

# Benjamin's Aura

Miriam Bratu Hansen

Walter Benjamin's first comment on the concept of aura can be found in an unpublished report on one of his hashish experiments, dated March 1930: "Everything I said on the subject [the nature of aura] was directed polemically against the theosophists, whose inexperience and ignorance I find highly repugnant. . . . First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine."<sup>1</sup> This assertion contrasts sharply with the common understanding of Benjamin's aura as a primarily aesthetic category—as shorthand for the particular qualities of traditional art that he observed waning in modernity, associated with the singular status of the artwork, its authority, authenticity, and unattainability, epitomized by the idea of beautiful semblance. On that understanding, aura is defined in antithetical relation to the productive forces that have been rendering it socially obsolete: technological reproducibility, epitomized by film, and the masses, the violently contested subject/object of political and military mobilization. Wherever aura or, rather, the simulation of auratic effects does appear on the side of the technological media (as in the recycling of the classics, the Hollywood star cult, or fascist mass spectacle), it assumes

Work on this essay was made possible by an Ellen Maria Gorrissen Fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin, Spring 2004. For critical exchanges and suggestions, I wish to thank Paula Amad, Bill Brown, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Frances Ferguson, Michael Fried, Michael Geyer, Tom Gunning, Roberta Malagoli, Dan Morgan, and Gary Smith, as well as lecture audiences at the American Academy and the Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University.

Unless otherwise noted, translations of texts unpublished in English are my own. I have added references to the German source following the English to indicate only when I have modified the translation.

1. Walter Benjamin, "Protocols of Drug Experiments," *On Hashish*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), p. 58; hereafter abbreviated "P." I return to this passage below.

*Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008)  
© 2007 by Miriam Bratu Hansen. All rights reserved.

an acutely negative valence, which turns the etiology of aura's decline into a call for its demolition.

The narrowly aesthetic understanding of aura rests on a reductive reading of Benjamin, even of his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), which seems to advance most axiomatically such circumscription.<sup>2</sup> If we agree that Benjamin's writings, read through and against their historical contingencies, still hold actuality for film and media theory—and hence for questions of the aesthetic in the broadest sense—this notion of aura is not particularly helpful. I proceed from the suspicion, first expressed by Benjamin's antipodean friends Gershom Scholem and Bertolt Brecht, that the exemplary linkage of aura to the status of the artwork in Western tradition, whatever it may have accomplished for Benjamin's theory of modernity, was not least a tactical move designed to isolate and distance the concept from the at once more popular and more esoteric notions of aura that flourished in contemporary occultist discourse (and do to this day).<sup>3</sup> As Benjamin knew well, to corral the meanings of aura into the privileged sphere of aesthetic tradition—and thus to

2. This narrow understanding of aura is particularly pronounced in the essay's third, 1939 version, which was first published in 1955 and entered English-language debates under the title "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), pp. 217–51. A thoroughly revised translation of this version is now available in Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," trans. Zohn and Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings* [hereafter abbreviated SW], trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 4:251–83. However, I will be using primarily the second (first typescript) version of 1936, to which Benjamin referred as his urtext; see Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* [hereafter abbreviated GS], ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt, 1989), 7:350–84; trans. Jephcott and Zohn under the title "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," SW, 3:101–33. I discuss the implications of these different versions in Miriam Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October*, no. 109 (Summer 2004): 3–45, an essay that offers a counterpoint to the present one; both will be part of a book that puts Benjamin's reflections on film and mass-mediated modernity in a conversation with those of Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor W. Adorno.

3. See Bertolt Brecht, entry for 25 July 1938, *Journals, 1934–55*, trans. Hugh Rorrison, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London, 1993), p. 10: "a load of mysticism, although his attitude is against mysticism"; on Scholem, see below.

MIRIAM BRATU HANSEN is Ferdinand Schevill Distinguished Service Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, where she teaches in the Department of English and the Committee on Cinema and Media Studies. Her publications include a book on Ezra Pound's early poetics (1979) and *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (1991). She is currently completing a study entitled *The Other Frankfurt School: Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno on Cinema, Mass Culture, and Modernity*. Her next project is a book on the notion of cinema as vernacular modernism.

historicize it as a phenomenon in decline—was the only way the term could be introduced into Marxist debates at all, in an intellectual and political gamble that would legitimate it as a philosophical category.

However, as I hope to show, Benjamin's deployment—and remarkably longtime avoidance—of the term *aura* is informed by the very field of discourse from which he sought to disassociate the term. And it is precisely the broader anthropological, perceptual-mnemonic, and visionary dimensions of aura that he wrests from that field which I take to be of interest for more current concerns. Restoring these dimensions to aura will highlight the conflicting roles the concept played in his lifelong endeavor to theorize the conditions of possibility of experience (in the emphatic sense of *Erfahrung*) in modernity.<sup>4</sup> For aura not only named the most precious facet among other types of experience he described as irrevocably in decline, to be grasped only through their historical erosion. Aura's epistemic structure, secularized and modernized (qua "profane illumination," Weimar *flânerie*, "mimetic faculty," and "optical unconscious"), can also be seen at work in Benjamin's efforts to reconceptualize experience through the very conditions of its impossibility, as the only chance to counter the bungled (capitalist-imperialist) adaptation of technology that first exploded in World War One and was leading to the fascist conquest of Europe. These efforts entailed exploring new modes of apperception and adaptation equal to a technologically changed and changing environment. At the same time, though, they revolved around the possibility that the new technological media could reactivate older potentials of perception and imagination that would enable human beings to engage productively, at a collective and sensorial level, with modern forms of self-alienation (*Selbstentfremdung*).

This essay will begin with glossing the range of meanings that aura acquires in Benjamin's writings of the 1930s, a process that happens substantially through his exploration of technological media. Against the backdrop of these broader, experimental, and iridescent aspects of the concept, I will revisit its more restrictive deployment in the artwork essay. The other project is to reexamine Benjamin's alleged ambivalence toward aura—his being torn between the extremes of revolutionary avant-gardism and elegiac mourning for beautiful semblance—in light of the notion's multiple, philo-

4. On the concept of *Erfahrung*—its etymological connotations of *Fahrt* ("journey") and *Gefahr* ("peril," related to the Latin *periri*, also the root of *experience*) and its differential relation to the term *Erlebnis* ("momentary, immediate experience")—see Martin Jay's magisterial study *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, 2005). The literature on Benjamin's concept of experience is too extensive to cite here; see *ibid.*, chap. 8, for more recent contributions. My own thinking on the role of aura in Benjamin's theory of experience is indebted to Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das Vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich, 1983).

sophically and politically incongruous genealogies. Rather than reviewing the sources he explicitly names (drawn from art history and literature) or those he polemically rejects (such as theosophy and anthroposophy), I will turn to the less frequently discussed lineage of, on the one hand, the vitalist philosophy of Ludwig Klages and, on the other, Scholem's version of Jewish mysticism. The former lineage will take us through the Munich Kosmiker circle to Klages's theory of the image and a racialist notion of transgenerational memory; the latter involves the kabbalistic theory of the *tselem*—literally “image,” interpreted by Scholem as a visionary encounter with an other, alien self—and the gnostically inflected notion (as read through Kafka) of productive self-alienation. By tracing these strangely crabbed and seemingly incompatible contexts, I hope to elucidate the extraordinary stakes entailed in Benjamin's resuscitation of the concept of aura. The point is not to revisit some of the more esoteric byways of Benjamin scholarship but to show how he transformed these theoretical impulses in his effort to reimagine (something like) experience under the conditions of technologically mediated culture.

Anything but a clearly delimited, stable concept, aura describes a cluster of meanings and relations that appear in Benjamin's writings in various configurations and not always under its own name; it is this conceptual fluidity that allows aura to become such a productive nodal point in Benjamin's thinking. However, since my goal is to defamiliarize the common understanding of the concept, let me first cite the two main definitions familiar from his work: (1) Aura understood as “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance [apparition, semblance] of a distance, however near it may be” (or, “however close the thing that calls it forth”); and (2) aura understood as a form of perception that “invests” or endows a phenomenon with the “ability to look back at us,” to open its eyes or “lift its gaze.”<sup>5</sup> When Benjamin develops the second definition in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” he refers the reader back to his earlier formulation in the artwork essay; the two are conjoined in *The Arcades Project* when he invokes his “definition of aura as the distance of the gaze that awakens

5. The first definition—“ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag”—appears in Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” (1931), trans. Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, *SW*, 2:518; *GS*, 2:378. It is resumed almost verbatim in the artwork essay; see *SW*, 3:104; *GS*, 7:355. The parenthetical phrase—“however close the thing that calls it forth”—is from Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 447; hereafter abbreviated *AP*. The second definition—“die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen”—is elaborated in Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1940), trans. Zohn, *SW*, 4:338; *GS*, 1:646.

in the object looked at" ("meine Definition der Aura als der Ferne des im Angeblickten erwachenden Blicks") (*AP*, p. 314; *PW*, 5:1:396).

I will begin, though, with a third usage of the term that, at first glance, appears distinct from both. I'm referring to the more common understanding (now as then) of aura as an elusive phenomenal substance, ether, or halo that surrounds a person or object of perception, encapsulating their individuality and authenticity. It is in this sense that Benjamin uses the term in his first set of "hashish impressions" (1927–28) and, more systematically, in his reflections on early photographs in "Little History of Photography" (1931).<sup>6</sup>

Before 1880, he argues in that essay, the photographer, still considered an advanced technician rather than an "artist," encountered in his client "a member of a rising class, endowed with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's frock coat or floppy cravat" (*SW*, 2:517; *GS*, 2:376). The aura of objects such as clothing or furniture stands in a metonymic relation to the person who uses them or has been using them. Thus Schelling's coat will pass into immortality with the philosopher's image—"the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the wrinkles in his face" (*SW*, 2:514; *GS*, 2:373). In other words, the aura of Schelling's coat does not derive, say, from its unique status as a handmade, custom-made object but from a long-term material relationship with the wearer's physique or, rather, physiognomy. It thus seems to participate in—and figuratively instantiate—the logic of the trace, the indexical dimension, or existential bond, in photographic signification.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin elsewhere refers

6. See, for instance, his first "impression of hashish," written 18 December 1927, at 3:30 AM: "The sphere of 'character' opens up. . . . One's aura interpenetrates with that of the others" ("P," p. 19; *GS*, 6:558). Writing about his second experiment with hashish on 15 January 1928, Benjamin complains that Ernst Bloch gently tried to touch his knee: "I sensed the contact long before it actually reached me. I felt it as a highly repugnant violation of my aura" ("P," p. 27; *GS*, 6:563). Something of this psychophysiological sense of aura survives into the artwork essay's comparison of the screen actor to the live actor on stage. On the relation of aura and body, see, among others, Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, "Formen und Metamorphosen der Aura," in *Das Schwinden der Sinne*, ed. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt, 1984), pp. 75–86.

7. Trace (*Spur*) is one of those concepts in Benjamin that have antithetical meanings depending on the constellation in which they are deployed; it is rejected as the fetishizing signature of the bourgeois interior in his advocacy of the new "culture of glass" in "Experience and Poverty" (1933), trans. Livingstone, *SW*, 2:734 (and quoting Brecht, "Erase the traces!"), but valorized as a mark of an epic culture—and its implied renewal in modern literature and film—that links art with material production and tactical, habitual perception; see Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1936), trans. Zohn, *SW*, 3:149. While in some contexts *aura* and *trace* are overlapping terms, in both negative and positive senses, a relatively late entry in the *Arcades Project* puts them in stark opposition: "Trace and aura. The trace is the appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is the appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us" (*AP*, p. 447). See Hans Robert Jauss, "Spur und Aura (Bemerkungen zu Walter Benjamins 'Passagen-Werk') and Karlheinz Stierle, "Aura, Spur, und Benjamins Vergegenwärtigung des 19.

to this type of aura as the “aura of the *habitual*” (*AP*, p. 461; emphasis added) or the “experience that inscribes itself as long [repetitive] practice” (*Übung*) (*SW*, 4:337; *GS*, 1:2:644).

