is linked to the temporality of the lived moment and to the possibility of producing substantive experience. In regards to the two versions of Brecht's *The Flight of the Lindberghs* (1929 and 1930), Benjamin elaborates upon the transition from a glorified articulation of the hero to an alternative presentation which breaks down 'the spectrum of the event (*Erlebnis*) in order to extract the colors of experience (*Erfahrung*)'.[104] For Benjamin, these can only be drawn from 'Lindbergh's work' and be given back to the real *Lindberghs*: the workers. In the second version of *The Flight of the Lindberghs,* Brecht refuses 'the effect of empathy to which modern audiences are so accustomed'. Benjamin then refers to this empathy as the 'usual drug of passive identification' with the stories and victories of others that move the audience

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[102] Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 4–5.

[103] 'What is Epic Theatre?' (Second Version), *Understanding Brecht (New Edition)*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Bostock, Ana (London: Verso, 2003), p. 18. Hereafter *EP*(II).

[104] *EP*(II):18.

to illusory perceptions which only produce 'vague memories' (*Erinnerung*) and 'vague hopes'.[105] The second version of 'What is Epic Theatre?' thus relates the interruption of the temporality of traditional theatre to the interruption of the lived moment which characterises late capitalism. This interruption opens the opportunity to produce experience. The central element of this presentation of the process of interruption is the mnemonic gesture which it implies, echoing now both 'The Storyteller' and the essays on epic narration and Baudelaire's lyric poetry. Although positive references to memory do not appear in Benjamin's writings on Brecht, interruption is associated with *repetition*, *experiments* and *tests* which create new ways of occupying the empty space, breaking with the false memories and hopes produced by traditional forms of presentation.

In this reading of Benjamin, the notion of montage as technique or method for the refunctionalisation of the system of production (as it is formulated in 'The Author as Producer') is framed within the dialectic of *interruption* and *repetition* formulated in the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?'. Epic theatre interrupts the lived moment but is able to produce experience only by means of *repetition* and *cites* of other's actions, in a sort of mnemotechnic device which nonetheless contests the form of memory associated to *Erinnerung* or remembrance. Its destructive character does not offer the conditions for experience, which elicits repetition and reclaims for the public to be *trained* or *educated* in forms of repetition other than mechanic or reflex movement.

The most progressivistic moment of Benjamin (the affirmation of *innovation* and *progressive technique*) is thus delimited by the epic quality of Brecht's theatre, allowing for an interruption that recasts a collective yet undeveloped form of experience based on practice and habit formation, or the *slowly-perfectioned* experience which the 1939 *exposé* of the unfinished book on Baudelaire opposes to the reflex movement conditioned by the conveyor belt. Relating some of the concepts discussed in the previous sections and chapters, it may be suggested that, unlike the lived moment, *experience* demands the repetition of the same (*Erlebnis will das Einmalige und die Sensation, Erfahrung das Immergleiches*),[106] whether the same appears by means of tradition, history, and reminiscence (*Gedächtnis*) in the essays on literature, or as

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[105] *EP*(II): 21; *GS* II:537.
[106] *GS* III: 198.

practice in tactile perception and repetition in the essays on reproducibility and epic theatre.

Contextualizing the model of interruption associated with the procedure of montage within the horizon of the epic allows for a proper understanding of its role in the theory of experience. As a feature of the episodic character of the epic, montage both suspends the amnesic temporality of the lived moment and allows for an opportunity in which experience may be attained. The principle of montage has a double function in Brecht's epic theatre: it interrupts the sequence of events but at the same time reproduces gestures and actions by means of cites or quotes. Its disruptive character is therefore complemented by repetition. This model ultimately serves to conclude this chapter by establishing the relationship between *destruction*, *innervation* and *interruption* —as the opening up of humanity's space for action rather than the 'restoring' of the sensible (Buck-Morss) and the 'undoing' of the negative effects of shock (Hansen)—, and the *constructive* character of montage, repetition and long-term practice. This relation trains human sensibility in the process of adaptation to the exceptional conditions opened up by technical reproducibility. In this argument, destruction, innervation and interruption can only create a space which remains open to multiple outcomes, whether revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. Habit-formation and training by means of repetition thus enable humanity to orient itself in this new space and to produce an understanding which *may* contest the illusory nature of montage as technical artifice. The inflection on the possible outcomes of this process sustains both the imperative character of the politicisation of art (Fenves) and the rejection of the alleged progressivism of Benjamin's prognosis on the course of art and technology (*contra* Hansen).

