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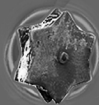
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The Messianic Past: Walter Benjamin and the re-enactment of History

Arianne Françoise Conty

Abstract

In this article, artistic re-enactments will serve as a backdrop for a re-evaluation of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history in light of Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma. This article will set out to show how remediation plays a similar role in establishing historic truth for both Benjamin and Freud, but it will also point to some fundamental differences. Indeed, artistic re-enactments, and their Freudian underpinnings, seem to reverse the mechanism at work in Benjamin, for whom it is the trauma of the present that is redeemed by the fragments of the past, rather than vice versa. If Freudian trauma re-enacts the past in order to free the present of its influence, it was Benjamin's present that was traumatic under National Socialism, and he turned to the past in order to leave open the possibility for a different future. How can the artistic re-enactments of the 21st century help us to understand how history and trauma are experienced in our own times?

“those who control the present control the past
and those who control the past control the future.”

George Orwell, 1984

If the 20th century art scene abandoned representation to concentrate on multiple perspectives and non-figurative forms of art that could deconstruct conventional ideologies, the 21st century has shifted toward remediation and performance art. In particular, museums and galleries repeatedly host re-enactment expositions, re-mediating historic events in video, photographic, installation and theatre performances that allow an audience to witness, and thereby belatedly experience, historic events that have marked the past.¹ Often hosting the same iconic re-enactments, these exhibits allow one to wander from a slow-motion video re-enactment of JFK’s death to a video game entitled *Waco Resurrection* to a reconstruction of the Milgram Experiment, to a two-screen installation showing how Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* had colonized the historic event; one can witness a meticulously filmed re-enactment in England of SS and Wehrmacht units in action next to the uncanny photographic collage of victims of

1 *A Little Bit of History Repeated*, Kunst-Werke Berlin (2001); *A Short History of Performance*, The Whitechapel (2002); *Experience, Memory, Reenactment*, Piet Zwart Institute (2004); *Life, Once More*, Witte de With (2005); *Seven Easy Pieces*, Marina Abramovic, Guggenheim Museum, (2005); *Once More...With Feeling*, Reg Vardy Gallery (2006); *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History*, Mass MOCA (2006); *Now Again the Past: Rewind, Replay, Resound*, Carnegie Art Center (2006), *Playback_Simulated Realities*, Edith Russ House (2006); *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, (2008).

war (the famous pictures of a napalm victim during the Vietnam War and a Shoah survivor) transferred out of their context and into a happy suburban setting. Such exhibitions are a mesmerizing meditation on history and trauma, or rather, history as trauma. If such a traumatic relation to the past can therefore be understood as marking the 21st century, the uncanny repetitions of this past in artistic remediations reveal to what extent we continue to seek our present identity in relation to this past and thus to what extent notions of identity, authenticity and history are today marked by a radical indiscretion or unknowing.

As a collection of uncanny repetitions of history, such remediations furnish a striking re-enactment of Walter Benjamin's attempt to "blast" history out of the past and into the present by collecting fragments or citations. But re-enactments also serve as a visual remediation in the sense of a remedy (both words are derived from the Latin *remedium*, to heal or redress a wrong), functioning as the medium of transference in order to enact a cure. Re-enactments thus seem to serve as a fitting backdrop for a re-evaluation of Benjamin's philosophy of history in light of Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma² and the role of transference in enabling a cure. This article sets itself the goal of developing these parallels, but also of pointing to some fundamental differences. On closer inspection, re-enactments, and their

2 If Benjamin was quite familiar with Freud, we find only elliptical references to his work (his fascination with Freud was discouraged by Adorno, who saw it as threatening to his Marxist methodology).

Freudian underpinnings, seem to reverse the mechanism at work in Benjamin, for whom it is the trauma of the present that is redeemed by the fragments of the past, rather than vice versa. It was Benjamin's present that was unlivable under National Socialism, and he turned to the past in order to leave open the possibility for a different future. What of our own generation? Are we still trying to cope with the traumas of the 20th century in order to understand who we have become, or do we experience our own present as somehow unlivable and are thus seeking in the transference of remediation art the unlivable potentials of a past that might give a different future to be seen?

