

CATASTROPHE IN PERMANENCE: BENJAMIN'S NATURAL HISTORY
OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Matthew S. Bower

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2017

APPROVED:

Irene J. Klaver, Major Professor
David Kaplan, Committee Member
Jennifer Way, Committee Member
Douglas R. Anderson, Chair of the
Department of Philosophy and
Religion
David Holdeman, Dean of the College of
Arts and Sciences
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the
Toulouse Graduate School

Bower, Matthew S. *Catastrophe in Permanence: Benjamin's Natural History of Environmental Crisis*. Doctor of Philosophy (Philosophy), May 2017, 155 pp., bibliography, 159 titles.

Walter Benjamin warned in 1940 of a certain inconspicuous threat to political thinking, not least of all to materialism, that takes progress as an historical norm. Implicit in this conception is what he describes as an empty continuum of time along which the prevailing tradition chronicles its own mythic development and drains everyday life of genuine historical experience. The myth of progressive history advances insidiously today in consumeristic and technocratic attempts at reconciling cultural imagery with organic nature. In this dissertation, I pursue the contradictions of such images as they crystallize around the natural history of twenty-first century commodity society, where promises of ecological remediation, sustainable urban development, and climate change mitigation have yet to introduce a true crisis of historical experience to the ongoing environmental crisis of capitalism. A more radical way of seeing the cultural representation of nature would, I argue, penetrate its mythic determination by market forces and bear witness to the natural-historical ruins and traces that constitute, in Benjamin's terms, a single "catastrophe" where others perceive historical continuity. I argue that Benjamin's critique of progress is instructive to interpreting those utopian dreams, ablaze in consumer life and technological fantasy, that recent decades of growing environmental concern have channeled into the recovery of an experience of the natural world. His dialectics of nature and alienated history confront the wish-image of organic abundance with the transience of its appropriated expression in the commodity-form. Drawing together this confrontation with a varied literature on

collective memory, nature, and the city, I suggest that our poverty of experience is more than simply a technical, economic, or even ecological problem, but rather follows from the commodification of history itself. The goal of this work is to reflect upon the potentiality of communal politics that subsist not in rushing headlong into a progressive future but, as Benjamin urges, in reaching for the emergency brake on the runaway train of progress.

Copyright 2017

by

Matthew S. Bower

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| CHAPTER 1. FROM ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY TO NATURAL HISTORY..... | 1 |
| A Storm Is Blowing from Paradise | 3 |
| <i>Naturgeschichte</i> and Mythic History | 9 |
| Cities in Ruin..... | 15 |
| CHAPTER 2. NATURE ON DISPLAY | 27 |
| Natural History Museum..... | 28 |
| Green Aura and Fetish | 34 |
| Eternal Recurrence and Transitory Nature | 40 |
| CHAPTER 3. DESTRUCTION WITHOUT EXPERIENCE | 51 |
| The Armature of Modernity | 56 |
| Warmth is Ebbing from Things..... | 67 |
| Alienation as Natural History..... | 80 |
| CHAPTER 4. TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUE | 92 |
| Automatic Imperialism | 94 |
| Profane Nature | 105 |
| Reaching for the Emergency Brake | 119 |
| EPILOGUE..... | 141 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 146 |

CHAPTER 1

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY TO NATURAL HISTORY

Somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.

W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

In the summer of 2007, artist Eve Mosher set out to visualize New York City's 100-year floodplain. The HighWaterLine, as the project was called, traced more than 70 miles of Brooklyn and Manhattan by imposing a blue-white chalk boundary at roughly ten feet above sea level.¹ Bisecting luxury waterfront redevelopment sites, low-income neighborhoods, industrial zones, and transit infrastructure, it would thereby adumbrate the vulnerability of low-lying areas to more frequent and severe flooding, a predicted outcome of climate change. Mosher sought to represent at street level the consensus of Columbia University's Metropolitan East Coast Assessment: that the impact of extreme weather patterns in coming decades poses a significant civil engineering problem for which the city is underprepared.² Indeed, just five years later, the storm surge from Hurricane Sandy retraced that same elevation contour as it inundated entire waterfront areas and destroyed thousands of homes. Past the carousel in Brooklyn Bridge Park, at the mouth of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, near the 14th Street substation where floodwaters cut power to Lower Manhattan—many of the very scenes of which image after image was shown in the news had in fact been marked well in advance by Mosher.

¹ "The Science," HighWaterLine, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://highwaterline.org/about/the-science/>

² Cynthia Rosenzweig, William Solecki et al. "Climate Change and a Global City: An Assessment of the Metropolitan East Coast Region" (Metropolitan East Coast Assessment, June 19, 2000), http://metroeast_climate.ciesin.columbia.edu/sectors.html.

What appears prophetic in this work also reveals the inadequacy of our time for apprehending destruction historically. “I wanted to leave this visually interesting mark, to open up space for conversation,” Mosher explains of the waterline.³ One starting point for such conversation would have been to ask how to translate everyday life into historical experience. Our separation from the ability to share and talk about such experiences might in that sense be framed as a philosophical question that gets at the heart of our so-called environmental crisis. By showing us an existing reality that for most New Yorkers cannot be seen clearly, a reality which remains even after the storm mostly disjointed from the circulation of news, commercial imageries, scientific facts, and communicable observations, Mosher’s waterline colludes with our alienation from the physical environment. We are left to wonder not only what we have learned in the aftermath of Sandy, but whether learning from such events is even possible in our current political state, whether this disaster and the countless others facing the twenty-first century will not repeatedly outstrip the collective possibility of organizing society in a more humane and enduring way.

Critical inquiry into the meaning of ‘progress’ ought to begin with understanding the destruction brought about by climate change and ecological disturbances as being removed from experience and yet also as being fundamentally anthropogenic, in the sense that the whole of empirical nature bears the imprint of a singular epoch in human development—the Anthropocene as it is now popularly called.⁴ The task is then to see

³ Mosher is quoted in Elizabeth Kolbert’s “Crossing the Line,” *The New Yorker* (November 12, 2012), accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/11/12/crossing-the-line-3>.

⁴ Paul J. Crutzen, an atmospheric chemist, is usually credited with popularizing the term “Anthropocene” as a way of describing and marking the pervasive disturbances caused to Earth’s atmosphere since the dawn of the industrial age, though the term has yet to gain recognition by the International Commission on Stratigraphy. See: Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, 23 (January 3, 2002).

the central contradiction of modernity insofar as it purports mastery over nature while it simultaneously naturalizes the material conditions of society. The unease one feels looking at photographs and videos of flooded locations that were marked ahead of time by Mosher can be attributed to the fact that these images, as if by double-exposure, irradiate the city's most ordinary and familiar spaces in the twilight of an anticipated disaster against which there ought to have been some recourse to action. This doubling of perspective and the resulting separation of historical content from the construction of the subject is what I pursue as the revolutionary nexus of Walter Benjamin's concept of natural history.

A Storm Is Blowing from Paradise

If estrangement from nature characterizes something essential about the age in which we live and the imagined future of society, dividing cultural production of hope in technology from a looming ecological crisis, it is worth questioning the nature of this estrangement: How is natural destruction constituted by our estrangement, both from nature and from the mechanisms of that destruction? I address this question as it pertains to the conflict between modern subjectivity and historiographical criticism brought to light in Benjamin's writings on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a sense, the question could seem to recapitulate one of the main crises of reason that preoccupied much of German Romantic thought in the early nineteenth century: our lost unity with nature—which is to say, nature divided against itself in its becoming self-conscious and its subsequent rational-mathematical dematerialization at the hands of modern science. Yet Benjamin also approaches both the presupposition of this original

unity and the idealist orientation of progress made towards reunification with a profound suspicion borne by historical disenchantment over industrialized class society. Engaging the idea of nature with Benjamin's cultural theory of modernization, I attempt to crystallize, as Mosher tries to do visually, the tension between a progressive politics of environmentalism set in collective motion against impending destruction and the anthropogenesis of that very destruction. This anthropogenesis is characteristic of the modern individual's isolation from historical progress and has as well encouraged the commercialization of certain Romantic sensibilities towards nature, creating an *anti-industrial* culture industry, as it were, that lends to the things it produces the illusion of ecological responsibility. Yet the underlying conditions have not changed, and in slyly concealing material relations behind economic principles, the true possibility of addressing ecological destruction is withdrawn from political community. If Benjamin's regard for modernist production aesthetics and his receptivity to the hidden potential of technology seem at the outset an awkward match for environmental politics, it is by the same token that his writing takes us straight to the historical tyranny of idealized nature, penetrating its appropriation in the marketplace.

My intention in engaging Benjamin's work with the crises of the twenty-first century is to set predominant forms of cultural expressions of nature at odds with the content of material and environmental history. His modernism is one which allows us to pursue the falsehood of progress as a first step towards political edification, intervening upon the recurring dreams of history through which we mistake oppression for emancipation, destruction for reconciliation, and the ownership of production by the ruling class for the authority of nature.

Benjamin eschews Hegel's formulation that the truth lies in the whole and instead invites us to contemplate the catastrophe of our time as woven into the particularity of historical suffering, a truth aimed at in the dictum: "As long as there is still one beggar around, there will still be myth."⁵ Insofar as we experience nature as lost or estranged from us, its appearance in culture is myth. The history of environmental destruction matters most of all on this count because it is symptomatic of and not merely accidental to the same mythic narrative that naturalizes class struggle. Our estrangement is therefore, in keeping with the materialist challenge to ruling ideology, an estrangement from both natural and historical categories. It is because of this separation from experience that history so often articulates itself in the vernacular of nature, regressing into a mythologized antiquity at the same moment each article of culture conceals the destruction of its past behind an aura of being new and innovative.

The devil is in the details for Benjamin, and in trying to draw out these steep contradictions of progressive historicism he is committed to showing how the particulars of bourgeois culture evince a history that advances bad side first, to paraphrase Marx.⁶ Progress and regress are rather synchronous in the historical symbols of the big,

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 400 (K6,4). Citations of *The Arcades Project* will hereafter be indicated in text as *AP* followed by the page number and the code corresponding to Benjamin's own filing system for his *Konvoluts*. Theodor W. Adorno cites the axiom quoted here in describing physical pain as "the last epistemological quiver of the somatic element" which makes evident for him that "the philosophy of identity is the mythological form of thought." *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1973), 203.

⁶ The idea that history proceeds by its bad side can be traced to Marx's early criticisms of Young Hegelianism, including both *The Poverty of Philosophy*, written in 1847, and the work he co-authored with Engels in 1844, *The Holy Family*. Making light of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's crude distinction between the "good side" of economic growth and the "bad side" which bears inequalities, Marx establishes that it is actually the "bad side" which is the engine of all class antagonisms which move history forward, a principle that is later indispensable to Benjamin's own theses on history. "[It] is always the bad side that in the end triumphs over the good side. It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 1845–1848, Vol. 6, (London: International Publishers, 1976), 174.

modernized city. Following as a “Brechtian maxim” that one should not “start from the good old things but the bad new ones,”⁷ Benjamin’s mode of aesthetic production—like that of his friend Bertolt Brecht—brushes the material contents of oppressed life against the ideological formula of “once upon a time” where historicist enchantment dwells.⁸

It is important to see how this move seizes upon the interrelationship between the disparity of class society and the utopian, modern drive to portray nature as a primeval garden of abundance that for Francis Bacon’s archetypal “man of science” need only be enslaved by the mechanical arts to reveal “the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things,” a knowledge through which will be sought “the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible.”⁹ Along with Descartes’s parallel inauguration of an imperial program for mathematical and mechanical philosophy—making us “lords and possessors of nature”¹⁰—this represents the technocratic promise of modern science and economic modernity at large. Far from emancipating us from natural struggle and social injustice, however, such knowledge is instrumental to their preservation where it is put into the service of the ruling class. Technological advancements are evenhandedly expressed in mythic forms resembling those of Bacon’s “instauration”: a renewal of the prelapsarian knowledge, whereby

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Frederic Jameson, trans. Anya Bostock (London: Verso, 1977), 99.

⁸ See: Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (New York: Verso, 1981), 6.

⁹ Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*, ed. Jerry Weinberger. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1989), 71. In her analysis of the violent, domineering imagery of the Baconian program as well as its role in the development of capitalist conceptions of progress, Carolyn Merchant writes: “The Baconian program, so important to the rise of Western science, contained within it a set of attitudes about nature and the scientist that reinforced the tendencies toward growth and progress inherent in early capitalism.” *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 78:

¹⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (New York: Penguin, 2003), 44.

“Adam gave names to the creatures according to their propriety,” which he crucially differentiates from the *moral* knowledge of good and evil that led to the fall in the first place.¹¹ Technology, which Bacon sees as our ladder back into the garden, is declared categorically different from corrupted moral knowledge, and so it is perhaps fitting that in the lineage of Baconian science which thrives under capitalism we see the economic exploitation of technological production by the ruling class conceived of amorally, that is, as merely the natural order of things. Among the most significant examples of such reification is the expression of the very principles of capitalism from the late nineteenth century onwards as identical to those of Darwinian natural selection: Criteria of evolutionary “fitness” are assimilated to criteria of power, and societal relations harden into historical givens on this account.

If certain aspects of technology seem naturally progressive, other aspects betray its decline. The bad promise of development in this schema announces cultural novelty through the expression of mythic tropes of abundant happiness, but its material conditions remain unstable and inequitable; the myth is borne by social destitution and environmental disaster, and things become outmoded and left to ruin before they can ever realize their genuine utopian potential. Climate change can thus be viewed as the most widespread cumulative effect of the myth that growth can continue unhampered. The political problem goes beyond simply showing that societal progress *will*, given a certain timeline, run up against catastrophic Malthusian limitations; it lies in showing the catastrophic limitations *already* exceeded within culture, unmaking that very conception according to which society is presumed to advance progressively as a function of its

¹¹ Bacon, *The New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*, 16.

cultural achievements. Insofar as “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,”¹² history can always be read in reverse as catastrophe.

Among the most recognizable and powerful images in Benjamin is Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, and it is in this image that the historian’s philosophical reading of the reversal from cultural progress to barbarism is stationed:

It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. (SW IV, 392)

The emptiness of the future is cast behind the gaze of history, just as death, in its unfathomable negativity, stands behind the living and is apprehended only indirectly. These themes are united by Benjamin because there is an affinity between death and the dream of futurity. For this angel, all utopian wish-images of our return to paradise are the afterlife-in-the-making of modernity; they hold a mirror up to history in the way that death holds a mirror to life. Benjamin continues:

Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (SW IV, 392)

Modernity’s progress in science and industry is the coinciding of catastrophe and mythic paradise for Benjamin. His angel of history, who is surveying the catastrophic past while

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, vol. 4, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), 392. Citations of the four volumes of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* will hereafter be indicated in text by SW followed by the volume and page number.

blown against his will into the future, represents the dialectical opposite of the ruling class, for whom history can be retrospectively indexed as a chain of events suspended in “homogenous, empty time” and always leading up to the present (SW IV, 396). What is really at stake in the question of progress for Benjamin is not a contested future, but the contestation of the catastrophic past enveloped by the present.

Naturgeschichte and Mythic History

How does the idea of natural history contribute to the unearthing of present catastrophe within environmental history? My concern here follows, as it does in Benjamin’s encounter with historical materialism, from the mystified vision of nature animating development through the intercession of a utopian imaginary. Benjamin’s dialectical presentation of capitalist modernity as natural history seeks to agitate the ways in which, as Marx argued, social processes ossify while the material conditions of society are abstracted into “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” of consumption and exhibition.¹³ “More and more relentlessly,” Benjamin tells us, “the objective environment of human beings is coming to wear the expression of the commodity” (SW IV, 173). In the novel incarnations of this expressive change, he claims, developmental growth stages a conciliatory, symbolic unity with the image of nature while denying its own physical organization the dynamic potential for socialized history. Moments of crisis, transmuted by this dialectics of the commodity, then come to

¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 163.

be regarded—not least of all by liberal progressivism—as but temporary setbacks in civilization’s lockstep march with modernization.

If the aestheticized ‘nature’ that we come across in certain schools of landscape painting and organic architecture, or on consumer packaged goods and in ad spots for hybrid electric vehicles, occupies this symbolic position on the one hand—infusing the dream of progress with recurrent motifs of harmony and abundance—Benjamin makes it clear that techno-scientific mastery of physical nature is on the other hand inextricable from the devastation of the historical proletariat: “Nature, which as Dietzgen put it, ‘exists gratis,’ is a complement to the corrupted conception of labor” (SW IV, 394). These structural conditions that tie work to physical environment are effaced in the commodities they produce. There is a total disconnection of the advertisement’s claim to making progress from the lived compulsions of consumer society and wage labor. To move from environmental history to Benjamin’s “*Naturgeschichte*” is an attempt to see how historical and structural processes are mistaken for organic ones, while the semblance of nature is shot through with the appearance of artifact.

Beyond its regular connotation as a history of nature, the term “nature-history” or “natural history,” as it appears in Benjamin’s habilitation thesis *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, subverts predominant categories by supplying their referents with ambiguity. This stripping away and reconfiguring of meanings, coupling historical objects to a primordial landscape, is compared by Benjamin to the expression of transience in allegory:

The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of ruin. In the ruin history has

physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.¹⁴

Ruins emblemize the flattening of history into the transience of natural things. In the contemplation of the allegorical ruin, the stagnation of progress is pushed to a formal extreme, where natural history becomes a perspective from which to view the rigidity of things.

Theodor W. Adorno owes the core insight of his 1932 lecture “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” to Benjamin’s failed habilitation, similarly equating history with the transience found in the natural history of destruction. In seeking “to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history,”¹⁵ Adorno praises Benjamin for bringing natural history “out of infinite distance into infinite closeness” and making it “an object of philosophical interpretation.”¹⁶ To regard manifestations of culture “as though they were natural,” as Adorno puts it in his later essay on Benjamin, is the core methodology of Benjamin’s historical dialectics: “The totality of his thought is characterized by what may be called ‘natural history.’”¹⁷

The proximity of dialectical critique to reification entails this micrological “closeness” to the naturalizing effect of culture upon its objects. For Benjamin, it foregrounds history as the inescapable ‘natural’ laws of commodity society relating both to work and to the environment through which that work is carried out. The category of nature structuring economy and cultural expression functions then in the same way as

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 177–8.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (1984), 111.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno. *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 233.

myth in ancient times, as a predetermination of the fate of human beings and their world. In her exposition of Benjamin's natural history in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss explains the contradiction succinctly:

Within myth, the passage of time takes the form of predetermination. The course of events is said to be predestined by the gods, written in the stars, spoken by oracles, or inscribed in sacred texts. Strictly speaking, myth and history are incompatible. The former dictates that human beings are powerless to interfere in the workings of fate, nothing truly new can happen, while the concept of history implies the possibility of human influence upon events, and with it, the moral and political responsibility of people as conscious agents to shape their own destiny.¹⁸

This notion that technological, urban, economic, and social changes constitute a force over which human beings are powerless comes to a head at the turn of the nineteenth century in Europe—in such works as Chateaubriand's *René*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Written against the backdrop of an emerging bourgeois class and its political throes, this is the literature of a modern Promethean myth. However, Benjamin's concept of "nature-history" is not a throwback to Romanticism or Weimar Classicism, for which myth holds a very different role. In his rendering of culture as natural history, Benjamin in fact doubles down on reification: He re-reifies the reified form of history, which is myth.

How can Benjamin's critique serve both to intentionally reify culture in the form of natural history *and* take reification as its critical object? Benjamin does not try to outmaneuver myth or ideology to see either unadulterated natural or historical categories clearly. His method, as Adorno puts it, "swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly rejecting it,"¹⁹ and so offers an immanent critique of the convergence of

¹⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 78.

¹⁹ Adorno. *Prisms*, 233.

predetermined historical meaning and symbols of historical experience. Treating culture as a natural object allows Benjamin to contemplate the contradictions of capitalism in the stasis of an image. “The glance of his philosophy is Medusan,” Adorno says.²⁰ This “appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill” (which would become a point of contention for Adorno²¹) allows for recombining ossified fragments of history and nature, past and future, along antithetical axes of imagistic signification (SW III, 40).

“For us, there is peril in this assimilation of culture to nature, which we regard as the classic ruse of ideology,” writes Stephen Helmling. Rather than attempting to “flatly reject” the category of nature, dissolving everything into culture, Adorno and Benjamin both make methodological the belief that “critique must suffer the ruse of ideology, and even in a sense reproduce it from within, in the very course of the attempt to unmask it and undo its power.”²² Unlike Adorno, however, Benjamin undertakes to render graphically, as an immediate image, the dialectics of this ambiguity.²³ He attempts to

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Adorno’s disappointed reception of “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” frames Benjamin’s “theological motif” of redemption as devolving into either “the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts” or else the subject of mere whimsy: Benjamin’s dialectical-image occupies a “betwicked” spot at the “crossroads of magic and positivism. [...] Only theory could break the spell,” Adorno claims in a letter to Benjamin, dated 10 November, 1938, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 582.

²² Steven Helmling, “Constellation and Critique: Adorno’s Constellation, Benjamin’s Dialectical Image,” *Postmodern Culture* 14.1 (2003), available online at <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.903/14.1helmling.txt>.

²³ At issue for Adorno is not the question of purging theological motifs—which he adopts in his own writing—but of intervening upon the relation between transcendence of the world and the empirical amalgamations of nature and history. Giorgio Agamben offers a defense through which to ward off Adorno’s Hegelian entreaties (which depend on the unfolding of a temporal process) by conceptualizing Benjamin’s work in the arresting, non-chronological moment of contact between structure and superstructure: “What looks upon us from the monuments and the rubble of the past and seems in them to refer, almost allegorically, to a hidden meaning, is not, then, a relic of the ideological superstructure, which, in order to be understood, has to be traced back, by a painstaking work of mediation, to the historical structure which determines it; quite the contrary—what we now have before us is praxis itself as

view history as nature in the image of natural history: “No historical category without its natural substance, no natural category without its historical filtration” (*AP* 864: O°, 80). Entertaining this ambiguous juncture of natural and historical categories, we come to find the evolution of humanity as being bound up with natural history such that one cannot distinguish between the manifestation of culture and the brute force of physical environment along a unilinear path of progress or decline. Instead, Benjamin appeals to the Marxian theme of awakening humanity from its slumber and activating its revolutionary historical energies.

To comprehend what is at stake in seizing the reified forms of cultural expression in this way, we must keep in mind what exactly Benjamin means when he speaks of “catastrophe.” Awakening defines the underlying theme of catastrophe as the untapped potential of historical revolution: “Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity” (*AP* 474: N10,2). The great realization of nineteenth-century Europe, according to Benjamin, is the absence of an experience of such opportunity in the disenchanting post-revolutionary years, the fact that cultural evolution—lacking the self-determined potential required of a genuinely human history—has not yet outgrown its prehistory and thus constitutes a catastrophic stagnation under capitalism. Running together nature and history, combining their referents in such a way as to forcefully double down on historicism, is a means of expressing stagnant frustration at the core of any progressive ideality that defers its revolutionary situation to future material conditions.

As such, the representation of the base within the superstructure, of nature within culture, is mythic, consisting of wish-images and dream-images that naively envision the

origin and monadic historical structure.” *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 2007), 136.

future through the idioms of the past. Whereas “Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture” such that the former is always antecedent to the latter, what matters for Benjamin “is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture”—the manifestation of the base as “perceptible *Ur*-phenomenon” (AP 460: N1A,6). Benjamin’s dialectical image and thought-images (*Denkbilder*) make immanently apparent the indebtedness of epistemological discursion to the visual. Historical knowledge must be cognitively image-like in its construction so as to shortcut continuity, and it cannot be transmitted in dominant narrative because it belongs only to the true, non-authorial subject of history: the “unhonour’d dead,” as the poet Thomas Gray put it. True history belongs to the anonymous and marginalized oppressed who came before us and who serve as reminders of our missed opportunities for collective action. The image of agrarian abundance found on supermarket shelves must be confronted with that of the panhandler in the parking lot, whose existence alone betrays the myth.

Cities in Ruin

Charles Baudelaire is a cardinal figure in Benjamin’s interpolation of the recent past into the present. He is the poet who gives an historical expression to the rapid changes brought about by the commodity city. With an air of melancholy and derisiveness, he could hold fast to oppositional forces in the emergent situation of urban modernity while resisting their progressive culmination. What makes Baudelaire unique among his contemporaries in this regard is his capacity to see the modern city from the outset as being already in ruin. His poetry shares with Mosher’s HighWaterLine a

reimagining of cultural history through the physicality of natural destruction. Yet, it is not an apocalyptic destruction *per se*, but rather the mundane and natural impurity of decay found in an objectivity beset by grand symbolic meanings and visionary ideals of development.

If we understand the street to be, as André Breton says, “the only valid field of experience,”²⁴ then Baudelaire’s poetry gives us the “physiognomy of the nature-history” of this field, inhabited by personalities who assume the energies of modernization in their outward comportment against the tyrannies of the modernized environment. What Benjamin had worked out in his writing on the seventeenth-century allegory—that ostentation of history merged into its setting—is succeeded by the commodity-form in Baudelaire’s poetics of the metropolis: “The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.” (SW IV, 188). More specifically, Benjamin sees that the landscape of the nineteenth century, which was increasingly dominated by the market, appeared hollowed out in the same manner as those mortifications of life and visions of Hell found in the Baroque: “The devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity” (SW IV, 164). This hollowing out is permitted in part, as Brecht argues, by surrendering truth to market forces:

In an age when capital, in its desperate struggle, is summoning up all its enormous means to stamp as truth any idea it finds useful, truth has become a commodity to such an extent—such a questionable, tricky thing, dependent on buyer and seller, themselves dependent on many things—that the question ‘what is true’ can no longer be resolved without the question ‘whom does this truth benefit’.²⁵

²⁴ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press: 1960), 113; Cited in SW II, 233.

²⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn, et al., trans. Laura Bradley, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 111.

Baudelaire's originality is perceived by Benjamin as the product of announcing precisely this servitude of historical truth to capital. The former's allegorical intention in relating to the commodity expresses what is categorically new in a rustic, already outdated poetic form.

An analysis of allegorical expression in Benjamin's habilitation—and especially his countering of the late Romantic tendency to aestheticize the organic symbol and to denigrate the Baroque emblem—provides the frame through which to coordinate the antinomical relationship of past and novelty. That ambivalence of the commodity as it relates to the age of mass production and to organic meaning is for Benjamin structurally ushered in by allegory. Conversely, where the aesthetic takes on the face of natural signification—as it does in the Romantic artistic intention and in the ornate *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art”—Benjamin sees mythic nature. He speaks of the “strange combination of nature and history” that occurs in allegorical staging of pictorial and textual elements.²⁶ These correspond with a method of reading the narrative of history not through a burgeoning semiotic transfiguration of finite nature into Romantic harmony, but in the flattened simultaneity that materializes as natural setting, hieroglyph, and stage prop in the Baroque.