The indexical dimension of aura’s relation to the past is not necessarily a matter of continuity or tradition; more often than not, it is a past whose ghostly apparition projects into the present and (to invoke Roland Barthes) “wounds” the beholder.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin’s often-cited passage concerning the double portrait of the photographer Dauthendey and his fiancée—who was to slash her veins after the birth of their sixth child—evokes a complex temporality in which the past moment encrypted in the photograph speaks to the later beholder of the photographed subject’s *future*:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency [*Zufall*], of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the character of the image, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the thusness [*Sosein*] of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. [*SW*, 2:510; *GS*, 2:371]

The futurity that has seared the photographic image in the chance moment of exposure does not simply derive from circumstantial knowledge of its posthistory or that of its subject; it emerges in the field of the beholder’s compulsively searching gaze. The spark that leaps across time is a profoundly unsettling and disjunctive one, triggered by the young woman’s gaze off, past the camera and past her fiancé, absorbed in an “ominous distance” (*SW*, 2:510). It speaks to the beholder, and the later reader of the passage, not simply of photography’s constitutive relation to death but more insistently of a particular form of death—suicide—that links the fate of the photographed subject to the writer’s own future death.<sup>9</sup>

---

Jahrhunderts,” in *Art social und art industriel: Funktionen der Kunst im Zeitalter des Industrialismus*, ed. Helmut Pfeiffer, Jauss, and Françoise Gaillard (Munich, 1987), pp. 19–38, pp. 39–47; and Mika Elo, “Die Wiederkehr der Aura,” in *Walter Benjamins Medientheorie*, ed. Christian Schulte (Konstanz, 2005), pp. 117–35, esp. p. 130.

8. I am using Roland Barthes’s language here deliberately because so many of his observations on photography echo Benjamin. See, in particular, his notion of the punctum, the accidental mark or detail of the photograph that “pricks,” stings, wounds the beholder, in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), pp. 26–27.

9. As is evident from his correspondence and diary notes from May 1931 through July 1932, Benjamin was actually contemplating taking his own life when he wrote “Little History of Photography,” which is to say that the forgotten future of the woman who was to become Mrs. Dauthendey speaks to him less through an uncanny premonition than through a rather conscious and detailed preoccupation with this mode of death. See farewell letters to Franz Hessel, Jula Radt-Cohn, Ernst Schoen, and Egon and Gert Wissing (including Benjamin’s will), all dated 27 July 1932, in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 4 vols. (Frankfurt, 1998), 4:115–22; hereafter abbreviated *GB*. Also see Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story*

The notion of aura as a premonition of future catastrophe harks back to medical theories since antiquity that use the term to describe symptoms of anxiety and unease preceding and foreboding epileptic or hysterical attacks.<sup>10</sup> For Benjamin, the ominous aspect of aura belongs to the realm of the daemonic, in particular the phenomenon of self-alienating encounters with an other, older self. In a technologically refracted, specifically modern form, this aspect of aura resurfaces in his notion of an optical unconscious, which he unfolds from the passage about the Dauthendey portrait quoted above and that, as we shall see, assumes acute political significance in the artwork essay's speculations on Mickey Mouse.

These few examples make it evident that the aura is not an inherent property of persons or objects but pertains to the *medium* of perception, naming a particular structure of vision (though one not limited to the visual). More precisely, aura is itself a medium that defines the gaze of the human beings portrayed: "There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze inasmuch as it penetrated that medium" (SW, 2:515–17; GS, 2:376). In other words, aura implies a phenomenal structure that enables the manifestation of the gaze, inevitably refracted and disjunctive, and shapes its potential meanings.

Benjamin's concept of medium in this context cannot be conflated with the post-McLuhan equation of the term with technological medium, let alone with a means of communication. Rather it proceeds from an older philosophical usage (at the latest since Hegel and Herder) referring to an in-between substance or agency—such as language, writing, thinking, memory—that mediates and constitutes meaning; it resonates no less with esoteric and spiritualist connotations pivoting on an embodied medium's capacity of communing with the dead.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, however, Benjamin

---

*of a Friendship*, trans. Zohn (1981; New York, 2003), pp. 225–37; Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1985), pp. 97–100; and the editors' chronology in SW, 2:842–43.

10. See Peter M. Spangenberg, "Aura," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch*, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al., 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 2000), 1:402–4. The nineteenth-century positivist psychiatrist Hippolyte Baraduc tried to document these symptoms by means of photographs; see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris, 1982), p. 97; see also Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), chap. 1. On Benjamin's aura in the context of sensory-physiological and psychopathological research since the late nineteenth century, see Karl Clausberg, "Aura und Ausdruck: Synästhesien der Beseelung," in *Ausdruck, Ausstrahlung. Aura: Synästhesien der Beseelung im Medienzeitalter*, ed. Clausberg, Elize Bisanz, and Cornelius Weiller (Bad Honnef, 2007), pp. 41–86.

11. See Markus Bauer, "Die Mitte der Mitteilung: Walter Benjamins Begriff des Mediums," in *Walter Benjamins Medientheorie*, pp. 39–48. For a different approach, see Sam Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford, Calif., 1996), pp. 76–106, and Hanno Reisch, *Das Archiv und die Erfahrung: Walter Benjamins Essays im medientheoretischen Kontext* (Würzburg, 1992), pp. 98–108.

suggests that aura as a medium of perception—or “perceptibility”—becomes visible only on the basis of technological reproduction. The gaze of the photographed subject would not persist without its refraction by an apparatus, that is, a nonhuman lens and the particular conditions of setting and exposure; it already responds to another—and other—look that at once threatens and inscribes the subject’s authenticity and individuality. This element of contestation captured in the contingency of the long-forgotten moment, the oscillation, in Eduardo Cadava’s words, “between a gaze that can return the gaze of an other and one that cannot,” accounts for the aura of these early photographs (“beautiful and unapproachable” [SW, 2:527]), *their* ability to look back at *us* across the distance of time, answering to the gaze of the later beholder.<sup>12</sup>

At this point we can see how the seemingly distinct sense of aura Benjamin develops in “Little History of Photography” folds into the later definition of aura as the experience of investing a phenomenon with the ability to return the gaze (whether actual or phantasmatic).

Experience of the aura . . . arises from the transposition of a response characteristic of human society to the relationship *of* the inanimate or nature *with* human beings. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of a phenomenon we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.  
[SW, 4:338; GS, 1:646; my emphasis]

As we saw in connection with the Dauthendey portrait, the auratic return of the gaze does not depend upon the photographic subject’s direct look at the camera (or, for that matter, the later injunction against that direct look which voyeuristically solicits the viewer as buyer [see SW, 2:512]). What is more, in the above formulation and elsewhere Benjamin attributes the agency of the auratic gaze to the object being looked at, thereby echoing philosophical speculation from early romanticism through Henri Bergson that the ability to return the gaze is already dormant in, if not constitutive of, the object.

If “Little History of Photography” discusses early photography as a historical threshold phenomenon, which has a late “pendant” in a poignant boyhood portrait of Kafka (SW, 2:515), the later writings mark it more decisively as a watershed.<sup>13</sup> Thus Benjamin writes in the artwork essay: “In the

12. Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), p. 120.

13. On the place of the Kafka portrait in “Little History of Photography,” especially its superimposition with Benjamin’s own visit to a photographer’s studio as a highly allegorical scene of “distorted” “similarity” (Benjamin, “Berlin Childhood around 1900” [1934], trans. Eiland, SW, 3:390, 391), see Cadava, *Words of Light*, pp. 106–27.

fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time" (SW, 3:108). In the second Baudelaire essay, he goes so far as to implicate even *early* photography in the "phenomenon of a 'decline of the aura.'" He writes, "What was inevitably felt to be inhuman—one might even say deadly—in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera [*Apparat*], since the camera records the human likeness without returning the gaze" (SW, 4:338). The early camera's indifference to the human gaze inaugurates the transformation of looking relations, both social and sexual, in metropolitan modernity. In Baudelaire's poetry, the image of eyes that have lost the ability to return the look ("the eye of the city dweller . . . overburdened with protective functions") becomes emblematic of the disintegration of the aura, its shattering in the "experience of shock," an experience qua *Erlebnis* (SW, 4:341, 343; GS, 1:2:653).

If Benjamin sees the significance of Baudelaire in his having registered the shattering of aura and having given it the weight of an irreversible historic experience (*Erfahrung*), he finds in Proust a contemporary whose writing seeks to artificially reproduce, as it were, in the "deadly game" that was his life the ephemeral conditions of auratic perception.<sup>14</sup> As someone well versed in "the problem of the aura," Proust intimates that the ability of objects to return the gaze hinges on a material trace: "People who are fond of secrets occasionally flatter themselves that objects retain something of the gaze that has rested on them" (SW, 4:338–39). This mystical assumption is key to Proust's concept of *mémoire involontaire*, a sensorily and synaesthetically triggered embodied memory that can only be retrieved through "actualization, not reflection" (SW, 2:244; see 2:246). In contrast with volitional remembering, or the recounting of an *Erlebnis*, the data of involuntary memory are "unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them" (SW, 4:338). In this regard, Benjamin writes, they share the primary aspect of aura as "the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be," that is, an essential inapproachability and unavailability, related to an irrecoverable absence or loss.

The linkage of aura with *mémoire involontaire* not only suggests that the "unique distance" that appears to the beholder is of a *temporal* dimension; it also inscribes the entwinement of distance and closeness with the register of the unconscious. The fleeting moment of auratic perception actualizes a past not ordinarily accessible to the waking self; it entails a passivity in which something "takes possession of us" rather than vice versa (*AP*, p. 447). Not

14. Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), trans. Jephcott, SW, 2:597. Benjamin's writings on Proust range from his 1929 essay "On the Image of Proust," trans. Zohn, SW, 2:237–47 through his late reflections on the writer in his second Baudelaire essay, SW, 4:332, 337–39. Also see fragments relating to the 1929 essay in GS, 2:1048–69.

surprisingly, Benjamin elaborates this aspect of auratic perception with recourse to the psycho-perceptual experience of dreaming. But, instead of turning to Freud, he invokes Valéry's observation that in dreams, there is "an equation between me and the object. . . . The things I look at see me just as much as I see them" (SW, 4:339). A decade earlier, he refers to Franz Hessel's Berlin *flâneur* as a "dreamer" upon whom "things and people threaten to cast their bitter look," citing Hessel's axiomatic insistence on the priority of the object's gaze as a condition of physiognomic seeing or reading: "We see only what looks at us."<sup>15</sup>

The image of the seer seen is of course a topos in poetry and poetics in the wake of romanticism (for example, Baudelaire, Valéry, Rilke, and Hofmannsthal) as well as in phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and metapsychological thought (notably Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Lacan).<sup>16</sup> In the most general sense, it suggests a type of vision that exceeds and destabilizes traditional scientific, practical, and representational conceptions of vision, along with linear notions of time and space and clear-cut, hierarchical distinctions between subject and object. In this mode of vision, the gaze of the object, however familiar, is experienced by the subject as other and prior, strange and heteronomous. Whether conceptualized in terms of a constitutive lack, split, or loss, this other gaze in turn confronts the subject with a fundamental strangeness within and of the self.

Rather than following the psychoanalytic route (which he was not unaware of), Benjamin locates the unsettling force of the auratic return of the gaze in an anthropologically and mythopoetically conceived prehistory—Goethe's "Mothers," Bachofen's *Vorwelt*, Baudelaire's "vie antérieure." The phrase he cites from Novalis to back up his definition of auratic experience as the expectation that the gaze will be returned, "perceptibility . . . is an attentiveness," implicitly extends to a prehistoric other (SW, 4:338). Already in his 1919 dissertation, Benjamin was fascinated with the ambiguity of that phrase—its deliberate blurring of the distinction between subject and object of perception—on which he elaborates by way of another quotation from Novalis's text: "In all predicates in which we see the fossil, it sees us."<sup>17</sup> The reflexivity of this mode of perception, its reciprocity across eons, seems to both hinge upon and bring to fleeting consciousness an archaic element

15. Benjamin, "The Return of the *Flâneur*" (1929), trans. Livingstone, SW, 2:265; GS, 3:198.

16. Also see Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris, 1992), which makes extensive reference to Benjamin.