Conclusion

Tradition and Reproducibility

I

In a letter to Werner Kraft from 1935 Benjamin describes the essay on technical reproducibility as an investigation concerned with 'the fate of art' and the features it 'will manifest in a future liberated from magic'.[1] The methodological remarks of the essay discussed in the previous chapter constrain the possibility of attaining such a future and argue for its fragmentary actualisation: the liberation of art from the dynamics determined by its subordination to the logic of capitalism, in which the productive forces of humanity are turned into a 'fetish of doom' subordinated to the 'bungled [*verunglückte*] reception of technology', as Benjamin respectively writes in 'Theories of German Fascism'[2] and 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian'.[3] The possibility of interrupting the aestheticisation of politics depends on understanding, first, what is lost in the subordination of the potential equilibrium between technology and sensibility to its alienated form and, second, the conditions in which substantive experience may be attained or produced. This thesis has examined different formulations of that which is lost. Chapters I and II were dedicated to the interrelated work of doctrine and tradition as the medium for the transmissibility of experience. Chapter III addressed the work of different forms of memory as basis for experience, while Chapter IV examined the corporeal associations that allow sensibility to organise the continuous flux of stimulus in industrial capitalism. With the shattering of tradition and the effects that shock has on memory and the body what is ultimately lost is the

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[1] Letter from Benjamin to Werner Kraft, from 27th December, 1935: *CWB*: 517.
[2] *SW* 2: 321.
[3] *SW* 3: 266; *GS* II: 475.

ability to relate the ephemeral, lived moment to the past so that the present may be contextualised and gain substantial meaning. What is lost therefore is the capacity to interrupt the mnemonic effect of modern shock by relating the present to the past.

Benjamin's writings explore different ways of recasting the temporal juxtaposition originally associated with the work of tradition and memory. Although the method of montage associated with avant-garde practices (in Dadaism, Surrealism, Soviet montage cinema, epic narration and theatre) is the exemplary model of *interruption* in the realm of art, the third version of the essay on reproducibility provides elements for the characterisation of montage as the principle or law that organises the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility, to include film but also the constructive character of photography and narration in general. This law is the medium that, for Benjamin, makes possible the development of a new sensibility, one which by means of long-term practice or training may reach an equilibrium with the illusory nature which the new technologies produce. This illusory nature, the 'highest artifice' produced by technology, had thus become second nature in a state of distraction.

In the light of the suspension of this possibility and the subsequent deferral of the equilibrium between technology and humanity, the radicalisation of the principle of montage as method or stylistic device in the work of art aims to interrupt the further anaesthetisation of sensibility. In the essays on epic narration and epic theatre, photography and reproducibility discussed in chapters three and four of this thesis, the *method* of montage enacts the temporal disjunction that is originally associated with the transmissibility of tradition and the work of memory.

Critical to the *method* of montage is its capacity to disrupt the present by means of the juxtaposition of divergent elements but, also, its ability to produce a new relation to technology based on long-term practice. The function of montage has normally been discussed from the perspective of its disruptive or destructive character, or its affinities with the dialectical image. However, it also necessary to emphasise that the opportunities it opens for human sensibility are not enough to ground experience if they remain within the sphere of an ecstatic moment of suspension or innervation. If cinematic montage, as Hansen writes, 'offered a temporal dynamics that allowed Benjamin to think against and beyond the overwhelming facticity of the present

situation',[4] it has to offer conditions for the interruption of this situation but also for the creation of an alternative relation to technology. It is in this way that repetition, training and citation become central for the characterisation of the principle of montage, as Brecht's epic theatre shows. *Repetition, adaptation* and *practice* supplement the *ballistic* or the ecstatic character associated with interruption. Although innervation and interruption open the space for play or action they do not ground experience unless long-term practice or training catalyse the interplay between sensibility and technology by means of habit and play.