By the nineteenth century, allegory had become unfashionable in the domain of art and literature. Baudelaire's isolation and “belatedness” in deploying allegorical devices—his persona as a “straggler” (*SW IV*, 191)—is thus telling of the heroic struggle he would undertake against the comforting and consoling narrative of reified cultural progress. “That Baudelaire was hostile to progress was the indispensable condition for

²⁶ Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 167.

his ability to master Paris in verse,” Benjamin tells us (*SW IV*, 185). This hostility also equips Baudelaire with the emotional endurance to withhold himself from the ideality of what the commodity has to offer, as semblance, and to instead empathize with its underlying formal expression: “The mass-produced article was Baudelaire’s model” (*SW IV*, 188). In attempting to model poetry on the form of commodity society itself, Baudelaire discovers that the potent historical reification of the commodity mirrors the allegory’s arrangement of historical objects into natural setting. “Allegorical emblems return as commodities” for Baudelaire (*SW IV*, 183), and so his poetry is given a mimetic power to imitate the commodity-form in its ripping signifiers from their referents, rearranging and conflating meanings as images, and dissecting symbolic coherence.

The disappearance of historical experience is a germinal theme in Benjamin’s return to the seventeenth century and in his deploying the devices of allegory through Baudelaire’s poetic encounter with the force of urbanized capitalist modernity. This removal of the subject from experience by market forces and the transposition of experience to mass culture become the *modus operandi* of historicist reification. In this way, the dismembered script of the allegory mirrors the heavy-handed retooling of symbolic meaning by the commodity-form: “wrenching of things from their familiar contexts—the normal state for goods on display—is a procedure highly characteristic of Baudelaire. It is linked to the destruction of organic contexts in the allegorical intention” (*SW IV*, 173). Both commodification and allegory freeze historical forces as though an ice age had befallen them, and in calling out this icy naturalizing effect Benjamin seeks to demystify the spell that culture has cast on historical truth. “Nature was not seen by [the Baroque writers] in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her

creations,” Benjamin writes. “In nature they saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of this generation recognize history.”²⁷ This same overripe quality is doubled in the cycling of commodity production, the phasing out of an aura of newness that has already begun to decay. Mass-produced commodities mirror the ambivalence of the duplicitous relationship between symbol and allegorical emblem in their libidinal wish fulfillment and in their eventual re-emergence as ruins.

“Allegory should be shown as the antidote to myth,” Benjamin says. “Myth was the comfortable route from which Baudelaire abstained” (SW IV, 179). Benjamin’s dialectics of symbol and allegory in the commodity-form therefore coordinates the dialectics of myth and history. Symbolic intuition, on the one hand, is concerned with mythic transcendence from the horror of history, where symbols lure subjectivity into the interior of the object by distilling an idealization of redemptive happiness; allegory, on the other hand, embarrasses this symbolic intuition by revealing its arbitrariness, calcifying objects until they shrivel away from their intimate coupling with idealized eternity and appear instead as image-like emblems of transitory nature. If mass culture dreams its historical potential through identification with the organic harmony and beauty of Romantic nature’s signification, then the manipulation of the allegorical form of the commodity allows meaning to settle into the fossilized imprint of nature’s decay. The difference between the symbol and emblem is thus temporal on Benjamin’s account: Whereas the “wooded interior of the symbol” consolidates time and desire into a sacred and mystical instant illuminated by redemption, the allegorical emblem is a spatializing of eschatological meaning in which nature is cyclical and transitory rather

²⁷ Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 179.

than linear in its seasons.²⁸ Allegory turns the symbol inside out to express its own convention and device in rearranging and manipulating meanings to accommodate the new.

Likewise, the stock of images that were produced by an environment deeply transformed by the commodity's aspirant symbols in the creation of the new were then again spatialized into natural transience by Baudelaire's melancholy emblematics of Parisian street life. By hardening the seductive ideality of the commodity-form into the eternity of transitory nature, we can foreground cultural production as catastrophe without history. This is why the 'new' in the Baudelairean city signifies nothing other than constant changelessness. That is, we see the city as myth and its temporality as that of natural growth and decomposition. If in the auratic imaginary of the marketed product subject and object are bound together, then everyone is turned into a potential buyer, and the seductiveness of the thing is all the more receptive and welcoming to our innermost desires. Via such momentary glimmers of symbolic transcendence, the articles of mass production extend an invitation to anyone able to pay their way, and we are made to feel at home in their elusive nature: This toothpaste will guarantee a more beautiful smile, that luxury car will signify success and command respect, and so on.

The melancholic attempt at re-reifying the ideology of the commodity, by contrast, preserves the object of desire while dismantling its aura. In that intimacy of the aura and the mythic instant of one's identification with nature, imagination is always on the brink of disruption by external traumas and violent threats from the outside, the most damning of which is the object's eventual withdrawal from the imaginary and its frigid

²⁸ Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 165.

indifference to financial hardship, ecological destruction, and poverty. Baudelaire's crowded field of experience in the city street epitomizes the imaginary's fragility against the forceful imposition of perspectives and the symbolic positioning of alien meanings. He recognizes that the commodity's deep well of infinite empathy is reserved only for those who can afford it or aspire to afford it. Benjamin characterizes the first of these relations as fetish and the second as wish-image. The traumatic encounter with disruptions to symbolic transcendence and the retreat of experience behind the symbol are exponentially multiplied during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as commodity circulation unleashes compensatory energies in the field of potential buyers. But in the absence or withdrawal of these aspects, the commodity offers up nothing but icy indifference. The allegorical mode of apprehending this fact is therefore a dialectical movement from the failed claims of progress to *Naturgeschichte*: Fetishes of mythic history recede into fossilized traces, and wish-images of mythological nature are reduced to ruin.²⁹

The crossing of history into categories of nature, which constitutes the technique of Benjamin's dialectical image, is both the deceptive gesture of ideological reification and the point of departure for such an immanent critique. It applies a "heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of the Marxist method" (AP 461: N2,6). The theory developed by way of this graphical method, which is as literary and textual as it is visual, "is intimately related to that of montage," proceeding by "citing without quotation marks" (AP 458: N1,10) and digressing into the forgotten glosses and

²⁹ For a diagrammatic exposition of Benjamin's reinterpretation of the Hegelian polarities of consciousness and reality into polarities of myth and natural history, see: Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 211–2.

seemingly irrelevant corners of the past: “What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course” (*AP* 456: N1,2). Benjamin thereby introduces ambiguity into the representations of commodity society by tearing away signifiers from their referents and ostentatiously rearranging them as emblems, now drained of symbolism. Buck-Morss describes the logic of the dialectical image which produces the critical effect of Benjamin’s literary montage:

When historical referents are called “natural” in uncritical affirmation, identifying the empirical course of their development as progress, the result is myth; when prehistoric nature is evoked in the act of naming the historically modern, the effect is to demythify. But Benjamin’s aim was not merely to criticize “natural history” as ideology; it was to show how, within the right configuration, the ideational elements of nature and history could reveal the truth of modern reality, its transitoriness as well as its primitive stage.³⁰

The dialectics of commodities—a movement between the mythic representation of urbanized nature and the naturalization of structural production—comprises the collective dream of history in Benjamin’s writings, where we are separated from the forces of history by virtue of the fact that they seem to organically determine our existence. That formula of rapidly successive, constructive presentation—which he discovers in Brecht’s dramatic agitprop devices and in the filmic shock-cutting pioneered by Sergei Eisenstein—then condenses modern things in their given time and space, renaming them with insignia of archaic nature.³¹

How do we interpret the dream of our era to recognize it as such, to awaken revolutionary action against self-destruction? In attempting to formulate a “revolutionary criticism” around Benjamin’s rescue of allegorical expression, Terry Eagleton (informed

³⁰ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 68.

³¹ See: Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetic of Power* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 132.

in some part by the work of Jacques Lacan as well) presents three possibilities for the subject startled by the indifference of this culture-turned-nature to her libidinal drive. The first, to “regress to an imaginary past,” is the strategy of late Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassicism’s salvaging of myth, a strategy so disdained by Baudelaire whose own disruption of the imaginary unity promised by the commodity-form proposes another way:

The second is to remain disconsolately marooned in the symbolic order, like all those melancholiasts from the *Trauerspiel* to the *Fleurs du Mal*, therapeutically demystified but to the same degree impotent. This, for Benjamin is a notable advance on the first: few writers have expended so much energy on the patient, destructive, non-visionary task of clearing away the imaginary so that something might germinate in the space left behind.³²

Just as the allegorists and Baudelaire alike were able to make the space of cultural inheritance “arable” again by clearing away the “undergrowth of delusion and myth” that had been strangling representations of antiquity (*AP* 456: N1,3), so the function of natural history for Benjamin is to demystify unities of cultural meanings. Benjamin’s methods are not, however, purely deconstructive, and merely clearing away myth is not sufficient for bringing about a revolutionary moment. Eagleton continues:

But there is also a third strategy, Benjamin’s own, for which this second is a *sine qua non* yet with which it forms no obvious continuum. This is to re-channel desire from both past and present to the future: to detect in the decline of the aura the form of new social and libidinal relations, realizable by revolutionary practice.³³

The re-channeling of desire into political praxis—perhaps the most difficult of these three strategies—motivates Benjamin’s modernist aesthetics of a constructive historiography and his notion of the historical constellation: “Articulating the past

³² Eagleton, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment” (SW IV, 403). Overcoming Baudelairean resignation to ruin would involve constellating images of past and present that move us beyond estrangement from our experience of history. Benjamin wants to allegorize the symbolically redemptive motifs of phantasmagoria and wish-images by seeking “the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe” through which authentic historical signification can be rescued before being lost forever in the name of progress (SW IV, 185).

This historiography established by Benjamin’s dialectical image of past and present follows the dismantling of mythic identifications of the subject with nature by transforming the newest aspects of cultural production into fossil and ruin—a collision of history and setting. In the constellations formed between the archaic and the new, we must then differentiate historicism’s “eternal’ image of the past” and historical materialism’s “unique experience with the past”; for the former, the present is always a transition; for the latter, “time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill” (SW IV, 396). The movement of historicist narrative, its transition from the image of a previous time to the image of the contemporary, is thus arrested in motion and brought to a climactic, quivering pause at the very height of this gesture. That standstill moment is the “now-time” [*Jetztzeit*] capable of blasting apart the historicist’s timeline and introducing a revolutionary calendar. “Materialist historiography,” Benjamin explains, “is based on a constructive principle,” and so his messianic hope subsists in the possibility of Robespierre taking a dialectical leap into the past and resurrecting the image of ancient Rome in a moment of decisiveness that sends a jolt to the existing social order:

Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with

tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. (SW IV, 396)

Benjamin's notion of constellating such shocks gives us a path forward for responding historically to the way culture masks its exploitation of land and human labor. The monadology of historical constellations makes immanently visible the political tensions between signifiers of past and present, nature and culture.

Insofar as the cyclical destructiveness of consumer society can be defined by its libidinal attachments and disenchanting waste products, disrupting the auratic seduction of the commodity is *primarily* an environmental concern. The task of opening space for political praxis in the face of destruction, I argue, begins by crossing wish-images and fetishized objects with their natural-historical signs in pessimistic agitation and ends with organizing that discontent into revolutionary action. Unlike progressive liberal hope (such as was found among the Social Democrats in Benjamin's own time), materialist historiography warns us against the seductive image of a future in which history has made peace with its past destruction. This reconciliation has today become a banality of technological innovation and 'sustainable' marketing. Benjamin reminds us that revolutionary action is better "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren" (SW IV, 394). Similarly, in seeing the interconnection of production labor and ecology, we should be cautious in the face of environmental hope that promises too much. We might instead draw our strength from our shared inheritance of despoliation.

My answer to the question of estrangement from destruction is to work through Benjamin's radical challenge to the myth of progress. I assert that our unpreparedness for environmental catastrophe reveals figments of organic reconciliation and unity as

being endemic to the deleterious regression of cultural history. Benjamin's political use of allegory is timely in its demystifying and dismembering of embellished meanings from these organic symbols, violating their auras of transcendence to divulge their artifice and confer upon them the transience of natural-historical ruin. The misperception that emancipation necessarily accompanies modern progress and technological solutionism, that it is only a matter of time before 'green' sustainable technology brings salvation and rescues us from the crisis, fixes an historicist narrative that subjects us to the dominant mythology of commodity production and to the decomposition of experience that fills consumer life.

CHAPTER 2

NATURE ON DISPLAY

For what the hurrying eye has seen merely from the car it cannot retain, and the vanishing landscape leaves no more traces behind than it bears upon itself.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

26 Nature Photos You Won't Believe Aren't Photoshopped.
BuzzFeed, October 26, 2015

Giorgio Agamben, expanding on Benjamin's theorization of estranged experience, describes a figure we could easily picture as the average New Yorker encountering Eve Mosher's HighWaterLine prior to the impact of Hurricane Sandy: "Modern man makes his way home in the evening wearied by a jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience."³⁴ The possibility of collective experience of catastrophe is remote from the lives of individuals. With respect to visualizing this impossibility of experience, Mosher's waterline recalls Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer's "marked sites," a term employed by art critic Rosalind E. Krauss to describe works in which landscape and not-landscape coincide.³⁵ Unlike most earthworks of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which tended to employ the latter as a focal point of the former, this confrontation between nature and urban space suggests Mosher's project, inversely, as an instance of the landscape scored into the city, where it could not previously be experienced or easily imagined. Defining such a physical boundary, whether corresponding to sea level rise or to climate change, is not an

³⁴ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 16.

³⁵ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 287.

encounter with the power of nature so much as an encounter with the limits of experience in the face of trauma. Benjamin's concept of natural history undertakes a similar attempt to regard cultural things as categorically natural, that is, as outside the experience of human history.

Conceiving of our estrangement from nature as the result of there simply being too little of it—too few trees and not enough fresh air—demarcates nature as a distinct site of experience, a particular look and feel of a place that need only be imported into the built-up expanse and distributed equitably across so many parks and gardens. This ideal, of course, is preceded by Romantic movements within art, architecture, and urban planning,³⁶ including many of those criticized in Benjamin's study of the nineteenth century. Neatly reconciling the "great Bifurcation" of nature and culture, as Bruno Latour refers to it,³⁷ through a superficial commingling of experiential domains, as if one were mixing a cocktail, leaves unexamined the ideology by which commodification already conflates these categories and the profoundly structural sense in which they are always inextricable from one another in the dialectics of commodities.

Natural History Museum

As a counterpoint to Mosher's work, the aestheticized presentation of nature as a demarcated space can be observed along another New York City boundary. When the third and final phase of the High Line renovation opened to the public in 2014, allowing

³⁶ In North America, the City Beautiful Movement is perhaps the most notable and materially influential of such efforts to introduce an aesthetic of nature and harmony to urban planning that would, it was believed, positively affect societal order. See: Philip Pregill and Nancy Volkman, *Landscapes in History: Design and Planning in the Eastern and Western Traditions* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 584–94.

³⁷ Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 41 (2010), 478.

visitors to walk nearly two miles of Manhattan on a disused rail viaduct turned “green” promenade, it extended as well the development narrative around organic and urban hybridity. As one of the park’s founders explained, “People fell in love with the idea that nature had taken over this monumental site.” This third phase was planned, in distinction from the more manicured and modernist look of its lower section, to “evoke the ruin and rebirth” of the industrial past by letting things grow wild, exposing both rusted infrastructure and tangled shrubs in hopes of accentuating “a melancholy and quiet that contrasted with the bustle of the city.”³⁸ That same year, the High Line drew more than five million visitors. Maligned by others as another waypoint in New York City’s transformation into Disney World, the park has been among the most expensive in the world to construct, funded mainly by private interests, and has helped guarantee a steady throng of moneyed idlers eager to see or be seen at the ultrachic bistros, invitation-only nightclubs, fashion boutiques, art galleries, and luxury hotels that now populate the West Side. It is elsewhere described as “a tourist-clogged catwalk and a catalyst for some of the most rapid gentrification in the city’s history.” One visitor relates the subsuming of nature here to exhibition: “Guards admonished me when my foot moved too close to a weed. Was this a park or a museum?”³⁹

So-called urban renewal projects like the High Line or the Coulée verte René-Dumont in Paris, lately imitated in every major city with the promise of revitalization and beautification, entice the spectator with a suggestion of decay reclaimed by wildness to the point of making it difficult to separate them visually. They together form a unified

³⁸ Lisa W. Foderaro, “High Line Offers a Walk on the Wild Side,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2013, New York edition.

³⁹ Jeremiah Moss, “Disney World on the Hudson,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 2012, New York edition.

spectacle, each part of which, including the “wild” patches of overgrowth, is carefully planned and portioned. It is the exhibition of undisciplined nature in this controlled and artificial manner, withdrawn into a spectacle with which the intercourse of human affairs takes a passive role, that reflects what Agamben refers to as the “museumification” of things:

The impossibility of using has its emblematic place in the Museum. The museumification of the world is today an accomplished fact. One by one, the spiritual potentialities that defined the people’s lives—art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics—have docilely withdrawn into the Museum. “Museum” here is not a given physical space or place but the separate dimension to which what was once—but is no longer—felt as true and decisive has moved. In this sense, the Museum can coincide with an entire city (such as Evora and Venice, which were declared World Heritage sites), a region (when it is declared a park or nature preserve), and even a group of individuals (insofar as they represent a form of life that has disappeared). But more generally, everything today can become a Museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing.⁴⁰

This notion that the built and unbuilt spaces we inhabit are given up to pure exhibition, leaving us to become tourists of our own home, so to speak, is a complement to the idea that the organizing principle of commodity society is sacredness, or separation from use, which Agamben pulls from Benjamin’s 1921 essay “Capitalism as Religion.” Where exhibition makes nature “sacred” in the sense that it becomes a symbol divorced from the messy activity of social existence, there is an obscuring of the structural conditions from which nature is materially inextricable. These conditions are consequently made unavailable to experience. The laws of human development come to symbolize laws of nature in the commodity fetish, which in turn commands a spiritual devotion to maintaining its distanced worship.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 83–4.

The aesthetic exhibition of nature from within the “brutal agglomeration” of accelerated urbanization struck many master builders at the end of the nineteenth century—coinciding with the architectural plasticity made available by wrought iron, poured concrete, and plate glass—as a question of marrying organic forms and technical functions.⁴¹ A certain parallel can be drawn, then, between transforming nature into a museum and the observations Benjamin makes on the rise of Jugendstil,⁴² which he positions after realism as “art’s second attempt to come to terms with technology” (*SW IV*, 164). While the exacting tools of media reproduction and photography had unsettled techniques of realist representation, architecture, design, and the plastic arts seized upon the motifs of the organic in a way that “forces the auratic” upon technology through ornamentation (*AP 557*: S8a,1), that is, through the “mediumistic language of the line, in the flower as symbol of naked vegetal nature confronted by the technologically armed world” (*SW III*, 38). The desire to affix organic forms to functional structure marks an advance in the bourgeoisie’s gaining access “to the technological bases of its control over nature,” and yet also reveals a desperation to

⁴¹ Even for Louis Sullivan, who championed the principle that “form follows function” and who is widely considered the father of architectural modernism and skyscraper construction, placing buildings in the service of “higher” natural laws at the turn of the century meant marrying functionalism with Art Nouveau, Romanesque, and Celtic Revival ornamentation. The use of bronze, cast-iron, and lightweight terra cotta accents allowed him to façade his office buildings with patterns of foliage and ivy. Benjamin notes that around the time that floral motifs had entered the interior of the home in European Art Nouveau and Jugendstil, “the real gravitational center of living space shifts to the office” (*SW III*, 38–9). Sullivan, in his landmark text on office building design, perfectly inventories the bourgeoisie’s growing concern with beautification against the lifeless figures of modernization: “How shall we impart to this sterile pile, this crude, harsh, brutal agglomeration, this stark, staring exclamation of eternal strife, the graciousness of those higher forms of sensibility and culture that rest on the lower and fiercer passions? How shall we proclaim from the dizzy height of this strange, weird, modern housetop the peaceful evangel of sentiment, of beauty, the cult of a higher life?” See: “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.” *Lippincott’s Magazine*, no. 57, March 1896, 403.

⁴² Jugendstil describes the German and Austrian reception of Art Nouveau in the 1890s. It is worth noting that Benjamin’s romantic interest in Latvian agitprop theater director Asja Lācis brought him to Rīga in 1925, where, thanks to the city’s influx of trade wealth spent on luxury apartment buildings, he would have seen one of Europe’s highest concentrations of new Jugendstil architecture.

regress into myth by reclaiming the symbol (epitomized in the flower-gazes and flower maidens of Jugendstil) from the technological organization of society: “the bourgeoisie senses that its days are numbered” and so “deludes itself with the prospect of a longer life or, at the least, a death in beauty” (AP 559: S9a,4).

In “The Ring of Saturn”—a brief text written sometime between 1928 and 1929—Benjamin turns to Jean-Jacques Grandville’s 1844 *Another World*, a collection of illustrations that depict in absurd satire this reification of society as nature. Grandville envisions a hobgoblin traversing between planetary worlds across a vast and ornate causeway, connecting the cosmos to a new order set forth by architectural imagination:

The three-hundredth-thirty-three-thousandth pier rested on Saturn. There our goblin noticed that the ring around this planet was nothing other than a circular balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn strolled in the evening to get a breath of fresh air (AP 885).

This could be taken as prescient of Jugendstil’s attempts to “renew art on the basis of technology’s own rich store of forms” (AP 887): nature assumes the transient forms of history—in this case, the early stages of modernism—aping bourgeois desire and consumer taste by virtue of a malleability of construction in iron, initially imperceptible to the masses, that would project “limitless possibilities” (AP 885). Speciation and morphology, which are nineteenth century hallmarks of scientific naturalism, soon resemble the infinite variety engendered by commodity society and the whims of fashion. Grandville’s absurdism, prefiguring Surrealism, exaggerates nature’s capitulation to commerce and thereby infuses the plentitude of the former with the libidinal economy of technological wish-images and dream-images.

The affinity between nature as ornament and nature as commodity is pronounced in both Jugendstil and the earlier, non-artistic assimilation of new materials to

engineering. In making the stylization of natural beauty as a material design stand in for the cold and attenuated experience of the modern constructed form, the purpose of art is to mediate between organism and environment, insulating human consciousness from its exposure to what Benjamin describes as elements of “speed, numbers, effects of surprise, contrast, repetition, size, novelty, and credulity”⁴³ belonging to engineering—that is, with a regression into the myth of our lost childhood.⁴⁴ Jugendstil sought to naturalize in aestheticism the technological forms of cast and wrought iron construction, steam power, gas lighting, and rail travel that had begun to violently transform the human landscape.

There is then concurrent with technological modernity a collective psychological adjustment to its startling and upsetting intrusion into the private and spiritual realms. This attempt to reconcile the physical space of modern society with an organic aura is epitomized by the commodity fetish. That dislocation of things behind their fantasied symbolic coherence makes it all the easier for the modern individual to remain unaffected, to distance herself by becoming immersed in a collective dream in which the corbels above street corners unfurl like leaves, entryways part like sylvan bowers, and the master builder is a gardener of skyscrapers.

⁴³ Benjamin quotes Paul Valéry’s suggestion that we need soon be cloistered away from the forces of modernity as though Valéry were responding directly to the “emergence” of Jugendstil’s floral motif in the work of Charles Baudelaire (*AP* 560: S10,2).

⁴⁴ The term Jugendstil (*Jugend*-style, or “Youth-style”) derives from *Jugend*, a Munich-based art journal that popularized Art Nouveau in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century.

Green Aura and Fetish

Today, images of organic nature are sewn tightly into the cultural fabric of the consumer city, including and especially where they have become markers of progress in the face of growing environmental ‘consciousness.’ There they gain currency in an economy of fetishization and voluntarist personal responsibility. In keeping with Agamben’s assertion that nature is made Museum in its aestheticized form, where it is withdrawn from experience, the ‘greenwashing’ of consumer culture these days exhibits its products as enshrined symbols of progress and prescribes a consumer ethos that accords with them. Knowing what to buy and where to buy it imparts to the individual the guilty conscience of her participation in systematic and global excess of destruction, but the type of participation it demands most of all is spectatorial distance. Opposite the lapses and lacunae of everyday experience that we find in the midst of Mosher’s demarcation of looming urban catastrophe, there is then another experiential gap opened between the physical conditions of the marketplace and their dematerialization as phantasmagoria of urbanized nature. The shopper who faithfully insists on using canvas grocery bags in lieu of plastic and carefully avoids coffee grown on clear-cut rainforest land—whatever the actual ecological effect—is the personality who most vividly engenders this frustrated attempt at relating one’s life to society at large.

Laboring under the oppressive immediacy of consumption, individual behavior takes on all the weight of private debt, suggesting another parallel between capitalism and traditional religion: “Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt,” says Benjamin, “not atonement” (*SW I*, 288). Financialization of social relations cuts off the mass production of culture from its proper public domain, and so world-

historical questions about mitigating climate change are deferred to the private world of recycling and exercising the due diligence of reading product labels. The association of environmentalism with a particular cultural or counter-cultural identity is therefore also indicative of the extent to which, as Adorno notes in the early 1950s, "all cultural products, even non-conformist ones, have been incorporated into the distribution-mechanisms of large-scale capital."⁴⁵ Consuming thus becomes culturally expressive (in contrast to the atomized world of labor). The desires of the underclass come to resemble those of the bourgeoisie, conforming to a hegemonic expectation to consume in a particular way even and especially when running counter to shared material interests.

Manufacturing, energy production, and supply chains have since at least the start of the twenty-first century become increasingly bounded in by a cultural imaginary of nature and the ways in which individualized human activity impacts the physical environment. Very rarely, however, do our isolated experiences or interactions with greenwashed consumer goods or commodified resources actually bring us into direct relation with the physicality of those environmental aspects which seem to coalesce in the aura of the thing. According to Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, the ideology of the commodity eclipses the reality of the labor relations and structural conditions required to produce it, and so, like the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world," we find that "the products of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life."⁴⁶ For environmental or "conscious" consumer capitalism (as the co-CEO of

⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 207.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, "Capital, Volume One." in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 321.

Whole Foods Market terms it),⁴⁷ the fetish is attached not only to the product but to its distant origination from which we are nonetheless estranged. The desire to see where and how something was made, to gain reassurance of its naturalness, intention, and sustainability, serves only to enhance its aura and our personal material enjoyment of its immaterial qualities in an age of impersonal mass production. Our fetish-worship of these green signifiers—with such catchphrases as ‘all natural,’ ‘cruelty-free,’ ‘artisanal,’ USDA Organic Certified, Fair Trade Certified, LEED Certified—bestows upon things a phantasmagoric power that exceeds and obscures their utility while taking on all the concrete objectivity of the thing itself.