In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud attempts to explain how the repetition of traumatic events in nightmares can contradict the wish-fulfillment goal of dreams. Traumatic neuroses, he writes "have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little" (1989: 598). The psyche is unprepared for the event that occurs, and so the event is suppressed, and returns in order to create preparedness through anxiety, but belatedly. To quote Freud once more: "These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (1989: 609). It is, however, impossible to protect the psyche by means of belated anxiety, for the breach in the protective shield has already occurred. This belated impossibility explains

why the dream is repeated again and again.

The breach implies the absence of the conscious mind to register the event. If trauma refers to an event someone witnesses without being able to consciously experience it, the repetition compulsion attempts to retrieve an experience at which the survivor was not consciously present. To testify to their own past, a past that consciousness was not able to experience, trauma survivors must therefore, to use the term of trauma theorist Dori Laub, “testify to an absence” (1992: 59). They live the events of their own past as a stranger, reviewing the images of memory, that, as Benjamin puts it, “(they) have never seen before (they) remember them” (GS II: 1064, cited in Hansen 2008: 348).

The survivor lives the traumatic events either through the mediation of the repeated images that we call nightmares, or in the case of a cure, through the mediation of the analyst, by means of transference. Yet because the analyst presents the trauma to the survivor from outside, as a contemporary interpretation, he or she reinforces the repetition compulsion, rather than aiding the patient to forego repetition by means of remembrance. By means of transference, Freud writes, the patient “is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material *as a contemporary experience* instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (1989: 602).

If trauma creates an insurmountable distance between the past event and the present mediated experience of it, it also collapses this distance, for

rather than simply accepting their status as passive victims of history, survivors testify to what Freud calls the “instinct for mastery” (1989: 600) by taking an active role in their destiny. Repetition, in this sense, is the means to take revenge on a past beyond one’s control by wilfully re-enacting the event not as victim but as the one in control. For Freud, this need to “make themselves master of the situation” (1989: 601) is more urgent than the instinct’s drive for pleasure, placing the repetition of trauma “beyond the pleasure principle.” Freud mentions in this light his grandchild’s game of *fort/da*, throwing an object attached to a string away and then drawing it near, in order to compulsively repeat, and thereby control, the departure of the mother, to *want* her to leave, albeit belatedly.

Trauma describes that part of the past that can only be lived the second time round, as it were, mediated via transference in the present. Marked by an absence that haunts the present, the survivor can make the experience hers only in the now, as a mediated interpretation. And this is precisely what re-enactments attempt to achieve at the level of the collective unconscious. In this sense, Freud’s explanation of trauma has explanatory power in making sense of many re-enactments, and has been used by many curators and artists to explain their works and exhibits. British re-enactment artist Rod Dickinson, for example, mentions the Freudian uncanny in his musings on how re-enactments are capable of addressing historic trauma. He writes:

Re-enactment seems, as a form of representation, strangely well equipped to address moments of collective trauma and anxiety... Almost as if, taking a Debordian turn, the re-enactment operates as the uncanny of the spectacle. A live image, in real space and real time, but simultaneously displaced³.

Inke Arns, the curator for the 2008 Berlin exhibit called *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*⁴, similarly called the exhibit “an uncanny return to the place of trauma” (2008: 53), by repeating events that have so shocked or jolted us that they call for continual repetition and re-interpretation in the now. The goal was not to re-situate the spectator in the context of the past in order to understand that past as such, but rather, as the curator put it, the exhibit was “about *the relevance of what happened in the past for the here and now*. Thus one can say that artistic re-enactments are not an affirmative confirmation of the past; rather they are *questionings of the present* through reaching back to historical events that have etched themselves indelibly into the collective memory” (2008: 43).