The question of whether the dynamics prompted by innervation and interruption leads to the restoration or undoing of the negative effects of technology, or the creation of a new ground for sensibility might be answered by pointing out the relationship between the total or complete equilibrium between sensibility and technology and its fragmentary, partial actualisation in capitalism. This equilibrium is virtually embedded in the technologies of reproduction. Although the lost opportunities to develop it are irretrievable, this virtual equilibrium is found anew in divergent contexts. Understanding the present as being embedded with such potentiality creates what Caygill refers to as 'the openness to the future'.[5] The emphasis that Benjamin gives to montage as law allows for an understanding of the transformation of the 'illusory nature' which the new technologies produce and the corresponding transformation of the methods that may contest and reveal its artificiality. The openness to the future is thus marked by the irregular rhythm of the development of both tendencies in Benjamin's narrative. The aestheticisation of politics and the politicisation of art unfold in an irregular rhythm of resistance and counter-resistance. The politicisation of art is unable to give a definite answer to the endless task posited by the aestheticisation of politics. Thus, Benjamin's analysis is not concerned with making 'predictions concerning the status of art in a technologically transformed environment', as Hansen maintains.[6] Rather, technical reproducibility and the law of montage provide the basis for understanding the transformability of both the illusory nature which technology produces and the conditions for its interruption. It is the perfectionability of the illusory nature produced by technology which grounds (and renews) the need for the politicisation of art and its imperative character. The openness to the future is not

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[4] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 89.
[5] Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 5, 76, 94, 114.
[6] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 90.

grounded in the predictability of concrete facts in history but in the 'counterfactual imagination' configuring Benjamin's narrative.[7]

If Benjamin's theory of distraction may be seen as 'mild politics' in comparison to the eschatological dimension that the epilogue of the essay reaches (the either/or decision between barbarism and revolution, fascism and communism),[8] its *weakness* responds however to the materialist assumptions of his own diagnosis of modernity. It avoids both the progressivistic conception of technology and the romantic affirmation of proletarian culture for which, according to Hansen, such a mild politics needs a correction.[9] Hansen responds to the weakness (and ambiguity) of Benjamin's politics with the concept of 'mimetic innervation', bringing together both the destructive character of innervation and the positive basis of the mimetic faculty for the articulation of new forms of sensibility. Hansen's further development of the mimetic faculty as *mimetic innervation* highlights the role that mimesis plays in Benjamin's works, yet paradoxically radicalises the gesture of interruption that she associates with the Brechtian motifs in the essay on reproducibility and which she rightly aims to constrain. Thus, rather than downplaying the effects of Brechtian interruption, I suggest that these may be understood in a different way by noticing their contribution towards the epic character of Brecht's theatre. Framing Brechtian interruption within the broader context of the pedagogic function that the epic acquires only by means of repetition, rehearsals, and long-term practice, the affinities between the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?' and the transmissibility of storytelling can be illuminated. This strategy thus weakens the strong opposition between the Artwork essay and 'The Author as Producer' on the one hand, and the essays on Leskov, memory and literature on the other. In emphasising the epic character of Brecht's theatre not only is *interruption* contextualised in the broader pedagogic function attributed to the epic in general; the concepts of *innovation* and *progressive technique* deployed in 'The Author as Producer' also acquire a new (non-progressivistic) meaning: *innovation* renews the concealed potentiality of the system of production subordinated to concepts and practices that are momentarily made inoperable. As Benjamin suggests in the two versions of 'What is Epic Theatre?', Brecht's gesture renews the most *basic* and *fundamental* elements of

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[7] Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*: 119, 144.
[8] Gillian Rose, 'Walter Benjamin —Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', in *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Marcus, Laura and Nead, Lynda (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 104.
[9] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 91.

theatre, suspending the lived moment and its capacity to produce just 'vague memories' and 'hopes' in the audience.

Benjamin thus discerns different models of interpenetration between sensibility and technology. To argue that innervation, Brechtian interruption and other forms of suspension or interruption only provide an entry into (but not total access to) substantive experience means that the space for action or play they inaugurate is opened up to multiple outcomes or unknown futures. Here, the repetition originally associated with the transmissibility of tradition and memory is displaced towards the body and its sensory capacity. While the destructive character of interruption enacts the 'distortion of distortion',[10] experience requires the repetition of this gesture in order not to annihilate the illusory nature which the law of montage produces but, rather, to transform it into a productive second nature that humanity can master in a state of distraction. Such a mastery had responded to Benjamin's search for that 'productive self-alienation' which never came into being.[11]