The industrial food system, among the industries best suited to exploiting fantasies of abundance and organic unity, has been able to tap into wish-imagery of pastoral and bucolic scenes that intimate a reconciliation with bygone agrarianism. Multinational agrochemical corporation Monsanto—which only half a century ago sponsored the House of the Future attraction at Disneyland, showcasing a domestic dream-world of high-tech modernism—now bills itself as “a sustainable agriculture company.”⁴⁸ Obvious shifts in brand messaging and public relations strategy have been similarly implemented in the energy sector, with such gimmicky sloganeering as General Electric’s “Ecomagination” campaign or the promotion of the oxymoronically named “clean coal.” Myth, the sticky interpenetration of nature and history to fulfill the needs of industry by capitalizing upon fantasy, is what makes it possible for BP

⁴⁷ See: John Mackey and Raj Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

⁴⁸ “Our Commitment to Sustainable Agriculture,” Monsanto Company, accessed June 4, 2016, <http://www.monsanto.com/whoweare/pages/our-commitment-to-sustainable-agriculture.aspx>

(formerly British Petroleum) to have similarly rebranded itself to “Beyond Petroleum” more than a decade prior to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in 2014.

The risk—and irony—of the latest market drives towards renewable energy and sustainable development, then, is that they merely assimilate in various codified ways to the structure of global capital. Even where we recognize the mendacity of advertising, its utopian imagery nonetheless coheres with the broader delusions of culture. Merely identifying the ploy is not enough to dispel myth. The commodity must instead be engaged on its own terms by ripping it from its conflated context and refashioning it as a devalued emblem—as a ruin. Ideological dissimulation from nature is otherwise like those pits of quicksand that appear in old Hollywood movies, where attempting to resist or struggle only seems to draw us further in.

Hannah Arendt is mostly correct when, attacking what she perceives as Marx’s lionization of labor, she says that the human subject is reduced by industry to an *animal laboran*, “imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of his own needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the incommunicability of experience, especially that of oppression, is equally key to approaching historical significance as a loss of traditional community for Benjamin. However, Benjamin understands consumption as being a kind of labor too, and insofar as laboring classes in late capitalism are preoccupied with consumption to a far greater extent than they were in decades past, the globalized model of neoliberal privatization and competition, which allows the mass distribution of cheap ubiquitous goods, acquires a reflexivity in how and what people consume.

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 118–9.

Timothy Morton concludes in a rather Benjaminian provocation that “Environmentalisms in general are consumerist.”⁵⁰ By this, he means that desires acted upon through the marketplace gain social significance in their outward expression. Consuming is shaped through contemplative distance, a material self-styling that becomes possible with the emergence of bourgeois European society: “The reflexive consumer is interested in what it feels like to experience a certain form of consumerism—window-shopping in the shopping mall of subjectivity.”⁵¹ Conversely, our role as consumerists is primarily environmental: a way of objectifying ourselves in the things we consume. Objectification of our identity, seeing ourselves alongside the commodity on display is for Benjamin participation in collective dreaming. It separates the subject from experience such that even subjectivity can be displayed as thing-like. For the guilty conscious of the ecologically conscientious consumer, the commodity extends an oneiric bridge, via what Benjamin terms its exhibition value, between the indifference of the crowd on the street and the isolated inner world of the modern subject. Consuming cannot then function as a way of genuinely coming into contact with things in the way one might imagine; on the contrary, experience is opposed to consumption because through consuming we are attempting to reproduce as our inner life the evident naturalness of cultural spectacle.

Similarly, whatever therapeutic or existential justification is to be made for escaping the suffocating multitudes of late capitalism to find a little open space, to carve out a Thoreauvian livelihood in the simple and wild economy of dwelling closely to the

⁵⁰ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

earth, such defection on the part of the consumer is arguably still an ideological function of private, fragmentary existence. Both of these “conscious” responses to the catastrophic—internalized responsibility and escapism—are the result of divorcing experience not just from nature but from the *historical*, and thus collective, potential to realize our material relationship to the environment.

Estrangement does not mean then that nature is physically or spatially separated from human life, since life-processes are constituted by and indeed part of nature in the most elementary and material way. Nor can it mean simply that natural things appear distant or alien, that human beings are somehow withdrawn from the immediate semblance of nature, particularly in an era of accelerated media representation. As Benjamin puts it, “things press too urgently on human society. The ‘unclouded,’ ‘innocent’ eye has become a lie [...] Today the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement” (SW I, 476). The advertising image depends both on its seeming natural and its ability to symbolically represent consumer objectivity as part of that naturalness. The same distancing of nature through commercial relations and its subsequent aestheticization explains the commonplace of traveling to remote, relatively unspoiled parts of the world only to wrestle with expectations of how nature should live up to or surpass in scale the photographs seen of it back home. Even prior to photographic reproducibility and mass media, estrangement from nature is affected by the artistic standards of the eighteenth century’s obsession with the picturesque, as

exemplified in such curiosities as the “Claude-glass,” a “small, tinted, convex mirror [that] helped tourists see the landscape as they would art.”⁵²

Organic nature is estranged from the subject—in Agamben’s sense of museumification, of being removed from use—as soon as it is no longer materially decisive in the life-processes of society, whereupon mass production can be regarded as natural law. The idea that destruction of the environment results from our anesthetization to organic things misses the far more crucial point that it is in the sensate nearness of aestheticized nature that our experience is orphaned from the potential for a genuine sense of historical community.

Eternal Recurrence and Transitory Nature

The imaginary of nature is central to Benjamin’s most important and epic undertaking, his unfinished *Passagen-Werk* (translated as *The Arcades Project*).⁵³ There, in excavating the moldering dream-worlds of nineteenth century arcades, we learn that modernity and technological innovation are in their very moment of novelty also a citation of the archaic and primordial past. Their artifacts and literary culture are *Ur*-phenomena because, like Goethe’s botanical *theoria*, the detailed particulars emanate a monadological and objectively patterned interrelationship with the totalizing reification of ideology: Thus primitive mythic forms emerge from the ornamental medium

⁵² The Claude-glass was named after the landscape artist Claude Lorrain. See: Allen Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004), 67.

⁵³ *The Arcades Project* is Eiland and McLaughlin’s translation of *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (1982), Vol. V of *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 Vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser with the collaboration of Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

of new plastic arts in Jugendstil and related movements. “The dreaming collective knows no history,” says Benjamin. “Events pass before it as always identical and always new” (*AP* 854: M°,14). In this Nietzschean frame, the productivity and accumulated objects of consumer life form the emblematic pattern of violent, exploitative repetition condemning humanity to its mythic state: “For the essence of mythic happenings is recurrence” (*SW* IV, 404); and elsewhere: “The doctrine of eternal recurrence as a dream of the immense discoveries imminent in the field of reproduction technology” (*SW* IV, 182).

Estranged from historical potential, we encounter the new and modern within the transience of natural history as an eternal return of the same, and so every article of culture is a testimony of missed opportunity for revolution. It is also on this front that “eternal recurrence transforms the historical event itself into a mass-produced article” (*SW* IV, 166). Commodification infiltrates the world of things and the authority those things hold over the transmission of culture across generations: “that things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (*SW* IV, 184). Going beyond Marxist orthodoxy in his conception of natural history, Benjamin shows that the revolutionary break with myth, the awakening stirred from within this modern dream of historicism, must also be a break with its naturalized temporal relations. Time, too, is reified as the categorical given of history into which progress unfolds.

The ubiquitous and alluring merger of technology and design championed by Apple Inc. provides a salient recent example of this commodification of time implicit in the fetish as “ever-same in great masses” (*SW* IV, 164). Apple’s annual Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) has become for many a ritual observance of

consumerist temporality, recalling the first World Exhibitions in its enchantment with and allegiance to innovation and suggesting the serial tendency to upgrade and swap out products as a monadological recapitulation of macro social ideals of progress. Live online streams of the WWDC, broadcast globally, are anticipated each year with cult-like obedience and fervor. The consumer objects perceived through this mandate of technical and aesthetic progress lend themselves to delivering time in consumable and repetitive blocks, from each segment of the 24-hour news cycle, to continual operating system updates, to viral content posted on a social media timeline. This progression is normalized by the commodity-like nature of a smooth, homogenous temporality, made to occur as but one item on the conveyor belt of history: interchangeable, ever-renewable, and therefore in a constant state of repeated creation and annihilation.

Today's cyclical production of new technological goods by technological means conforms to the general pattern that has defined market society since the nineteenth century: "the new in the ever-selfsame, and the ever-selfsame in the new" (SW IV, 175). The defining trait of capitalist innovation is therefore minimal shelf life, or the drive towards what Marx describes as the "constant revolutionizing of production," where new relations "become antiquated before they can ossify"⁵⁴—an effect as evident in the origins of urban capitalism as in the rapid succession of automotive model years in the twentieth century and the nonstop upgrading of software versions in the twenty-first.

In his natural-historical analysis of the transience of the commodity, Benjamin keeps in view Giacomo Leopardi's dialogue between Fashion and Death, whose

⁵⁴ Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 476.

“common nature and custom is to incessantly renew the world.”⁵⁵ The fetishistic quality of the commodity labors under the death drive—what Freud relates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a return to an earlier, static form. The imaginary’s enchanted fetish worship, ritually observed in fashion, is also the object’s death mask; once the erotic object is elevated by fashionable worship, it solidifies its immaterial allure in a *petite mort*, a brief flicker of the utopian consummation that dissimulates death’s impossible quiescence. “To the living,” Benjamin says, fashion couples the body to the inorganic: “it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve” (SW III, 37). The naked human body can never command such a heightened libidinal power as when it is made up and adorned in the attires of fashion.

Insofar as advertising and fashion attempt to conceal the commodity-form behind fetish worship, the task of criticism for Benjamin is a foregrounding of the commodity’s aura against our aloof libidinal relation to it. This is the reason why the spectacle of commodity society, where the repetitive appearances of things in the superstructure are disenchanting by their underlying structural reproducibility, is successor to the allegorical way of seeing, which similarly undercuts the meaning of historical objects and reassigns them as emblems of mortality and transitory nature. For Benjamin, this foregrounding of the aura, the retooling of its own seductive power, fashions an emblematic natural history of the commodification of the human and the humanizing of the commodity:

More and more relentlessly, the objective environment of human beings is coming to wear the expression of the commodity. At the same time, advertising seeks to disguise the commodity character of things. What resists the mendacious transfiguration of the commodity world is its distortion into allegory.

⁵⁵ Giacomo Leopardi, *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. by Charles Edwardes (Boston: J.R. Osgood & Company, 1882), 20; AP 18.

The commodity wants to look itself in the face. It celebrates its incarnation in the whore. (SW IV, 173)

For its emergence in high modernity, the commodity-form's apprehension in an allegorical mode "has its counterpart in the concurrent bourgeois attempt to humanize the commodity sentimentally" (SW IV, 173), an attempt that is also symptomatic of compensating for the selling off of the human face of social meaning in the marketplace of goods.

This is why Baudelaire—in whose poetry we first encounter as historical experience "this devaluation of the human environment by the commodity economy"—empathizes above all with the prostitute on the street over *tout-Paris*: She *is* the human embodiment of the commodity-form and thus, alternatively, "allegory incarnate" (SW IV, 96). In contrast to the human-being-as-commodity, the bourgeoisie wants "to give [the commodity], like the human being, a home. The means used were the étuis, covers, and cases in which the domestic utensils of the time were sheathed" (SW IV, 173). The same desire to humanize the cold objects of mass production persists today where every new iPhone purchase is accompanied by the purchase of a protective case as an expression of its uniqueness, preciousness, and individual character.

Benjamin's early study of the German *Trauerspiel* contrasts the erotic symbol of fashion's inorganic claim with the vanitas emblems of Baroque allegory to show the commodity's oppositional duality. We see the image of an idealized desire in retreat from that undiscovered country of death. Paradoxically, the pain and suffering of the organic being is sought in the fleeting image of inorganic material. The aura of the commodity—that "strange tissue of space and time" (SW III, 104)—conceals its form and so produces ideology. It blurs the outlines of its material reproducibility, and the

function of advertising becomes that of protecting against this momentary brush with death in the vertigo of an eternal grasping for happiness through sameness. A fundamental contradiction of cultural production thereby exhibits itself in the commodity: the new as a continual search for paradise in the transitory. Mass-produced culture harbors the regression into myth, while at the very same moment positing itself, over and over again, as the liberating symbol of futurity. The ultimate promise of technological solutionism (the idea that innovation will outpace destruction), never leaves the phase of collective dreaming so long as it remains under the sway of the repetitive commodity-form.

As a theory of culture, such natural-historical transitoriness accords with Marx's analysis of the conditions of the continual revolutionizing of production—what in subsequent economic parlance is referred to in terms of planned obsolescence and creative destruction.⁵⁶ The importance of the miniature and the diorama in Benjamin's work also reflects the monadological character of such transitory patterns in cultural production, where every artifact left behind by progress can be examined as a snow-globe view of the temporality of the consumer metropolis and its accompanying narrative. Modernization, from this micrological and materialist standpoint, dwells in the phantasms that haunt quotidian objects, the ecstasy of movement and exchange found in technics and aesthetics that enchant or obfuscate earlier forms. Every new iPhone manufactured by Apple takes its place as the final cause of all prior iterations; similarly, last year's fashions, exhibited in 'seasons,' always appear even more outdated than vintage styles, which can be endlessly appropriated by the 'new.' The newness of

⁵⁶ See: Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers 1950).

cultural production requires, under the dictate of fashion, positing its future at the expense of any fragment of the immediate past that would expose it to stagnation. Neoclassicism similarly presents this anachronism by attempting to bypass any sign of temporal heterogeneity, quoting the fantasy of a classical epoch anachronistically in a novel technological context.

The content produced through the commodity-form operates in the manner at the level of dreams, divorced from physical immediacy while paradoxically conveying a sense of moving closer to things. Thus, “Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity,” Benjamin says. The utility of owning the latest iPhone can only acquire widespread market value as a dreamlike state of being *the latest*—as no longer being *merely* a commodity. “[Newness] is the origin of the semblance that belongs inalienably to images produced by the collective unconscious” (SW III, 41). The narrative of cultural history proceeds as the self-reflective aspect of the commodity. Its aura is that quality of value that celebrates our desire; it assumes the form of a mirror out of which “the gaze is returned,” Benjamin argues, for a society where technology has broken the gaze between people on the street (SW IV, 173).

The boundless empathy of the commodity-form is also exemplified in superficial differentiations of bourgeois taste and mass production. We find in fashion, home decor, and personal electronics the duplicity of consumer goods sold under two different labels—one a luxury brand, the other a discount brand—with both owned by a single corporation and in many cases produced in the same factory. The more the environment comes to resemble the commodity, the more expediently it delivers on a mass scale highly individualized consumer fantasy. By this pattern one could glance

backwards across the last one hundred and fifty years and account for the subsuming of arcade boutiques into the department store, of main street storefronts into the indoor shopping mall, of the marketplace into the big box chain, of cinemas into cable television, and more lately of all of these commercial sites into digital space. All the better to deliver personal fantasy through mass distribution. In the place of traditional social expectations, we now have what MBAs and marketing professionals refer to as the ‘advertorial,’ algorithmically served ‘optimization,’ and ‘native content marketing,’ blurring together the world of consumable goods with the most personalized of reassuring historicist narratives. These narratives, however disconnected they may seem, can be traced to the hegemony of bourgeois cultural production and to its technological reproducibility.

If the false promise of development has its origin in the image of the new, it terminates as the material accumulation of forgotten and unsatisfied desires. In this “waste economy,” as Arendt called it, “things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world.”⁵⁷ Such familiar, cautionary insights are found in step with urban upheaval and new manufacturing techniques: “Whole landscapes have had to be destroyed in order to make way for the creation of the new,” remarks geographer David Harvey.⁵⁸ In connecting the ecstasy of the new and its inevitable discontents within finite ecological limits—that is, to vast deforestation, islets of trash riding Pacific currents, open mines, dried-up river basins, and climate change—historical materialism would have to elucidate this inextricability of mythic creation and

⁵⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 134.

⁵⁸ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 245.

destruction. History, on these Marxian grounds, becomes characterized everywhere by its fleeting appearances. Inside the opiate cloud of consumer fantasy, then, Benjamin plays the part of paleontologist. He anchors materialist criticism to traces of fossilized remains and ossified ruins buried underneath cultural production. By transecting accumulated strata of urbanization, digging down into the landfill, the historical truth of ideological progress is shown to be only a monotonous repetition: The new arrives—wrapped in excessive plastic packaging, illuminated in window displays, endorsed by celebrities—only to be abruptly replaced or outmoded and fossilized in the strata of culture’s physical remnants.

What must be insisted upon, then, is that our destruction of the earth and our delusions about the saving power of technology stem from a relationship to time and nature that is beholden to myth. The naturalization of the modern and the progressive, which is the mythic predetermination of an organic origin for the prevailing state of things, is demythified when we merge history into prehistory, effectively freezing and devaluing its symbolic meanings and making them available for socialist reconstruction. Benjamin counters as a constructive historiographic procedure the simultaneity of the mosaic or constellation to the continuity of the historicist’s timeline. To be duped by the ideology of the latter’s narrative cohesiveness is to make an exception of the present, to see the pain of those who came before us “embedded in history,” as John Berger puts it, while crediting “*ourselves* with an over-view, looking across from what we treat as the summit of history.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ John Berger, “Between Two Colmars” in *About Looking*, (New York: First Vintage International, 1991), 140.

Benjamin applies a micrology of historical trivia to the oneiric imagery of paleo-archaic nature codifying and unifying sweeping visions of progress. To visualize material culture as *Ur*-phenomenon of the recently forgotten and disenfranchised past is a matter of tracing the archaic in the new, a “telescoping of the past through the present” (*AP* 471: N7a,3). Without the continuity of ideology, appeals to things getting better and worse cannot be fitted to chronological linearity for the historical materialist, who must recognize that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (*SW* IV, 391). This enemy is, of course, the ruling class of every era, and cultural inheritance contains both the symbols of that victory and the fossilized remains of what it has covered over through constant renewal. The driving method of Benjamin’s entire work subsists in the idea that nothing can be consigned to the dustbin: “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history” (*SW* IV, 390).

Benjamin’s cultural theory, in flattening things into natural history, emulates fashion’s ability to repurpose the costumes of old, to take a dialectical “tiger’s leap into the past” so as to bring the bad side of the present to bear on what came before. If mythologizing permits the particularities of a given time and place to be subsumed into the reified continuity of progress—that is, into a “homogenous, empty time”—then Benjamin’s tactic must bring to the structure of history “the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” in an effort to “blast” these fading particularities out of the continuum, to “make the continuum of history explode” (*SW* IV, 395). Rather than rewrite the narrative of class society’s failed progress, Benjamin wants to shatter and reconstruct the whole thing as a montaged simultaneity of destructive regression. The devices of montage,

juxtaposition, and bricolage allow the discarded fragments of history to be cobbled together again out of context and in relation to the contemporary, revealing that imperceptible presence of exploited labor, colonial plunder, and depleted land that shapes every cultural artifact.

Depicting dialectically the content of the nineteenth-century dream is not then to theorize its material conditions as they lead causally back to the current state of things, but to constellate its oneiric images with those of the present so as to dispel mythic thinking about the conciliatory progression of events and the naturalness of commercial society. This is as true of analyzing the conditions of revolution as it is for understanding the relationship between industrialization and environmental disaster. Historicist attributions of unilinear causality—saying simply, in hindsight, that the unearthing of fossil fuels led to our climate crisis—is antithetical to a criticism whose target is the very structure of historical transmission. The relevant question is not only what conditions brought about climate change, but how have the history of those conditions continually manifested in the illusion of novelty and in affirmation of catastrophe?

CHAPTER 3

DESTRUCTION WITHOUT EXPERIENCE

I don't want a future, I want a present.

Robert Walser, *The Tanners*

Early in his writings—while still under the influence of the German Youth Movement—Benjamin differentiates spiritless (*Geistlosen*) experience as a chain of isolated events lived-through (*erlebt*) from the sort of spiritual experience found in wide-eyed dreams of youth (*SW I*, 3-5). After the outbreak of war in 1914, this distinction seems to be more directly associated with the question of history in the modern era, and by 1936 Benjamin describes the seclusion of the modern individual as a force that has undermined “the ability to share experiences,” an ability epitomized by oral tradition and storytelling (*SW III*, 143). Giving critical expression to his youthful aspiration of securing higher forms of experience (*Erfahrung*), Benjamin arrives at an understanding of the development from industrial to consumer capitalism in terms of the “destruction of experience,” as Agamben refers to it; this loss of tradition relegates everyday life to a sporadic multitude of experiences merely “undergone.”⁶⁰

What since ancient times has distinguished the authority of the storytelling tradition is the fact that its transmission of historical meaning, the communicability of experience from one generation to the next, is situated in ordinary life. The truth of a story is validated not by its facticity but by the “counsel” and wisdom it conferred with respect to practical concerns. As experiences that bear the imprint of the person communicating them, “the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel,”

⁶⁰ The title of this chapter alludes to Giorgio Agamben’s important engagement with Benjamin’s writings on the “destruction of experience.” See: *Infancy and History*, 23.

stories also carry with them traces of the storyteller's life and memory (SW III, 149). By way of contrast, Benjamin argues, the banalities of modern society are saturated with information, data, figures, and facts that the subject can never really take hold of or possess in the way in which one is said to 'have' experience. These atomized articles of knowledge, as imperative to the widening circulation of newspapers among a literate middle class as to the isolation of variables in scientific experimentation, impose their authority on the everyday. Benjamin thus places "the principles of journalistic information (newness, brevity, clarity, and, above all, lack of connection between the individual news items)" at the heart of a recognizably modern goal that has since only been exaggerated by digital media: "to isolate events from the realm in which they could affect the experience of the reader" (SW IV, 315-6).

The "prompt verifiability" of information, which requires exactly the immediate explanation that storytelling precludes, overtakes the validity of narratives which are distanced either by time or space. For the average *Le Figaro* reader, "an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid" (SW III, 147). Because the everyday of modernity is already shot through with information and readily accessible explanations for anything that might occur, it can no longer accommodate the long experience of a tradition through which history entails its proper subject in the act of passing on wisdom.

Recognizing this extirpation of what Benjamin means by "tradition," especially as he comes to associate it with the limits of repressed history, also helps explain the difficulty in any attempt to register global catastrophe subjectively and to incite collective action against it. In recent years, we have seen how the authority given to the narrative

connecting industrialization to anthropogenic destruction depends not on its moral or even practical value, but on its validity as a scientific hypothesis (one that, consequently, some deny) and on media representation, far removed from the mundane experiences of people who for a long time already now have lived within the ongoing context of environmental disturbance. For this reason, the primary challenge in the face of disaster on the historical materialist account is in overcoming isolated experience.

Analysis of how tradition has waned in step with advances in scientific, industrial, military, and media technologies is coupled in Benjamin's work with a critique of the isolated temporality underlying modernity's claim to historical progress: Because the predominant historical narrative is necessarily that of the ruling class, transmission of the experience of the oppressed could previously only occur through tradition—and Benjamin has in mind the Jewish tradition as but one example alongside that of the proletariat. In commodity society, however, the means of transmission which deviate from historicism, whether by word of mouth, through folk art or heirlooms, written as marginalia, or recounted in stories, are overexposed in the disorienting light of spectacle, made to fade away into the background of the dominant narrative.

Genuine historical experience—which is “a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life” (SW IV, 314)—would alternatively have to involve arranging and restructuring the concatenated chain of mass cultural events into some constellation of political potentiality that gives rise to cultural resistance, subversive narratives, acts of protest, defiant and agitative aesthetic forms. For the twenty-first century, it would mean recovering a “tradition” belonging to the true subject of history who is deprived of both her community and her relation to the natural environment by

the oppressor: This subject is undocumented, appearing within the pages of male Eurocentric imperial textbook history only as the nameless oppressed, the colonized, the enslaved 'other.' Benjamin endeavors in his later revolutionary historiography to grasp cultural development, for all its utopian striving, in the repression of collectively transmitted memory belonging to the excluded subject and the prevailing power dynamics of historicism. Asking what in any moment of cultural expression cannot be experienced historically thereby forms a constitutive moment in Benjamin's initial approach to the idea of catastrophe as a missed opportunity for remediation, and it is this question that must be posed to the present era as a way of growing sensitive to the impossibility of arresting destruction under capital.

The narrative of unsocialized history—which is to say, history as it is merely undergone by the isolated individual—should first be understood in the absence of communal tradition as manifestly *organic* in its emergence. That society should remain unsocialized simply strikes the everyday observer as natural, and this reification in the Marxist sense, the purported objectivity of this historical narrative, results from mistaking fluid social relations for fixed externalities. According to Benjamin, the solidification of culture in natural forms occasions myth because it always affirms the shape of the present as simply being part of the organic unfolding of progress. Like the myths of the ancients, the myth of progress predetermines meaning where there cannot exist a knowable relationship of cause and effect between the past and the current order; progress is always configured by temporal necessity as if its productive and destructive conditions emerged from somewhere outside the active deliberation and praxis of social existence. The environmentally deleterious side of technological advancement would by

this logic seem to depend in no small part on our inexperience, both in the sense of being underprepared and insofar as tradition has been removed from the narrative continuity of events survived by people day to day. We are able to talk about the state of the world by way of news articles and scientific consensus, just as we can report on a fire in the Latin Quarter, but we cannot communicate the disaster of modern history itself. This is why modernization and the resulting atrophy of traditional experience are exemplified for Benjamin by soldiers who had “grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience” upon surviving the mechanized violence of the First World War (SW III, 144). It is this same non-translatibility of experience and our inability to give an account of trauma especially, that comes to characterize the widespread dissolution of tradition inside ever-shifting arrangements of everyday urban and consumer life. “The total obliteration of the war by information, propaganda, commentaries,” adds Adorno, “all this is another expression for the withering of experience, the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies.”⁶¹

What does it mean to say that the ordinary domain of advanced consumer capitalism, like the mechanized battlefield, can no longer transpire as an authentic historical experience? If *Erlebnis*, or “lived-through” time, is the experience proper to the age of commodity production from which all other experiences are cut off, the question of history can be stationed, as Benjamin has it, in a dialectical presentation of movement between the phantasmagoria of univocal historicist signification and the polyvalent natural-historical traces and ruins left behind. Overturning grand progressive narratives about technological achievement and industry, which assert their

⁶¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.

naturalness, would then mean exposing them as merely the flipside of repressed history, bereft of its experiencing subject.