17. Novalis, quoted in Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" (1920), trans. David Lachterman, Eiland, and Ian Balfour, SW, 1:145. The entirety of section 4, on "The Early Romantic Theory of the Knowledge of Nature," is relevant to the complex that he will later refer to by the term *aura*.

in our present selves, a forgotten trace of our material bond with nonhuman nature.<sup>18</sup>

What exactly may constitute this trace is the object of an exchange between Adorno and Benjamin concerning the latter's reliance, for both his historical etiology of the decline of experience in modernity and his elegiac evocation of aura in the second Baudelaire essay, on Proust's theory of *mémoire involontaire*. Finding fault with this theory's lack of an important element—*forgetting*—Adorno argues that a dialectical theory of forgetting needs to be grounded in a Marxist critique of reification.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, he suggests that Benjamin's concept of aura might be more clearly elaborated along those lines as the "trace of a forgotten human element in the thing [*des vergessenen Menschlichen am Ding*]," that is, of reified human labor. In his reply, Benjamin insists that the "forgotten human element" actualized in auratic perception cannot be thus reduced. "The tree and the bush that are endowed [with an answering gaze] are not made by human hands. There must therefore be a human element in things that is *not* founded on labor" (CC, pp. 322, 327; GB, 6:446). Such emphasis, punctuated by Benjamin's refusal to discuss the matter further, suggests, as Marleen Stoessel and others have compellingly argued, that the dialectic of forgetting and remembering involved in aura has more to do with a different kind of fetishism: the psychosexual economy of knowledge and belief first theorized by Freud.<sup>20</sup>

My interest here, however, is in the particular ways in which aura's de-

18. See Stoessel, *Aura, das Vergessene Menschliche*, p. 75; Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl, and Jeremy Gaines (London, 1996), chap. 2; and Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, 1998).

19. See Theodor W. Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 29 Feb. 1940, in Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1929–1940* [hereafter abbreviated CC], trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Lonitz (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), pp. 320–21. Adorno proposes a distinction between "epic forgetting" (essential to hatching *Erfahrung*) and "reflex forgetting" (characteristic of *Erlebnis*)—which would amount to formulating a "distinction between good and bad reification"—to reconcile ostensible inconsistencies in Benjamin's account of experience and aura (CC, p. 321). What Adorno himself seems to have forgotten is that Benjamin, in his 1929 essay on Proust, had already articulated *mémoire involontaire* in terms of a dialectic of remembering and forgetting—calling the author's "weaving of his memory . . . a Penelope work of forgetting" (SW, 2:23). Also see the fragment relating to his Proust essay, GS, 2:3:1066.

20. See Stoessel, *Aura, das Vergessene Menschliche*, pp. 61, 72–77, and chap. 5, esp. pp. 130–40; see also Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Raison baroque: De Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris, 1984). This argument goes some way toward accounting for the gendered oscillation between a semireflective fetishization of aura and masculinist insistence on the necessity of its critical destruction, its allegorical mortification. However, the disjunctive temporality of auratic experience—the glimpse of a prehistoric past at once familiar and strange—suggests that the logic of fetishism is crucially inflected with the register of the Freudian uncanny, a point I elaborate in my earlier essay, "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 212–17. See also Helga Geyer-Ryan, "Abjection in the Texts of Walter Benjamin," *Fables of Desire: Studies in the Ethics of Art and Gender* (Cambridge, 1994), chap. 6.

fining elements of disjunctive temporality—its sudden and fleeting disruption of linear time, its uncanny linkage of past and future—and the concomitant dislocation of the subject are articulated through, rather than in mere opposition to, the technological media.<sup>21</sup> A case in point is the passage in “A Berlin Chronicle” (1932) that evokes the memory image of the six-year-old, already in bed, being told about the death of a distant cousin. Benjamin describes how this news (whose sexual implications he was to understand only much later) etched the room with all its details into the photographic “plate of remembrance,” usually underexposed by the dimness of habit, “until one day the necessary light flashes up from strange sources as if fuelled by magnesium powder” (SW, 2:632; GS, 6:516).<sup>22</sup> What is illuminated by the flash and thus photographically preserved in memory is neither the content of the message nor the child’s room but an image of our “deeper self,” separate from and outside our waking, everyday self, which “rests in another place and is touched by shock [*Choc*] as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match.” And, Benjamin concludes suggestively, “it is to this immolation [*Opfer*] of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images” (SW, 2:633).

In such formulations, the term *shock* acquires a valence quite different from, though no less in tension with, its more familiar sense of effecting, in its relentless proliferation in industrialist-capitalist labor and living, a defensive numbing of human sense perception.<sup>23</sup> This alternative sense of shock also differs from the deliberate, avant-gardist staging of counter-shock, designed to enhance the demolition of aura (as in the artwork essay’s section on dada). Rather, it relates to the idea of an involuntary confrontation of the subject with an external, alien image of the self.

When Benjamin unfolds this idea in “A Short Speech on Proust,” delivered on his fortieth birthday, 15 July 1932 (the date of his intended, at the

21. Giorgio Agamben suggests that Benjamin found an important contemporary source for thinking of photography and cinema as “transmitters of aura” (including the definition of Baudelaire as “poet of the aura”) in the writer-physician Léon Daudet’s book *Mélancholia* (1928); see Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 44–45. (Daudet was also at the time editor of *L’Action Française*, organ of the right-wing, ultranationalist, and monarchist movement founded by Charles Maurras.) The notion of technological media as transmitters of supernatural phenomena was of course pervasive in occultist practices (for example, spirit photography, telegraphy). The point here is that Benjamin not only historicized and dialecticized that conjuncture but also sought through it to theorize the possibility of temporally disjunctive experience in modernity.

22. The part of the news that the father “forgot” to convey to the child was that the man had died of syphilis; see SW, 2:635. See also the section “News of a Death” in the 1934 version of “Berlin Childhood around 1900,” SW, 3:389.

23. See Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October*, no. 62 (Autumn 1992): 3–41.

time not executed, suicide), he does so in language that expands the range of technological media beyond the paradigm of early photography.

Concerning the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them. This is most clearly the case in those images in which—as in some dreams—we see ourselves. We stand in front of ourselves, the way we might have stood somewhere in a prehistoric past [*Urvergangenheit*], but never before our waking gaze. Yet these images, developed in the darkroom of the lived moment, are the most important we shall ever see. One might say that our most profound moments have been equipped—like those cigarette packs—with a little image, a photograph of ourselves. And that “whole life” which, as they say, passes through the minds of people who are dying or confronting life-threatening danger is composed of such little images. They flash by in as rapid a sequence as the booklets of our childhood, precursors of the cinematograph, in which we admired a boxer, a swimmer, or a tennis player. [GS, 2:1064]

In evoking a visionary encounter with an other, older self, this passage foregrounds the doubly disjunctive temporality of auratic experience qua *mémoire involontaire*—a memory at once “prehistoric” and ephemeral, flashing past, referentially unanchored. Instead of illustrating this type of memory with recourse to the olfactory and gustatory so central in Proust, Benjamin tropes it in terms of visual media. Describing the elusive epistemological status of such memory images, he moves from photography—“the darkroom of the lived moment,” the little photograph of ourselves resembling those enclosed in cigarette packs—to protocinematic toys, the flipbooks of our childhood. The images imprinted on us in a prehistoric past are mobilized at moments of physical danger or imminent death, constituting the proverbial film that passes through a person’s mind in life-threatening situations.

The doubly disjunctive temporality of *mémoire involontaire* is thus overlaid with yet another temporality, that of the medium of photography in relation to film. This relationship should not be understood simply as a historical, let alone teleological, trajectory, in the sense of still photography being at once foundational to and superseded by film. Rather, in its reference to the flipbooks as precursors to cinema, Benjamin’s conceit invokes the dialectical relation of still frames and moving image in the process of *défilement*, that is, the filmstrip’s simultaneous production of and negation by the projected illusion of movement.<sup>24</sup> We might read this configuration

24. See Thierry Kuntzel, “Le Défilement: A View in Closeup” and Bertrand Augst, “Le Défilement into the Look,” in *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus*, ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

as an appeal to cinema's forgotten future (see *SW*, 2:390)—a reminder that, notwithstanding the technologically based logic of *défilement* and the compulsorily narrativized temporality of mainstream cinema, film can be broken down again into still images, literally, through techniques of freeze-frame, slow motion, or step-printing, or in the direction of what Gilles Deleuze has theorized as “time-image.” In other words, a medium-specific possibility could become a matter of aesthetic choice—in the way it appears in a wide range of film practices—and there's no reason why such play with disjunctive temporalities should be limited to cinema based on celluloid film.

If we consider these reflections from the perspective of aura in the wider sense, the absolute boundary between photography and film dissolves. Instead, their relationship emerges as a crossing for larger questions of vital significance that Benjamin was wrestling with during the 1930s. Thus, we could reformulate the question he poses in one of his draft notes for the artwork essay, “if the aura is in early photographs, why is it not in film?” (*GS*, 1:1048) to ask: If technological reproducibility supplies imagery for rethinking forms of auratic self-encounter to the individual writer/holder of photography, are there ways of translating aura's defining moments of disjunctive temporality and self-dislocating reflexivity into a potential for the *collective*, as the structural subject of cinema?<sup>25</sup>

This question, and the limits against which it pushes, pivots on the notion of the optical unconscious, which Benjamin hypothesizes for both photography and film in terms clearly differentiated along the axis of individual and collective. Howard Caygill has described the optical unconscious as “the possibility of creating an openness to the future,” “a space free of consciousness . . . charged with contingency if it is open to the future and to becoming something other than itself.”<sup>26</sup> The question, however, is what kind of future and for whom. When Benjamin speaks of the future in overtly or implicitly autobiographical writings—as an “invisible stranger” [*Fremde*] that has forgotten or left words or gestures “in our keeping”—or

---

(New York, 1981), pp. 233–47, 249–59; see also Raymond Bellour, “The Unattainable Text,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 19–27.

25. Benjamin himself formulates a version of this question, indeed a partisan response to it, in his essay on Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, “Reply to Oskar A. H. Schmitz” (1927), trans. Livingstone, *SW*, 2:16–19, which anticipates the artwork essay's section on the optical unconscious.

26. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London, 1998), p. 94. For Caygill, this understanding of the optical unconscious encapsulates Benjamin's concept of experience, “where the future subsists in the present as a contingency which, if realised, will retrospectively change the present.” Contrary to my argument here, Caygill insists that “the weave of space and time captured by the photograph is characterised by contingency and *is anything but auratic*” (*ibid.*; my emphasis).

in his account of the Dauthendey photograph, this future is hardly open to change, but inscribed with preordained fate and violent death (SW, 2:634–35).<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the nexus of memory and futurity, the capacity to both remember and imagine a different kind of existence, is key to his effort of tracking at once the decline and the transformative possibilities of experience in modernity—in the face of a political crisis in which not only his personal fate but the survival of the human species seemed at stake. Whether or not Benjamin ultimately believed that the cinema, as a medium of collective “innervation” (SW, 3:124 n. 10), could ever actualize its utopian, surrealist potential (“the dream of a better nature”)<sup>28</sup> or whether he considered the cinema revolutionary at best in the sense of “a purely preventive measure intended to avert the worst,”<sup>29</sup> what I wish to stress is that he was able to think salient features of auratic experience—temporal disjunction, the shocklike confrontation with an alien self—as asymmetrically entwined rather than simply incompatible with technological reproducibility and collective reception.

In light of the range of meanings and references the notion of aura acquires in Benjamin's writings, the definition we encounter in the artwork essay appears deliberately restrictive. The concept of aura is introduced to describe the mode of being of traditional works of art—that which “withers in the age of [their] technological reproducibility” (SW, 3:104)—their singular existence and authenticity, historical testimony and authority. To be sure, this withering is “symptomatic” of a process whose “significance extends beyond the realm of art,” a fundamental shift in the conditions of human sense perception that Benjamin in turn attributes to both the new technologies of reproduction and the increasing importance of the masses in modern life. We remember that a few years earlier Benjamin had insisted

27. The troping of the future as an invisible stranger or alien land (*jene unsichtbare Fremde*) is the counterpart to the *déjà vu*, the “shock” with which “moments enter consciousness as if already lived,” in which Benjamin emphasizes the acoustical dimension of the phenomenon; “a word, a tapping, or a rustling” may “transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo” (SW, 2:634). The linkage of auratic experience, futurity, and death already appears in one of Benjamin's earliest surviving texts, “The Metaphysics of Youth” (1913–14), trans. Livingstone, SW, 1:6–17; see esp. pp. 12–14. See also Roberta Malagoli, “Vergiß das Beste nicht! *Déjà vu*, memoria, e oblio in Walter Benjamin,” *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 27, nos. 1–2 (1988): 247–79.

28. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin repeatedly links the decline of aura to the waning of the “dream of a better nature” (AP, p. 362), and the waning of the utopian imagination in turn to impotence, both sexual and political; see AP, pp. 342, 361.

29. Irving Wohlfarth, “The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin's Actuality Today,” *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead (London, 1998), p. 28.

that “genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things,” thus making it key to the possibility of experience in/of the modern everyday. But now aura pertains to the special status of the art object, a status bestowed upon it by the secular cult of beauty since the Renaissance, the tradition of Western culture. It is in that sense that Adorno sought to salvage aura as an objective category, as the achieved semblance of autonomy in the work.

One might object that Benjamin himself undermines this more narrowly aesthetic sense of aura in his famous gesture at a definition (which he borrows, with one elision, from “Little History of Photography”). Moving from the transformations in the domain of *art* to the *social* determinants of large-scale changes in the organization of human perception, he poses the rhetorical question, “What, actually [*eigentlich*], is the aura?” and goes on to elaborate his general definition with an image relating to the experience of *nature*.

A strange weave [*Gespinst*] of space and time: the unique appearance [*einmalige Erscheinung*] of a distance, however near it may be. While resting on a summer afternoon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. [SW, 3:104–5; GS, 7:355]

Benjamin’s subsequent assertion that “in light of this description it is easy [*ist es ein Leichtes*] to grasp the social basis of the aura’s present decay” begs the question, to say the least (SW, 3:105; GS, 7:355). I would argue that it rather functions as a sleight-of-hand that allows him to preserve, without having to explain, the esoteric nature of the concept.

Undeniably, the image of a meditative encounter with nature presents a configuration that resonates with the wider sense of aura discussed above. The perceiving subject engages in a form of *Belehnung* or endowment of the natural object with “the ability to look back at us.” True to the etymological connotation of the word *aura* (Greek and Latin for “breath,” “breeze,” a subtle, fleeting waft of air, an atmospheric substance), the gazing subject is breathing, not just seeing, “the aura of those mountains, that branch.” The aura is a medium that envelops and physically connects—and thus blurs the boundaries between—subject and object, suggesting a sensory, embodied mode of perception. One need only cursorily recall the biblical and mystical connotations of *breath* and *breathing* to understand that this mode of perception involves surrender to the object as other. The auratic quality that manifests itself in the object—“the unique appearance of

a distance, however near it may be"—cannot be produced at will; it appears to the subject, not for it.

In its specific elaboration, however, the scene squarely fits within the iconography of romantic poetry and landscape painting and is associated with the concepts of pathos and, to a certain extent, the sublime. When he resumes the discussion of aura in the second Baudelaire essay, Benjamin remarks that the endowment of nature with an answering gaze "is a wellspring of poetry" (though he hastens to complicate the echo of early romanticism with a reference to Karl Kraus, a highly antiromantic contemporary).<sup>30</sup> What is more, the artwork essay renders the poetic topos of auratic experience as a topos of poetry *tout court*, that is, of the Western tradition of lyric poetry. As if to underscore this point, Benjamin's "definition" of aura is the only passage in the artwork essay written in a rhythm approaching metric verse.<sup>31</sup>

The invocation of lyric poetry in Benjamin's account of auratic experience connects with a more general aesthetic motif: the description of art and the effect of art on the perceiving subject in terms of a phenomenal distance or farness (*Ferne*). One lineage of this motif, including the image of the meditative beholder in a mountain scene, has been traced in modern philosophy of art, particularly in the work of Alois Riegl, whom Benjamin read and repeatedly discussed.<sup>32</sup> As is often pointed out, Benjamin deploys Riegl's concepts, in particular the opposition of contemplative distance and haptic nearness, throughout the artwork essay to throw into relief the tac-

30. "Whenever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature, when thus awakened, dreams and pulls the poet after its dream" (SW, 4:354 n. 77). If this account of poetic inspiration itself culminates in a lyrical image, the subsequent reference to Kraus ("Words, too, can have an aura. . . . The closer one looks at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back") pertains to a different, less esoteric type of language, written language or script, and thus to Benjamin's concern with physiognomic reading (including graphology) as a modern practice of the mimetic faculty.

31. "Ein sonderbares Gespinnst aus Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag. An einem Sommernachmittag ruhend einem Gebirgszug am Horizont oder einem Zweig folgen, der seinen Schatten auf den Ruhenden wirft—das heißt die Aura dieser Berge, dieses Zweiges atmen" (GS, 7:355; see also Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," 1:2:479). See Dietrich Thierkopf, "Nähe und Ferne: Kommentare zu Benjamins Denkverfahren," *Text und Kritik* 31–32 (Oct. 1971): 3–18. On the relationship of aura and the lyric in modernity, see Robert Kaufman, "Aura, Still," *October*, no. 99 (Winter 2002): 45–80.

32. See Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst" [Atmosphere as the Content of Modern Art] (1899), *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Karl M. Swoboda (Augsburg, 1929), pp. 28–39. See also Wolfgang Kemp, "Fernbilder: Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft," in *Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln. . . .: Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed. Burckhardt Lindner (Frankfurt, 1978), pp. 224–57, and Jennings, "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History," in *Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940: Zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. Uwe Steiner (Bern, 1992), pp. 77–102.

tile, haptic character of twentieth-century avant-garde art and film against the phenomenal distance of traditional, auratic art.<sup>33</sup>

Another lineage of the idea of distance as a constitutive condition of art (that is, autonomous art) connects the fate of aura in the artwork essay with the problematic of aesthetic semblance (*Schein*) and beauty's relation to truth, which had preoccupied Benjamin in his early work. The ingredients for this connection can be found, for instance, in Georg Simmel's formulation: "All art brings about a distancing from the immediacy of things: it allows the concreteness of stimuli to recede and stretches a veil between us and them just like the fine bluish haze that envelops distant mountains."<sup>34</sup> If Benjamin frequently invokes the ancient topos of "blue distance" (mediated through Klages) as a shorthand for romantic longing, the similarly resonant term *veil* (*Schleier*), like the related term *husk* (*Hülle*), more specifically occurs in conjunction with the classical concept of beauty as "beautiful semblance" (*schöner Schein*).<sup>35</sup> This concept refers not just to any appearance—let alone mere illusion—but entails the inextricability of object and appearance. As Benjamin writes in his early essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: "The beautiful is neither the veil [*Hülle*] nor the veiled object but rather the object *in* its veil."<sup>36</sup> In other words, the veil defines both the condition of beauty and its essential unavailability, a symbolic integrity predicated on "a distance however close the thing that calls it forth."<sup>37</sup>

It is not until the artwork essay that Benjamin explicitly laminates aura with the idea of beautiful semblance, a move that supports his insistence on the aura's irreversible decay, its historical index of pastness.<sup>38</sup> If, as Ben-

33. At least as important a source for this opposition was Wilhelm Worringer's ideologically charged popularization of Riegl's categories in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), which had its aesthetic counterpart less (as is often claimed) in German expressionism than in cubism following Cézanne (see Jennings, "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History," pp. 83, 89–100), and in British vorticism, mediated by T. E. Hulme and "reactionary modernists" such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. See also Antonia Lant, "Haptical Cinema," *October*, no. 74 (Fall 1995): 45–73.

34. Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, trans. Kaethe Mengelberg, Tom Bottomore, and David Frisby, 2d ed. (1900/1907; London, 2004), p. 473. Also see Simmel's book on Goethe (1912), *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt, 27 vols. (Frankfurt, 1989–), 15:74–76.

35. It is no coincidence that expressions like "blue distance" or "Fernblick ins Blau" (literally, "the far-gaze into the blue") appear epigrammatically in Benjamin's first avowedly modernist work, *One-Way Street* (1928), trans. Jephcott, *SW*, 1:468, 470; *GS*, 4:120, 123.

36. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," trans. Stanley Corngold, *SW*, 1:351; *GS*, 1:195, my emphasis.

37. Also see the fragment "On Semblance" (1919–20), trans. Livingstone, *SW*, 1:223–25. In the essay on Goethe (1919–22, published 1924–25), the term *aura* is used only in passing and, actually, in an antithetical sense to beauty; see Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," 1:348.

38. Gary Smith notes that the artwork essay's conflation of aura with the idea of beautiful semblance reflects a "less than seamless transfer of the grammar of beauty's relation to truth and the sublime onto the specifically modern category of aura" (Gary Smith, "A Genealogy of 'Aura': Walter Benjamin's Idea of Beauty," in *Artifacts, Representations, and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wartofsky*, ed. Carol C. Gould and Robert S. Cohen [Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1994], p. 115).

jamin asserts in the essay's urtext, Goethe's work is still imbued with "beautiful semblance . . . as an auratic reality," the concept of beautiful semblance in aesthetic theory, beginning with Hegel, is no longer grounded in auratic experience (SW, 3:127 n. 22). But beautiful semblance is also branded with another kind of belatedness. As "the aporetic element in the beautiful," semblance marks the object as not just absent in the work but always already *lost*. The admiration that "is courting [the] identical object" is a retrospective one; it "gleans what earlier generations admired in it" (SW, 4:352 n. 63).<sup>39</sup> The assertion of an internal, structural belatedness of beautiful semblance ties in with and comes to support the thesis of the historical erosion of aura. Yet, if auratic art has lost its social basis with the decline of the bourgeoisie and is rendered anachronistic by the new realities of the masses and technological reproducibility, it gains a heuristic function in Benjamin's project to delineate, by contrast, a fundamentally different regime of perception. That is, by insisting on both the aura's internally retrospective structure and irreversible historicity, he can deploy the concept to catalyze the ensemble of perceptual shifts that define the present—such as the ascendance of multiplicity and repeatability over singularity, nearness over farness, and a haptic engagement with things and space over a contemplative relation to images and time—and posit this ensemble as the signature of technological and social modernity.

However, the assimilation of aura to the grammar of beautiful semblance suppresses the broader senses of aura outlined above and thus restricts the concept's potential for theorizing the transformation of experience in modernity. One casualty of this operation is the daemonic aspect of aura (I will discuss this later in connection with Scholem), which foregrounds the shock of self-recognition qua self-alienation. Another is the conception of distance and nearness as a *polarity* (in the Goethean sense of mutually imbricated opposites that generate a field of force) rather than as an antinomic opposition.<sup>40</sup> In his earlier writings, beginning with *One-Way Street* and his experiments with hashish, Benjamin had pursued the paradoxical entwine-

39. Benjamin distinguishes beauty defined by its relationship to history from beauty in its relationship to nature. "On the basis of its *historical* existence, beauty is an appeal to join those who admired it in an earlier age," that is, to join the majority of those who are dead ("ad plures ire, as the Romans called dying") (SW, 4:352 n. 63). It is significant, especially in the context of his reception of Klages (see below), that Benjamin does not use the term *tradition* here, but speaks of generations and the majority of the dead.

40. For Goethe's notion of polarity, see his *Theory of Colors*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (1840; Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 293–303. More contemporary versions of the polarity of farness and closeness can be found in *Lebensphilosophie*, in particular Klages, and in Heidegger; see, for example, Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" (1950), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York, 1975), pp. 165–66.

ment of distance and nearness as a visionary mode epitomized by the psychophysiological state of *Rausch* or ecstatic trance: “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 one without the other” (SW, 2:732).<sup>41</sup> While still invoking the polarity of distance and nearness in aura’s paradoxical manifestation of a distance “however near it may be,” the artwork essay’s rhetorical design effectively severs and reduces distance and nearness to spatiotemporal categories that define antithetical perceptual regimes.