What Arns calls a “desire for performative repetition” (ibid.) is explained by the fact that we rarely live history directly. Rather, we are given re-mediated

3 Rod Dickinson. “Re: Re-enactment: ‘Live Art’ and Mediatisation” (December 8, 2005), available online at the New Media--Curating Discussion List, www.crumbweb.org.

4 *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*, Inke Arns (ed.), Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, November 18, 2007 – January 13, 2008.

glimpses of history through the media, the newspapers and television channels that bring us an event vicariously, mediated through someone else's eyes. In this sense, the reporter plays the role of the analyst in contemporary culture, bringing us an experience of history by means of transference. This lack of direct access points to an understanding of meaning itself as mediated, and in this light, the performative repetition of re-enactments can be understood as an attempt to experience something forever lost to us as individuals, first-hand.⁵ The mediation of memory is a constant reminder of this distance, as each re-enactment questions, in the words of artist Steve Rushton, "how memory is an entity which is continuously being restructured – not only by filmmakers and re-enactors but also by us personally, as mediating and mediated subjects (2005:6/Arns, 2008:61). Yet in line with Freud's description of trauma, re-enactments also eliminate the distance between audience and actors, between past event and present experience. Arns explains that "by eliminating the safe distance between abstract knowledge and personal experience, between then and now, between others and oneself, re-enactments make personal experience of abstract history possible" (2008: 61).

5 In the words of Arns: "History appears to be present at all times and in all places; at the same time, however, this permanent availability of media representation renders all forms of authenticity increasingly remote. In the current situation of intensified spectacles, there is a growing feeling of insecurity about what the images actually mean. In this situation artistic re-enactments do not ask the naïve question about what really happened outside of the history represented by the media – the "authenticity" beyond the images – instead, they ask what the images we see might mean concretely to us, if we were to experience these situations personally" (2008: 43).

In this light, the mediated re-enactment allows the witness to become a part of history, to experience it first-hand after the fact, and thereby make sense of it consciously.

Re-enactments thus testify to the absence of first-hand experience even by the survivors of trauma themselves. History understood as a shared past must thus inexorably repeat itself, and it is the mediated re-enactments that allow the events of the past to be claimed in the present as our own. Both near and distant, artistic re-enactments make Freud's uncanny visible, the strange feeling of familiarity with foreign events that we might call the experience of the *déjà vu*, or what Walter Benjamin famously called "the optical unconscious."⁶ By pointing to the impossibility of the conscious mind to appropriate the optical unconscious, Benjamin describes the images of the past as surfacing like a dream, giving us the code to decipher the present. If Benjamin can be understood as attempting to excavate historical ruins from the strata of the unconscious mind, he does not seek to create a meta-narrative or what he famously calls "the barbarism of civilization," but rather superimposes each strata to create an optical unconscious that can "carry over the principle of montage into history" (2002: 461).⁷

6 In the sole reference to Benjamin in the reference catalogue of the Berlin exhibit, Arns draws a parallel between Benjamin and Freud by remarking that "similar to the mechanical recording techniques (slow motion in film, enlargements in photography) described by Walter Benjamin, re-enactments make the Optical Unconscious visible" (2008: 63).

7 Comparing Benjamin to contemporary artist Hannah Höch, Brent Plate writes that "by fragmenting images of various worlds, Höch puts together a new image, a pieced-together creation in which the lines of juxtaposition continue

Benjamin's historical montage will draw the dialectical images of the past into the present the way a dream draws images of the unconscious mind into consciousness. The analogy between the historical montage and the dreamwork is explicit in Benjamin's writing, and can be traced both to his familiarity with Freud, and to the important influence on his work of Marcel Proust, who will provide him with the key concepts of the "optical unconscious" and the *mémoire involontaire*. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin will take up the relation between the dialectical image and the dreamwork explicitly, directly citing Marcel Proust:

Good nights turn so effectively the soil and break through the surface stone of our body that we discover there, where our muscles dive down and throw out their twisted roots and breathe the air of the new life, the garden in which as a child we used to play. There is no need to travel in order to see it again; we must dig down inwardly to discover it. What once covered the earth is no longer upon it but beneath; a mere excursion does not suffice for a visit to the dead city – excavation is necessary also.⁸

The past has sunk beneath the surface of the earth, beneath the surface consciousness of our waking life, and can be retrieved not by traveling the surface, but by excavating the depths of the unconscious

to show through. There is no beautiful, unified whole, no seamless blending of past and present, same and other, here and there; the world is merely frozen into an image of juxtaposition" (2005: 16).