II

In a footnote to the third version of the essay on reproducibility Benjamin writes that the proletariat 'is preparing for a society in which neither the objective nor the subjective conditions for the formation of masses will any longer exist'.[12] He does not explain this process of preparation. Rather, he offers the conditions for thinking the momentary realisation of this project in a productive interpenetration with technology on the basis of play. What this passage illustrates is the difference between the masses and the alternative collective, society or humanity that is counterfactually defined. This difference is critical for an understanding of the suspended transition to the relation to technology as second nature. This difference also serves to dissociate the masses from the alternative collective that Benjamin conceives, and to dissolve the false opposition between the masses and the concept of aura that different interpreters attribute to the

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[10] Irving Wohlfarth, 'Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation', *New German Critique*, 1979, 70–98 (p. 80).
[11] *SW* 3: 113.
[12] *SW* 3: 129.

essay on reproducibility. Although Hansen explains in an exceptional manner the antinomic character that the masses have in the Artwork essay, for example, she reads in Benjamin a further surrender to one side of this characterisation which ultimately 'elides the masses as a collective subject'.[13] This further identification of the masses and the collective subject is, according to her, the cost of Benjamin's 'tactical dichotomization of the terms *aura* and *masses* with regard to cinema' and of his understanding of the 'relationship between *cinema* and *masses* in terms of a structural affinity based in a non-auratic perceptual regime'.[14] The consequence of opposing the masses to aura on the one hand, and of equating the masses and cinema on the other, is double: the 'surrender of the auratic image in favor of reproduction' and the masses being neglected 'the possibility of aesthetic experience'.[15] For Hansen, *aesthetic experience* means *auratic* experience. What is at stake in this argument is the definition of *aura* as being either the hallmark of substantive experience or the residue of a belated aestheticism which grounds no experience.

Benjamin's distinction between perception and experience provides the elements for contesting the allegedly undialectical identification of the masses with cinema and the opposition between aura and the masses. As examined in the previous chapter, Benjamin distinguishes between 'auratic perception' as the 'basis for experience' (*Erfahrungsgrund*) in relation to traditional art, and auratic perception as the basis for a distorted form of sensibility in the age of technical reproducibility, one which grounds no experience. This confirms the structural affinity between cinema and the increasing movement of the masses, but does not deny the persistence of auratic perception in the age of technical reproducibility. What the distinction eludes is the possibility of understanding auratic perception as the ground for substantive experience in the age of technical reproducibility. This distinction then provides the conditions for understanding the persistence of auratic perception and its relation to contemporary masses. It is indeed on the basis of the auratic perception embodied by the masses that the ambivalence of the masses emerge in Benjamin's account: the double movement of the masses' 'desire to get closer to things' in reproduction (thereby annihilating cult) and the auratic reception of the new realm of reproduction and the illusory nature that the latter produces (thereby renewing cult). It is also on the basis of auratic perception that

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[13] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 93.
[14] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 103.
[15] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 103.

humanity *can live through* (*erleben läßt*) its annihilation with aesthetic pleasure. Benjamin emphasises that this renewed form of cult suspends the potentiality of play which is virtually embedded in the new technologies of reproduction. In this situation, rather than artificially *recreating* aura (as Benjamin entertains in the essay on photography), the essay on reproducibility gives the conditions for a more nuanced characterisation of the persistence of *aura*: it is a specific form of perception which constrains the potentiality for play and is therefore unable to ground experience.

Rather than opposing aura to the masses and identifying the masses with cinema, Benjamin offers a characterisation of auratic perception in terms of its capacity to either ground experience in relation to traditional art or to produce only a reduced form of sensibility (i.e. *Erlebnis*) in relation to the technically reproducible work of art which has liberated the potentiality for play. If there is an opposition determining Benjamin's argument in the essay on reproducibility, this is the opposition between auratic perception and play in relation to the potential inaugurated by technology and the law of montage. Rather than neglecting the possibility of aesthetic experience to the masses, Benjamin understood this potentiality as the ability to give form to a new collective *physis* in an equilibrium or interplay with technology.

The critical contribution of the opposition between aura and play in the Artwork essay is the characterisation of different forms of sensibility in terms of their relation to the illusory nature which is inherent in the law of montage. In this context, the problem of substantive experience and its relation to other definitions of *aura* in Benjamin's works can be posited in terms of whether those forms of auratic perception relate to this illusory nature as an artifice mastered as an illusion of second-degree, or if it is fetishistically received as the presentation of a reality free from the operation of the apparatus. If the multiple genealogies of the concept of *aura* cannot be reduced to the presentation of *aura* in the discussion on *play* in the artwork essay, the perspective opened up by this question offers an alternative ground to relate the divergent formulations of *aura* in Benjamin's writings.