By assimilating aura to a regressive fetishistic cult of beautiful semblance (and, arguably, to a Kantian notion of distance vis-à-vis the sublime as the condition of aesthetic pleasure and individuation), the artwork essay makes a case, not only for a recognition of the aura’s irreversible decline, but for its active demolition. Conversely, by hailing film as a force in that liquidation, it places the cinema on the side of “a new kind of barbarism” and “poverty” of experience rather than assigning it a historic function for negotiating the transformation of experience. The essay thus jettisons what I take to be Benjamin’s more productive reflections on the reconfiguration of distance and proximity in modernity, specifically as they revolve around new economies of body and image space and the role of film in enabling a collective, playful innervation of technology.<sup>42</sup>

It would be shortsighted to ignore the political crisis—and the failure, if not complicity, of literary intellectuals in the face of it—in which Benjamin sought to intervene.<sup>43</sup> The problem was not simply that the decaying aura had come to prolong the cultural privilege of the degenerating bourgeoisie. As is often pointed out, Benjamin’s call to demolition was aimed at the technologically enhanced fabrication, from the mid-nineteenth century on,

41. Situated in the Klages-inspired closing section of *One-Way Street*, “To the Planetarium,” this statement refers to the conditions of possibility—and high stakes—of attaining this kind of experience, predicated on “the ancients’ intercourse with the cosmos,” in modernity and doing so in a collective mode (SW, 1:486). Benjamin discerned a dystopian version of such cosmic communion in the technologically enabled orgies of destruction in World War One. See Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the Idea of Technological Eros: A Tentative Reading of *Zum Planetarium*,” *Benjamin Studies/Studien* 1 (2002): 65–109.

42. These reflections can be traced from *One-Way Street* (1928), through the essays on surrealism (“Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism” [1927], trans. Eiland, and “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” [1929], trans. Jephcott, SW, 2:3–5, 2:207–21), to the urtext of the artwork essay. On the significance of this strand in Benjamin’s thinking on film, see my essays “Room-for-Play” and “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 306–43. See also Gertrud Koch, “Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ Essay,” trans. Nancy Nenno, in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London, 1994), pp. 205–15.

43. See, most recently, Maria Gough, “Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde,” *October*, no. 101 (Summer 2002): 53–83; see also Chryssoula Kambas, *Walter Benjamin im Exil: Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Ästhetik* (Tübingen, 1983).

of auratic effects on a mass scale. This was the thread that linked phenomena such as the phantasmagoria of spectacular entertainment and the commodity displays of the world fairs (up to the present, that is, the 1930s); the creation of atmosphere in photographs of old Paris at the height of urban demolition; and the manufacturing of personality from portrait photography to the Hollywood cult of the star. The diverse practices of aura simulation converged and culminated, however, in supplying the means for resurrecting the aura's undead remains in the arena of national-populist and fascist politics. More precisely, this fatal resurrection was the heuristic vantage point that mandated, in the first place, Benjamin's genealogical tracking of the catastrophic concatenation of art, technology, and the masses.

It appears then that Benjamin distinguishes between a *genuine* aura, which is irrevocably in decay, and a *simulated* aura that prevents a different, utopian, or at the very least nondestructive interplay among those three terms—art, technology, the masses—from winning. It has been argued that it is only the simulated or “pseudo aura” (“an already distorting reaction formation toward the historical ‘decay of aura’”) which is the object of the artwork essay's call for demolition.<sup>44</sup> But I believe that the force of this call cannot but hit “genuine” aura as well; it rhetorically executes the same “destructive, cathartic” function that Benjamin ascribes to film in relation to traditional culture (SW, 3:104). In that sense, the artwork essay would have to be seen as a desperate experiment, an existential wager comparable to the *tabula rasa* approach of “Experience and Poverty” three years earlier, the stakes exponentially raised with the darkening of the political—and Benjamin's personal—situation.

However, considering that aura as both medium of experience and epistemic model was essential to Benjamin's own mode of thinking (and resurfaced as such in his writings and letters as late as the second Baudelaire essay and his theses on the concept of history [1940]), the matter may be still more complex. For the “genuine” aura that Benjamin surrenders in the face of the overwhelming efficacy of aura simulation is, as I have tried to show, already a pocket version—circumscribed by the tradition of Western art and poetry, its range of temporalities foreshortened into a simple, irreversible pastness, an *auréole* or “halo,” like the one in Baudelaire's prose poem, that the poet would do well to be losing (see SW, 4:342). One might argue, therefore, that the self-denigrating reduction of aura in the artwork essay is not least an act of defense, a fetishistic deflection that would protect,

44. Josef Fürnkäs, “Aura,” in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt, 2000), 1:141–42; see also p. 127.

as it were, the vital parts of the concept inasmuch as they were indispensable to the project of reconceptualizing experience in modernity.

If there is such a logic to the experiment, the violence deployed to carry it out should not be underestimated. Adorno famously invoked Anna Freud's notion of "identification with the aggressor" to criticize Benjamin's betrayal of aura (in the narrow sense of beautiful semblance and aesthetic autonomy) to the mass-cultural forms and forces of liquidation.<sup>45</sup> What eludes the psychoanalytic verdict, though, is the historical and political dilemma that Benjamin sought to confront—the extent to which "genuine" aura was compromised by the industrial and totalitarian simulation of auratic effects and yet, at the same time, contained structural elements that were indispensable to reimagining experience in a collective, secularized, and technologically mediated form. One strategy of preserving the potentiality of aura, of being able to introduce the concept in the first place, was to place it under erasure, to mark it as constitutively belated and irreversibly moribund; in other words, Benjamin had to kill the term, mortify and blast it to pieces, before he could use it at all. The other strategy was to abandon the term altogether and use the demolished fragments of auratic perception in other concepts, in particular the mimetic faculty and the optical unconscious.

This complex operation has obscured some of the more basic and banal reasons that made it impossible for Benjamin—or any serious writer on the Left—to use aura as an innocent, let alone positive, concept. Since the beginning of the century, the term *aura* had flourished in all kinds of occultist, spiritistic, and parapsychological discourses, especially theosophy and the only slightly more respectable anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner—with meanings and imagery not dissimilar from its more recent revival in New Age cults. Benjamin made no secret of his contempt for Steiner and his school, attributing its success to the collapse of general education and comparing its rise to that of advertising.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Benjamin studiously avoided using the term *aura* for many years, although his thinking quite early on betrays an interest in the type of experience associated with it (see, for example, *SW*, 1:13). As Josef Fürnkäs points out, it took his turn to the avant-gardist exploration of capitalist modernity inaugurated with *One-Way Street* and his encounter with surrealism in 1925 before he could appropriate and redefine aura for his own purposes.<sup>47</sup>

45. Adorno, "Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse*" (1955), *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ed. Tiedemann, 2 vols. (New York, 1992), 2:326.

46. "If one [advertising] has mastered the art of transforming the commodity into an arcanum, the other [occult science] is able to sell the arcanum as a commodity" (Benjamin, "Light from Obscurantists" (1932), trans. Livingstone, *SW*, 2:656).

47. Fürnkäs, "Aura," pp. 105–6.

He takes that step, not coincidentally, in an unpublished “protocol” of one of his hashish experiments. I resume the quotation that opened this essay:

Everything I said on the subject [the nature of aura] was directed polemically against the theosophists, whose inexperience and ignorance I find highly repugnant. And I contrasted three aspects of genuine aura—though by no means schematically—with the conventional and banal ideas of the theosophists. First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine. Second, the aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement of the object whose aura it is. Third, genuine aura can in no sense be thought of as the spruced-up version of the magic rays beloved of spiritualists which we find depicted and described in vulgar works of mysticism. On the contrary, the distinctive feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo [*Umzirkung*], in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case [*Futteral*]. Perhaps nothing gives such a clear idea of aura as Van Gogh’s late paintings, in which one could say that the aura appears to have been painted along with the various objects. [“P,” p. 58; *GS*, 6:588]

Just as he is experimenting with hashish and modes of writing about that experience, Benjamin is clearly experimenting with the concept of aura.

First, the insistence that “genuine aura appears in all things” suggests that he initially sought to reinvent aura as an exoteric and materialist concept capable of grasping the realities of the modern everyday. In this spirit he writes as early as 1925 (defending the illustrated magazine *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* against a conservative attack): “To show things in the *aura of their actuality* is worth more, is far more fruitful, albeit indirectly, than to trump them with ultimately petit bourgeois ideas of popular education [*Volksbildung*]” (*GS*, 4:448–49; my emphasis). A thus secularized aura would correspond to or at least overlap with the seemingly paradoxical concept of profane illumination that Benjamin develops around the same time with regard to the surrealists, in particular, Louis Aragon’s explorations of Paris as modern myth. In fact, his cautioning of the surrealists against drifting into spiritism and mere intoxication seems to be fueled by the same animus that prompts him to reclaim the aura from the theosophists and Steinerites: “We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (*SW*, 2:216). Such exploration is aimed at the quotidian, the recognition of a collective physis transformed by modern technology and consumption. It takes shape, not in the “aura of novelty,” but rather in the encounter with *all* things, even and es-

pecially those that are no longer fashionable—in the “aura of the habitual. In memory, childhood, and dream” (*AP*, p. 461).

Second, against an ontological use of aura Benjamin emphasizes its unstable and relational character, its dependence on particular constellations—in other words, on acts of reading and interpretation. This point ties in with his third observation, the characterization of aura as *ornament*. (I am bracketing here an all-too-obvious comparison with Heidegger on the basis of their common, though I think substantially different, invocation of Van Gogh.)<sup>48</sup> The characterization of aura as ornament or ornamental halo may sound odd in light of Benjamin’s concurrent endorsement of *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Sobriety, including Adolf Loos and his famous attack on the ornament in architecture and design.<sup>49</sup> However, the term names an important epistemological trope in other contexts. For one thing, it is associated with the writings of Siegfried Kracauer, who used linear figures such as ornament and arabesque to approach the surface phenomena of contemporary commercial culture (notably in his discussion of Taylorist entertainment forms as “mass ornament”).<sup>50</sup> For another, the notion of ornament plays a part in Benjamin’s own theories of physiognomic reading. In a subsequent hashish protocol, he refers to the ornament as the “most hidden, generally most inaccessible world of surfaces” which reveals itself to the subject only under the influence, in a mode reminiscent of childhood games and feverish dreams. As an abstract configuration on a two-dimensional plane, the ornament (similar to the allegorical emblem) inevitably has multiple meanings; indeed, it represents the “Ur-phenomenon” of “manifold interpretability” (“P,” p. 82; *GS*, 6:604). This observation situates aura, qua ornament, in the context of Benjamin’s speculations on the mimetic faculty, the gift for seeing and producing similarities that unconsciously or imperceptibly permeate our lives.<sup>51</sup> If in modernity such

48. See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 32–37. While Heidegger’s famous invocation of Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of peasant shoes depends on the three-dimensional depth of the shoes that makes for their essential thingness, Benjamin’s reference turns on the ornamental flatness of Van Gogh’s later paintings. See Michael P. Steinberg, “The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods, and the Object of History,” in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Steinberg (Ithaca, N.Y., 1996), esp. pp. 96–106; see also Christopher P. Long, “Art’s Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art, and Politics,” *New German Critique* 83 (Spring–Summer 2001): 89–115, esp. 99–101.

49. See, in particular, *SW*, 2:733–34. Also see Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1908), in *Programs and Manifestoes on Twentieth-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 19–24.

50. See Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament” (1927), *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 75–86.

51. See Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar” (1933), trans. Jennings, Knut Tarnowski, and Jephcott, and “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933), trans. Jephcott, *SW*, 2:694–98, 2:720–22. See also Burckhardt Lindner, “Benjamin’s Aurakonzepzion: Anthropologie und Technik, Bild und Text,” in *Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940*, pp. 217–48, esp. 218–24.

similarities have withdrawn and become nonsensuous (as exemplified by language, in particular written language), the phylogenetic prototype of mimetic reading—in particular the ancients' reading of celestial constellations—already entailed, Benjamin speculates, a degree of abstraction or perception of similarities by way of ornamental figures. By the same logic, he asks, aren't the stars with their “gaze from the distance the Ur-phenomenon of aura?” (GS, 2:958).