8 Marcel Proust, *Le côté de Guermantes*, vol. 1, p. 82, cited in AP: 404.

mind during sleep. One is of course reminded here of Freud's famous excavation example from *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he describes the various levels of the city of Rome as being built one on top of the other, and gives us to imagine the unconscious as a city of Rome in which all of the levels would be superimposed rather than cancelling each other out. Allow me to quote at length:

Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past – an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus would still be rising to their old height on the Palatine and that the castle of Sant Angelo would still be carrying on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege by the Goths, and so on. But more than this... On the piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon of today, as it was bequeathed to us by Hadrian, but, on the same site, the original edifice erected by Agrippa; indeed, the same piece of ground would be supporting the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it was built. And the observer would perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other.

There is clearly no point in spinning our fantasy any further, for it leads to things that are unimaginable and even absurd. If we want to represent historical sequence in spatial terms we can only do it by juxtaposition in space: the same space cannot have two different contents. Our attempt seems to be an idle game. It has only one justification. It shows us how far we are from mastering the characteristics of mental life by representing them in pictorial terms (1961: 18-19).

Taking up this Freudian challenge, Benjamin will devote his life to trying to represent mental life in pictorial terms, retaining Freud's archaeological metaphor and seeking ways of excavating the past not to reproduce the historical continuity of normative historiography, but to juxtapose multiple pasts in the present in order to free the present from a unitary hegemonic interpretation. Benjamin's dialectical images are precisely the representation of unconscious mental life, the forgotten past, in pictorial form. Such a juxtaposition of Freudian and Proustian excavations in order to create a palimpsest of memories is made clear in Benjamin's article "Berlin Chronicle":

Memory is the medium of what has been experienced the way the earthen realm is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who wishes to approach his own buried past must act like a man who digs. This determines the tone, the stance of real memories. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same fact of the matter, to strew it the way one

strews soil, to churn it the way one churns the earthen realm. Because facts of the matter are only deposits, layers which deliver only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the true assets hidden within the inner earth: the images which, torn from all former contexts, stand – like ruins or torsos in the collector’s gallery – as the treasures in the sober chambers of our belated insights (2005, SW 2: 611).

Insights can only be belated, because they depend upon digging up the relics of the past, the forgotten images that can only be retrieved by tearing them from their former contexts like the heterogenous art works in a collector’s gallery. The conscious present then, is nothing but a collage, a remediation of the images of the past to constitute a new constellation that can free the spectator from the hegemony of a continuous identity, a continuous history, and thus free up the future from the constraints of continuity to allow for contingent transformation, and thus, for hope.

If the past is a collection of suppressed and forgotten ruins that must be dug up and brought to light, the betrayed possibilities of the past are excavated so as to give them a chance to be experienced, like the events of trauma, for the first time in the present. To reinforce that this unconscious resurfacing “testifies to an absence,” to repeat the words of Dori Laub, Benjamin describes the past as being retrievable by means of Marcel Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, when a memory flashes into our minds like a photographic snapshot, a memory that brings back

an event that was never experienced. Benjamin writes the following in his earlier article “A Short Speech on Proust”:

Concerning the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them (GS, 2: 1064, cited in Hansen 2008: 348).

Similar to the images that surface during sleep, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* allows for the past to surface outside the constraints of the selective power of the conscious intellect and its tendency to seek conformity, outside, that is, of the meta-narrative dictated by the politico-economic powers that be. In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites the following quote from Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) to emphasize the location of memory in the material ruins that we may chance upon:

And so it is with our own past. It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach, of intellect, in some material object... which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die⁹.