More than simply critiquing modernization and its disastrous programmatic mastery of nature, Benjamin's exacting dialectical coordination of signs seizes on the expression of nature in historicist temporality and posits it as prehistory, demythifying its claim on how we remember the past and perceive the future. Nature is as much the primal condition of an animal existence that has been humanized by progress as it is the coded representation of that visionary and utopian humanization itself. This is an historical truth Benjamin understood well, and in his peculiar philosophical mixing of various elements from Marx, Freud, the Surrealists, and Jewish mysticism there is an appropriate method for reading environmental history as a history of self-destruction. Repression on his view compartmentalizes and separates things from the sphere of their experiential availability such that, now more than ever, resolving the ecological crisis seems politically out of reach. So long as the engulfing phantasmagoria of late capitalism's utopian dream just goes on, as status quo, exceeding humanity's sensory capabilities at every turn and eluding their utilization in socialist practice, cultural production *is* the catastrophe.

The Armature of Modernity

Paul Virilio, heir to Benjamin's incisive analysis of experience, diagnoses the "picnoleptic" lapse as a mass social condition proper to the disequilibrium and vertigo of those who are compelled to assimilate their bodily comportment to the cold and quickening phenomena of technological reproducibility. The gap in experience is soon

dispelled by an impression that the missing time never even existed; events have in their memory retained full continuity just at the moment of seizure: "At each crisis, without realizing it, a little of his or her life simply escaped."⁶² Such is the attenuated condition of experience in the midst of forces which, once unleashed, seem to far exceed the historical apprehension of individual subjectivity.

The accelerated tempo and attendant lapses that we find in later mechanized society are prefigured by the patterns of modernity documented in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. There he traces back through the long nineteenth century the unhinging of experience from a consciousness that no longer has any fixed position or authentic point of view in the world. It becomes necessary for the urban multitude to adapt not only to technological novelty, but to the constant renewal of novelty through commercial interests and to the dramatic separation of its individuals from creative and destructive forces subsuming their social domain. To put things more sharply into focus, we should recall that in the course of just a single generation in France the rebellion of the Estates-General and the subsequent terror and upheaval had withdrawn behind an explosion of business interests, succeeded in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars by powerful financial armaments for enacting the revolution's bourgeois ideals: By mid-century, liberalization gave way to railroad speculation schemes, the establishment of transatlantic steamship lines, the introduction of gas lighting to urban areas, and the amassing of investment capital by private banking companies such as those of the Rothschild family and the P reire brothers, the latter of whom funded Baron Haussmann's construction of the boulevards in Paris under Napoleon III. The 'new' within Benjamin's natural-historical

⁶² Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 2009), 10.

formulation of these capitalist advances cannot occasion experience because it occurs as a motif of repetition. The new recapitulates the old in situations that afford no access to political community. Thus Benjamin quotes Victor Hugo's wry comparison of the Bourse's decadent architecture to a Greek temple (where "on days of high religious solemnity, the theory of stockbrokers and jobbers can be majestically expounded") and cites his attempt in poetry to exhibit the stirrings of the material world to the spirit realm with an apologetic irony, imagining a balloon's-eye view of Paris someday affording "that wealth of lines" and "unexpected beauty, which characterizes a checkerboard" (*AP* 165: F6a,1).

The Arcades Project demonstrates the separation of suppressed dream content and myth from the political potential of the individual, whose physical being is now at the mercy of vast, unrelenting forces of progress that, however garish or alluring, disturbing or comforting they might be, are rearranging the city like a checkerboard and erecting new temples of worship. It is in Baudelaire's poetics, vacillating between an optical distress and boredom unmistakably characteristic of this period of the nineteenth century, that we learn the ways in which all of these disconcerting changes had brought about a general taming of the human sensorium by circuits of nervous energy. The individual's adjustment to the new, especially on the city street, "in no way contributes to progress" for Baudelaire, and any faith in such progress, captive to all its vicious intrusions, ought to be exposed as nothing less than the heresy it is (*SW IV*, 188). Pushing back against the pressures of commodity society that had overcome the crowd would demand of Baudelaire throwing his entire being into the act of resistance,

endlessly laboring to defend consciousness against the onrush of bodies, signs, images, and noises.

The figure of the nineteenth century most clearly characterizing the precarious existence affected by the appearances and disappearances of the category of the 'new' is the *flâneur* who, along with the gambler, the prostitute, the detective, the collector, the lesbian, the counterfeiter, and the dandy, is among the physiognomic types populating Baudelaire's Paris. The proverbial male *flâneur* is an endangered species competing with the shock experiences (*Chockerlebnis*) of modernization (SW IV, 329). His flamboyance and itinerant way of life—taking refuge in the Parisian arcades, losing himself to the convolutions of the streets—is constantly under threat as the big city rearranges itself around him and introduces an onrush of horse-drawn carriages that “do not recognize pedestrians as rivals” (SW III, 326). Only in the arcade could the *flâneur*, uncompromising in the style of inhabiting urban space which was afforded him by a life of leisure, find the elbow room that the average man of the crowd was everywhere else surrendering. “Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades,” Benjamin notes. “The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace” (SW III, 31).

In Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's allegorizing, the *flâneur* is essentially part of the crowd and yet by virtue of his perambulations and calculated eccentricities keeps himself at a distance from the anonymous throng; he thus embodies the contradictions of modernity itself: that peculiar alienation of envisaged bourgeois individuality performed *en masse*. The vanishing of *flânerie* is suggestive of the

assimilation of leisure class to consumer class following from the mass production of commodities that occur as both cause of and antidote to the unnerving experiences of metropolitan capitalism. The economic pressures and industriousness of the city discard the coherence of traditional life to which the *flâneur* is accustomed, and if his way of seeing, being seen, and moving about slowly could transform the street into an *intérieur* in protest of the new industrious class, then the appearance of the department store, the “last promenade for the flâneur,” is the transformation of this *intérieur* back into a street (SW III, 31).

For Benjamin, the *flâneur*'s desire to plunge into the midst of the crowd while remaining intact is the dramatizing of commercial society's incursions upon the integrity of the individual. Specifically, the new relationship established between subject and object by the commodity-form is one of being intoxicated by the manic energies and abrupt changes of the big city: The commodity regards every human being as a potential buyer, and thus universal empathy is its organizing principle. Like the *flâneur*, the commodity-form exhibits the virtue of circulating through the streets without prejudice:

The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. He is thus in the same situation as the commodity. He is unaware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him; it permeates him blissfully, like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity immersed in a surging stream of customers. (SW III, 31)

The precondition for *flânerie* is a displacement from things, to be “as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city” (SW III, 326). Baudelaire more than any other engenders the universal discomfort of the *flâneur* and his empathizing with the conflicted demands modernity places upon individuals, not

least of all the lyric poet who must now hunt for rhymes on the street. He is at once numb to the hope of progress and overly-sensitive to the mimetic power of the manufactured commodity—indeed, he internalizes this mimesis in his poetry.

To the extent that the era of commodity production finds a voice in Baudelaire's poetry and in his Satanic posturing, the newest and latest aspects of modernity are subjected to a hollowing out and devaluing of all appearances that for Benjamin is the hallmark of the allegorical intention behind seventeenth-century Baroque representations of Hell. In an exchange with Adorno on the *flâneur* section of "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" essay, Benjamin defines *flânerie* as "a state of intoxication" in the face of "ever selfsame appearance" (SW III, 208–9), and it is precisely with this futility of the desire for happiness against unending sameness, falling "from emblem to emblem" into the "dizziness of its bottomless depths"⁶³ that the poet who penned the following lines inverts harmonious narrative with a demonic irony and, like the commodity, intoxicates himself on the freefall of meaning:

Il faut être toujours ivre. Tout est là: c'est l'unique question. Pour ne pas sentir l'horrible fardeau du Temps qui brise vos épaules et vous penche vers la terre, il faut vous enivrer sans trêve.

[You must always be intoxicated. It is the key to all: the one question. In order not to feel the horrible burden of Time breaking your back and bending you toward the earth, you must become drunk, without truce.]⁶⁴

Intoxication is one means of cushioning the shock experiences of modernity, and for Baudelaire-as-*flâneur* it replaces the lyric poetry of pastorals and idylls. If Romanticism voiced one urban response to the introduction of boulevards, enclosed arcades, coal-

⁶³ Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 232.

⁶⁴ Charles Baudelaire, "Enivrez-vous" in *Flowers of Evil and Other Works/Les Fleurs du Mal et Œuvres Choisies: A Dual-Language Book*. ed. and trans. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Dover, 1992), 148–9.

burning factories, gas lighting, and railroads in its anti-technological invocation of rustic and rural life, the “spleen” that dissociates Baudelaire from the “cult of Nature,” the atheistic religion of Diderot and Holbach,”⁶⁵ imagines natural things as “the vitalization, the materialization, the blooming of man’s *wicked thoughts*.”⁶⁶

Baudelaire’s poetics of physiognomy, his “botanizing on the asphalt” (SW IV, 19), clearly separates him from those who would eulogize nature like so many “sanctified vegetables.”⁶⁷ Nature, from within the pages of *Les Fleurs du mal*, appears Satanic, infused with original sin so as to profane the “sacred” and distanced fetish-worship of nature’s exhibition in the commodity market. Benjamin observes this Satanism develop as a political device, a genre of transgression out of which the ranks of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont find themselves on the far side of art’s traditional moral functioning. Only by allowing oneself to become intoxicated with the empathetic objects of street life could lyric poetry translate a genuine experience of all the changes taking place in the nineteenth century city. For the poet forced to sell his writing in the marketplace, this meant a personal identification with the commodity.

Because allegory is read as the “armature of modernity” (SW IV, 183) by Benjamin, the shock experiences encountered in Baudelaire’s work mark those momentary ruptures where historical possibility coalesces in the same fashion as in

⁶⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “Prométhée délivré, par L. Ménard,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 11. Despite an affinity for Diderot, Baudelaire remains alienated from what he describes in this review of his friend Louis Ménard’s work as “le culte de la Nature, cette grande religion de Diderot et d’Holbach, cet unique ornement de l’athéisme.” See: Roberto Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, trans. by Alastair McEwen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 6.

⁶⁶ Letter from Charles Baudelaire to Alphonse Toussenel, dated January 21, 1856, in *Correspondance*, vol. 1, ed. Claude Pichois with the collaboration of Jean Ziegler (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 336. Cited in Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, 19.

⁶⁷ Letter from Charles Baudelaire to Fernand Desnoyers, in late 1835–early 1854, in Pichois, ed., *Correspondance*, vol. 1, 248. Cited in Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, 17.

Baroque emblems of transience. This is why Baudelairean spleen is said to be “that feeling which corresponds to catastrophe in permanence” (SW IV, 164): Despite constant change—successive appearances and disappearances—nothing really changes. One can look to a poem like “Le Cygne,” in which a beautiful captive swan flees its cage only to scrape along in the dusty gutter, to find Baudelaire’s typical embittered debasement of the changes that arrive with the historical advent of the new:

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N’a bourgé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.

[Paris is changing, but naught in my melancholy
has moved. These new palaces and scaffoldings, blocks of stone,
old suburbs—everything for me is turned to allegory,
and my memories are heavier than rocks.]⁶⁸

Baudelaire’s spleen, Benjamin explains, is evoked by a “mourning for what was and lack of hope for what is to come” (SW IV, 50), an empathic quality reminiscent both of Benjamin’s own temperament and of the *acedia*, or “indolence of the heart,” he ascribes to tragic heroes and medieval theologians (SW IV, 391). In the icy hands of the splenetic allegorist the big city is forced to rigidify, to grow brittle in the midst of development. Susan Sontag writes in her essay on Benjamin, “Precisely because the melancholy character is haunted by death, it is melancholics who best know how to read the world. Or rather, it is the world which yields itself to the melancholic’s scrutiny, as it does to no one else’s.”⁶⁹

The idea that a tremendous loss is precipitated by industriousness is therefore essential to understanding poetry’s intercourse with shock experience. In the dizzying

⁶⁸ Baudelaire, “Le Cygne,” in *Flowers of Evil*, 74–5.

⁶⁹ Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 119–20.

adjustment of the multitudes to new technological force and urban development, the *Erlebnis* of modern life could be retained as little more than a transitory and isolated moment, tantamount to an action performed by a worker on an assembly line. Referencing Marx, Benjamin reminds us that as much as workers use their machines, the working conditions make use of the worker (SW IV, 328), and so machinery concretizes the fascistic coerciveness that we encounter in a wider human environment shaped by commodity exchange. The world is transformed by market forces both disguising themselves as organic principles and producing myriad images and things to be consumed which look immutably natural from the inner world of *Erlebnis*. Shock is simply an effect of the nervous system colliding with the inhumanness of an objective human environment saturated by phantasmagoria and wish-imagery.

In the distinction Benjamin makes between tradition and isolated experience, the former, which has historically occupied the site of poetic experience, becomes a vestigial aspect of something lived that never fully entered into consciousness. It corresponds to the aura that triggers Marcel Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, a residue of loss that establishes continuity—what Benjamin calls, in reference to Freud, a memory trace. *Erlebnis*, by contrast, precludes memory traces. This sort of isolated experience, which is a *voluntary* remembrance, exists in the heightened encounters of urban modernity as something that enters fully into consciousness. It surrounds consciousness with stimuli that the intellect must protect against by registering and accentuating the moment. The principle of memory that Benjamin adopts from Freud as a literary motif is thus the destructive effect of *Erlebnis*. It precludes involuntary memory by countering experience with the intellect: “only what has not been experienced

explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of *mémoire involontaire*" (SW IV, 317).

Baudelaire gives voice to the melancholy experience of interceding between the aura of things-at-a-distance and the poiesis of shock, at once personal and totalizing, far-flung from the cushioning assurances of scientific, urban, and historicist progress. Definitive of his poetry is the exposure to and combat with trauma in the dissipation of the aura—involuntary and surprising incursions upon the physical and psychic integrity of the subject. Aura and shock are thus paired as related, yet oppositional mediating terms in both Benjamin's reception of Baudelaire and his Freudian account of recollection. The author who penned the prose poem "Loss of a Halo" no doubt understood something of this paradoxical position, caught between the lyric tradition with its auratic nostalgia and the acceleration of the modern world, the demand to exhibit himself "*on the market*" (AP 335: J59,7). Satirizing himself, Baudelaire describes the poet's halo fallen into the "mire of the macadam," and in this single movement expresses the desire to remake the sanctity of art in the physical image of collision, of slapstick desanctification.⁷⁰ As Roberto Calasso succinctly puts it, in Baudelaire, "physiology had made a pact with metaphysics. And poetry would respect that."⁷¹ The late Marshall Berman, among the great twentieth-century writers of urban experience, draws out this image in which the poet contends with *mouvements brusques*, prefiguring the contortion of bodies and, eventually, automobiles that would dominate

⁷⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions Books, 1970), 94.

⁷¹ Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, 23.

Hausmann's boulevards.⁷² Berman draws a further connection to Marx, who observes: "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every activity hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe."⁷³ The big city crowd requires the individual, much like the machine-operator, to adapt to sudden shock, to turn one's own comportment into a kind of shock-absorbing reflex against the "maelstrom" of the street in Berman's account.

Baudelaire's particular metaphor for artistic and poetic activity, Benjamin notes, is that of the fencer. Multitudes of scattered appearances and objects lunge forward as interruptive, combative stimuli that the subject must then deflect. As Baudelaire is jostled by the throng—the shock-experience of being struck, caught in the mass of eyes that could no longer see or look at one another—he is furnished with the disenchantment triggering his poetic output: "He named the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience" (*SW IV*, 343). Parrying the blows, he counters this disintegrative effect with cutting cynicism and a pointed sentiment of historical loss:

Perdu dans ce villain monde, *coudoyé par les foules*, je suis comme un homme lassé dont l'oeil ne voit en arrière, dans les années profondes, que désabusement et amertume, et, devant lui, qu'un orage où rien de neuf n'est contenu, ni enseignement ni douleur.⁷⁴

[Lost in this base world, jostled by the crowd, I am like a weary man whose eye, looking backward into the depths of the years, sees only disillusion and bitterness, and looking ahead sees only a tempest which contains nothing new, neither instruction nor pain.] (*SW IV*, 342)

⁷² See: Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 156.

⁷³ Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 476.

⁷⁴ Charles Baudelaire, "Fusées" in *Œuvres*, vol. 2, ed. Yves-Gérard Le Dantec (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1931–1932), 641.

What Benjamin traces to Baudelaire in this passage—and what he takes to be an authoritative experience of modernity’s relation to history—is the same circumspection of progress found in the image of the angel of history. Baudelaire’s splenetic feeling suggests a key transformative moment in which the ideality of the future, and of the perpetually new, clouds the experience of history in some fundamental way. Benjamin sees the *flâneur*—whom he regards as never far from the surface of Baudelaire’s texts, enchanted by the spatial labyrinth of the city, given to nostalgia and memory traces—suddenly startled into a disturbed consciousness of time’s passing.

Warmth is Ebbing from Things

With the last word of “Le Voyage,” a poem that gives morbid closure to *Les Fleurs du mal*, the old bastions and citadels of the big city’s spiritual life are swept away by restless boredom. If other poets and artists in the same period could take refuge in organic unity, nature was accessible to Baudelaire only through disorienting spells of melancholy and impatience accompanying this frenetic “*nouveau*” of modern desire—the shock of the new, as Robert Hughes would have it. Benjamin similarly notes that “Baudelaire is the source of the cruel *aperçu* that the city changes faster than a human heart” (SW II, 265).⁷⁵ That shock experience within the shifting reality of Parisian life during the mid-nineteenth century and the germination of *nouveauté* as a category of production informs Benjamin’s obsession with the character of Baudelaire, whose “way of looking at the world” is described by virtue of “infinite mental efforts” expended on the

⁷⁵ In “Le Cygne,” Baudelaire writes, “la forme d’une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d’un mortel,” *Flowers of Evil*, 74–5.

negative essence of things; if we compare time to a photographer who captures on his plates only a negative, we see that through such efforts Baudelaire “alone is able to extract from the negatives of essence a presentiment of its real picture” (SW IV, 34).

The death drive at work here, binding together the allure of the commodity to the vanishing world of the lyric poet can be found in Baudelaire’s image of voyagers who, despite their worldly travels, remain exiled from true experience. No matter how far they go, their experience of their own desires is incomplete, fragmentary, and frustrated. Alternating between fantasy and disillusionment, the combined imagery of time and desire in “Le Voyage” announces the path of progress: “*En avant!*”

Benjamin similarly expends his intellectual energy attempting to ossify the flux of progress. Going beyond Baudelaire, however, his politics trace the negative figure of ongoing catastrophe as the missed opportunity for revolutionary action inside the upsetting changes of urban development. It is in this spirit that he invokes the prohibition on soothsaying in the Jewish tradition: by instructing remembrance, the Jews not only “disenchanted the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment,” but also made possible the messianic opening of a redeemed history (SW IV, 397). Reconciling the destruction of the earth and the anonymous toil of workers with a progressive agenda for modernization is not quite so simple then as soberly untangling myth from the skein of history; the more radical operation of culture criticism, resistant to visionary progress at the expense of the past, moves inside of the reified forms of myth and undertakes a dialectical intercession between rapidly vanishing cognitive images and discursive utopian prognostications.

It is thus important to note that Benjamin's critical thought is neither a hopeful prognostication nor a reconstruction of the old historical narrative. It is not simply nostalgic for pre-industrial society. Quite to the contrary, the theme of natural history that runs from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to the materialist bearing of his *Arcades Project* seizes upon the real modernist possibility of a more humane future by showing us that commodity capitalism's claim to progress within this new compulsive technological physicality—it's Promethean mastery of natural law and subduing of the world by human design—is without a genuine subject. Insofar as its practice would entail bringing this physicality under a communal charge, revolutionary politics framed as natural history demands the recuperation of historical experience of nature.

In "On the Concept of History," a fragment of theses written shortly before his death in 1940 and published posthumously, Benjamin elevates his early notion of the loss of experience to historiography. His goal, which accords with Marx's insight that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,"⁷⁶ is to prise open narrative continuities as prevailing ideological reifications. More pointedly, he warns of an inconspicuous threat to political thinking, not least of all to materialism, that takes for granted the historical progression of societal forms while ignoring their normatively regressive purchase on the present:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' [*Ausnahmezustand*] in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. — This amazement is not

⁷⁶ Marx, "The German Ideology." *Marx-Engels Reader*, 172.

the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable. (SW IV, 392)

It is worth noting that preparatory material written in the early phases of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* shows up in the 1940 theses on history. Buck-Morss has made the case that this fact lends itself to reading the theses as a methodological précis for the philosophical construction of an "Ur-history of the 19th century," the intent of which would be a graphical, materialist inventory of both its socialist potential and its catastrophic unfolding.⁷⁷

Benjamin's incongruous debt to Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt—specifically with respect to the latter's theory of sovereignty, which takes as rule rather than exception the decisive power to declare an *Ausnahmezustand*—is here allied with the repressed tradition that contradicts progressivist social democratic optimism in technology. The destruction of this tradition testifies to what is so unphilosophical in thinking modern history ought by now to have cast off its barbarism. Thus, when Agamben reconstructs an "exoteric dossier" of the confrontation between Schmitt and Benjamin, the latter's goal is presented as one chiefly concerned with dissolving the fiction of historical authority, deposing its law by inaugurating a new epoch.⁷⁸ On Benjamin's view, the "real" state of emergency differs from that imposed by the ruling class because it calls into question the very basis of transmitting the experience of history; it reveals all documents of culture as documents of barbarism. This dictum and the idea that we cannot contemplate the past without horror because every advance owes as much to anonymous toil as to genius, might therefore be extended to the insight that capitalist

⁷⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 217–8.

⁷⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52.

modernity, in its essential separation of subjectivity from collective experience, also forms a systematic norm of environmental destruction. Without experience, destruction comes about as merely a propensity of the prevailing, undisciplined state of things. Any conception of historical progress without historical experience is doomed to celebrate what Karl Kraus describes as “pyrrhic victories over nature.”⁷⁹

The perception in big cities like London and Paris that humanity had reached the end of an era, a *fin de siècle*, was no doubt driven by the contradictory onset of divisive cultural turnover alongside conciliatory hope in technological novelty. Cultural tradition was supplanted by mass production, laying waste to things while at the same time refashioning them in the fantastic image of a modernized future. The Industrial Revolution thereby entailed an immense destructive capacity within its generative potential. Technological progress furnishes the illusion of liberating social change, all the while failing to deliver on its promises, repressing its exigencies, and annihilating channels of collective organization by atomizing experience. In a more contemporary context, coordinating these two poles—the failed history of commodity capitalism and its utopian dream-world—helps us see precisely why experiences of destruction are divorced from the subject of consumer life. How else can one account for the tremendous productive power and wealth amassed under an ideology that in the same stroke requires the gradual devastation and depletion of its own material resources? Well before the heyday of ecology, Benjamin understands a key historical materialist criticism, central to much of Western Marxism, in terms that can inform today’s environmental thinking: Technology without socialism can only realize its potential

⁷⁹ Karl Kraus, *Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Selected Aphorisms*, ed. and trans. Harry Zohn (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990) 122.

through alienated self-destruction. To put it differently, insofar as environmental destruction constitutes self-destruction, there is no history—only myth.

What Benjamin uncovers as an implicit ideological danger with regard to the exceptional status of emergency is the tendency to posit historical time as *Erlebt*, as falling into an empty continuum of lived-through events. The universal history of historicism thereby advances by way of an “additive” procedure: “it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time” (SW IV, 396). Falling back on such an uncontested “norm” for how modern development has advanced, bourgeois culture chronicles its victorious succession of forced perspectives, justifying and imparting authority to a temporal status quo of continual *nouveauté* and deferral to the future. States of emergency can be proclaimed ideologically as an exception to an otherwise unbroken continuity of progress. The constricted movements and accelerative disorientation of bodies coursing through the great metropolises of the nineteenth century, which Benjamin characterizes in his study of Baudelaire, mark this violent wresting of heterogeneous experience from the individual by a logic of inexorable, universal change. It also marks the vanishing of organic natural cycles and the obscurity of artifact: “In the Berlin Arcade, there is no grass growing,” says Kraus. “It looks like the day after the end of the world, although people are still moving about. Organic life is withered, and in this condition is put on display. [...] Here God is made by machine.”⁸⁰

We see such universalized logic of commercialization as well where mass consumerism fundamentally redefines domestic and economic arrangements far beyond the city center. Suburban corporate parks, supermarkets, housing subdivisions,

⁸⁰ AP 541: R 2,3. Cited: Karl Kraus, *Nachts* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1924), 201–2.

and shopping malls, spread out and yet woven together by vast networks of traffic-choked expressways, are indicative of the persistently insular experience of individuals whose collective activity is nonetheless carried out *en masse*. Only media and consumer services and goods can fully penetrate the individual's isolated sphere, which becomes increasingly delimited by the demanding operation of technology. Adorno in the late 1940s, living among fellow German *émigrés* in the automobile-dominated coastline of Santa Monica, California, writes:

Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. [...] And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children and cyclists? The movements machines demand of their users already have the violent, hard-hitting, unrelenting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment. Not least to blame for the withering of experience is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus, either in freedom of conduct or in autonomy of things, which would survive as the core experience, because it is not consumed by the moment of action.⁸¹

Young Benjamin's own concern over the dispossession of experience and its chilling withdrawal from the everyday—here proving influential to Adorno—develops a revolutionary significance within his later philosophy of history: Once things start dictating their fascistic demands upon our private lives, they appear naturally and immutably divorced from political community. We increasingly live through the mandate of technical procedure rather than that of tradition.

The constant onrush of lived-through time associated with modern life separates human beings from a collective protagonistic role in bringing about their own emancipatory social means. These means are also inextricably bound up with cohesive narratives and mythic thinking about the meaning of nature. We can examine

⁸¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 40.

estrangement from nature as a dimension of mythico-historical time by seeing how Benjamin's theory of experience dovetails with what might be described as his revolutionary praxis of disenchantment. The further things seem removed from nature, the more obstinately they cling to it as an ideal. Where vast proliferation of and preoccupation with appearance elides communal truths, new social forms expropriate nature from its historical meaning in the community, edging it into a space of transcendence. This is indeed why utopian inflections of technological, urban, and industrial development given to expressing their naturalness in the vernacular of some rustic idyll must invariably suppress within that symbolic appropriation any lingering historical suggestion of feudal bondage or lordship. The dreamed-of past, that idealized panorama, is instead tinged with prelapsarian nascency, and it is this dream that we find depicted most of all in the contents of consumer marketing. Under the sway of this expression, cultural production and technical innovation, now suspended in the fantasies of those busy city centers and sprawling suburbs, mirror the abundance of organic prehistory in their convergent teleological promise. Modern alienation, if we follow Benjamin's thinking, is the result of superimposing prehistory upon the future. His analysis can be said to frame a critique of that Romantic hope harbored by the commodity which promises to resolve the split between nature and development. This latent hope has become ever more essential to the progressive spirit of technology.