The definition of aura that Benjamin introduces in the essay on photography and which he later repeats in the work on reproducibility, according to which *aura* is a specific *wave of space and time*, concentrates the disjunction that he associates, first, with the transmissibility of tradition and the work of memory and, later, with the possibilities

opened up by the law of montage. Benjamin defines aura as 'a strange wave of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance however near it may be'.[16] On the axes of space and time, auratic perception interrupts the conditions of everyday experience by relating the ephemeral present to what is distant, both spatially and temporally. In the essay on photography, this definition serves to characterise 'the spark of contingency' concealed in the photographic image:

> Despite all the skill of the photographer and all the good planning in the pose of his model, the viewer feels irresistibly compelled to seek out the tiniest spark of concurrence, a here and now, in such an image, with which actuality has seared, so to speak, the characters in the image. We are compelled to find the inconspicuous place in which, in the essence of that moment, the future nestles still today, so eloquently that we, looking back, are able to discover it.[17]

What Benjamin names as *a strange wave of space and time* which produces the appearance of a distance appears here as the object of a discovery which is possible to be realised only by a sensibility that seeks for the future nested in the past, *seared* in the photographic print. The *spark of contingency* that this perception produces undoes or suspends the illusory nature of the printing which endows its subjects with a magical character. In this sense, the essay on photography formulates two different concepts of *aura*. That which contributes towards the illusory character of photographic presentation (i.e. the aura of the bourgeoisie or the aura that Schiller's coat acquires as an indexical mark of its owner), and that which is associated with the 'beholder' who searches for the contingent elements that suspends such an illusory presentation. Only if the illusory nature of photographic presentation is contested can the *spark of contingency* be produced, or may the image be *othered* —to borrow an expression formulated by Andrew Benjamin.[18] What brings the two notions of aura together is the gesture that Benjamin attributes to the beholder of the image. As Benjamin explains in the exposé from 1939, *investing* the object with the ability to look back at us produces the experience of the aura of that object: 'To experience the aura of a phenomenon we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us'.[19] The ability of the object to reveal the *spark of contingency* or to *look back at us* depends on the ability of the viewer to *discover* the future concealed in the image of the past or the ability of the

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[16] *On Photography*: 57.
[17] *On Photography*: 65-6.
[18] Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin*, pp. 30–31, 37.
[19] *OSMB:* 136; *GS*1:646

observer to seek for the other's gaze. In the *exposé* of the unfinished book on Baudelaire, the passer-by recognises in the other the loss of the ability to return the gaze, the loss of the conditions for inter-subjective relations.

The gestures of *investing* the object with the ability to return the gaze and *discovering* the spark of contingency stand in a double relation to the characterisation of auratic perception in the Artwork essay. From the perspective of the distinction between auratic perception (*auratische Wahrnehmung*) and experience (*Erfahrung*), *investing* the image with contingency and *discovering* the other's gaze are either auratic forms of sensibility or substantive (non-auratic) forms of perception which open the opportunity to ground experience. They are examples of the former if they are explained as fetishist gestures within the logic of reification, in which the object is endowed with magical attributes. They are examples of substantive, non-auratic perception if those gestures are understood as forms of contesting the illusory nature of the image: if the photographic image is viewed not as a mere presentation of the fixed past but as being embedded with multiple futures, the beholder's perception is non-auratic and, consequently, opens up the opportunity to ground substantive experience. This comparison shows the affinities between the presentation of auratic experience in the essays on photography and Baudelaire, and the characterisation of experience in the Artwork essay (grounded in *non-auratic* perception): both forms of substantive experience illustrate the temporal disjunction that suspends the illusory nature which is inherent in technology and its effects. This disjunction opens up the technical image to multiple meanings that exceed the ephemeral present. In both cases, what determines the character of such experience as substantive experience is the attentiveness towards the discrete possibilities virtually embedded in the object.