Because hidden in the contingent fragment and brought to light by the flash of a photographic

⁹ *Du côté de chez Swann* (vol. 1, pp. 67-69), cited in the *Arcades Project*, K: 403.

cut, the past does not live *within us*, but rather, like Proust's famous Madeleine, in the world of things. In Benjamin's historical materialism, memory thus becomes an imminently political entity, because the control of artefacts and their mediation controls not only our past, but also the future of that past which brings us, for a brief instant, the image of our present.

By asking whose history is being told and to what end, Benjamin's historical materialism undermines unity and causality, revealing the present to be "saturated with tensions." An anti-humanist, Benjamin's goal was not to fit these "thought fragments" into an overarching or meta-narrative, but to allow them a life of their own.¹⁰ He did not seek to reconstruct the past but rather to "rub history against the grain." History, understood in terms of temporal continuity, is not history at all but what Benjamin calls historicism. The continuity of historicism can only take place after the fact, and is thus not part of the past at all, but only a way of controlling it in hindsight,

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt corroborates this reading in her introductory essay, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940": "The main work consisted in treading fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were. It definitely was a sort of surrealist montage. Benjamin's ideal of producing a work consisting entirely of quotations, one that was mounted so masterfully that it could dispense with any accompanying text, may strike one as whimsical in the extreme and self-destructive to boot, but it was not, any more than were the contemporaneous surrealist experiments which arose from similar impulses. To the extent that an accompanying text by the author proved unavoidable, it was a matter of fashioning it in such a way as to preserve "the intention of such investigations," namely, "to plumb the depths of language and thought... by drilling rather than excavating" (*Briefe I*, 329), so as not to ruin everything with explanations that seek to provide a causal or systematic connection" (Arendt, 2007: 47-48).

from the present. In other words, it is only after the fact, to reinforce an interpretation of the present, that continuity is created as a meta-narrative, and this synthesis abandons history by the wayside. The trauma, in this sense, is the cut or break in the present that creates the past as lost, as suppressed and that thereby limits the reality of the present to the transference of an “official version.” In an oft-cited quote from “Theses on the Philosophy of History” he writes:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a casual connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It becomes historical, posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one (2007: 263).

Benjamin’s methodology for unstringing the beads of the rosary so that they can form a free-floating constellation is to repeat by directly citing the unredeemed experience of the past as a collector summons up history in the objects of his collection. This possibility can be understood as Benjamin’s own interpretation of what the revolution would signify, redemption as the absolute citability of the past. He writes:

To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for

a redeemed mankind has its past become citable
in all its moments (2007: 254).

Though its conditions are constructed by the collector in his collection, this juxtaposition can appear only when the movement of the present toward the past and the past toward the present comes to a stop, a “standstill,” or what he calls “the caesura in the movement of thought” (2002: 475). In one of the more difficult passages of the *Arcades Project*, he puts it in the following way:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent (2002, N: 462).

For Benjamin, such a “dialectics at a standstill” is possible only thanks to mechanical reproduction. In his article, “A Little History of Photography,” he writes of the uncanny way in which the technologically mediated image arrests the dialectical movement of distance and proximity, enacting a coincidence of opposites that could not have been created by the naked eye. It is precisely the freeze-framing of the camera, the break or cut, or what Benjamin will call the caesura, that allows the now to appear, and thus, that allows us to live the dimension of the

now. Such a conviction gives to mechanical media a power never before conceptualized, that of playing a redemptive role in human experience. Only thanks to such a mechanical caesura does the dialectical nature of the now come into focus as a palimpsest of the past in the here and now. It is the mechanical image that captures or freeze-frames the future of the past which gives the dimension of the now its immediacy. The camera as machine, then, captures not so much what the photographer frames and wills, but “the tiny spark of contingency,” that allows the optical unconscious to surface. Benjamin writes, and I quote at length:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: ‘other’ in the sense that a space interwoven with human consciousness gives way to a space interwoven with the unconscious. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin, *SW 2*: 510-512)