There is nonetheless an unmistakably liberating moment that follows from cutting off access to the authority of experience in ushering in mass reproduction technologies, Benjamin argues. When fetishizes and wish-images—the commodity-forms onto which the reality of our historical experience has been transposed—reappear as traces of an

outmoded past or as ruins, they are laid bare as allegorical emblems. Meanings can be swapped out, appropriated, and recycled with all the ruthless cunning of the advertiser. The vanished boutiques of the nineteenth century, like so many of the other commercial fossils of more recent decades, are commodity culture petrified, and this continual discharging of culture from the collective dream into the domain of natural history suggests both the ability to repurpose materials freely and the cold materiality of a civilization inhabited by phantasms. “Warmth is ebbing from things,” Benjamin tells us in *One-Way Street*, observing how the familiar utensils and devices of advanced society reflect in their efforts to “gently but insistently repel us” the frigidity of the stranger who everywhere seems to populate this modern ice age: “Bus conductors, officials, workmen, salesmen—they all feel themselves to be the representatives of a refractory material world whose menace they take pains to demonstrate through their own surliness” (SW I, 453–4). While regressive fantasies of commercial advertising dominate our gaze, the recurrence of finite physical forms outlive and thereby conspire against fantasy. Here we discover signification stripped of its coherent narrative, arbiters of taste turned mere marketplace hawkers, and time out of joint with the relentless changeover of appearances. Negatively, repetition causes the withering away of auras that once haloed articles of traditional culture; positively, the reproducibility of those same articles gives insight into the expropriation of tradition and the possibility for new political traditions. There is, in other words, a certain degree of free play between transposed experience and its devices of transposition.

In an exchange with Adorno in 1938, Benjamin suggests, “The concept of the trace finds its philosophical determination in opposition to the aura” (SW IV, 106). The

fossil or trace of an earlier iteration of a cultural product divulges its reproducibility and thus its transience, its inability to assimilate to the dream of progress. If the ambiguous immateriality of commodities subjected to the rituals of fetish worship removes people from the underlying work put into them, then mechanization, as Siegfried Giedion describes it, also bears shock experiences that in the “slow shaping of daily life” counter the auratic coherence of subject and object with “explosions of history.”⁸² The decline of the aura, that sphere of authenticity which Benjamin discusses as being removed from the technical, correlates with liberating technique from tradition on the one hand, and a disorientation of the modern subject—confronted as she is by the ephemerality and impact of her experience—on the other. Everyday events are given a certain formal liberty through technical means, while their mythic content triggers repressive impulses in the adjustment to shock.

The mythic character of progressive history advances insidiously today in the consumeristic and technological image of its reconciliation with organic nature. Representations that put nature on sale or on display have perhaps never been more ubiquitous than they are in the present era. We find them in Edenic motifs of feasting and abundance on supermarket shelves, in the seamless integration of gesture and desire made possible by mobile applications and wearable touch-screens, in the merger of urban infrastructure with green space, and in hyper-contracted cycles of cultural production. But is it not for loss of her own experience (and moreover, an incapacity to experience this loss) that the alienated subject entrusts historical meaning to the manifold appearances and objects promising to reconstitute the mythic harmony of a

⁸² Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

lost natural order? Estrangement from nature is intimately bound up, paradoxically, with an ideology of progress that looks and feels more and more natural.

All great industrial transformations of nature depend on an externalizing of experience that can prevail over and against the immediacy of the material and built environment. The brown fog of a winter dawn in London could once be directly attributed to deep-shaft coal mining in the north of England, the deforestation of Europe to iron smelting technologies, widespread soil degradation in the American Midwest to new methods of intensive farming, the burning of the Cuyahoga River to industrial manufacturing and oil refining, and so on. These disfigurements of the earth by industrial nations and the destructive power of fossil fuel technologies from the late 1800s onward have in the short span of a century been mostly outsourced to former colonial nations and manufacturing economies, offset by an ever more distended complex of factories and supply chains, and concealed behind the commodity's fugitive aloofness. It is nothing if not convenient that in the same decade which imposed major environmental regulations for clean air and water on manufacturers in the United States, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon began talks paving the way for a major trade agreement with China.

To understand why destruction is without a subject of experience—comprising what Adorno calls a “subjectless” subject⁸³—we can think about structural conditions in terms of their mediated representation and material separation. If one looks to the interval of decolonization in the Global South, the decline of manufacturing in the Western nations of the Global North, and the deindustrialization of many American

⁸³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 56.

cities, it is less clear that the consumer has been disburdened of exploitative labor practices and externalized costs to the environment than it is that her experience has become increasingly separate from them. Rather, the most evident progress made by commodity capitalism in recent decades has been in abstracting such externalized impacts as mere facets of a far more immediate economy of images, all the while internalizing organic nature as its ideal quality. “It is ironic,” notes Timothy Morton, “that a clothing store that operates using sweatshop labor from other countries is called Gap.”⁸⁴ Outsourcing, the distancing of ecological and material consequences, is not an abusive exception to the normal functioning of capitalism—it *is* the norm. The disappearing of labor from the object produced is what Marx gives as the very definition of commodity, and thus the essential aspect of its exchange value. It also speaks to the meaning of “*sacer*”—as relating to the sacred, and thus to separation—as it appears in Agamben’s reading of Benjamin’s theory of the poverty of experience under capitalism.⁸⁵ The sacredness attributable to fetishes of ‘fast’ fashion, to take one example, is proportional to the extent that it obfuscates the lack of labor laws and environmental regulations in Bangladesh.

Even products that bear the label of being “sustainably” and “fairly” manufactured depend wholly upon an abstraction from the sheer mundaneness of the manufacturing process, its workers, and its environmental burden. These labels simply represent labor as if it were something alluringly and auratically bound up with the commodity—which is to say something that nonetheless stands apart from the crude materiality of its means

⁸⁴ Morton, 88.

⁸⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 77–8.

of production. According to Marx, abstraction from labor is the precondition for the niceties of the commodity. With the advent of marketing, the standards of production themselves—the very idea of labor—become a nicety separate from its reality. Above all, it is the constant representation of such niceties as a promise of the *new* which constitutes modernity in Benjamin's interpretation of how the commodity-form transposes experience. Novelty, through the revolutionizing of the means of production, is the agile and elusive quality that allows fetishism to outmaneuver shelf-life, to seem always on the verge of a more abundant and equitable future that never arrives. The regime of sense and appearance governing the world today has therefore grown exponentially more sophisticated in hiding its destructive side by displacing it in both space and time, inventing for itself a new, imagined nature as the 'green' horizon of its historical progression.

For Benjamin, loss of experience is the systemic condition that makes the mythic coherence of such historical movement possible. Separation defines the entire economic structure of capitalist modernity. All of the minutia and detail of ordinary things, objects whose careful design bears the imprint of faraway destruction, are elevated in their novelty to a symbolic order removed from utility. Newness on this account is expressed as nostalgia for prehistory. Illuminating an historical view of nature and a naturalized view of history, contesting the materiality of that imperialist history of destruction and domination, and challenging the technological solutionism of cultural production begins with revealing the poverty of experience at the root of progress.

Alienation as Natural History

If traditional forms of intergenerational experience dissipate with the arrival of the commodity-form, then the material degradation of the world, a mass effect that is no longer accessible communally, should be seen not as an unintended consequence of capitalist production but as its inherent legacy. To make the case for how anthropogenic destruction would attain to this state of historical normalcy in relation to the subject, I look to Marx's theory of reification in his analysis of commodities.

Let us then return to Benjamin's materialist conceptualization of how ideas of progress achieve hegemony in the perceived organic cohesion of cultural products. What is meant by the notion of a "historical norm" can be interpreted through the Marxist discovery that the totalizing effect of commodity exchange is to objectify historical relations. Fascism emerges as the historical norm where history has been estranged from its proper subject and reified as the de facto course of civilization. As a result of estrangement, which is to say separation from the means of controlling our collective destiny, the times in which we live are merely "lived through," and in a misguided social democratic hope we mistake historicist continuity for progress. What Marx diagnoses as the fetishism of the commodity-form, true to the quintessential deception of ideology, is a confusion of social and natural categories, wherein "the use-value of objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects."⁸⁶ Products exhibit usefulness and usability by virtue of their oneiric participation in an ideal, while their ideal market value is regarded as

⁸⁶ Marx, "Capital, Volume One," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 328.

objectively bound up with corporeal being. Modern people pursue quixotic fantasies with an air of level-headed pragmatism, while perceiving the artificiality of economics as if things had simply sprung from the earth with their sticker price attached. It is this insight into the conflation of humanly constructed history with nature that Benjamin radicalizes as the theme of natural history.

Because human society swells to the proportion of a force of nature, any declaration of sudden crisis, projecting its state of emergency as the historical exception, only reaffirms the historical normalcy of estranged human relations and labor processes. In opposing fascism, progressivism thus fails to see the inherent fascistic order which it takes for granted in its normal material conditions. Social progress without socialization of its economic life conspires with fascism. It melts the solid exigencies of class struggle into air. The consequent unavailability of the physical environment for communal politics spells out a concept of human history that is entirely incompatible with revolution, given that the community's real political task in averting self-destruction is to make those opaque conditions genuinely available as transparent relations and embodied labor practices. Revolutionary practice would make the destruction of the world immanently accessible to the historical subject.

On such a view, climate change might seem by definition the inherent environmental logic of unsocialized development. Nature as a socially mediated category is reified by cultural production and technology such that the constructed environment becomes "second nature" to us, an idea Georg Lukács famously develops in *The Theory of the Novel* and later in *History and Class Consciousness*. Where the mediacy of nature in its transformation into a product of labor is transformed again into

the immediacy of the commodity, the originary productive historical relationship between human beings and their environment becomes fragmented and ossified. In other words, where technology and industrial ways of making things become second nature to us, our history is naturalized in its objects and we forget its socially constructed origin in the organization of societal activity. The conveniences and comforts of a life amply furnished with such products—luxury automobiles, laptop computers, seasonal fashion, household appliances, imported tropical fruit—only exaggerates the thing-like immediacy of their value and renders invisible the productive forces concealed by market exchange. This consequently means that even when a connection can be drawn between those everyday objects and the collective scale of destruction resulting from their production, they are kept at a distance, and the domain of consumption eclipses that of the structural base. Giving the Marxist intent behind his analysis of alienation a Hegelian inflection, Lukács in this vein notes that only as a universal category of society

does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the 'second nature' so created.⁸⁷

The suggestion that the current epoch encompasses a transition from the holocene to what is lately termed the Anthropocene would then on Lukács's view track closely not only to the pervasive impact of human activity, but also to the fact that we do not recognize this humanly constructed epoch as our own.

In the 1980s, Bill McKibben declared the "end of nature" as the untenability of certain ideas of organic change, such as the "reassuring sense of a timeless future,"

⁸⁷ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 86.

against enumerable and measurable alterations of the earth's atmosphere as a whole: "Our comforting sense of the permanence of our natural world, our confidence that it will change gradually and imperceptibly if at all, is, then, the result of a subtly warped perspective."⁸⁸ Yet our naturalized notion of history fails to apprehend its ephemerality even in the image of vanishing nature, and so we perpetually dream nature anew. Coinciding with ecology's earlier entry into the cultural mainstream, the 1972 post-apocalyptic science fiction film *Silent Running* is a poignant imagining of these entwined limits of nature and history. After the extinction of all plant life on Earth, an ecologist aboard a starship is charged with cultivating the few remaining botanical and animal specimens inside geodesic biodomes for the eventual repopulation of the planet. This lifeboat premise makes clear the ideological essence of technological solutionism, which assumes that history can save itself, that it contains within its own boundless temporal possibility the seeds of a human future capable of outgrowing even the finitude of nature. The final scene of the film offers an ironic reversal of this assumption: Technologically mediated nature outlives humanity. Alone, a sole surviving robotic drone tends to the greenhouse as it floats adrift in deep space.

The absorption of transient nature into history, then, does not necessarily disrupt the normalizing continuity of its seeming second nature to us. We instead prefer to see signs of nature's historicity and contingency—that concrete enumeration of natural change—enlisted by the comforting universal history of the 'new' of the commodity-form. Objectification of history in the commodity results in a curious withering of matter and an engorgement of its ideality. In the moment of its material decline through

⁸⁸ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 2006), 4,7.

structural and industrial productive processes, nature is articulated in the superstructure as a transcendent category of creative novelty. The commodity-form, Marx states (quoted by Lukács), “is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁸⁹ Yet insofar as there is a side to novelty ultimately spoiled by finite refuse and detritus, we can say that the underlying historical processes, made invisible by the commodity, depend also on natural objective and creaturely necessities of labor and production that become reconstituted by their reified appearance in second nature.

Alfred Schmidt, a student of Adorno and Max Horkheimer, notes that Lukács neglects to describe nature minimally as a world of external necessity that the human being discovers herself unable to transcend, and so succumbs to a “neo-Hegelian ‘actualist’ view”⁹⁰ that “dissolves nature, both in form and content, into the social forms of its appropriation.”⁹¹ The lifeboat fantasy of technological solutionism divulges itself out of just such a repressed material limit of the superstructure. We dream of transcending nature because we have no immediate experience of the ways it delimits our economic activity. For Marx, however, “nature is not *merely* a social category,” an important distinction to note in the context of Benjamin’s interpretation of commodity analysis: “If nature is a social category, the inverted statement that society is a category of nature is equally valid.”⁹² Organic nature is not erased by inorganic second nature, but is merely appropriated as a product of industry; in regarding social processes as if

⁸⁹ Marx, “Capital, Volume One,” *Marx-Engels Reader*, 321. Cited in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 86.

⁹⁰ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Verso, 2014), 69.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 70.

they were natural, our alienation from the labor behind production consists as well in alienation from the relationship which makes nature our sole and constitutive source of subsistence. As Marx argues in the 1844 Paris manuscripts, nature is our “inorganic body.” Nature, in other words, is defined in part as all matter external to the subject; it is our means of living as organisms—our “species-being”—indissolubly realized through physical limits. Our consciousness both mediates and is mediated *by* nature; the two are co-constitutive. What Marx means by “estranged labor,” then, is labor that turns both the ideal and material aspects of man’s species-being “into a being *alien* to him, into a *means* to his *individual existence*. It estranges man’s own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his *human being*.”⁹³

Destruction of nature is a fundamental part of industrial production because it entails a forgetting of nature’s appropriation into resources behind individual life-processes. Even the resources we regard as “raw”—timber, coal, oil, water, metals—require in turn other products and labor-processes for their extraction and processing: “Products are therefore not only the results, but also essential conditions of the labour-process.”⁹⁴ Yet products of labor, once objectified by market exchange, are nonetheless represented in the superstructure of cultural spectacle as ready-made for human consumption. More recently, John Bellamy Foster has attempted to enrich Marx’s theory of alienation as a “metabolic rift” between the social development of capitalist modernity and the ecological exchange of matter and energy which are its precondition. Only socialism, he argues, would be capable of returning nutrients to the depleted soils,

⁹³ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” *Marx-Engels Reader*, 77.

⁹⁴ Marx, “Capital, Volume One,” *Marx-Engels Reader*, 347.

reforesting clear-cut land, and mitigating the effects of climate change.⁹⁵ This is because the unsocialized historical evolution of industry outgrows apprehensible mediations of the human being's immediate environment and overlays itself as a secondarily immutable immediacy—whereupon history congeals as natural law. The disastrous impact of factory towns and mechanized agriculture is not seen as mismanagement or a failure of community, but rather as the natural path of progress.

It was not until the summer of 1924, while studying *History and Class Consciousness*, that Benjamin began to relate his theory of experience directly to these historical materialist insights, at the same time extending a significant departure from the orthodox Marxist theoretical tradition. Concurrently, he became open to the possibility of “radical communism” after meeting Asja Lācis, an agitprop theater director from Rīga and friend of Bertolt Brecht. Such oblique sources of Marxist inspiration gave political bearings to the staged arbitration and dramatization of immanent historical meanings which Benjamin would derive in the habilitation thesis on *Trauerspiel* that he was concurrently writing. Lukács for his part “astonished” Benjamin by proceeding from politics to epistemology to arrive at principles that would “resonate” for him and “validate” his own thinking.⁹⁶ The atrophy of experience wrought by reified industrialization is for Lukács and Benjamin alike couched in that lost tradition of wisdom and knowing which runs perpendicular to strict oppositions of subject and object, an experience that instead discovers proletarian self-consciousness in a protagonistic historical charge.

⁹⁵ See: John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

⁹⁶ Walter Benjamin to Gerhard Scholem, dated 16 September, 1924, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 248.

Benjamin's politics can be differentiated from that of Lukács, however, in its more radical distrust of the *technique* of Enlightenment science. Steven Vogel argues that Lukács's ambivalence towards natural science as an object of criticism—though correctly denouncing Engels's application of scientific method to society—is at odds with his dissolution of nature into its social appropriation. Lukács commits to a methodological separation of nature and culture that escapes his epistemological scrutiny, which ought instead show how science, like industry, misapprehends its own practice.⁹⁷

In contrast to Lukács's inconsistently neo-Kantian account of natural science and neo-Hegelian account of social theory, Benjamin adopts a materialist position that in fact seems closer to Marx's own in the Paris manuscripts, a text which is quoted extensively in *The Arcades Project*. There Marx equates the method of and knowledge produced by natural science with the transformative power of industrialized production. Knowledge about nature is simply another kind of practical human activity that takes place through it. There is no methodological recourse to privileging knowledge of the natural as epistemologically distinct from alienated consciousness. Such dualism would be unstable for an historical materialist view not only because human activity is within nature but, as Vogel points out, "because as natural organisms, and like *all* natural organisms, our position in the world is fundamentally active and transformative, so the 'nature' we inhabit (which is to say, our 'environment') is one we have always already helped form."⁹⁸ What Benjamin occasionally refers to as "anthropological materialism"

⁹⁷ Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 18.

⁹⁸ Steven Vogel, "On Nature and Alienation" in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. Andrew Biro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 198.

is, in the same vein as early Marx, an account of industrialization that seeks its historical significance in the interpenetration of the collective creaturely existence and bourgeois political meanings. Animal and human life-processes are, practically speaking, transformations of environments. A political response to the fascism of a technologically transformed world must therefore operate from the *inside* of technique in order to challenge it.

Distinct from Engels's appeals to merge dialectical social theory and scientific method, Marx's early materialist writings on the contradictory reversal of natural and social categories anticipates Benjamin's wider theoretical context for challenging the estrangement of species-being from the environment, which alienated humanity has transformed for itself through labor. "Estrangement" from nature in this early Marxist frame is really what happens when the practical social construction of that which environs us in a world fundamentally transformed by human activity appears plainly natural. It then projects upon the inorganic body an organic otherness that, as Vogel suggests, we either Romantically hope to reconcile ourselves with or tragically regard as lost. For early Marx, Vogel says, "*the appearance of nature is itself a symptom of alienation.*"⁹⁹ This view stands in contrast to some of Marx's later writings (and to those of Adorno) which attempt to theorize matter as an unknowable substrate of economic practice through a negative ontology. The Aristotelian identification in the Paris manuscripts of practical human transformations of matter *with* nature, as having always been part of nature transforming itself, is closer to Benjamin's own radical rejection of Enlightenment epistemology. Yet, that does not mean this identification transposes

⁹⁹ Ibid., 196.

ontology to political praxis since, as Buck-Morss has argued, a communist ontology would be a contradiction in terms, precluding inclusive community by already setting out in advance a generalization of being.¹⁰⁰ Benjamin's anthropological materialism suggests a view of alienation which accounts for aestheticized "nature" being organized by industry and technology as the source of an overt fascism of the built environment, as we have seen. Industrialization and the rise of mass culture articulate an imaginary of organic coherence that, in its unreconciled and symbolic separation from the bodily demands of day to day activity, signifies the estrangement of humanity from its own coercive means of production. But describing estrangement in this anthropological materialist manner, sketching the human being historically in her active and habitual engagement with the environment, is not to generalize the being of humanity outside of the social mediation of those entanglements. The question of Marx's early writings, Buck-Morss argues, is accordingly: "How do we turn this social—we could say in a descriptive way, socialist—fact of our work, and our consciousness of this work as social beings, into a commonist practice?"¹⁰¹ Benjamin comes to anchor the disappearance of traditional experience not in phenomenological reduction to some social essence or even to an avowedly Marxist principle, but to the disintegrating granularity of thinking as contingent social praxis.

Nature and history are encoded meanings that, when reversed, divulge the contradictory form of technological change as referencing both innovation and ruination. Benjamin's natural-historical framework for what might be called an anti-imperialist

¹⁰⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, "A Commonist Ethics," in *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2013), 60–1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

technique in approaching the emergent *physis* of technology begins with a recognition of pre-historic nature in the historical *Ur*-form of commodity culture. As a result, the categorical structures of prehistoric organic nature—“productivity and transitoriness as well as decay and extinction”¹⁰²—are puzzlingly recapitulated by the second nature of modern technology and industry precisely in their claim to novelty, to having mastered nature and built something historically new. Benjamin’s method sets itself apart from “vulgar” interpretations of the young Marx, however, opposing Baconian tendencies to reduce experience of nature according to its economic use value. He rather holds to the hidden pure potentiality of nature’s utility by rejecting imperialist mastery. Benjamin embraces a dialectical commitment to the indivisibility of nature and culture both in their moment of subjectivity and in their moment of objective mediation. He is aware that it is in the latter moment of mediation, divorced from an historical subject, that the potential active transformation of matter is put into the service of capital accumulation. As such, returning experience to communal subjectivity becomes Benjamin’s procedure of criticism against reified history.

Benjamin brings to revolutionary practice, by way of his theory of the poverty of experience, a means of petrifying and shattering the harmonious cohesion of myth. He understands the commodity’s abundance of “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” as being at the same instant a devaluation of things. Once the shell of wish-imagery is molted away from the physical form, we are left with a sense of arbitrariness in light of it having once been enshrined with meaning. This is what is meant by the allegorical intention. Only by arresting linear cultural progress in this way, seeing it

¹⁰² Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 70.

flash-frozen in time as material ruin, and crystalizing its radiant imagery from the temporal solution of stagnant natural history, is reification made rigid enough for subjectivity to firmly take hold. Estrangement from nature, as an historical position from which to embark upon revolutionary practice, can be deployed against itself and against the organicist motifs of historical progress in particular. For Benjamin, a rejection of the “natural”—as he phrases it in relation to Baudelaire (SW IV, 165)—is paradoxically the precondition for returning nature to the sphere of communal praxis.

CHAPTER 4

TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUE

In 1828, the poles were to become ice free.

Walter Benjamin, "Fourier"

*Ski Dubai is the first indoor ski resort in the Middle East
which offers an amazing 'real snow' setting all year round.*

Emirates Holidays brochure, 2014–2015

The central theme that is played out time and again with respect to development is a portrayal of human beings who are in disharmony with their world and who naively believe themselves to be in control of their fate. Marshall Berman describes such hubris through the lens of Goethe's "tragedy of development," in which Faust "connects his personal drives with the economic, political and social forces that drive the world; he learns to build and to destroy." But in the midst of Faust's striving to demolish the past and construct a new social reality, he is overcome by the inertia of his unfinished work: "For the developer, to stop moving, to rest in the shadows, to let the old people enfold him, is death."¹⁰³ This pattern of losing control over our own creations is also depicted famously in the Mickey Mouse adaptation of Goethe's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" and is echoed by Marx: Bourgeois society, with the "gigantic means of production and exchange" underlying its dreamlike superstructure, is compared in *The Communist Manifesto* to "the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."¹⁰⁴

The successor to German Romanticism's skepticism towards Enlightenment science and to British Romanticism's reaction against industrialism could perhaps today

¹⁰³ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 61.

¹⁰⁴ Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto." *Marx-Engels Reader*, 478. See: Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 101.

be found in a more or less passive nostalgia for nature amidst the global sprawl of consumer metropolitanism, characterized by its 24/7 day-night of mass media, endless traffic, widespread pollution, and marketing spectacle. The Faustian enterprise, its foolhardy striving to transform the environment for the sake of humanistic goals, becomes, ironically, a perpetual and oppressively inhumane undertaking from which there is no relief. The body and senses are ultimately monopolized by their own acceleration in a way that demands unending physiological and psychological adjustment to the outside world.

The critical point contained in this reading of Romantic tragedy for Benjamin is that projecting the technological and urban dream-worlds of capitalist modernity into nature while seeing the necessity of the marketplace as naturally lawful is in fact essential to the enclosure of the earth by commodity production. Moreover, we can add that it is inside of these dream-worlds that technology prematurely figures its own liberating potential through a green aura of ecological harmony and utopian abundance. Benjamin's most valuable contribution to criticism in the twenty-first century is perhaps his radicalizing the Romantic notion that society is not yet ready to manage the technological apotheosis it has unleashed upon the world, an untimeliness made evident by the chimerical shape imbued to it by the fantasies of mass culture. This idea that material conditions are suppressed by the dream of history is a generally Marxist theme, but for Benjamin it is also crucial that unconscious forms lying dormant in fantasy can energize technology's social means for realizing the potential of our collective dreaming. According to Buck-Morss, this bivalence of technological potentiality and mythic historical regression characterizes Benjamin's entire study of the

nineteenth century and his revolutionary political bearings: “Extreme optimism concerning the promise of the ‘new’ nature of technology, and total pessimism concerning the course of history, which without proletarian revolution would never leave the stage of prehistory.”¹⁰⁵ The true ‘innovation’ of technology, to use a preferred industry term, would therefore depend in Benjamin’s own physiological terminology upon “innervating” the dreaming collective’s political activity, awakening them to their pure technical means. A genuine historical technique would, in short, be wholly incompatible with environmental self-destruction.

Automatic Imperialism

On Benjamin’s anthropological materialist view, traditional experience of nature might be portrayed as a common world inhabited by a community, and it was through the possibility of narrative passed from mouth to mouth that this community could register historical meaning in its shared physical commonplaces. Stories that were distant in time or space still held a certain authority because they provided counsel in relation to practical matters and to the figure of the storyteller; their usefulness was evident as moral, advice, proverb, or maxim (*SW III*, 147). Thus in the Middle Ages, there endured an interrelationship between resident craftsman and itinerant journeyman: “the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, was combined with the lore of the past, such as is manifested most clearly to the native inhabitants of a place” (*SW III*, 146). The parallel between artisan and storyteller helps clarify why Benjamin places the atrophy of experience at the center of his materialist

¹⁰⁵ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 64.

politics of natural history. External nature entered into the story not merely as a background or setting, but as the swift encounter between “work-seasoned gestures of the hand” and the creaturely world where human economy is carried out; the storyteller’s task, like that of the craftsman, could be seen as “[fashioning] the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way” (SW III, 162).