What the decline of aura implies is the unsettling of the conditions for the persistence of this form of *attentiveness* in light of the emergence of technical reproducibility. It is within this context that the Artwork essay emphasises the confrontation with the object as technically assembled or mounted and, consequently, as bearing an illusory nature of second degree. It is in this sense that the temporal disjunction firstly associated with tradition and memory is displaced, in light of the shattering of tradition, to technical reproducibility and the law of montage. Here, rather than staging a stark opposition between reproducibility and the work of tradition and memory, the Artwork essay may be read as ascribing to technical reproducibility the potentiality to produce substantive

experience by means of an alternative form of producing the temporal disjunction originally attributed to the work of tradition and memory. If reproducibility annihilates the conditions for the 'unique appearance of a distance', the law of montage produces such temporal disjunction or interruption by means of the juxtaposition of divergent elements whose temporal and spatial origins recast the dynamics of nearness and distance in the technical image. This is the contribution of montage as the law or general principle of construction of the work of art, further radicalised in its avant-garde expressions. The gesture of *investing* and *discovering* both *the spark of contingency* and the *return of the gaze* depend on a particular form of *attentiveness*, one which emerges on the basis of the dynamics of interruption and the mastering of the object in habitual long-term practice and play.

Diarmuid Costello's distinction between the specific and the general concepts of *aura* serves to stress this point, albeit in a negative form. Costello differentiates between the 'specific' concept of aura associated with the reception of the work of art and the 'general' concept of aura linked to our ability to relate to *others*. For him the annihilation of auratic perception in regard to works of art is the sign of the annihilation of our capacity to feel empathy. Regarding 'aesthetic experience' as a propaedeutic for moral feelings and action, the 'celebration' of the annihilation of aura 'is tantamount to celebrating barbarism'.[20] For Costello, the loss of the capacity for auratic experience is the loss of the capacity to respond to 'the particularity of others'.[21] If the relationship between the experience of art and action exists, it is reversed in Benjamin's account of the politicisation of art: the work of art has a disruptive quality which breaks with inherited systems of perception, thereby expanding humanity's space for action or play. Art is not a propaedeutic for moral feelings but rather the battlefield to contest illusory forms of presenting reality. It works negatively by producing or staging the conflict between the inherited regime of concepts and practices, and the concealed potentiality of the system of production subordinated to those same concepts and practices. Here, to politicise art means to liberate such a potentiality in forms that make those distinctions inoperable, if only in a momentary way. Borrowing from Adorno, 'the difference of artworks from the empirical world, the semblance character, is constituted out of the

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[20] Diarmuid Costello, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today', *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 179–80.
[21] Costello, 'Aura, Face and Photography': 179–80.

empirical world and in opposition to it'.[22] If for Adorno this difference originates in the 'semblance character' of the work, for Benjamin this difference is produced by practices which undo or suspend the system of production that makes them possible in the first place.

III

The argument pursued in this thesis with regard to the notion of experience is that both the work of tradition and memory on the one hand, and technically reproducible art, epic narration and theatre on the other, substantiate experience from different yet complementary standpoints. Here, different forms of repetition are opposed to the reflex, mechanical movement produced by the model of the conveyor belt. In this way, the potentiality associated with reproducibility and, more specifically, with the work of art that 'emerges on the basis of montage', cannot be merely opposed to the work of tradition and memory. If it operates in a different medium (other than tradition and memory), the assembled work bears the potentiality to produce both a temporal interruption and long-term practice, yet always on the basis of recognising the 'impossibility to reverse the decline of aura', as Jay suggests.[23]

These forms of repetition are associated with mimesis, which Benjamin regards to be the '*Ur-phenomenon* of all artistic activity'.[24] With the potential liberation of play by technical reproducibility, mimesis is situated in the process of repetition that Benjamin associates with the equilibrium between humanity and technology. Such an equilibrium responds to the principle of 'once is as good as never', referring thereby to repetition, tests and experimentation. *Play* exploits, therefore, the experimental character that Benjamin attributes to mimesis. The 'inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimental procedures' on which the interplay between technology and sensibility is based offers the opportunity to ground experience in the absence of tradition. As Benjamin writes in 'Toys and Plays': 'the transformation of a shattering of experience into habit —that is

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[22] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 103.
[23] Martin Jay, 'Taking On the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness', *New German Critique*, 2006, 15–30 (p. 18).
[24] *SW* 3: 137, 127.

the essence of play'.[25] The attentiveness delineated by the concepts of interruption, play, repetition and habit associated with the principle and method of *montage* contextualise the opposition between tradition and reproducibility which the Artwork essay stages within a broader understanding of their affinities, providing then elements for contesting the antinomic readings of Benjamin.