Captured by the unconscious eye of the camera, the photograph (and the video image even more so),

reveal to us the “inconspicuous spot” where the future of the past comes into focus, a spot that cannot be consciously conjured but that must appear involuntarily. As the site of the optical unconscious, the technologically mediated image involuntarily reveals the here and now to be the future dimension of the past. The here and now, that is, can be seen only when this dialectic of making near and making distant is frozen by the flash of the camera, which rips contingency out of the long-forgotten past. Benjamin calls this standstill, when the camera captures the present of the past, a “dialectical image,”¹¹ and claims in the *Arcades Project*, that “only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic)” (2002 N: 462)¹².

11 Gerhard Richter describes Benjamin’s dialectical image in the following words: “He looks awry, seeking his material and inspiration not in the officially sanctioned sites of a cultural text but in the refuse and debris that has been overlooked, repressed, or marginalized. Through a strategic montage, in which the neglected debris of history is put into a new grammatical constellation, a true revolutionary image emerges. This image, lodged in the language of its literary performance, is, for Benjamin, that of history itself.” Gerhard Richter, 2004, “Benjamin’s Confessional and Literary Writings,” pg. 233.

12 The citation continues: “And the place where once encounters them is language.” Like the dream, the dialectical image is already language, and it is for this reason that Benjamin will use verbal citations as his own means of re-enacting history. As is well known, Benjamin collected books (children’s books, books by and about the insane) but perhaps most especially he was a collector of phrases, a citation collector. Citation is at the center of all of his writing, not to verify and support his theses, but as the thesis itself, his comments being secondary. Benjamin’s later writings, in particular the *Arcades Project* and his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” attempted to create a literary montage of textual citations to tear history out of its embedded context and into the present. “To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context” (2002: 476). The goal was to cite, but without the overarching interpretation, hence the textual montage that he used to get rid of the quotation marks. As he wrote in the *Arcades Project*, “this work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage” (2002: 458). Working against dispersion, the context of the present is the frame for a photomontage,

Yet such dialectical images can be reached only by violent means for Benjamin, by wrenching the artefact out of the museum that placed it there to create the status quo and into a materialist collection (or better yet a re-enactment exhibit) that does not try to make it fit, that allows it to be other, an element of juxtaposition. The dialectical image, he writes in the *Arcades Project*, “blasts the epoch out of the reified ‘continuity of history’” (2002, N: 474).¹³ Reinforcing the stimuli overload that causes the shock of trauma, Benjamin writes of “blasting,” “jolting” as the method to destroy the hegemony of continuity, as if he wanted to shift the trauma from the unconscious to the conscious, from the fortuitous past to the controlled hegemonic present that he struggled to resist. Indeed, it is such a hegemonic present that he called the “catastrophe.” He writes in the *Arcades Project* for instance: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” is the catastrophe” (2002: 473). The catastrophe is the normative version of the present for Benjamin, and it is the goal of historical materialism to make us aware of this catastrophic present,

a superimposition to allow the past to “become space” (2002: 871) in order to “carry over the principle of montage into history” (2002: 461). Such citations create a constellation of past moments that flash into the present like an image emerging from the unconscious. As a re-claiming of the past, citation avoids context and linear succession, functioning, like Freud’s unconscious, along the axes of metonymy and metaphor (Or what ecstatic kabbalist Abraham Aboulafia called “jumping and skipping.”). In this sense, Benjamin practices history the way the unconscious dreams.

13 And again: “What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their ‘enshrinement as heritage’” (2002, N: 473).

and thereby bring it “into a critical state” (2002, N: 471). As with nightmares, Benjamin’s historical materialism attempts to create anxiety or what he calls “a constellation saturated with tensions” (2002, N: 471), to make us aware that we are survivors not of the past, but *in* the present. Because the past is not an idea, but lives on in the material world, it is by juxtaposing ruins that he hopes to build the groundwork for a *déjà vu*, a photomontage, in which each memory, like a wandering Jew, reminds the survivor that the promised land is not a place but the repetitive act of restitution (*tikkun*), of picking up the broken pieces.