Benjamin’s theory of reification—and of how storytelling vanishes a result of new productive forces—follows Marx and Lukács in suggesting that the environment in which we live has, starting in the nineteenth century, increasingly come to wear the expression of the commodity-form. It is important to note that this does not mean that the productive forces themselves have grown away from material nature; rather, they have lost the opportunity for being shaped by a practical communal wisdom. This means that for the historical materialist orientation of a revolutionary politics there have been two epochs of nature. Buck-Morss notes: “The first evolved slowly over millions of years; the second, our own, began with the industrial revolution, and changes its face daily.”¹⁰⁶ The turnover and constantly changing face of mass culture makes it easy to promise, without having experience or counsel, a future that never arrives, a consummation of desire that remains ever elusive because it is always isolated from what came before and what comes after. Given the impossibility of communicating experience, how can historical meaning emerge from the dream-world of its new productive forces under capital?

¹⁰⁶ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 70.

Benjamin's answer to this question requires drawing out a distinction too often glossed over: technique versus technology. Although the latter is portrayed as historically progressive through its enthronement in the commodity-form and mass fantasy—such as it appeared in the World Exhibitions and in the satire of Grandville's illustrations, where “the whole of nature is transformed into specialties” (*SW IV*, 37)—it does so only on the precondition that it has been emptied of tradition. If progress belongs to the forward-looking ruling class and to private industry, tradition is allied with the silenced, anonymous oppression of proletarian ancestors. Any empirical facet of capitalism's violence (whether it be poverty or rising sea levels) which at present runs counter to the ruling class's dream of progress can be reduced to an engineering puzzle that will be solved in time if only we apply a little more ingenuity or imagination: Hunger will be eliminated thanks to the bounty of genetically engineered crops, climate change will be reversed thanks to some miracle energy source—but the structural conditions of technology within such solutionist fantasies typically remain unchanged. They depend fundamentally on the speculative value not of pure technological possibility (such as Benjamin finds in Charles Fourier's writings) but of return on investment in the domain of venture capital and speculative financial markets. The corresponding tendency is to treat technological fantasy as a prelude to history, an attitude summed up recently by one conservative politician who cautions that we “need to be careful not to paint the apocalypse” when addressing climate change: “The market will work faster. There's

someone in a garage somewhere [...] that's going to have a clue, to have an answer for this."¹⁰⁷

Technological procedure succumbs to the ideology of the ruling class so long as the market can ensure its products are separated from everyday experience. Without experience, this passive withdrawal from artificiality renders the latter (so it will appear to the Situationists in 1967) as spectacle. For Benjamin, the hollowing out and denaturing of the commodity once it has entered the marketplace—and has thus been, as Marx claims, “divested of its real particularity,” given instead to a “ghostly objectivity”—is the prerequisite for the emergence of wish-images on display (*AP* 181: G5,1).¹⁰⁸ That is to say, the arbitrariness of the commodity's meaning, made apparent most of all by its constantly changing price, estranges it in a way that makes possible its existence as a cipher for optimistic, conciliatory myths of development. The mythic entwining of nature and history is then orphaned from the authority of tradition, which once proffered lessons through the deeds of human-animal hybrids or sacrifices made to gods of the harvest. If narrative operated in traditional community as a way of coming to terms with certain fixed and shared experiences, the impossibility of experiencing things collectively is affirmed by the commodity's hollowness, its total fungibility. “It is as if the reified, hardened plaster-cast of events takes the place of events themselves,” notes Adorno.¹⁰⁹ Beset by laws of persistent economic change now seen as lying

¹⁰⁷ Oliver Milman, “Jeb Bush Pins Hopes on 'Someone in a Garage' to Tackle Climate Change,” *The Guardian*, January 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/29/jeb-bush-marco-rubio-climate-change-garage?CMP=share_btn_tw.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin's source is a citation of Marx in Otto Rühle, *Karl Marx* (Hellerau b. Dresden: Avalun Publishing House, 1928), 384–5.

¹⁰⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.

outside the realm of history, the modern individual is free to discover her dreamlike enchantment in the hollowed-out space of the commodity.

One of the main threads of Benjamin's historical analysis is that mythic nature furnishes technological commodity production with wish-images that distort the structure of class domination and what is today observed as ecological devastation: Benjamin frames Grandville's work, for instance, as a satirical inversion of the hybrid of nature and history in traditional myth; Grandville intentionally transposes fetish qualities onto the universe, expressing in the image of Saturn's rings as an iron balcony or in the drawing of marine life as a collection of fans, wigs, combs, and brushes just how self-referential and alienated the bourgeois fantasy of utopian nature is. With the arrival of industrial capitalist modernity, human evolution has thus entered the second epoch of reified nature. Yet it remains as a result of myth fundamentally *pre-historic*.

Modern experience as it is presented in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* has been detached from its historical subject, the community. By stubbornly attending to the identification of historical change with natural evolution, Benjamin acts as cultural paleontologist by re-naturalizing the already naturalized historicist ideology, opening the idealized panorama of the recent social past as a scene of petrification: "arcades dot the metropolitan landscape like caves containing the fossil of a vanished monster: the consumer of the pre-imperial era of capitalism, the last dinosaur of Europe" (*AP* 540, R 2,3). The mercantile fossils of these extinct bourgeois consumers show that their specialty shops and luxury boutiques have been left behind not by the triumphant progression of a human history free from barbarism, but rather, Buck-Morss argues,

simply by the “natural” evolution of industrial capitalism.¹¹⁰ Natural history is then a dialectical riposte to the historicist move to naturalize progress. If we are to see Benjamin’s criticism as holding especial relevance for our time, which can be defined by an emphasis on digital and technological innovation as much as by ecological crisis, it would lie in the fact that the very technologies promising a better world are still conceived of within the old imperialistic structures that preclude their socialized potential. Buck-Morss gives a summation of the critical power of Benjamin’s project:

A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*, provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened.)¹¹¹

Recollection is a far more radical assault on the institution of technological destruction than is imagining a better world because the latter makes forgetting all the easier, and historicism is a kind of forgetting in the name of progress.

We find Benjamin’s most concentrated problematization of imperialistic Enlightenment epistemologies of nature and how they pertain to the disappearance of historical experience in his momentous conclusion to *One-Way Street*, “To the Planetarium,” which is worth quoting at length:

The ancients’ intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance [*Rausch*]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights. It is not; its hour strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers. Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new

¹¹⁰ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 65.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale—that is, in the spirit of technology. But because the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. (SW I, 486)

Benjamin's materialism here gets at the transformation of matter by technology as an aspect of social practice, but it is an errant practice which systematically results in horror and domination. The sheer technical potential applied in the Great War—and in every other aspect of modernization—terminates in the end with atrocity. We have yet to realize a communal meaning for the power available to us. So long as the technique for creating, using, and implementing technology is an expression of power relations in the service of capital, modernity remains abortive, premature, and barbaric. This definition of technique constitutes the “too early” stage whereby technological production is caught in its own utopian dream.¹¹² He continues:

The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man. Man as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology, a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families (SW I, 487).

A subtle anthropological differentiation is made between the technology of pre-industrial society and that of capitalist modes of mechanized production. It is not technology *per se*, but the particular *techne* of the new *physis* of technology which remains disastrously and imperialistically exploitative. Whereas technical knowledge and tools in pre-

¹¹² Ibid., 118; See: AP, 698: a1,1.

industrial society are entwined with the labor of individual life-processes (and their exploitation) to greater or lesser extents, technological capitalism has totally alienated the human being from her own transformation of nature. In its place, nature is given new life in the domain of producing and consuming wish-images, in the aestheticization of nature which is experienced only through solitary rapture.

We can think on the disappearance of a genuine experience of nature or of destruction as nothing less than the disappearance of those traditional communal practices through which nature was mediated as a world which could not yet be overcome. That is not to say pre-industrial technology was inherently less destructive or exploitative, but only that destruction could still be experienced communally. The Romantic misperception that communing with nature is something one does by escaping society or encountering wildness in spiritual solitude is thus indicative, in Marxist parlance, of a self-alienation of the species-being. Only as a counterpoint to the conformism of bourgeois New England society can intimacy with nature, such as can be found in the home economics of Henry David Thoreau or the self-reliance of Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, be invested with the spiritual gravity of Hindu *Ātman*. Meanwhile, the social pathology of being without communal narrative results in perverse experiences of the violent power afforded by technology on a cosmic scale, from the invention of factory machinery, to the mechanized battlefields of World War One, to the deployment of the atomic bomb five years after Benjamin's death. The whole of technological progress is from the first circumscribed by sheer physical possibility ("It worked!" was one account of J. Robert Oppenheimer's initial exclamation at the dropping of the atomic bomb) and yet its destruction is in retrospect memorialized by

humanism (as in Oppenheimer's better-known quotation of the Bhagavad Gita during a television broadcast).¹¹³

Such a separation of communal experience and physical nature is what Benjamin has in mind at the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," where he describes humankind's fascistic ecstasy at the violence of the First World War in terms of *l'art pour l'art*, humankind's wooing of the cosmos as a contemplative art object that exhibits itself to itself: "Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure" (SW III, 122). The inexperienceability of our historical self-destruction through technology is exhibited in the thrill of accelerating forwards, in an image that explodes intervals of subjective reflection and objective compulsion: "It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved, and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen" (SW I, 476). The core difficulty of untangling environmental destruction from technology will lie in our libidinal association with the latter's unyielding locomotion, its violation of our own desires through aestheticized brutality. Benjamin makes clear at the end of "To the Planetarium" this ambivalence of technical potential:

One need recall only the experience of velocities by virtue of which mankind is now preparing to embark on incalculable journeys into the interior of time, to encounter there rhythms from which the sick shall draw strength as they did earlier on high mountains or on the shores of southern seas. The "Lunaparks" are a prefiguration of sanatoria. The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call "Nature." In the nights of annihilation of the last war, the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic. And the revolts that followed it were the first attempt of mankind to bring the new body under its control. The power of the proletariat is the measure of its convalescence. If it is not gripped to

¹¹³ Charles Thorpe, *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 161–2.

the very marrow by the discipline of this power, no pacifist polemics will save it. Living substance conquers the frenzy of destruction only in the ecstasy of procreation. (SW I, 487)

Lunaparks exemplify the new nature of technology as pure means, and in such images Benjamin's hope for undreamt of possibilities and for the repurposing of modernity is most palpable. But it is through this same image of ecstatic movement—and the proximity of amusement to warfare—that we come to understand that technology requires an emancipatory technique to overcome its servitude to empire.

Architect Rem Koolhaas offers a related image in his 1978 *Delirious New York*: Coney Island, he suggests, develops in the early twentieth century to form the city's erogenous zone, a seaside "clitoral appendage" arousing a heightened state of Manhattanist ecstasy.¹¹⁴ Lindsay Anderson's 1953 documentary short *O Dreamland* portrays to a similar extent the seasonal funfairs of northern England as a phantasmagorical extension of factory towns. The modernist dream takes pleasure in outstripping experience as a constructive principle, and in the amusement parks of the early twentieth century we have a "fetal" expression of the melting away of self-awareness in the city's disciplined and manic convulsions. The rollercoaster becomes a Frankenstein of rail travel; novelty treats and the invention of the hotdog offer dreamlike, fetishized perversions of dining; and freak shows invite humanity's most devouring gaze. In such Grandville-like amusements we find the same exhibited power and overwhelming impulsion behind high-speed transit systems, genetically engineered organisms, and the spectacle of reality television. There is a kernel of liberating potential in each case which, due to the repressed state of social and working relations

¹¹⁴ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 30.

and the uncritical procedures of science, surfaces prematurely. Technological nature and mass culture in its relation to physical reality frequently results in a moment of seizure, a gesture of dumbfounding stimulation without purpose.

According to Benjamin, so-called unskilled labor is degraded most significantly in this way by mechanization. With the introduction of automated assembly lines and their uniformity of gestures, a lack of experience becomes its own industrial specialty. Unlike the practice and learned technique required in handicraft, the Taylorist model of cheap mass production driven by unskilled labor entailed training as an insulation from experience. In truth, the unskilled laborer must be trained in adjusting to the continual demands made by machines, the shock and jolting movement recaptured in the libidinal relation to thrill-seeking diversions: “What the amusement park achieves with its dodgem cars and other similar amusements is nothing but a taste of the training that the unskilled laborer undergoes in the factory” (SW IV, 329). The interchangeable worker who performs a single, instrumentally coordinated function is the exemplar of Marx’s observation that working conditions make use of the workers, just as the visitor to the amusement park surrenders herself to the velocity of the rollercoaster.

To see how these stimulating impulses of technical possibility are time and again thwarted by their transience in the commodity-form, we must return to the tension between historical cohesion and the atrophy of experience. In particular, we must see how experience of nature, like the sensorium of the worker, has been subjected to the atomizing effects of mechanized mass production. There is an argument to be made that environmental destruction is a self-destruction, perpetrated by technological organization over which we have given up control. Benjamin’s analysis of technique in

One-Way Street and elsewhere is not a rejection of technology as such, but of the effacing of collective bodily political awareness, an anaesthetization which permits us to take pleasure in our self-destruction without feeling its pain. How then do we secure experience as illuminating the possibility of new communal productive techniques?

Profane Nature

Whenever the question of nature comes into Benjamin's view, it is always guided by an attempt at holding together in an instant the genuine revolutionary potential of technological progress with the disastrous course of societal progress. Although harnessing the latent emancipatory power of technology involves imagining it in concert with humanity's physical nature, *a la* Fourier, the affirmation of that same power as an enchanted image ends up alienating humanity from itself and its existence in an environment—its inorganic body. To approach nature by recognizing the crisis of experience investigated in Benjamin's work requires that we discharge it from Enlightenment presuppositions that isolate us from historical disaster. The positivist conceit of mastering nature lies in divorcing the means of communicating knowledge, which is reduced to a mere recording of information, from the traditional subject of experience. Yet the point is not to restore this authority or to revive storytelling as an alternative to modern science, but rather to politicize their disappearance.

The ambivalence of such politicizing is not lost on Benjamin, who remarks in "The Storyteller," an essay written the same year as "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," that the removal of narrative from the realm of oral tradition "at the same time is making it possible to find a new beauty in what is

vanishing” (SW III, 146). Benjamin “is out to celebrate the very aura he dismantles with his other hand,” Terry Eagleton argues; he wants to democratically re-envision the story by rescuing traditional authority without authorship, “a hybrid of the auratic and mechanically reproduced artefacts, redolent of mythological meaning yet amenable to the labour of interpretation.”¹¹⁵ Reproduction is crucially differentiated from repetition in Benjamin’s account, and if the latter stands for the serialized, hollow temporality of historicist myth, it is the former whose apparatus divests mythic phenomena of their magical quality and yields by virtue of its technical mode of representation the kind of deliberately attenuated display of meaning found in Baroque emblems. By enlarging, cropping, multiplying, parceling, and laboriously rearranging the particularities of culturally constructed nature, representing them by ripping them out of context, reproduction technology allows ambiguity to bluntly impede upon symbolic cohesion. The apparent contradiction between lamenting the loss of experience in *The Storyteller* and celebrating liberation from authority in “The Work of Art” essay seems an intentional dialectical maneuvering between mythologized and material nature, an attempt to unearth pastoral meaning by digging it out from the fiction of prevailing history, exposing its arbitrariness, and surrendering it to a new collective use.

There is in these texts a profaning of the organic symbolic content that will become equally important to Benjamin’s encounter with and critique of Surrealism. The problematic of estrangement from nature and the critical epistemology upon which it depends first arises, however, in his confrontation with the Kantian account of pure reason, later to be intensified by the disarming of symbolic content by “[winning] the

¹¹⁵ Eagleton, 60.

energies of intoxication for the revolution”; it is in this regard that “Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer” (SW II, 216). When channeled into political *poiesis*, intoxication (*Rausch*), assists in organizing pessimism against the optimism of prevailing mythic views of nature, consciousness, and history.

In an early unpublished essay from 1918 titled “The Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin tries to work out a means of adopting and cultivating Kant's transcendental idealism while also assigning future criticism the radical task of disabusing its Enlightenment mythology, which naively assumes that perceptions furnish sensuous and intellectual knowledge through a strictly causal relationship (SW I, 103). The significance here for analyzing alienation from nature is twofold: First, we learn from Kant's “Copernican” insight that the essential characterization of nature as structured by the mind is an a priori ideality that gives form to appearance. What we perceive as objectively other-than-human, insofar as a phenomenal reality is placed before us, is only determined through categories of the understanding according to a schema, that is, in relation to time and space. Second, the shortcomings of the Kantian inquiry into the origins of knowledge lie, as the young Benjamin urges, in not being quite radical enough in this insight. The subjective construction of nature is for this reason a theme Benjamin will turn inside out during his lifetime in appealing to Baroque allegory, Surrealist method, and to an immanent critique of reification in *The Arcades Project*. His concept of natural history, as it transposes culture to the Pleistocene, is the dialectical antithesis to the idea of dissolving nature into subjectivity. Further, the problem of epistemology lies in Kant's refusal to “open up the realm of metaphysics” because he has already smuggled metaphysical rudiments into his epistemology—namely, the “hollowness” of

his naive concept of experience, expunging the “full freedom and depth” of imagination from knowledge (*SWI*, 102). More specifically, Kant fails to systematize concepts of experience outside the causal, mechanical, and empty relations of mathematics and Newtonian physics, a limitation of which the absolute notion of unilinear time in the transcendental aesthetic is also symptomatic. Benjamin comes to recognize the shortcomings of the Kantian system as he attempts to account for liminal experiences of historical meaning.

In effect, Kant presents a duality: a transcendental subject on the one hand, which cannot be substantiated in knowledge, and the content of an empirical subject on the other, received through perception. The “I think” of the transcendental subject cannot itself be cognized for Kant, but rather, must subsist as a consciousness which is “*capable* of accompanying all my presentations,” since the coalescence of perception in experience requires the guarantee of subjective thought.¹¹⁶ Because Kant’s critique fixes knowledge of experience to categories of the understanding and represents all knowledge as this question of consciousness, a cognizing subject that cannot be cognized, his system only admits of what can be undergone and related chronologically. We have already seen how such a one-dimensional conception of experience, championed by modern science, relates to the withering of traditional authority in the political community, but the relating of events *chronologically* will pose certain dangers as well in Benjamin’s historiographic model.

Countering the separation of scientific knowledge from the subject of experience that runs through Enlightenment thinking, Benjamin turns first to Johann Georg

¹¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Unified Edition, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett, 1996), 177; B131–2.

Hamann's "metacritique," for which the unity of sense and understanding in Kant's philosophy "has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers" (SW I, 107). Language is the historical origin of the subject of experience, according to Benjamin, and the "uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge" is to be its life's path. He writes, "The great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of experience, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language..." (SW I, 107-8). Benjamin early on wants to secure a "higher concept of experience" (SW I, 102), one that takes language as its central question and which in its historical occurrence encompasses nature as the speechless, yet "sensuous breath" (SW I, 73) of semiotic correspondences, speaking through human existence.

Rather than approaching knowledge of nature as a question of consciousness as Kant does, Benjamin follows Hamann in translating the separation of experience from the subject into theological terms: The human animal is not the unique possessor of language, but rather the animal who enunciates the silent language of nature: "Even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns" (SW I, 73). This self-referential signifying essence of linguistic enunciation, a theme that underpins Agamben's reading of Benjamin's messianism, becomes central to the latter's reflections on lamentation in German *Trauerspiel*. It lends itself as well to the formulation of a philological method influenced by André Breton. If Benjamin's mature political theology, abandoning Kantian systematic philosophy, responds to the shortsighted view of experience found both in scientific epistemology and in historical materialism, it is because it seeks to weaponize the

recuperation of a *communal* experience through collective dream-interpretation: the allegorical rearranging and reassembling of dream signifiers as political forays against historical reification. Dreaming, after all, “loosens individuality like a bad tooth” (SW II, 208).

How does the quest for a new mode of experience outside the mechanical-linear terms set forth by the Enlightenment inform Benjamin’s political orientation towards technique and the deep slumber of capitalist fantasies about nature? Rolf Tiedeman asserts that “the experiences of the Surrealists taught [Benjamin] that it was a matter not of restoring theological experience but of transporting it into the profane” (AP 934). This marks the serious break with Kant in Benjamin’s theory of experience and sets the stage for the later theological reinterpretation of materialism that we find in the 1940 theses on history. Why such a reinterpretation was necessary seems to have to do less with any particular metaphysical disagreement with Marxism on experience than with Benjamin’s own early understanding of how he might “cut through” experience “without destroying it,” having “penetrated into the center of the matter.”¹¹⁷ By fully penetrating experience as it exists in its expropriated modern state, Benjamin orchestrates the disenchantment and rearranging of the orphaned signifiers of history and nature.

Returning genuine historical experience to the uses of technology can then be seen as a matter of profaning mythic meaning where it has been pulled into sacred distance, expropriated to the domain of authority. There, as fetish worship removed from use value, technique can be co-opted by the ruling class for imperialistic ends. This is the theme that gives Benjamin’s observations on modern warfare and the

¹¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings, 1910–1917*, trans. by Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 119; *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol 2., 902.

erasure of storytelling relevance to the destruction that cannot be communicated from the standpoint of the modern consumerist fantasy. Frederick Jameson thus describes “the relationship between narrative and narrative closure, the possibility of storytelling, and the kinds of experience—social and existential—structurally available in a given social formation” as “Benjamin’s great theme—the formal unfolding or disintegration of storytelling as a reflex of village society, the great industrial city, and the world of media respectively.”¹¹⁸ This description of the problem of modern narrative, in which the everyday once gave birth to telling stories but can now no longer wield authority over positivist truth, indicates what is politically at stake in the expropriation of experience from technology: Human history can no longer be apprehended collectively except through the temporal form ascribed to life by mass culture. Agamben speaks similarly of “the disappearance of the maxim and the proverb,” which had once enthroned experience as authoritative truth:

The slogan, which has replaced them, is the proverb of humankind to whom experience is lost. This does not mean that today there are no more experiences, but that they are enacted outside the individual. And it is interesting that the individual merely observes them, with relief.¹¹⁹

The externalizing of authority—a kind of universal technocratic deferral to expertise and specialization—should for Benjamin be seen as anchoring the mythology of nature in the ideology of culture. Yet, at the same time, the vanishing of authoritative truth in transmitted wisdom coincides with an arbitrary signification of the commodity. The codified meanings of nature-culture binaries are ambivalent emblems under commodification. The ideological naturalness of culture relieves us specifically because

¹¹⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Sartre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 206.

¹¹⁹ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 16–7.

it frees us to live within the immediately lived character of *Elerbnis*—isolated events that are merely undergone. In lieu of carrying on an oral tradition and inheritance, experience subsists now in the shortened attention span of big-budget blockbusters, social media voyeurism, and bite-sized magazine editorials. Individuals on the street bear witness everywhere to the fruits of progress, but can only come into contact with them through corporate and private mediation.

The inward, lived intuition of the world through *Erlebnis*, long privileged by early Romanticism (and later by Husserlean phenomenology) as belonging properly to the subject's pre-scientific encounter with the world, must be placed in dialectical relation to the loss of this other kind of experience, the outwardly shared and communal authority of *Erfahrung*. The decline of the latter struck Benjamin in his youth as being in part a liberating opportunity, primarily because it is equally a decline of the authority to which traditional experience belonged. This is a theme that returns throughout his subsequent theory of history, especially in the anarchic, disaffected prerogative of “The Destructive Character” (1931). In an essay titled “Erfahrung,” penned nearly two decades earlier, a twenty-year-old Benjamin describes similarly the embittered clash of youthful hope with the authority of the adult who “has always already experienced [*erlebt*] everything” and who “in advance devalues the years we live” and surrenders the meaning of youth to that grand experience which testifies to nothing but “years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy” (*SW I*, 3). That there might be recourse to hope preceding experience is a truth which, if the youth are to take their elders at their word, can only subsist in the inexperiencible as to remain impervious to authority. Dissolution of *Erfahrung* signals that rebellious, masculinist trajectory from the

destructive character's sole dictum of "clearing away" (SW II, 541) to the unfortunate violent sexual imagery of the historical materialist who is "man enough to blast open the continuum of history" and who "leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello" (SW IV 396).

An alternative figure might better serve environmental politics here than Benjamin's self-restrained tough guy materialist: that of the *flâneur*—or preferably the *flâneuse*—whose gaze, styled after Baudelaire's allegorizing of the transience of the present, falls on the disenchanting wish-image of a society in harmony with nature and perceives not only the sorrow of lost time but the magnitude of environmental destruction constituting that historical loss. For such an *eco-flâneuse*, as we might imagine her, blasting open the continuum of history generates a moment of experiential potentiality freed from tradition and authority. She apprehends firsthand the mendacity of historicism's universal history because she is there on the street to parry the shock experience of time's being violently wrested away from her with a heightened consciousness. Her melancholic sloth, resistant to the slick 'greening' of progress, would have to be motivated by her perception of the recurrent sameness of this latest form of the new. Even if she does not fully understand why experience of nature has been deferred to the imaginary, the *eco-flâneuse* is acutely aware of its passing from the present and of her own consequent isolation, and so she wanders the newest spaces of urban-organic hybridity to hound these experiences at their moment of disappearance; she "despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up" and "flits by" (SW IV, 390-391). For historical materialism, this is the moment in which it becomes possible to arrest the image before it is appropriated as a tool of the

ruling class. In the nineteenth century, this meant constellating the archaic with the new as a fleeting image of natural-historical transience; in the twenty-first, this same image additionally requires constellating historical-environmental destruction with the mythic future of technology's reconciliation with nature.

While Marx and Lukács inform much of the theory of natural-historical reification for Benjamin's critical materialist program, it is the Surrealists who provide this methodological and practical orientation to the allegory of natural history and emancipatory opportunities for re-imagining technique. Conversely, it is with respect to the possibility of communism that Benjamin's distrust of Enlightenment technology and science extends an anti-imperialist political goal to Surrealist experience. "To organize pessimism" in the manner of the Surrealists is then to "discover in the space of political action ... image space" (SW IV, 404). Image space is where, for the lonely figure of the *eco-flâneuse*, the commodity-form of nature has taken the place of allegorizing culture-as-nature. By allowing the 'naturalness' of culture to ossify, she shatters the green aura bundling together subject to organic meaning across optical distance. The *eco-flâneuse*, like Benjamin, is a provocateur in her handling and manipulation of signifiers, which she refashions as natural-historical emblems so as to confront dreaming with the material destruction and decay of its collective body.

Benjamin understands revolutionary action as demanding this manner of making political space for opportunity against the threat of catastrophe, or rather against the continuity of historicism which spans every missed opportunity for action. Positing the collective human body and sensorium in relation to political image space, such that revolution would surrealize the interfacing of senses and mechanism to attain a

“nearness that looks with its own eyes,” allows Benjamin to take the side of technology’s immanent historical potential against its appropriation by the ruling classes (SW II, 217). But how is the reconstructive task of creating historical potentialities to be conceived? In revolutionary technique, the untapped potential of nature would not be reduced to its utility vis-à-vis labor practices from which we are currently alienated, but would rather subsist in a mimesis between organic processes and labor practices that returns the uses of nature from private consumption to *common use*.