Notwithstanding Benjamin's polemics against the theosophists and the disciples of Steiner, his notion of aura as ornamental halo is certainly no less mystical. But it is one thing to reclaim the aura from its “vulgar” currency by radically redefining it; it is another to appropriate the concept from sources that are even more fraught or, for that matter, too close to name. I am referring here, on the one hand, to the Munich Kosmiker circle, in particular Alfred Schuler and Klages, with whom Stefan George, a regular and revered visitor, and Karl Wolfskehl, the only Jewish member of the group, broke because of their virulent anti-Semitism in 1904.<sup>52</sup> On the other, I am referring to the tradition of Jewish mysticism that captured Benjamin's interest early on, mediated primarily through his lifelong friendship with Scholem.

Benjamin came into contact with the Kosmiker through his friend Franz Hessel (and probably also Rilke) in 1915 when he went to study in Munich. He had sought out Klages personally the year before, initially attracted to his work on graphology, a mode of physiognomic reading that fascinated Benjamin throughout his life and in which he himself had some expertise.<sup>53</sup> He also was familiar with Klages's radical ecological manifesto “Mensch und Erde” (“Man and Earth,” written for the Meissner meeting of the German

52. See Richard Faber, *Männerrunde mit Gräfin: Die “Kosmiker” Derleth, George, Klages, Schuler, Wolfskehl, und Franziska von Reventlow* (Frankfurt, 1994); Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity—A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), esp. chap. 4, “Munich's Dionysian Avant-Garde in 1900”; Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, “Zwischen Rilke und Hitler: Alfred Schuler,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 19 (1967): 333–47; Werner Fuld, “Die Aura: Zur Geschichte eines Begriffs bei Benjamin,” *Akzente* 26 (June 1979): 360–69; and Karl Wolfskehl, 1869–1969: *Leben und Werk in Dokumenten*, ed. Manfred Schlösser (Darmstadt, 1969), pp. 138–39.

53. Benjamin, on behalf of the “Freie Studentenschaft,” had invited Klages to give a lecture on graphology which took place in Munich in July 1914; see letters to Ernst Schoen, 22 June 1914, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940* [hereafter abbreviated CWB], trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Scholem and Adorno (Chicago, 1994), p. 69; GB, 1:237. See also letters to Klages himself, 10 December 1920 and 28 February 1923, GB, 2:319, 2:114. Benjamin discusses Klages's books, *Prinzipien der Charakterologie* (1910) and *Handschrift und Charakter* (1917)—both of which were to enjoy a wave of reprints during the Nazi period—in his review article, “Graphology Old and New” (1930), trans. Livingstone, SW, 2:398–400; also see Benjamin, “Review of the Mendelssohns' *Der Mensch in der Handschrift*” (1928), trans. Livingstone, SW, 2:131–34 and the fragment “Zur Graphologie” (1922 or 1928), GS, 6:185.

youth movement in 1913) and wrote reverential letters to the philosopher on the publication of his essay on dream consciousness, “Vom Traumbewußtsein” (1913–14, expanded 1919), and his book *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* (Of Cosmogonic Eros) (1922).<sup>54</sup> He was almost as consistent, though even more secretive, in his fascination with Schuler, whom he described, in a text written in 1934–35 for publication in French, as a “highly peculiar figure.”<sup>55</sup>

The Kosmiker subscribed to neopagan, hedonistic, and antipatriarchal theories inspired by Nietzsche and Johann Jakob Bachofen (in particular the latter’s protofeminist work *Das Mutterrecht* [1861] or Mother-Right) and galvanized by the charismatic Schuler, their “oracular authority” (SW, 3:18). In his dramatizations of late Roman antiquity, Schuler claimed to perceive the emanation of an “aura,” an ephemeral breath (*Hauch*), from the recently excavated ruins at Trier, which animated the “spirits” or “ghosts” (*Geister*) of prehistoric, primeval time (*Vorzeit*). Such emanation to him was the echo of an “open era” or “open life,” defined by rituals of blood sacrifice and communion with the dead, which was slowly but irreversibly declining, giving way to a “closed life” defined by capitalist progress, logos, and patriarchy rooted in the cult of “Jahwe—Moloch.” According to Schuler, the late Romans already sensed this decline: “*Es ist die Aura, die schwindet*”—“that which is vanishing is the aura.”<sup>56</sup>

The Kosmikers’ aura may have entered Benjamin’s dictionary more specifically through Wolfskehl, with whom he developed a sympathetic, if somewhat condescending, relationship beginning in 1927. Wolfskehl played the part of the cultural hermaphrodite in more than one sense: he referred

54. In his letter to Klages of 10 December 1920, Benjamin inquires about the announced sequel to the essay on dream consciousness, “which revealed to me extraordinary and, if I may say so, longed-for perspectives” (GB, 2:114). In a letter of 28 February 1923, he writes: “I permit myself . . . to convey to you how much joy and confirmation of my own thoughts I gratefully took away from your text on the cosmogonic eros” (GB, 2:319). Also see his fragment of 1922–23, “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem” (1922–23), trans. Livingstone, SW, 1:397–401, esp. sec. 6.

55. Benjamin, “Johann Jakob Bachofen” (1935), trans. Jephcott, SW, 3:18. As late as 1933, however, he manages to mention Schuler positively in print (not coincidentally in a “thought-image” entitled “Secret Signs”), attributing to him the insight that authentic cognition had to contain “a dash of nonsense [*Widersinn*]”: “what is decisive is not the progression from one cognition [*Erkenntnis*] to the next, but the leap [or crack, *Sprung*] within every single cognition” (Benjamin, “Short Shadows [II]” [1933], trans. Livingstone, SW, 2:699; GS, 4:425). His letter to Scholem of 15 August 1930 suggests not only his enduring interest in Schuler (“admittedly on the basis of very special constellations”) but also an awareness of the untimeliness of that connection: “I also had ordered a slim volume of posthumously published fragments that I can marvel at in secret” (CWB, p. 367; GB, 3:538).

56. Alfred Schuler, *Fragmente und Vorträge aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Ludwig Klages (Leipzig, 1940), pp. 151, 262, and Klages’s introduction, p. 7. Also see Kaltenbrunner, “Zwischen Rilke und Hitler,” pp. 336–37.

to himself as “at once Jewish, Roman, and German” (as late as 1933) and during his Kosmiker days was variously dubbed “matriarch of Zion,” “Dionysos of Schwabing,” or, in Hessel’s word, “Hermopan.”<sup>57</sup> Benjamin seems to have treasured Wolfskehl primarily as a kind of medium, repeatedly emphasizing the visionary power of the poet’s voice (reading the texts of others) and handwriting (an incomparable “hiding-place” and “world-historical refugium” in which, as in its author, “dwell images, wisdom, and [otherwise forgotten] phrases” [GS, 3:368]). But among the texts actually written by the poet, Benjamin singles out the essay “Lebensluft” (Air of Life) (1929), which he links to his own ongoing work on surrealism and thus the notion of profane illumination. Wolfskehl’s essay begins with the words: “We may call it aura or use a less ‘occult’ term—every material being radiates it, has, as it were, its own specific atmosphere. Whether animate or inanimate . . . , created by human hand or unintentionally produced, everything thus pushes beyond itself, surrounds itself with itself, with a weightless fluidal husk.”<sup>58</sup>

A more problematic intertext for Benjamin’s aura—and notions surrounding that mode of experience—is the work of Klages, whose anthropological-psychological speculations he credits with having elevated the esoteric theories of the Bachofen revival to a level where they could “claim a place in philosophy” (SW, 3:18).<sup>59</sup> Like Schuler, George, and, for that mat-

57. See Faber, “Karl Wolfskehl, ein deutsch-jüdischer Antiintellektueller,” in “*Verkannte Brüder*”: Stefan George und das deutsch-jüdische Bürgertum zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Emigration, ed. Gert Mattenklott, Michael Philipp, and Julius H. Schoeps (Hildesheim, 2001), pp. 117–33. On Benjamin’s interactions with Wolfskehl, see GB, 3:312, 326, 348, 454, 460, 474–75, as well as Benjamin’s homage to the poet, “Karl Wolfskehl zum sechzigsten Geburtstag: Eine Erinnerung” (1929), GS, 41:366–68. Benjamin also dissociates Wolfskehl from the spiritists (and even the Steinerites who claimed him as one of their own) in a remarkable review of 1932, “Erleuchtung durch Dunkelmänner: Zu Hans Liebstoeckl, ‘Die Geheimwissenschaften im Lichte unserer Zeit,’” GS, 3:356–60; see esp. p. 357.

58. Karl Wolfskehl, “Lebensluft” (1929), *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Margot Ruben and Claus Victor Bock, 2 vols. (Hamburg, 1960), 2:419. Benjamin also mentions “Die neue Stoa,” *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:380–83, which sounds the cosmic key words of “Urwelt” and “Fernen der Ferne” (“distances of distance”) in a critique of instrumental reason and scientific progress. Benjamin is likely to have also read another of Wolfskehl’s articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*: “Spielraum” (1929), *Gesammelte Werke*, 2:430–33, a term that Wolfskehl deploys against the technological transformation of space and time in modernity which Benjamin in turn was to appropriate to describe film’s enabling and therapeutic role vis-à-vis that very transformation; see Hansen, “Room-for-Play.”

59. On Klages and Benjamin, see, among others, John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993); Richard Block, “Selective Affinities: Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Klages,” *Arcadia* 35 (2000): 117–36; Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the Idea of Technological Eros”; and Michael Pauen, “Eros der Ferne: Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Klages,” in *Global Benjamin: Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongreß 1992*, ed. Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm, 3 vols. (Munich, 1992), 2:693–716, esp. 706–11. For attempts to revive Klages from the perspective of Critical Theory, including Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ecology, phenomenology (especially Heidegger), and poststructuralism, see Pauen,

ter, Spengler, Klages engaged in powerful prophecies of decline—attributed to the hegemony of the intellect (*Geist*), the advance of science and technology in the pursuit of progress and property, and even labor itself (the result of the “Yahwist curse” that expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise). Against the self-destructive pursuits of mechanical civilization, he extolled archaic, mythical modes of experience based in a prehistoric unity of soul and body, which could be recaptured in states of dreaming and ecstatic trance (*Rausch*). In Klages’s excoriation of technological modernity, the Kosmikers’ neo-Nietzschean crusade against Judeo-Christian asceticism converged with anti-Semitic tendencies in (neo)romantic anticapitalism.<sup>60</sup>

Benjamin’s admiration for Klages is an example of his antinomic mode of thinking, his professed tendency, in both thought and life, to move “by way of extreme positions.”<sup>61</sup> This mode of thinking entailed, as Scholem observed in retrospect, that “he was capable of perceiving the subterranean rumbling of the revolution even in authors whose worldview was reactionary.”<sup>62</sup> To be sure, Benjamin had major differences with Klages on both political and philosophical grounds (to say nothing of the writer’s paranoid anti-Semitism), increasingly so after his turn to Marxism in the mid-1920s. But his critique of Klages’s lapsarian prophecies, in particular “his doomed attempt to reject the existing ‘technical,’ ‘mechanized’ state of the modern world,” went beyond the standard Marxist verdict against *Lebensphilosophie*—that the vitalist condemnation of machine technology was abstractly fixated on a means of production and thereby concealed the relations of production.<sup>63</sup> Rather, Benjamin considered Klages a “reactionary thinker” for setting up an “insipid and helpless antithesis . . . between the symbol-

---

“Wahlverwandtschaften wider Willen? Rezeptionsgeschichte und Modernität von Ludwig Klages,” in *Perspektiven der Lebensphilosophie: Zum 125. Geburtstag von Ludwig Klages*, ed. Michael Großheim (Bonn, 1999), pp. 21–43, and Großheim, “‘Die namenlose Dummheit, die das Resultat des Fortschritts ist’—Lebensphilosophie und dialektische Kritik der Moderne,” *Logos* 3 (1996): 97–133.

60. See, in particular, Klages’s introduction to Schuler’s writings, pp. 1–119. On Klages’s (and Schuler’s) anti-Semitism, see Faber, *Männerrunde mit Gräfin*, pp. 69–91.