The trauma of the present lies in its closure for Benjamin, for this closure eradicates the possibility of a future in the now. Because there is no continuity but that of oppression, the future cannot be planned for Benjamin. Only by turning to the past and disordering it, raising the oppressed back to the surface, allowing memory to reclaim what it was not allowed to experience, can the future remain open. Paradoxically, then, Benjamin redeems the future by returning to the past, as if the already and the not yet could alone heal the trauma of the present.

If for philosopher Jacques Derrida the openness of the future entails that the messianic never come, that it remain pure futurity¹⁴, it appears that for Benjamin this pure futurity only becomes future after the fact, that is, when it can redeem the past. The Messiah can come, that is, only belatedly, or, as Kafka put it, “the Messiah will only come when he is no longer

14 See for example, Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie*, 1983, Paris: Galilée.

necessary. He'll come only a day after his coming..." Benjamin owned the drawing of Paul Klée that aptly figures this messianic impossibility: it is that of the *Angelus Novus*, who is swept forward by a great wind, yet with its back turned on the future, staring fixedly into the past. Belief in a future of hope, then, can come for Benjamin only by redeeming the past in the present.

Yet such a redemption is indeed possible, since re-enactments of the past reveal the "tiny spark of contingency" of the here and now, the true site of history. Like unconscious dreams, the past emerges "as an image flashing up in the now of its recognisability" (2002: 473).¹⁵ It can be recognized not in the present, which has a duration that links it indelibly to the past, but in the epiphany of the now. Like the *déjà vu*, what-has-been surfaces as the experience of the *Jetztzeit* or *nunc stans* that condenses time as duration into a single instant. As he puts it in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," "history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)" (2007: 261). This "now" allows for the possibility of justice, since such an "authentic concept of universal history," he writes in the *Arcades Project*, "is a messianic concept" (2002, N: 485).

What Benjamin calls the "weak messianic power" of history depends upon incompleteness, upon the

15 The full citation reads: "The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognisability. The rescue that is carried out by these means – and only by these – can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost."

unfinished and unfinishable project of remembrance. Remembrance then, is itself redemptive, just as remediation is remedy, and the dialectical image is itself messianic in that it opens up an experience of the “time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of messianic time” (2007: 263). Such a present as *Jetztzeit*, or what Benjamin calls “a Messianic cessation of happening” (2007: 263) and the re-enactment of happenings coincide here, for both allow us to experience the now and glimpse in its incompleteness (and in our own incompleteness) the lineaments of an open future.

For the Terrans of the 21st century that we are, Benjamin’s intolerable present has become our past, a past of genocide and wars, a past that so “jolted” and “blasted” us out of our continuous historical habits that we now affix a post- to all our self-descriptions: post-modern, post-humanist, post-colonial... Perhaps most importantly, we have become post-historical, in the sense that the geological age we have brought upon ourselves, the Anthropocene, forces us to think of ourselves as a geological species, and thus to think of history beyond the exclusive territory of culture.¹⁶

The remediation of the traumatic events that constitute our past are a means of belatedly preparing the psyche to experience history second-hand and thereby to avoid repeating such events in the present. Remediation, we might say, instead of repetition. Such artistic re-enactments thus function as a medium

16 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (Winter 2009), pp. 197-222.

of transference in order to allow us to experience the past in the present, and to glimpse the contingent remainder or excess that was not captured by hegemonic historiography and that thus constitutes an arsenal of potentialities. It is in this sense that such remediations serve as a remedy, for in addition to allowing the spectator to appropriate the events of the past in order to constitute the present as post-, they reveal the un-lived potentials that constitute the present as pre-. Remediation art thus plays an essential role in actualizing the incomplete and discontinuous potentials of the past so that the 21st century can remedy, and not repeat, the trauma of the 20th century.

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