The sacred separation of nature can be seen in its museumification, where it is cordoned off as ‘reserve’ or ‘preserve,’ but it is also evident in the fetishizing and obscuring of the interface between domestic commodities and natural processes. Maria Kaika suggests in her book *City of Flows* that Benjamin’s analysis of the fetish and wish-image shows commodified urban nature at the turn of the century transformed into “objects of delight and desire in themselves, signs of a better society that was yet to arrive.”¹²⁰ The symbolic content of the commodity attaches to its materiality while at the same time masking the genuine historical potential of its material conditions of production, transportation, and ecological relationality:

In their fetish role, networks and their nodal infrastructures were not just carrying water, electricity, etc. into the city, but also embodied the promise of the dream of a good society. The cathedrals of progress represented, displayed, and celebrated the aestheticized dreams of tomorrow’s utopia.¹²¹

As Kaika argues, the seemingly miraculous appearance of water when turning on a faucet and of electricity when plugging in an appliance, the scripting of natural processes as either beautiful or dirty and impure, the division of ‘outside’ nature from

¹²⁰ Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 39.

¹²¹ Kaika, 39–40.

the 'inside' of domesticity, and the carrying away of waste through a largely invisible infrastructure all characterize the bifurcation of a green aura of nature from its disenchanting material systems. The domestication and "mastery" of nature by commodity society is paradoxically dependent, then, on its mediation and the efficacy therein of keeping nature separated from us.

"Separation is also and above all exercised in the sphere of the body, as the repression and separation of certain physiological functions," Agamben notes. "One of these is defecation, which, in modern society, is isolated and hidden by means of a series of devices and prohibitions that concern both behavior and language."¹²² The Western bathroom or water closet is one exemplar of the importance of separation and mediation to the collective dream of modernization. Indoor plumbing (which relocates the coded geographical accessibility of water from the river, well, or public bath to the private tap) and centralized waste treatment (which renders private and invisible the sewage that was once a commonplace of urban street life) become the symbolic signifiers of having mastered nature through the aestheticizing of cleanliness and purity in the space of the bathroom.¹²³ In his book on Japanese architecture and aesthetics, the novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki appropriately remarks on the "fond associations with the beauties of nature" of the traditional outdoor toilets found in Kyoto temples: "Compared to Westerners, who regard the toilet as utterly unclean and avoid even the mention of it in polite conversation, we are far more sensible and certainly in better taste."¹²⁴

¹²² Agamben, *Profanations*, 86.

¹²³ Kaika, 53–4.

¹²⁴ Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Sedgwick, ME: Leete's Island Books, 1977), 4.

Estrangement from historical environmental destruction follows from such a pattern of nature's social construction in the fetishizing of symbolic value and the concealing of natural processes. The symbols of comfortable modern living separate socio-ecological production processes from the signifying of technological progress through what Kaika describes as a "severing of ties between surface appearance and the underground flows and networks."¹²⁵ Benjamin's historiographic method dispels the illusion of that separateness with a profanatory re-appropriation into pure technical potential of use, into a use value that bridges exhibition value with the unseen rubbish and decay of underlying systems. "What could it mean to 'profane defecation'?" asks Agamben on this latter count. "Certainly not to regain a supposed naturalness [...]. Rather, it is a matter of archaeologically arriving at defecation as a field of polar tensions between nature and culture, private and public, singular and common."¹²⁶ The standstill historical image of civilization's relationship to the natural world is subsequently that which arranges these polarities, including both aestheticized and unsightly nature, into a constellation of past and present against the homogenous timeline of historicism's modern dream. For Benjamin, this sort of heavy-handed misuse of what is otherwise apportioned off as sacred or put on display provides a political dimension to the intoxicated historical experience of the Surrealists: "The true, creative overcoming of religious illumination," he says, "certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" (*SW II*, 209).

¹²⁵ Kaika, 48.

¹²⁶ Agamben, *Profanations*, 86.

Kaika concludes that, despite capitalist modernity's best efforts to conceal its physical impurities and inefficiencies—and to in turn sanctify its symbols of progress as a means of creating the separation upon which it vitally depends—there are nonetheless unexpected lapses and breaches, such as occur in every major city the world over:

No matter how rational, sanitized, and clean (both in symbolic and literary terms) our cities have become, the “urban trash” in the form of networks, dirt, sewerage, pipes, and homeless people lurks underneath the city, in the corners, at the outskirts, bursting out on occasion in the form of rats, disease, homelessness, garbage piles, polluted waters, floods, and bursting pipes. They remain stubborn reminders of the materiality of the networked city and undermine its smooth facade. [...] The dystopian underbelly of the city that at times springs up in the form of accumulated waste, dirty water, pollution, or social disintegration produces a sharp contrast when set against the increasingly managed clarity of the urban environment. The contradictions cannot be successfully contained or displaced.¹²⁷

To “profane defecation,” then, as Agamben frames it, subsists precisely in such contradiction. That is to say, profaning what commodity capitalism keeps at a distance—and Italo Calvino reminds us that feces are among the only human products that have no history¹²⁸—means contextualizing it as contradiction, placing it into a polar relationship with that which represses it and makes it historically invisible.

We can understand the contradiction posed between material production processes (both organic and inorganic) and the myth of a sacred, disciplined, and aestheticized nature as being the tensive power of an allegorizing that disenchant symbols of progress and makes possible social constructions of non-authorial, democratically envisioned auratic meanings from the dismembered pieces. The allegorist schooled in historical materialism thrives on such contradiction insofar as it

¹²⁷ Kaika, 49.

¹²⁸ Quoted without attribution in Agamben, *Profanations*, 86.

calls out the lie of the new and clears political image space. More fundamentally, the technique of profanation liberates technology from its narrow economic value. Once mediated by historical materialism, Surrealist dream interpretation for Benjamin “discovers the new anew” (*AP* 855: M°,20)¹²⁹ in the same playful manner as a child, and it is this childlike encounter that Benjamin sees as the political model for recapturing experience. “When the child’s fantasy is cathected onto the products of modern production,” Buck-Morss explains, “it reactivates the original promise of industrialism, now slumbering in the lap of capitalism, to deliver a human society of material abundance.”¹³⁰ Awakening humanity to its self-destruction would have to additionally qualify this promise with an experience of the metabolic inextricability of organic and inorganic productive processes.

Reaching for the Emergency Brake

Chris Marker’s short film *2084* commemorates the 1984 centennial of the trade union movement’s inception in France by imagining a robotic television presenter from another hundred years into the future.¹³¹ Marker offers three possibilities for how the robot will be programmed to celebrate this hypothetical 200-year history and designates a color to each. First is *grise* (gray) for the *crise* (crisis) hypothesis, which is characterized by false securities and constant optimization of social welfare against industrial power. The workers’ syndicates are at their most efficient in this hypothetical

¹²⁹ Translation is Buck-Morss’s, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 274.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ The film was commissioned by the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail. *2084: Video clip pour une réflexion syndicale et pour le Plaisir*, directed by Chris Marker (France: La Lanterne, Groupe Confédéral Audiovisuel CFDT, 1984), Video.

timeline, since hope for stability is contingent upon their preservation. As a result, unions cannot bring about a new society, and nostalgia for the past serves, in Marker's words, as a substitute for that nostalgia for the future that in other times was called revolution. Second, Marker shows us a black hypothesis, in which familiar Stalinist or fascist techniques of power replace the ideology of culture. This techno-totalitarianism transforms the state into a machine and the trade union into its mechanic. The union troubleshoots and performs maintenance upon the workings of managerial technique, but is unable to imagine that the machine could be used for anything else.

Finally, we are given a blue hypothesis in which to imagine a brighter tomorrow that would not be "*totalement catastrophique*." However, this hypothesis is also the most cautious: Glancing backwards from the future at our current era, Marker positions trade unions as a bridge between the rage of the historically oppressed and their hope for happiness. In contrast to the technique of power, technology becomes instead an emancipatory force used to transform the world in its struggle against hunger, sickness, suffering, ignorance, and intolerance. The blue program supposes that the twentieth century was nothing more than a transition from barbarism to culture. In the end though, Marker reminds us that these are merely hypotheses and that the robotic television presenter of 2084 has not yet been fully programmed. Rather, we are each of us programming it ourselves day in and day out.

Marker's film intersperses its time-travelling politics with documentary interviews of ordinary French citizens in the 1980s. In this way, he asks his audience to treat the future not as an eager techno-utopian prognostication, but as an historical document. If the first two hypotheses imagine in retrospect the social hopes and dangers of power

hiding in our own epoch, it is only the blue hypothesis that regards revolution as a standpoint from which the present would be documented as prehistory. And yet, to say that the twentieth century would seem to have existed only as an interlude is also the extreme normalizing danger of historicism, a danger that according to Benjamin removes political desires and anxieties from their genuine historical potential. For Benjamin, the catastrophe—the missed opportunity for revolutionizing society—is necessarily located in a “now-time,” *Jetztzeit*, and not in transitioning to some future that must be attained or avoided.

The subtle distinction between a historiography of revolutionary transition, such as can be found in most Marxian criticism, and Benjamin’s procedure of constellating dialectical flash points between past and present may seem on the surface too obscured from practical matters. But this distinction is not only indispensable to Benjamin’s critical method, it predicates the most salient feature of that method for resisting assimilations of practical technique to the ideology of progress. That is, Benjamin introduces a corrective to the “vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogenous continuum,” which Agamben says “has become the hidden breach through which ideology has crept into the citadel of historical materialism.”¹³² The *Jetztzeit* of genuine action, befitting the revolutionizing of history itself, qualifies time rather than quantifies it and in so doing turns on its head the ideological notion that we await history, that we are subjected *to* it rather than subjects *of* it, and that culture will succeed barbarism on some calendar date at the far end of an impersonal continuum of linear time.

¹³² Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 99.

A propos the atrocities and terror of a war which led his friend Walter to commit suicide while fleeing the Nazis, Adorno remarks:

The idea that after this war life will continue 'normally' or even that culture might be 'rebuilt'—as if the rebuilding of culture were not already its negation—is idiotic. Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for?¹³³

The mere fact that, despite their transformative techniques, neither industrialized capitalism nor the age of information have been mastered by a humanistic and democratic transformation of society, should lend itself to distrust in any appeal to normalization that treats catastrophe as the exception rather than the rule. The narrative of an historical interlude, taken up from its imagined return to normalcy after unrestrained turmoil, would have to cut its losses from the span of recent history that has continually swept away accounts of oppression and anthropogenic destruction. Benjamin argues conversely that historical materialism “cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill” (SW IV, 396).

As a model of historical time, the standstill of dialectics foregrounds the catastrophe in its present immediacy and resists its deferral to strands of causality radiating forward. In an entry on “Awakening” from *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin elaborates:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is 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.—Only dialectical images are

¹³³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.

genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. (AP 462: N2a,3)

Images—especially those that empower us to “read” the *Ur*-history of the capitalist nineteenth century “like a text” (AP 464, N4,2)—can be assembled as tactical strategies against humanity’s subordination to progressions of time. In the dialectical image, history is melancholically staged alongside the transitory over-ripeness and decay of nature, but it also becomes the site of humanity’s potential for happiness, as Agamben writes: “Adam’s seven hours in Paradise are the primary core of all authentic historical experience.”¹³⁴ By the same token, the standstill of meaning makes revolution possible, according to Agamben, because it consists of transforming chronology into *cairology*, a moment of decisiveness in the recognition of history as the human community’s natural home. Cairological technique brings forth our emancipation from mythic servitude to linear time—an “awakening” from the collective dream of happiness to its practicable possibility—and merges “the time of history and the *cairós* in which man, by his initiative, grasps favourable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment.”¹³⁵

The now-time of emancipation must coincide with more than just “initiative” and a choice of freedom; it must fundamentally transform the reception of history. Because exploitation, violence, and despoliation at the level of economic structure go unregistered in the visionary, superstructural reification of technological progress, the historical materialist cannot easily rally proletarian classes to this cause with placating dream-images of liberated grandchildren living in a garden of abundance. The far more

¹³⁴ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 115.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

effective image of classless society is rather the immanent overlap between potential for Edenic happiness and the unredeemed inheritance of proletarian experiences directed at the dreaming present. The simultaneity of present and future in Marker's use of time travel as a cinematic device is to this end far more illustrative of Benjamin's thesis that "we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim"; we carry with us an historiographic obligation to preceding silent generations insofar as we are the redeemers of whom they dreamed and "our coming was expected on earth" (SW IV, 390). The revolutionary now-time, in other words, would retrieve a fragile image of the past from the brink of disappearance and "recognize itself as intended in that image" (SW IV, 391).

Images of what industrialized commodity society has already destroyed, those whom it has exploited, and the violence it has perpetrated against the future—our present—by filling the atmosphere with carbon dioxide are therefore decisive in coordinating technical activity against the continued oppressiveness of global capital and environmental destruction. Forward-looking progress, whether projected in the development of new technologies or visions of Social Democratic justice, is always an attempt on the part of conformism to overpower past traditions of collective struggle. Wresting tradition away from that conformism so as "to brush history against the grain" (SW IV, 392) is accordingly the therapeutic motivation behind Benjamin's reading of Freudian memory-traces into materialist historiography, and its power lies in bringing to light the political outrage hidden as repressed traumas. The analogous method for materialism that Benjamin finds in Freud's analysis is that of filling forgotten experience of destruction with consciousness in the dramatic field of transference. The traumatic

patient cannot do without recollection in seeking cathexis and is doomed without it to compulsive repetition. Similarly, the repressions of cultural history that cannot be recollected yield an eternal recurrence of unconscious compulsions in collective life.

On this point Benjamin quotes Hermann Lotze as a critic of the concept of societal progress: “Nothing is progress which does not mean an increase of happiness and perfection for those very souls which had suffered in a previous imperfect state” (*AP* 478–9: N13,3).¹³⁶ Only in turning back to the *Ur*-forms of cultural development and redeeming the value of past struggle to illuminate the opportunity for current struggle would it be possible to write a blue program, to wit, a future that is the negation of the present as catastrophic. Traumas may be forgotten and buried, but their presence as enduring memory-traces in the unconscious of collective dreaming spells out for Benjamin the meaning of history as necessitating intergenerational recollection, just as in Freud “the patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it.”¹³⁷ It is this recollective definition of human history that carries the most weight for the twenty-first century’s coming to terms with its structural lineage, addressing the latter as a repressed sign that in cultural expression points back to something set in motion long ago. The *Ur*-history of commodity capitalism would then become the startling “realization of dream elements in the course of waking up” (*AP* 464: N4,4), an image that presents the irreversible impact of climate change on the world’s ecosystems and poorest inhabitants as being wholly evident in mere fragments of culture.

¹³⁶ Cited: Hermann Lotze, *Mikrokosmos*, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1864), 23.

¹³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 18.

It follows that questioning progress in culture entails debasing its narrative authority. Humanitarian aid, philanthropic charity, market regulations, environmental policy, innovations in research and development, and even the welfare state—all masquerading as progressive—would be unmasked by the Benjaminian perspective, revealed in their critical opposition to the historical principle upon which revolutionary action could be made cathartic, that is, as a past oppression that requires communal intervention. By definition, technological solutionism and other managerial ideologies of amelioration lack the redemptive insight into who and what is excluded from history. They lack an ability to call forth cognitive images of forgotten experience and confront them in the present. In short, technique remains a tool of the ruling class so long as it is dominated by a conception of progress that separates culture from the faraway injustices and disasters for which it is extrinsically responsible. The situation of oppression should be looked upon from the standpoint of Judgment Day as a *citation à l'ordre du jour* according to Benjamin: “Only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments” (SW IV, 390).

Sans Soleil, another film by Chris Marker, similarly describes the redemption of inherited suffering as a “total recall.” Marker imagines a movie made about all of the traumatic exclusions of history, telling the story of an alien time-traveler who is capable of visiting every moment in his civilization’s past:

In the world he comes from, to call forth a vision, to be moved by a portrait, to tremble at the sound of music, can only be signs of a long and painful pre-history. He wants to understand. He feels these infirmities of time like an injustice, and he reacts to that injustice like Ché Guevara, like the youth of the sixties, with indignation. He is a Third Worlder of time. The idea that unhappiness had existed

in his planet's past is as unbearable to him as to them the existence of poverty in their present.¹³⁸

The lifeblood of revolution, Benjamin argues, is the pain of history. Like Marker's *Third Worlder* of time, Benjamin's revolutionary historian perceives disparity and destruction as more than just the indignation of a particular epoch. She wants to extend this indignation—in the same manner that the "satiated bourgeoisie" extends the idea of progress—over the totality of human history (*AP* 479: N13,3).

Mounting a philosophical "rescue" (*AP* 473: N9,3; 476: N11,4) of expropriated experience of historical objects is key to establishing the material effect of what might otherwise appear in Benjamin's late writings like a mystical retreat into historical meditation. If his program stalls in perennial contemplation of the abyss of unregistered pain, it is certainly not from the terrace of the grand hotel where his fellow German-Jewish exiles have taken up residence,¹³⁹ but rather in nervous proximity to totalitarian annihilation. At the core of Benjamin's work is a deep sensitivity to annihilation—to the margins of cultural experiences that were increasingly edged out of urban life and to the immediate political threat of historical erasure. Embracing a Kabbalistic disenchantment of the future under such intolerable circumstances signifies his political commitment to past injustice as the precondition for awakening human community, just as in the Jewish tradition it makes possible the awakening of redemptive history: "For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter" (*SW* IV, 397). As

¹³⁸ *Sans Soleil*, directed by Chris Marker (France: Argos Films, 1983), Video.

¹³⁹ "A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' which I described [...] as 'a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.'" Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 22.

Eagleton notes, however, this proposition should be “simply false” for the historical materialist: “Not every moment is the strait gate through which the Messiah may enter; socialist revolution occurs only in particular material conditions, not in some transcendental gift or voluntarist seizing of the time.”¹⁴⁰ How then can Benjamin’s conception of weak messianic power be squared with his own Marxian foregrounding of a cultural materialism and his mode of strategic critical activity for resisting the progressive dream-world?

It might be possible to curtail the role of voluntarism by relating Benjamin’s particular historiographic exegesis of weak messianic power in “On the Concept of History” to what Buck-Morss identifies as a more socially determined catalyst for political praxis, that is, to “materialist pedagogy.”¹⁴¹ The revolutionary value of reading a Baudelaire—or a Benjamin, for that matter—does not lie in revelatory authority, but in presenting the text’s critical pattern with tradition, which as a means of historical transmission outside the pages of textbook history bypasses the continuity of culture. As critical “constellations,” the arrangements of cultural artifacts and texts do not belong to a transmission of everlasting ideas or essential truths to be discovered as signs of the coming messianic age. They are taken up in the contingent project of laboriously deciphering, rending apart dominant authorial cohesion, and reconstructing the pieces as interrelated to concrete historical conditions. “The tyranny of scripture,” Eagleton goes on to clarify, “is for the revolutionary reader the dissemination of polyvalence.” Like the bible, history lacks an authorial intention and so its texts figure “less as expressive

¹⁴⁰ Eagleton, 81.

¹⁴¹ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 287.

media than as material ceremonies, scriptive fields of force to be negotiated, dense dispositions of signs less to be 'read' than meditatively engaged, incanted and ritually re-made."¹⁴² The textual evidence of a given era is not, then, expressive of concealed truth about history so much as its form is a heap of signs hurriedly gathered and consolidated by prevailing economic and social influence.

The "true historian" endeavors to "read what was never written," which is to say, the tradition of the oppressed, and to rewrite that tradition as being part and parcel of the structural power that produces culture (SW IV, 405).¹⁴³ This is why Benjamin defines the opportunity for critical interrogation as occurring whenever "the status quo threatens to be preserved" (N10,2) and so enlists cultural phenomena on the side of non-authorial political experience that would typically be overwritten by ideology. Constellating the particulars of the nineteenth century with those of the twentieth in a dialectical arrangement forces objectivity upon the apparent isolations of cultural production. Bourgeois inheritance always "appears reified" in this regard: Not only is its continuity and bequeathing of cultural spoils removed from concrete production processes by the niceties of fetishization, but its entire history—the history of the commodity—is limited to "nothing but the sediment formed in the consciousness of human beings by memorable events, events stirred up in the memory by no genuine—that is to say, political—experience" (SW III, 268). Buck-Morss explains that the purpose of class education is precisely "to provide this political experience."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Eagleton, 117.

¹⁴³ This line from Hugo von Hofmannsthal also appears as an epigraph to *Konvolute M* (AP 416, M). Rolf Tiedemann notes that Benjamin's reference is to "Der Tor und der Tod," *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1952), 220.

¹⁴⁴ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 289.

Critical interrogation of the past should then be understood to furnish the materials for revolutionary pedagogy in the present, rechanneling desire from the seductively organic linearity of cultural narrative into the inevitable decay and necrosis of natural-historical heterogeneity. Because “the materialist presentation of history carries along with it an immanent critique of the concept of progress,” it has to unmake and remake tradition outside of hypostasized continuity, and so bases its procedure for constellating images “on long experience, common sense, presence of mind, and dialectics” (AP 476: N11,4). Destabilizing the authority of narrative, this “stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows” extricates the fleeting image of the past, jostling it loose from its embeddedness in culture so as to pedagogically recombine it with a galvanizing image of the present (AP 458: N1,8).¹⁴⁵ The resulting depth of perspective allows Baudelaire’s ambivalent and impatient encounter with nineteenth-century capitalist modernity to educate Benjamin’s own generation on its material conditions.¹⁴⁶ Education takes place as an awakening to dream elements: “Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening,” Benjamin says, “so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else,” and his *Arcades Project* thus “deals with awakening from the nineteenth century” (AP 464: N4,3).

Accordingly, the “negatives of essence” Baudelaire labors over are posthumously salvaged as an *Ur*-form for brushing proletarian traditions against the grain of the bourgeois reception of his poetry. Benjamin, as Baudelaire’s pupil, extracts the latter’s

¹⁴⁵ In a letter from 1935, Adorno encourages Benjamin to develop an “explicit theory of perspective” based on the early nineteenth-century invention of the stereoscope. Theodor W. Adorno and Gretel Karplus to Walter Benjamin, Hornberg, 2 August, 1935, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 1503.

¹⁴⁶ See: Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 304.

splenetic distrust of pastoral sentimentalism and, in a way that speaks to our own generation, formulates a historiography whose “founding concept is not progress but actualization” (N2,2). Novelty—the *nouveau* of supposed historicist progress—is shown through this stereoscopic of past and present to be nothing more than a foreshortening of historical vision. Detaching signifiers from their fixed position in narrative history and *using* them, citing in alien contexts “without quotation marks,” and favoring montage over any attempt to reconstruct the past “the way it really was” (SW IV, 391), Benjamin’s historian-cum-bricoleur pulls the symbols of modernity into the orbit of human praxis. That moment of handling historical images is given to a profane illumination of the present as *Jetztzeit*, an instant of decisive action. Political education starting from the profane or “bad side” of culture could perhaps alternatively be seen as recycling historical “refuse” (AP 461: N2,6) of the consumer waste economy to neutralize the tyranny of the new. That is, it rescues a fleeting image of history from the mound of debris where our collective dream of progress had just previously fantasied its utopian culmination. “Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse,” observes Benjamin of Baudelaire’s poetic method of judiciously sorting everything the big city has thrown away (SW IV, 48).

Benjamin’s pedagogy teaches in this fashion that the same salvation made visible to us by the dream-world of technology is the obstacle to its realization. The more insistently commodity capitalism promises a better future, the more disastrous this world becomes, consolidating human labor, technocratic power, factory-scale mass slaughter, resource extraction and privatization, soil depletion, and outputs of pollution and carbon emissions to the imperative order of an automated mechanical rhythm.

History is a machine over which we have lost control. “Had Hegel’s philosophy of history embraced this age,” Adorno says of the Second World War, “Hitler’s robot-bombs would have found their place beside the early death of Alexander and similar images, as one of the selected empirical facts by which the state of the world-spirit manifests itself directly in symbols”; the world historical movement of spirit, its destruction of human and earthly life coordinated by capital, “refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel’s philosophy of history” by surrendering itself to a mechanized subjectless subject, “not on horseback, but on wings and without a head.”¹⁴⁷ One might hold that the Hegelian historical dialectic of mind and nature is decapitated in Benjamin’s dialectics at a standstill: Lacking an historical subject, the headless mechanisms of commodity production separate material effects from the dream-world of progress.

According to Agamben, historical knowledge for Benjamin does not derive from a science of logic, as it does for Hegel’s dialectical historicism, but from an “analogical and paradigmatic” image stuck *in medio* and “exposed like a zone of indifference” between polarities, or like an “unresolved oscillation between estrangement and a new event of meaning.”¹⁴⁸ That standstill now-time yields a potent visual language of instantaneity through which disparate historical signs, resisting a process of sublation, are instead directly in contact with one another as a waking opportunity for action. Aligning Benjamin’s technique of natural history with his messianic model of now-time is at once a rejection of a historical ‘return’ to nature through culture and a naturalizing of cultural progress in the image of unending transience. Because relentlessly forging

¹⁴⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.

¹⁴⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Nyphms*, trans. Amanda Minervini (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2013), 29–30.

ahead through technology also means overwriting and forgetting the destruction of its history, moments of remembrance slow down this movement by bringing technology into static constellation with an earlier epoch. But such constellations of destruction, in deriving from the principle of a “total recall,” do not turn to a saving ideal of eternal Paradise, but instead face the negativity with an allegorical gaze. Beset by “visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins,” allegory is not the *Aufhebung* of a dialectal turning, but rather an “about-turn” of ideal symbolized progress, a faltering before its own limits as the already reified existence of technology comes to a halt in yet another moment of reification.¹⁴⁹

Benjamin offers a corrective to one of Marx’s well-known symbols of the historical materialist dialectic, alleging on the contrary that the perceptibility of history demands its own temporal emancipation from its process: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake” (SW IV, 402). The dream of world history seems to have more in common in this regard with the Surrealist visualization of machinery. Louis Aragon’s *Le paysan de Paris*, as Buck-Morss observes, accounts for the “panicky terror” of delegating labor and thought to mechanization: “There is a modern form of tragedy: It is a kind of great steering mechanism that turns but no hand is at the wheel.”¹⁵⁰ The same motif adheres to the delegation of perception to media, through which one can no longer think what one wants to think, as “thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (SW IV, 267). One

¹⁴⁹ Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 232.

¹⁵⁰ Louis Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 146. Cited in: Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 260.

might look here to early, more literal depictions—such as Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* or Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*—of human frailty consumed by the scale and power of mechanization run amuck. Benjamin’s emergency break would thus engender a political recourse to stalling the runaway train of world-historical development, collapsing its momentum into a standstill moment.