61. Benjamin, letter to Gretel Karplus [Adorno], early June 1934, *GB*, 4:441. In his letter to Scholem, 15 August 1930, Benjamin calls Klages’s major new publication, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (The Intellect as Adversary of the Soul), “without doubt a great philosophical work” that he intended to study closely. “I would never have imagined that the kind of preposterous metaphysical dualism that forms the basis of Klages’s work could ever be associated with really new and far-reaching conceptions” (*CWB*, p. 366; *GB*, 3:537). On the antinomic method of Benjamin’s thinking, see McCole, introduction to *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*.

62. Scholem, “Walter Benjamin,” *Neue Rundschau* 76 (1965): 19; trans. Lux Furtmüller under the title “Walter Benjamin,” *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 10 (1968): 117–36.

63. Benjamin, “Review of Bernoulli’s *Bachofen*” (1926), trans. Livingstone, *SW*, 1:427. For a Marxist critique of Klages, Jung, and Bergson, see, for example, Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (1935), trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 304–24.

space of nature and that of technology,” that is, for failing to recognize that technology, at bottom, is nothing but a “truly new configuration of nature” (*AP*, p. 390; *PW*, 5:1:493). However, as we shall see, the very notion of such a transgenerational “symbol-space”—and the ability, which Benjamin attributes to children, to “recognize the new once again” and to incorporate these new images “into the image stock of humanity” (*AP*, p. 390; *PW*, 5:1:493)—testifies to how substantially he was thinking at once with, through, and against Klages.

Klages's writings, “properly fragmented,” provided Benjamin, not only with a quarry of insights and motifs, but also with a foil and catalyst that helped him formulate his own approach to technological modernity beginning with *One-Way Street*.<sup>64</sup> (Not least, this critical appropriation involved a modernization of Klages's language.) In Klages, Benjamin found elements of a theory of experience that could be turned from its vitalist head onto modernist-materialist feet. Central to this theory of experience was Klages's concept of the image or *Bild*, epitomized by the so-called *Urbild*, a primal or archaic image, and his lifelong insistence on the “actuality” or “reality of images.”<sup>65</sup> Aura (or “nimbus”) in Klages's parlance is the “fluidal shudder” or “veil” that constitutes and surrounds the *Urbild*, the “daemonically enchanted” image that transforms ordinary objects into visions or epiphanies.<sup>66</sup>

I will bypass the fairly well-known debates on Benjamin's appropriation of Klages's primal image in the initial stages of his *The Arcades Project*, that is, the understanding of modernity through its mythical dream images that have to be translated into historical, dialectical images.<sup>67</sup> I will neither go into Klages's significance for the cosmological and species-political strand in Benjamin's concept of history (which he was to develop under the heading of “anthropological materialism”) nor comment on the likelihood that he might have found in Klages a philosophical incentive, if not legitimation, for his drug experiments. The more interesting question in this context is what Benjamin sought in Klages that he could not have drawn—or did not

64. Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the Idea of Technological Eros,” p. 76.

65. Adorno acknowledged that Klages's “doctrine of ‘phantoms’” in the section “The Actuality of Images” (*Wirklichkeit der Bilder*) from his *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 3 vols. in 4 (Leipzig, 1929–32), 3:1:1223–37, “lies closest of all, relatively speaking, to our own concerns” (Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 5 Dec. 1934, *CC*, p. 61).

66. Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 3:1:1103 and *Vom Wesen des Bewusstseins* and *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3 of *Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Ernst Frauchiger et al. (Bonn, 1974), pp. 293–94, 422–23.

67. See, in particular, Adorno's (and Karplus's) response to the first *exposé* of *The Arcades Project* in the letters of 2–4 and 5 August 1935, *CC*, pp. 104–16. See also Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

acknowledge drawing, to the extent that he did—from the philosophy of Bergson (who, like Simmel, was part of the liberal-democratic, Jewish wing of *Lebensphilosophie*). After all, Bergson had responded more curiously than Klages to the transformations of perception and memory entailed by modern imaging technologies, which accounts for the important impulses his work has held for theories of film and media in recent decades.<sup>68</sup>

One reason may be that Benjamin found in Klages a theory, not only of the memory image, but of *image memory* that lent itself to being historicized and politicized against the grain more readily (and perhaps more antagonistically) than Bergson's. Klages's concept of the image partakes of the double and disjunctive temporality that fascinated Benjamin in Proust, as a medium at once ephemeral—irretrievable, flitting past—and enabling a self-dislocating encounter with the archaic. Unlike Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, Klages's *Urbild* derives its archaic dimension from the idea of a transgenerational or species memory: "Primal images are appearing souls of the past [*erscheinende Vergangheitsseelen*]." <sup>69</sup> In his gloss on *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* (which takes up much of a 1926 review of C. A. Bernoulli's book on Bachofen), Benjamin singles out this particular trajectory, crediting Klages's studies in "natural mythology" with seeking to restore to human memory "from an oblivion that has lasted thousands of years" the "reality" of "actually existing and formative 'images.'" These penetrate "the mechanical world of the senses" through the "medium of the human being" in states of ecstasy or dreaming. "Images . . . are souls, be they of things or people; distant souls of the past [*ferne Vergangheitsseelen*] form the world in which primitives, whose consciousness is comparable to the dream consciousness of modern man, can receive their perceptions" (*SW*, 1:427; *GS*, 3:44). For Klages, this mythical image memory has a physiological, specifically racial basis: the souls of the past appear or rematerialize thanks to the *Blutleuchte* or lighting up of the blood, a notion Klages takes from Schuler. Nonetheless, conscious of this ideological baggage and thus of risking cen-

68. Benjamin read *Matière et mémoire* during his student years but, to my knowledge, reserved any more systematic reflections until "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *SW*, 4:314–15, 336. The revival of Bergson in film and media theory has almost entirely been routed through Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, 1983) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, 1985). See, among others, Paul Douglass, "Deleuze's Bergson: Bergson Redux," in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Douglass (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 368–88 and "Bergson and Cinema: Friends or Foes?" in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester, 1999), pp. 209–27. For a return to Bergson through different routes, see, for instance, Paula Amad, *Archiving the Everyday: A Topos in French Film History, 1895–1930* (New York, forthcoming), chap. 3, and Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

69. Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, p. 470.

sure from his friends, in particular Adorno, Benjamin found in Klages an antithetical prompting for his own quest to theorize something like a trans-generational memory in modernity—a memory that would allow *new* images, that is, images of an industrially transformed collective physis to be assimilated nondestructively “into the image stock of humanity.”<sup>70</sup>

A no-less-important impulse of Klages's theory of images for Benjamin was his elaboration of the romantic polarity of farness and nearness, *Ferne* and *Nähe*. As an early fragment indebted to Klages shows, Benjamin's initial interest in this polarity was not concerned with the unique modality of works of art (as it might appear from the artwork essay) but with the “psychophysical problem” that linked questions of the body, eroticism, and dream consciousness within the more general project of a “theory of perception” (as opposed to a “theory of knowledge” or epistemology) (*SW*, 1:399).<sup>71</sup>

The conception of farness and nearness as “complementary poles,” rather than binary opposites, is central to Klages's treatise on “cosmogonic eros.” He asserts that this polarity extends to time as much as space; this temporal dimension imbricates the momentary “flashing-up” of the image with the past of cosmic nature (for example, stellar constellations), of generations of dead, and of one's own forgotten youth. Accordingly, he aligns farness with *image* and nearness with *thing* and stresses that farness and nearness are to be understood as *modes of perception* rather than measurable distances between subject and object.

Compared to someone noticing the bug on his hand, the beholder of blue-veiled mountain ranges more substantially resembles . . . the “dreamer” or the “immersed” [*dem Versunkenen*]. The observer seeking [cognitive] distinctions treats even the far-away as if it were something near . . . whereas the gaze of a person lost in contemplation of even an object close-by is captivated by an *image* of the object. . . . It is not so much the actual distance of an object as the mode of contemplation [*Betrachtung*] that determines whether the object is characterized by nearness or farness; and no one will confuse the thing-ness of the quality of nearness [*Nahcharakter*] with the image-ness of that of the far [*Ferncharakter*].<sup>72</sup>

70. To Adorno, the mythic-oneiric premises of Benjamin's image memory (in his initial concept of the “dialectical image”) were of course at least as suspect because of their propinquity with C. G. Jung's archetypes and the attendant notion of a collective unconscious; see Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 2–4 Aug. 1935, *CC*, pp. 106–7.

71. See esp. sec. 6, “Nearness and Distance (Continued),” *SW*, 1:397–400. Under the heading of “literature,” Benjamin lists five works by Klages, 1:398.

72. Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, pp. 432, 428.

The image, as he emphasizes throughout, is characterized by a constitutive untouchability or *Unantastbarkeit*, by a veil whose removal would rob the image of its essential character.<sup>73</sup> Benjamin may have replaced Klages's bug with a car or billboard and valorized proximity as a key parameter of modern experience, but he preserved Klages's fascination in the paradoxical conception of an "apparition of a distance however close the thing that calls it forth," to say nothing of "blue-veiled mountain ranges."

If Benjamin preserved this fascination by marking the aura as irreversibly moribund, he did not simply invert Klages's antimodernist hierarchy by endorsing a sensibility of nearness, thingness, and shock as the perceptual dominant of technologically mediated mass modernity (though of course he did that, too). More importantly, he radicalized Klages's theory of perception—as grounded in the reality of images rather than a subjective faculty—and historicized it in relation to the technologically transformed physis of modernity. In particular, he appropriated Klages's elaboration of the polarity of nearness and distance to theorize the epochal reconfiguration and interpenetration of "body space and image space" that he discerned in the mass-based media of advertising and cinema, the modern urban habitat, and the experiments of the surrealists (*SW*, 2:217).

Benjamin is likely to have found more specific impulses to think about the historic reconfiguration of body and image space in terms of technological media in Klages's essay "On Dream Consciousness," which he seems to have read in both versions.<sup>74</sup> In its emphasis on the phenomenal-sensorial characteristics of dreaming, rather than the meaning and interpretation of dreams, this implicitly anti-Freudian treatise appealed to Benjamin's interest in eccentric states of consciousness. What is more, whether or not Benjamin was aware of it, Klages's essay offers a rich archive of observations relevant to film. Notwithstanding its author's rejection of technology (including the "metropolitan intoxication by distraction"),<sup>75</sup> the essay reads for long stretches like an early theory of film. Just substitute the word *film* for *dream*, and you have a text that sounds key motifs of film aesthetics and reflections on cinematic spectatorship as articulated by contemporaries such as Hugo Münsterberg, Jean Epstein, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, and Kracauer.<sup>76</sup> Beyond the canon of classical film theory, I would submit,

73. See "Warum bringt es Verderben, den Schleier des Isisbildes zu heben?" appendix 1 of *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, pp. 474–82, esp. 481.

74. I will be referring to the 1919 version of "Von Traumbewußtsein," which expands the 1913–14 version by a second chapter, "Das Wachbewußtsein im Traume." See Klages, "Von Traumbewußtsein," *Sämtliche Werke*, 3:155–238; hereafter abbreviated "VT."

75. Klages, "Mensch und Erde," *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 623.

76. See, for example, Hugo Münsterberg, *Hugo Münsterberg on Film: "The Photoplay—A Psychological Study" [1916] and Other Writings*, ed. Allan Langdale (New York, 2002), and texts by

Klages's remarkable analysis of the "virtuality" of dream images and the dreamer's perception of these paradoxical "appearances" points to more recent efforts to make phenomenological thought productive for film.<sup>77</sup>

Against the psychoanalytic emphasis on the meaning of dreams for the individual subject, Klages aligns himself with antiquity's understanding of dream images as objective; he actually speaks of dreams as "apparitions," related to terms such as "phantasma" and "phantom" ("VT," p. 171). Dreaming (and dreamlike) states of consciousness are characterized by a "pathic passivity," "subordination of the will," and "surrender" to impressions that are taken for reality; a sense of distance and elusiveness; and, in language resonating in Kracauer's writing on film of the early 1920s, a feeling of ephemerality and transience and at the same time fusion with the constant flux and metamorphosing of phenomena: "[The dreamer] turns into a leaf rippling in the wind, drifting smoke, disintegrating foam, wandering cloud, falling star" ("VT," p. 164).<sup>78</sup> In other words, dreaming, like cinematic reception, entails a mimetic blending with such moving and morphing images and, accordingly, an erosion of the boundaries between subject and object. "What touches each other in the perfect dream should no longer even be called subject and object" ("VT," p. 170).