The major affinity between the transmissibility of tradition, the work of memory and the law of montage on which the work of art emerges consists, therefore, of the double movement which suspends the lived moment or the ephemeral present while relating it to the past. What this affinity reveals is the way Benjamin conceives of the possibility of grounding substantive experience in different contexts and through different media. It is from this perspective that this work has examined the way in which experience is grounded as an open-ended form of sensibility in four different moments or contexts in Benjamin's writings which, although related, serve to reveal divergent inflections in the notion of experience. The opposition between tradition and reproducibility staged in the Artwork essay and 'The Storyteller' may obscure these affinities which, I have argued, are illuminated if the law of montage organising the work of art is highlighted. On the one hand, although Benjamin recognises in the Artwork essay that tradition transmits its objects not without their further transformation, from the perspective of its shattering or loss, the essay does not explore the complexities associated with the process of transmissibility. Some of these are critical for the characterisation of the law of montage: interruption, suspension and repetition. On the other, 'The Storyteller' introduces the transmissibility of tradition in opposition to the technologies of reproduction and the amnestic character of *information* without exploring the mnemonic aspect that the new technologies may recast. In this way, the confrontation between tradition and reproducibility presented in the two essays comes at the cost of producing the 'Janus-faced' image of Benjamin's understanding of reproducibility and tradition. The problem of this formulation is not that it gives the conditions for the so-called *liquidationist* or *conservationist* readings of Benjamin, or the 'techno-utopian' and 'media-pessimistic' solutions to the questions posited by the crisis of tradition.[26] The main problem of opposing tradition and reproducibility without looking at their affinities is that it eludes the inherent conflict that Benjamin identifies in the process of

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[25] *SW* 2: 120.
[26] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*: 80-82, 204.

transmissibility by means of tradition, which is more clearly formulated in relation to the notion of *immanent critique* in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. This analysis then aims to provide the conditions for understanding the crisis of tradition as a historiographic crisis to which Benjamin contests by means of his theory of experience formed according to the law of montage.

From the perspective of its loss, tradition is explained both in the Artwork essay and in 'The Storyteller' as the medium of transmissibility that gives the conditions for experience. In both essays, there is a recognition of the transformation of the objects delivered by tradition in the process of their transmission. Notwithstanding, both accounts lack a characterisation of that which is lost in the process of transformation, and, furthermore, of the divergent ways in which the process of transmission and transformation of those phenomena delivered by tradition is marked by irregular rhythms. From the perspective of its loss, tradition appears in the essays from the 1930s as an open-ended unity yet with a coherence or continuous structure that remains, in general terms, stable or unchanged. In the course of this thesis, the emphasis given to the process of transmissibility as it is formulated in the early essays on Kant, language, translation and, mainly, in the 'Prologue' to the *Trauerspiel* book, provides the conditions for the presentation of the inherent conflict of the transmissibility of tradition and, consequently, of its double relation to reproducibility. The shattering of tradition produces the crisis of the transmissibility of experience as historiographic crisis by dissolving the inherent tension in transmissibility.

Benjamin's dictum in thesis VII of the 'Theses on the Concept of History' that 'there is no object of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'[27] might provide an ultimate attempt to grasp the tension internal to the transmissibility of tradition. At stake is the possibility of recasting the present as a moment of crisis open to multiple, unknown futures. With the shattering of tradition, experience is unsettled since it detaches cultural objects from the web of tradition, or from their embeddedness in any collective structure organised by the construction of inter-generational memory. This crisis produces the possibility of having reproducibility without transmissibility in opposition to storytelling, in which the conditions for reproducibility are the conditions for transmissibility. By dissociating reproducibility from transmissibility, phenomena

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[27] *SW* 4: 392.

also loss their ability to bear the historical testimony of their own process of emergence and the marks of their own *origin*. The dialectic of culture and barbarism becomes apparent in the *origin* of phenomena and in what Benjamin calls the *objectivity* with which history endows the names that have been used to present the *idea* of such phenomena. With the shattering of tradition, what is unsettled is the possibility of patterning the irregular rhythm which informs this process of transformation and the subsequent possibility of grasping the total yet *incomplete* history of phenomena (which ultimately opens this transformation to new futurities).