Benjamin’s political bearing differs from the Surrealists who, Buck-Morss explains, mistook the anarchic public exhibition of their self-induced dream states as an essentially individual affair: “Benjamin’s insistence that the dream was ‘a collective phenomenon’” is premised, by contrast, on the double sense in which unconsciousness refers to the collective’s “distracted dreaming state” of mass culture as well as to the fact that it remains “unconscious of itself.”¹⁵¹ Revolution then requires an arresting image to jolt the collective awake. “Whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream,” says Benjamin, “here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening” as a “dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history. That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been” (*AP*, 458: N1,9). The historiographic significance of the past’s cultural refuse is that it contains traces of earlier, unrealized utopias, carrying “elements of a classless society” stirred from within the collective’s unconscious (*AP*, 4–5). Whereas the mythological progression of culture withdraws in a forward momentum from what is antiquated, a dialectical standstill would have to empathize fully with what it leaves behind. Through recollecting these memory-traces in political consciousness, Benjamin’s procedure teaches us that the *reason* the unfashionable, out-of-date, and kitsch appear “ugly” is

¹⁵¹ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 260.

because they delimit the failed material of a one-time wish-image that disturbs our senses: “the ugliness of the object is the terrifying knock on the door when we’re asleep,” rousing us to “the sounds of the awakening morning we have drawn into our dreams” (*AP*, 907–8).

A genuine image of the myth of technology that is dissolved into the image space of environmental history would have to educate human praxis to those material conditions under which it no longer wields control over its own machinery, where the subject of history is asleep at the wheel, as it were. Benjamin’s emphasis on Marxian awakening as a metaphor for political education suggests that every creative product—every aggrandized technological breakthrough or progressive social achievement—in conforming to the dream-world of historical truth, is reinforced by positions of power that negate experience of destruction. That is why the return to our senses comes as an awakening jolt of experience, lest one is resigned, like the Surrealists, to the internal world of lucid dreaming. Benjamin is clear in connecting the image of awakening to the effects of modern life upon the nervous system:

Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto* (*SW* II, 217-218).

Through this somatic and psychic innervation, repressed nervous energy can be cathected in political consciousness and thereby made to transcend the prevailing order of phantasmagoric and dream-like appearances. Beyond these false appearances lies the materialist’s grasp of the spatialized, ecological relationality between economic labor, domestic economics, mass production, supply chains, infrastructure, and natural

life-processes. Only this communal apprehension of bodily awareness is capable of combining technique with socialist potential.

Historical-materialist consciousness in Benjamin's dialectics of awakening differs in an important respect from that of the orthodox Hegelian-Marxian dialectic because it treats anything excluded by historical movement—and not consciousness of this movement—as the genuine subject of history. *The Arcades Project's* dense pastiche of the forms of cultural reification, modelled after filmic montage and bearing striking similarities to Brechtian distancing, aims at imitatively calling attention to the materialist negativity underlying cultural production, verging on a grand parody of European philosophy in its championing of non-being over being. Benjamin thereby attempts to establish vacancies of action—neglected opportunities—as the potential for revolution. Awakening from the dream of technology occurs inside the negativity of historicism seized as now-time, a reaching into the negation of the past, and is for this reason also connected to the structure of historical memory. Benjamin describes a “spontaneous afterimage,” appearing in Bergson's exposition of *durée* in *Matter and Memory*, of that “alienating, blinding experience” of urban industrialism “which presented itself undistorted to Baudelaire's eyes, in the figure of his ideal reader” (SW IV, 314): the hypocritical, impatient, “delicate monster” who yawns and smokes his hookah while dreaming of death.¹⁵² But it is Proust who, from the first incursions of reality upon dreaming in the opening of *Swann's Way* to the madeleine episode, pushes recollection into the ideology of its social context where it is encountered as a *mémoire involontaire*, situated beyond the intellect in ruins and fossilized traces. Proust produces Bergson's

¹⁵² Baudelaire, “Au Lecteur” in *Flowers of Evil*, 21.

truth of experience “synthetically” by imitating that facet of ceremony and ritual in which “voluntary and involuntary recollection cease to be mutually exclusive” (SW IV, 315-316), where experience of tradition enjoins material memory with a collective cultural past.

That revolutionary awakening should not occur through the clarifying effect of well-reasoned narrative discourse, but as an abrupt, innervating jolt from something outside the dream-world is also described by Benjamin in a retelling of “Sleeping Beauty.”¹⁵³ In light of a popular tradition that “warns against recounting dreams on an empty stomach,” lest the dreamer “remains under the sway of the dream” (SW I, 444), Sleeping Beauty is awoken by the sound of the cook smacking the kitchen boy, and not by her Prince Charming. Similarly, recuperating the past, as Eagleton argues, cannot be achieved with a passive submission to its comforting, mythic symbols of a coming salvation:

Stung by her complicity with bourgeois academicism, truth has sunk into a deathly sleep from which only a further violation will awaken her—but this time the enlightening smack of Zen rather than the seductive embrace of science.¹⁵⁴

The innervating and intrusive image that brings us to our senses does so at a visceral level, and the author plays the role of master-chef who, as “culinary transformer of raw materials into nourishing texts, must cuff truth into his service with all the casual high-handedness with which Benjamin himself here manhandles a revered tale.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Terry Eagleton makes this observation in *Walter Benjamin*, 43–4. The original passage appears in the postscript of a letter Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem. See: Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, vol. I, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main, 1966), 418–9.

¹⁵⁴ Eagleton, 44.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

The Prince Charming of technological progress confers immense comfort against such bleak disasters as have already happened and will likely continue to afflict this millennium, which is perhaps all the more reason to despair of the obscurity of placing hope in the Zen-like awakening to revolutionary temporality. “Comfort isolates,” writes Benjamin, “on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization” (SW IV, 328). Far easier to sink into the unconsciousness of automation—and of perception conditioned by shock—than to bring the imperial machine to a halt. For that reason, Benjamin’s criticism is best thought of as a pedagogical imperative of discomforting perspectives. By representing the history of society *through* that discomfort, the image establishes a way of seeing catastrophe from a redemptive standpoint and as an alternative to progressive ideology. Adorno’s famous conclusion to *Minima Moralia*—in asking how to philosophize after Auschwitz—reads: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.”¹⁵⁶ Yet, because our reading of world history is inherently tainted by it, because we are always already inside our own dream-like cultural inheritance, such a standpoint remains inaccessible. Redemption can never fully enter into view because it is always “removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence.”¹⁵⁷ The messianic perspective is impossible, but politically motivating in spite of its weakness.

Understanding this theological motif in Benjamin as resolving the dialectical image to a redemptive standpoint must be placed in relation to both his critique of

¹⁵⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Baroque allegory and his materialist appeal to Kabbalah. Buck-Morss remarks that “in the dialectical leap from the hill of skulls to the resurrection of the spirit,” Benjamin argues the Baroque dramatists “‘treacherously’ (*treulos*) abandoned to the devil the very sorrow-filled nature, the very physical suffering that had been their original concern.” That is, they abandon the material world of both history and nature in favor of an immaterial power, that of inward spirituality. Buck-Morss makes the case that while Benjamin salvages melancholic apprehension of transitory nature from the allegorists, he turns to Kabbalist doctrine for the redemptive aspect of his secular materialist theology. The “new nature” of reified existence in technological commodity society, she points out, is not *evil*. Rather, its objects contain a latent social potential:

Scattered throughout [these] objects, the “divine sparks” described by the doctrine of *Tikkun* take the form of socialist potential, a transcendent element, the existence of which is no less real than the capitalist social relations that prevent its actualization. [...] Humanity’s historical responsibility is an interpretive task, “naming” both the socialist potential of the new nature (now synonymous with nature’s “redemption”) and the failure of history to realize it.¹⁵⁸

It is therefore not mystery, but a capacity to regain genuine experience in profane illumination, to transform chronology into cairology, that resolves Benjamin’s *Ur*-history of the empirical fragments of capitalism to the redemptive standpoint which blasts apart historicism’s continuum in “On the Concept of History.” Buck-Morss argues to this effect that the theses on history “have a didactic intent, providing in fact the initiation through which the *Passagen-Werk* reader must pass,” and goes on to conclude that the purpose of Benjamin’s seemingly obscure attempt to harness a mystical, redemptive materialism from Kabbalah and place it into a socio-psychological framework is “to remember that

¹⁵⁸ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 240.

theology animates historical materialism, but to keep this knowledge invisible because to call it by name would cause its truth to vanish—this is Benjamin’s last warning.”¹⁵⁹

In the age of climate change it is all the more pressing to “name” both socialist potentials and historical failures as they coincide in cultural images of progress. The need for emancipatory education will grow in proportion to the constitutive imprisonment of empirical life-processes by ideology (“the open-air prison which the world is becoming,” to use Adorno’s words).¹⁶⁰ The enclosure of nature in the commodity-form depends in that respect on the separation of experience from processes that humanity’s history as yet has no control over, not least of all the separation of mass-produced consumer culture from the rapacious burning of fossil fuels. Behind the resplendence of every new technological advancement remains an unseen mound of toxic, discarded circuitry manufactured by workers who cannot themselves afford to buy the products they make. If it is possible to hesitantly write a ‘green’ program as the fourth hypothesis for how Marker’s robotic television presenter would commemorate this century in the year 2084, it would not be to chronicle a transition from barbarism to culture, but to visualize both together at once, illuminating just how much and how little has changed.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 252.

¹⁶⁰ Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.

EPILOGUE

For 70 consecutive years, the Science and Security Board of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* has issued an annual assessment of the existential threat posed to humanity and to the planet by the technological potential for global destruction, a threat first brought about by nuclear armament and in the last few decades by continuing industrial-scale burning of fossil fuels. The risk level is represented metaphorically by the hands of a Doomsday Clock, which counts down to the midnight of annihilation. Though the decision in January 2017 “to move the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock 30 seconds closer to catastrophe” than it was in 2016¹⁶¹—setting it just two minutes and 30 seconds from the zero hour of annihilation—is no doubt an effective intimation of apocalyptic dangers, it differs from Walter Benjamin’s timekeeping in an important regard: Every present is for Benjamin already the midnight of catastrophe so long as it is separated from historical meaning.

A decisive barrier to revolution in the era of anthropogenic climate change is impoverishment of historical experience. This poverty removes individual life from the mass destructive activities carried out on a global scale and from a meaningful communal context in which to imagine alternatives. What kind of experience can restore the history of human-caused destruction to political community? How might community emerge from a collective bodily awakening to its ecological destruction? Our present crisis, and indeed the very language of ecology, may seem remote from the social and political exigencies that weigh on Benjamin’s own life and philosophy of experience. Yet

¹⁶¹ Science and Security Board Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, “2017 Doomsday Clock Statement,” ed. John Mecklin, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 26, 2017, <http://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/Final%202017%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>

underlying both epochs is the same long catastrophe, what Benjamin defines as a missed opportunity for human history to prevail. Revolutionary social practice would trace such opportunity, drawing together experience of nature and history to make visible—in art, intellectual labor, and cultural production, but also and especially in the domain of physical work and class struggle—the entwined fates of planetary life.

I have argued that Benjamin's criticism can reveal certain shortcomings of popular environmental traditions as they filter through mass culture. Both the Romantic return to pre-modern Nature and the capitalist faith in technological or economic progress fall back uncritically on a mythic concept of history. This reification of myth is one in which creativity, production, and the marketing of commodities, all calibrated to generate profit, draw energy from a fantasy of earth's inexhaustibility—an earth that "exists gratis." Nature serves, in other words, as the background of human beings' endeavors to transform their physical world infinitely and to seize on power relations. By contrast, the political value of experiencing destruction lies in the way it frustrates and interrupts this fantasy. Destruction calls forward the earth's finite and contingent materiality in collective life. It takes the hyperbole of naturalized history a step further and, as in Benjamin's abrasive and baroque representations, recasts historical fantasy in the role of organic transience and decay. An important political question, then, is how to represent this reassertion of finite materiality in the everyday.

To help illuminate Benjamin's bearing on social practice, I want to return once more to the image of Mosher's HighWaterLine and pair it with another, related image, that of SCS #16, a storm water detention pond described by Irene Klaver as harboring

“accidental” wildness.¹⁶² Whereas Mosher sets out to bisect built spaces of ordinary use with a boundary of ‘external’ nature, dramatizing through public art the inherent ecological instability of urban geography, Klaver’s image is one of hybridity “reclaiming” or profaning a type of built space perceived to be separate from both culture and nature, domesticated and yet, as she points out, frequently marked “OFF LIMITS!” to public life.

Also known as Little Lake, SCS #16 is presented by Klaver as an unassuming infrastructural feature in an average American town—Denton, Texas. Though constructed to serve the vital purpose of preventing flooding in downtown Denton, SCS #16’s flow control structure lacks the charisma of high-profile riverfront redevelopment projects, such as those planned further along the Trinity River basin in nearby Dallas and Fort Worth. In this sense, it is totally unremarkable. But for Klaver, this detention pond is much more than a non-space of functional infrastructure. It exemplifies an ambiguous blurring of nature and culture in an open territory—and with it, heightened opportunities for spontaneous, undisciplined, non-commodified, and non-gentrified engagement. Klaver portrays “a haphazard accidental community”¹⁶³ gravitating to the pond: floating colonies of fire ants emerging on its surface after heavy rainfall, a small Hindu community celebrating Diwali on the shore, a group of pelicans who use the pond as a migration stop, people walking their dogs and playing disc golf around its edges.

This is not the site of returning to pastoral nature nor one of high-tech ecological solutionism. Rather, SCS #16 engenders natural-cultural hybridity as an everyday practice, a profanation of manufactured nature through natural hyperactivity, which

¹⁶² Irene J. Klaver. “Accidental Wildness on a Detention Pond,” *Antennae, The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, #33, Autumn 2015, 45–58. www.antennae.org.uk

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

Klaver takes simply to mean nature being “overly active.” These hybrids, she explains, “facilitate an environmental imagination that accommodates a place of culture in nature by questioning its very distinction and questioning the workings of this distinction, thus it instantiates the hypernatural of the natural into an environmental imagination.”¹⁶⁴

I introduce this final image of a flood control structure alongside that of Mosher’s prophetic New York City waterline to reiterate two sides of how social practice in the Anthropocene might be understood through the frame of Benjamin’s criticism. If the HighWaterLine can be said to foreground our alienation from natural destruction and call into question the cultural demarcation of built environments, Klaver’s image of SCS #16 engenders a built environment that remains ambivalently outside of mass culture but which nonetheless makes its way into an “environmental imagination.” For Mosher, rising sea levels represent a return of finite natural materiality to the alienated subject on the city street; for Klaver, the otherwise invisible technological and infrastructural materiality, devoid of ideality and taken for granted, is reclaimed by subjects who participate in an improvised—accidentally wild—community, dynamically constituted by the water, the weather, the wind, birds, beavers, disc-golfers, dog walkers, fishing folks, and folks just hanging out at the water’s edge.

The current of hope that runs through Benjamin’s organizing of pessimism and his bricolage of morbid emblems comes to a head in the latent imagistic potential of objects and environments to submit to such profane uses. In this way, experience of these mundane objects and environments can permeate the popular imagination, drawn into the dream of mass-produced culture like those stirring sounds of the awakening

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 47–8.

morning of which Benjamin speaks. Representing the catastrophe of history, Benjamin's revolutionary pedagogy looks to rouse the dreaming collective to these new communal uses for material processes and structures—industrial, technological, infrastructural—and to fashion the material of experience, just as the storyteller once did, “in a solid, useful, and unique way.” Indeed, discovering new uses for our mechanized world may be imperative to avoiding the worst effects of climate change. The opportunity to represent the finite objectivity of the earth in common practice, to bring the destructive course of mythic progress to a standstill, is made evident not in some extraordinary vision of destruction, intimated by the counting down of a doomsday clock, but as a totally ordinary moment of coming to one's senses in the here and now. Benjamin sets the alternative scene of this everyday awakening to catastrophe: The collective body politic exchanges its human features “for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds” (SW II, 218).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Robert Martin. "Review of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Edited by Hannah Arendt." *Hudson Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 165–71.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- . *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. New York: Verso, 2005.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York: Routledge, 1973.
- . *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.
- . "The Actuality of Philosophy." Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. *Telos* 31 (Spring 1977): 120–33.
- . "The Idea of Natural History." Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. *Telos* 60 (Summer 1984): 111–24.
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*. Translated by Liz Heron. New York: Verso, 2007.
- . *Nymphs*. Translated by Amanda Minervini. Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2013.
- . *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- . *Profanations*. Translated by Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- . *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Aragon, Louis. *Le Paysan de Paris*. Paris: Gallimard, 1953.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Benjamin, Brecht: Zwei Essays*. Munich: Piper, 1971.
- . *The Human Condition*. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Bacon, Francis. *The New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*. Edited by Jerry Weinberger. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1989.

- Baudelaire, Charles. *Correspondance*. Edited by Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.
- . *Flowers of Evil and Other Works/Les Fleurs Du Mal et Œuvres Choisies: A Dual-Language Book*. Edited and translated by Wallace Fowlie. New York: Dover, 1992.
- . *Œuvres*. Edited by Yves-Gérard Le Dantec. Vol. 2. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléïde, 1931.
- . *Œuvres complètes*. Edited by Claude Pichois. Vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- . *Paris Spleen*. Translated by Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions Books, 1970.
- . *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*. Edited and translated by Jonathan Mayne. New York: Phaidon, 1965.
- Beecher, Jonathan. *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1986.
- Bencivenga, Ermanno. *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. Translated by Howard Eiland. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.
- . *Briefe*. Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Vol. 1. Frankfurt am Main, 1966.
- . *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Translated by Harry Zohn. London: Verso, 1997.
- . "Conversations with Brecht." In *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Fredric Jameson, translated by Anya Bostock, 86–99. London: Verso, 1977.
- . *Early Writings, 1910–1917*. Translated by Howard Eiland et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.
- . *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. 7 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Shurkamp Verlag, 1972.
- . *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. London: Random House, 1973.
- . *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. New York: Verso, 1979.
- . *Radio Benjamin*. Edited by Lecia Rosenthal. London: Verso, 2014.

- . *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Edited by Peter Demetz. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- . *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- . *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*. Edited by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- . *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. New York: Verso, 1998.
- . *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.
- . *Understanding Brecht*. Translated by Anna Bostock. London: Verso, 2003.
- . *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*. Edited by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla. Translated by Esther Leslie. London: Verso, 2015.
- Benjamin, Walter, and Theodor W. Adorno. *The Complete Correspondences 1928–1940*. Edited by Henri Lonitz. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- Berger, John. *About Looking*. New York: First Vintage International, 1991.
- . “Antiquarian and Revolutionary.” *New Society* 18 (June 1970): 1066–1067.
- Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Bewes, Timothy. *Reification: Or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Brecht, Bertolt. “Against Georg Lukács.” In *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Fredric Jameson, translated by Stuart Hood, 68–85. London: Verso, 1977.
- . *Brecht on Art and Politics*. Edited by Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles, et al. Translated by Laura Bradley, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- Breton, André. *Nadja*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. “A Communist Ethics.” In *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, 60–1. London: Verso, 2013.

- . *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.
- . *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.
- . *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*. Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977.
- Calasso, Roberto. *La Folie Baudelaire*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- Carlson, Allen. "Appreciation and the Natural Environment." In *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, 63–76. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004.
- Chateaubriand, Francois-René. *Atala / René*. Translated by Irving Putter. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1980.
- Clark, T. J. *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–1851*. New York: New York Graphic Society, 1973.
- Cohen, Margaret. *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.
- Crutzen, Paul J. "Geology of Mankind." *Nature* 415, no. 23 (January 3, 2002).
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*. Translated by Desmond M. Clarke. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1976.
- . *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. New York: Verso, 1981.
- Eiland, Howard, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Foderaro, Lisa W. "High Line Offers a Walk on the Wild Side." *The New York Times*, June 9, 2013, New York edition edition.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/nyregion/high-line-offers-a-walk-on-the-wild-side.html>.
- Foster, John Bellamy. *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

- Fourier, Charles. *Selections from the Works of Fourier*. Translated by Julia Franklin. London: S. Sonnenschein & co., 1901.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.
- . *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Edited and translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.
- Friedlander, Eli. *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Giacomo, Leopardi. *Essays and Dialogues*. Translated by Charles Edwardes. Boston: J.R. Osgood & Company, 1882.
- Giedion, Siegfried. *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Gilloch, Graeme. *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust: A Tragedy*. Edited by Cyrus Hamlin. Translated by Walter Arndt. Second Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Grandville, J. J. *Un Autre Monde*. Paris: Henri Fournier, 1844.
- Habermas, Jürgen. “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism.” Translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner. *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979): 30–64.
- Hamann, Johann Georg. *Writings on Philosophy and Language*. Edited and translated by Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Harvey, David. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Translated by Leo Rauch. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988.
- . *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . *The Science of Logic*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Helmling, Steven. “Constellation and Critique: Adorno’s Constellation, Benjamin’s Dialectical Image.” *Postmodern Culture* 14, no. 1 (2003).
<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.903/14.1helmling.txt>

- Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Herbert Steiner. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1952.
- Ingram, Susan. "The Writing of Asja Lacis." *New German Critique* 86 (2002): 159–77.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- . *Sartre*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- . "The Theoretical Hesitation: Benjamin's Sociological Predecessor." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 267–88.
- . "Walter Benjamin." In *London Review of Books: An Anthology*, edited by Jane Hindle, 88–97. London: Verso, 1996.
- Jeffries, Stuart. *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. London: Verso, 2016.
- Jennings, Michael W., and Howard Eiland, eds. *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Kaika, Maria. *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Unified Edition. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996.
- Klaver, Irene J. "Accidental Wildness on a Detention Pond," *Antennae, The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, #33, Autumn 2015, 45–58. www.antennae.org.uk
- Koepnick, Lutz. *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetic of Power*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. "Crossing the Line." *The New Yorker*, November 12, 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/11/12/crossing-the-line-3>.
- Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1994.
- Kraus, Karl. *Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Selected Aphorisms*. Edited and translated by Harry Zohn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . *Nachts*. Vienna and Leipzig, 1924.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. "Reinventing the Medium." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 289–305.

- . *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.
- Latour, Bruno. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto.'" *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471–90.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Translated by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.
- Lindroos, Kia. *Now-Time. Image-Space. Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art*. Jyväskylä, Finland: SoPhi at University of Jyväskylä, 1998.
- Lotze, Hermann. *Mikrokosmos*. Vol. 3. Leipzig, 1864.
- Löwy, Michael. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History."* Translated by Chris Turner. London: Verso, 2005.
- Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Translated by Rodney Livingston. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.
- . *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.
- Mackey, John, and Raj Sisodia. *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.
- Marker, Chris. *2084: Video clip pour une réflexion syndicale et pour le Plaisir*. Video. La Lanterne, Group Confédéral Audiovisuel, CFDT, 1984.
- . *Sans Soleil*. Film. Argos Films, 1983.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Vol. 1. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Collected Works, 1845–1848*. Vol. 6. London: International Publishers, 1976.
- . *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. 2nd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- McCole, John. *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House, 2006.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980.

- Milman, Oliver. "Jeb Bush Pins Hopes on 'Someone in a Garage' to Tackle Climate Change." *The Guardian*, January 29, 2016, sec. US news. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/29/jeb-bush-marco-rubio-climate-change-garage?CMP=share_btn_tw.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Mosher, Eve. "The Science." *HighWaterLine*, 2016. <http://highwaterline.org/about/the-science/>.
- Moss, Jeremiah. "Disney World on the Hudson." *The New York Times*, August 21, 2012, New York edition. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/22/opinion/in-the-shadows-of-the-high-line.html>.
- Naidus, Alex. "26 Nature Photos You Won't Believe Aren't Photoshopped." *Buzzfeed*, October 26, 2015. https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexnaidus/wow-nature-wow?utm_term=.nhVJ25x4Z#.tbMG04Log.
- Osborne, Peter. *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*. London: Verso, 1995.
- "Our Commitment to Sustainable Agriculture." *Monsanto Company*. Accessed June 4, 2016. <http://www.monsanto.com/whoweare/pages/our-commitment-to-sustainable-agriculture.aspx>.
- Pensky, Max. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.
- Pregill, Philip, and Nancy Volkman. *Landscapes in History: Design and Planning in the Eastern and Western Traditions*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999.
- Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. Translated by Lydia Davis. New York: Penguin, 2002.
- Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- . "The New Nature." *Boston Review*, January 4, 2016. <http://bostonreview.net/forum/jedediah-purdy-new-nature>.
- Rochlitz, Rainer. *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*. New York: Guilford Press, 1996.
- Rose, Gillian. *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. London: Verso, 2014.
- Rosenzweig, Cynthia, and William Solecki. "Climate Change and a Global City: An Assessment of the Metropolitan East Coast Region." Metropolitan East Coast

- Assessment, June 19, 2000.
http://metroeast_climate.ciesin.columbia.edu/sectors.html.
- Rühle, Otto. *Karl Marx*. Hellerau b. Dresden: Avalun Publishing House, 1928.
- Science and Security Board Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. "2017 Doomsday Clock Statement." Edited by John Mecklin. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 26, 2017.
<http://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/Final%202017%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>
- Schmidt, Alfred. *The Concept of Nature in Marx*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Verso, 2014.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by G. Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Scholem, Gershom. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*. Edited by Gershom Scholem. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- . *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: New York Review of Books, 1981.
- Schumpeter, Joseph. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1950.
- Sebald, W. G. *Austerlitz*. Translated by Anthea Bell. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Sontag, Susan. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- Stanley, Sarah K. "Revolutionary Climatology: Rings of Saturn, Ringed by Red Lightning." *Footprint* 18 (Spring/Summer 2016): 91–108.
- Stewart, Elizabeth. *Catastrophe and Survival: Walter Benjamin and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Continuum, 2010.
- Sullivan, Louis. "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." *Lippincott's Magazine*, March 1896.
- Tanizaki, Jun 'ichirō. *In Praise of Shadows*. Translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker. Sedgwick, ME: Leete's Island Books, 1977.
- Thorpe, Charles. *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Trumbull, Douglas. *Silent Running*. Film. Universal Pictures, 1972.

- Valéry, Paul. *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry*. Translated by Malcolm Cowley, C. Day Lewis, and Jackson Mathews. New York: New Directions Books, 1964.
- Virilio, Paul. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Translated by Philip Beitchman. New York: Seiotext(e), 2009.
- . *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. London: Verso, 1989.
- Vogel, Steven. *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- “On Nature and Alienation.” In *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, edited by Andrew Biro, 187–205. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
- Walser, Robert. *The Tanners*. Translated by Susan Bernofsky. New York: New Directions Books, 2009.
- Weigel, Sigrid. *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Wizisla, Erdmut. *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*. Translated by Christine Shuttleworth. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Wohlfarth, Irving. “Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin’s Critique of Cultural History.” In *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, edited by Michael P. Steinberg, 190–206. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.
- Žižek, Slavoj, and Costas Douzinas, eds. *The Idea of Communism*. London: Verso, 2010.