Critical to this presentation of the relation between tradition and reproducibility is Benjamin's understanding of language as the medium through which this irregular rhythm is articulated, and the emphasis on the subtle differences between the essays on language and translation from 1916 and 1921 and the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. If Benjamin 'advances' a 'shift' 'to the history of language and to history as language' in the transition from 'On Language as Such' to 'The Task of the Translator',[28] the latter still conceives of the transformation of language (and the unity of knowledge and experience embedded in it) as a process of unfolding or growth towards an unattainable higher realm of language. Although this process contemplates discontinuity and breaks, the emphasis that Benjamin puts in the process of *becoming* (*Werden*) of meaning and language directs the attention towards the process of completion of language.

It is the concept of *origin* that brings such breaks to the fore of the transformation of language, in which the dynamics of continuity and ruptures which is inherent in history is explored in more radical ways. Reading the doctrine of ideas of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' and its concept of *origin* in terms of the transmissibility of tradition opens up an opportunity to understand the relationship between transmissibility from a different perspective than the one which the essay on translation offers. Here, transmissibility by means of tradition not only implies the transformation of what is delivered by tradition but also the *betrayal* that is inherent in its transformation, as Caygill argues;[29] or the loss that marks the process of transmission, illustrated by the *forgetting* of the multiple elements of the *Trauerspiel* in its subsequent reception and subordination to different methodologies for genre definition. This dynamics of transformation and loss constitutes the historical testimony of the phenomena which is

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[28] Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*: 34.
[29] Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Destruction of Tradition': 12-15, 20-21.

at risk of being lost with the emergence of technical reproducibility and its ability to detach the objects of culture from their embeddedness in the fabric of tradition. Therefore, the crisis of experience which Benjamin first identifies with the loss of the eschatological closure of the *Trauerspiel* is supplemented with the loss of the capacity of phenomena to carry with them the traces of their own *origin*.

There is, however, a further point related to the concept of *origin* that will serve to establish both the problems that technical reproducibility brings for the transmissibility of tradition and the affinities between technical reproducibility and tradition. In tracing the origin of phenomena, the illusory appearance of phenomena as complete, enclosed unities is annihilated or temporarily suspended. Then, with the shattering of tradition this gesture of suspension is also affected and the objects (or their *facsimiles-Abbild*) that reproducibility brings closer are both detached from tradition and from the conditions for mastering or suspending their illusory nature. If reproducibility brings the object closer, however, the law of montage allows for conceiving of an alternative basis on which it is possible to suspend the illusory nature of the object. Here, tradition and technical reproducibility reveal their major affinity if the law of montage is emphasised: they are charged with the possibility of contesting the illusory nature of the unity of phenomena, whether those delivered by tradition or those produced in industrial capitalism. The suspension of such an appearance of unity is not able to ground substantive experience if the interruption which montage produces lacks in a mnemonic function. This, I argued, is grounded in divergent concepts of memory in the writings on epic narration (specifically in the sense of fragmentary reminiscence or *Gedächtnis*), and bodily associations linked to play, repetition and habit-formation in the essay on reproducibility, photography and epic theatre. It is in this sense that the destructive character associated with montage and other concepts in Benjamin's writings (such as *dialectical image* and the *now of cognisability*) offer an entry to a new space for play or action but do not ground experience by themselves. Finally, a further element that contributes to understanding the different standpoints from which Benjamin looks at the possibility of grounding substantive experience is related to the openness to history that informs both the doctrine of ideas and the concept of *origin* on the one hand, and the dynamics established on the basis of reproducibility and montage on the other. With the deferral of the total or complete equilibrium between technology and sensibility Benjamin establishes the basis for the transformation of both the illusory nature that

emerges on the basis of montage and reproducibility, and the possibility of articulating or configuring new forms to contest its illusory nature. The deferral of this equilibrium ultimately contests the temporality apparently concentrated in the newness of reproducibility, opening the present up to the future. Just like *origin* does not forecloses the transformability of phenomena, the deferral of complete *redemption* or *resolution* in the essay on reproducibility creates opportunities for concrete practices that bring temporary *solutions* to humanity's infinite task to emerge. In denying a fixed solution to the aestheticisation of politics, Benjamin thus makes room for the imperative character of the politicisation of art.

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