The destabilization of the "I" or *Ich* goes along with a "deobjectification" or *Entgegenständlichung* of space and time, in particular an unmooring of movement from spatiotemporal dimensions. Dream images are "virtual

---

Jean Epstein, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, and others in the first volume of *French Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Richard Abel, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1988). See also Kracauer's writings on film of the 1920s in *The Mass Ornament* and reviews in Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film*, vol. 6 of *Werke*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach and Ingrid Belke (Frankfurt, 2004). The more direct and better-known lineage between Klages and early film theory runs through Sergei Eisenstein who, like Wsewolod Meyerhold and other biomechanical acting theorists, found in Klages's study on "expressive movement" a confirmation of the theory (William James, William Carpenter) that bodily movement both manifests and generates affective reflexes. See Klages, *Ausdrucksbewegung und Gestaltungskraft: Grundlegung der Wissenschaft vom Ausdruck* (Leipzig, 1923).

77. See, among others, Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J., 1992) and "The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity," *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, 2004), pp. 286–318.

78. The double movement of the dreamer's mimetic fusion with the phenomena perceived and, in the flux of their displacement, a sense of pathic metamorphosing is reminiscent of Kracauer's account of the subject of "boredom" in the eponymous essay of 1924, in which "the spirit" allows itself to be polymorphously "cranked away" in the movie theater: "It squats as a fake Chinaman in a fake opium den, transforms itself into a trained dog that performs ludicrously clever tricks to please a film diva, gathers up into a storm amid towering mountain peaks, and turns into both a circus artist and a lion at the same time" (Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 332). The image of leaves rippling in the wind has been a topos since the Lumière Brothers first showed its films in 1895, famously invoked by Kracauer in the preface to his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960).

images that we see in the place-less space of a mirror" ("VT," p. 217). They are not a representation or sign of actual objects but an *expression* (*Ausdruck*) of their imagistic qualities; that is, they work by referencing, not things themselves, but the experiential substance of things (see "VT," pp. 213–14)—hence the paradoxical effect of sensory indifference (for instance, absence of pain) and visionary intensity, a synaesthetic form of beholding or visioning (*Schauen*) (see "VT," p. 171; see also pp. 189, 205). Thus, despite its "character of farness," oneiric perception involves a form of bodily experience in which one's "life is transferred to the place of appearance [or apparition]" ("VT," p. 189).<sup>79</sup>

If images are perceived as material reality and if bodies, for Klages (as for Bergson), are themselves defined as images, the valorization of their interpenetration as the only authentic form of vision harbors the risks of empirico-pessimism and solipsism. Klages addresses this quandary—the dissociation of reality into an indeterminate plurality—by asserting a categorical difference between the ordinary conditions of seeing and bodily being and a higher form of vision that is a prerequisite to "accomplishing the spiritual deed [*geistige Tat*]" of finding in the "peculiarity" (*Eigenheit*) of experienced reality "the universality of existences independent of [individual] life," that is, the universality of mythical, primal images. He supports that assertion, somewhat spuriously, with Heraklitus's famous phrase that "those who are awake have a single world in common, while each sleeper turns to a world of his own" ("VT," p. 213).<sup>80</sup> When Benjamin cites the same phrase in the section on the optical unconscious of the 1936 artwork essay, he not only uses it to epigrammatically evoke the world-historical difference of film but, in the same move, modernizes and democratizes Klages: "The ancient truth expressed by Heraklitus . . . has been invalidated by film—and less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse" (*SW*, 3:118).

I am not claiming that Benjamin read Klages's essay on dream consciousness in terms of a theory of film or cinema. But it is evident that his critical appropriation of Klages went far beyond the concept of aura; it actually contributed to a perspective in which film could come to figure, in Benjamin's words, as "the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics" (*SW*, 3:120). This not only required an inversion of Klages's stance on technology and a valorization of nearness and tactility as a key experiential parameter of col-

79. Benjamin elaborates on this thought, without attribution, in *SW* 1:449.

80. See Heraklitus, *The Cosmic Fragments*, ed. G. S. Kirk (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 57–64.

lective urban life. It also entailed Benjamin's insight that film, *because* of both its technological and its collective status, provided the most significant perceptual and social horizon in which the wounds inflicted on human bodies and senses *by* technology—in its industrial-capitalist and imperialist usage—might yet be healed, in which the numbing of the sensorium in defense against shock and the concomitant splitting of experience could be reversed, if not prevented, in the mode of play.<sup>81</sup>

There's one last twist in my tale. It involves another, equally important lineage for Benjamin's concept of aura: Jewish mysticism and theology. On 14 January 1926, Benjamin writes to Scholem about Bernoulli's book on Bachofen and the natural symbol (which, he says, "has a particular relevance for me—in a *fairytale*-like way"):

A confrontation with Bachofen and Klages is unavoidable; there is reason to assume, however, that it can be conducted compellingly only from the perspective of Jewish theology. It is no coincidence that these important scholars scent the archenemy precisely in this area, and not without cause. [C, 288; GB, 3:110]

The battleground of this confrontation, I believe, is the cluster of phenomena Benjamin sought to name with the term *aura*.

Scholem must have taken it for granted that Benjamin derived his concept of aura from Jewish theology. This comes across not only in their correspondence but also in his sharply critical response to the artwork essay (reported in his memoir on Benjamin):

I attacked his use of the concept of aura, which he had employed in an entirely different sense for many years and was now placing in what I considered a pseudo-Marxist context. In my view, his new definition of this phenomenon constituted, logically speaking, a subreption [an improper or fallacious appropriation] that permitted him to sneak metaphysical insights into a framework unsuited to them.<sup>82</sup>

It is telling that the archenemy for Scholem was not Klages but Benjamin's (and, by implication, Brecht's) Marxism.

Following scholars such as Giorgio Agamben and Harold Bloom, I share Scholem's assumption that Benjamin's understanding of aura is, partially at least, grounded in Jewish mysticism, in particular the kabbalistic theory of *tselem*, literally, "image" or *Bild*.<sup>83</sup> According to Scholem, the term is used

81. Benjamin's investment in technology (and in film as "second technology") is reminiscent of the logic of *Parsifal*: "Only the spear that struck it heals the wound" ("Die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur, der sie schlug").

82. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 207.

83. See Agamben, "Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption" (1982), *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford,

in the *Zohar* and elsewhere to refer to “the unique, individual spiritual shape of each human being” or a person’s “*principium individuationis*.” He considers the *tselem* a version of the idea of an “astral body,” a psychic “emanation of his own being made independent”—an idea that goes back to neo-Platonism and from there has migrated into both Jewish and non-Jewish mysticism.<sup>84</sup> (Klages and Steiner, for instance, refer to Paracelsus’s analogous notion of a “sideric body.”) Scholem highlights two aspects of the theory of *tselem* that have particular relevance for Benjamin’s concept of aura. One is the understanding of the *tselem* as a “personal daemon” that shadows and determines a person’s being, less in the benign sense as the person’s “perfected nature” than in the negative sense of an “antithetical self” or “adversary angel.”<sup>85</sup> The other relates to the idea of *tselem* as a form of visionary self-encounter, for which he quotes at length a sixteenth-century kabbalistic text on prophecy: “the complete secret of prophecy to a prophet consists in that he suddenly sees the form of his self standing before him, and he forgets his own self and [is removed from it; *entrückt*] . . . and that form [of his self] speaks with him and tells him the future.”<sup>86</sup>

The motif of a visionary, self-alienating self-encounter as described in this text is the topic of Scholem’s 1930 article “Eine kabbalistische Erklärung der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung” (A Kabbalist Account of Prophecy as Self-Encounter). Thanking his friend for an offprint of the article, Benjamin writes in November 1930: “You can hardly imagine how I feel watching you at work in this gold mine [*Goldbergwerke*, or ‘Goldberg territory’]. I read those few pages with true excitement” (CWB, p. 369; GB, 3:548).<sup>87</sup> It is exactly at this juncture in his life that Benjamin introduces the concept of aura into his writings, particularly in “Little History of Photography” and the hashish protocols and, implicitly, in the (semi-)autobiographical texts discussed above, “Berlin Chronicle” and the “Short Speech on Proust.”

---

Calif., 1999), pp. 138–59, esp. 145–48, and Harold Bloom, “Ring around the Scholar,” review of *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, in *Artforum* 33 (Nov. 1994): 3, 31. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *tselem* refers to the creation of man in the *image* of God (Gen. 1:26).

84. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Jonathan Chipman (1962; New York, 1991), pp. 251, 270, 254, 255.

85. Bloom, “Ring around the Scholar,” p. 31. This reading relies on Scholem’s interpretation of Benjamin’s angel as satanic; see Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and his Angel” (1972), *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York, 1976), pp. 198–236. Agamben calls Scholem’s interpretation into question by emphasizing the eudaemonist side of Benjamin’s angel, which is associated with his politics of happiness.

86. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, p. 253. The text in brackets quotes the same passage from the 1509 compilation *Shushan Sodot*, which Scholem first discusses in “Eine kabbalistische Erklärung der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 74 (1930): 288.

87. Benjamin puns on the name of the Judaic scholar Oskar Goldberg to whom both he and Scholem had a highly ambivalent relationship.

One might wonder how mystical and psychotheological speculations revolving around the formation and fate of the individual can have any bearing on modern, historically immanent and collectively experienced, technological media such as film. Yet the connection is not that far to seek. For one thing, Benjamin himself did not treat these domains as separate or incompatible; on the contrary, the very intersection of cosmic and secular-historical registers is a recurring theme in his philosophy of history.<sup>88</sup> For another, traditions of Jewish messianism and gnosticism—and their relevance to modernity—were already available for him through writers such as Proust and, especially, Kafka.

The signal importance of Kafka in this context cannot be underrated, although, to my knowledge, in Benjamin's writings on Kafka, including his great essay of 1934, the term *aura* does not appear. Its tenor clearly belongs to a different register than, say, the artwork essay's evocation of aura as beautiful semblance. Nonetheless, Benjamin finds in Kafka a number of motifs that overlap with elements of aura in the wider sense that are key to his theory of experience, including the very notion of experience as something haunting and destabilizing. ("I have experience [*Erfahrung*]," Benjamin quotes from early Kafka, "and I am not joking when I say that it is a seasickness on dry land.")<sup>89</sup> Suffice it here to mention the significance of *forgetting* in Kafka's work, linked to the motif of *Entstellung* or distortion, which is "the form which things assume in oblivion" (SW, 2:811) (this motif in turn relates to the notion of a distorted similarity that emerges in Benjamin's Proust essay and his autobiographical texts on his Berlin childhood).<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the irruption of forgotten, distorted, or misbegotten strange things or beings into the quotidian world—such as Kafka's elusive Odradek or the little hunchback of the opaque nursery rhyme—instantiates a temporality in which the recent past evokes the archaic. It taps into a lost memory that "is never . . . purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless uncertain and changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products" (SW, 2:809–10). In other words, Kafka offered Benjamin a pen-

88. See, in particular, "On the Concept of History" (1940), trans. Zohn, SW, 4:389–400, esp. thesis 18. The entwinement of these registers is programmatic to the surrealist-inspired, "anthropological materialist" first layer of *The Arcades Project*. See also Hanssen, *Benjamin's Other History*.

89. Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death" (1934), trans. Zohn, SW, 2:809.

90. See Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*" (1931), trans. Livingstone, SW, 2:497–99; SW, 2:240; and SW, 3:374. On Benjamin's notion of "distorted similitude" (and its distinction from "non-sensuous similitude"), see Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt, 1997).

dant, and alternative, to Klages's transgenerational, mythic image bank without the antimodernist and racial assumptions that compromised the Bachofen revival.

Probably the most important motif in Benjamin's reading of Kafka for his understanding of film is the concept of human self-alienation.

The invention of motion pictures and the phonograph came in an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of immeasurably mediated relationships which have become their only ones. *Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph.* The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what prompts his investigation, and what may enable him *to encounter fragments of his own existence*—fragments that are still within the context of the role. [SW, 2:814; GS, 2:436; my emphasis]

In the last section of the artwork essay, as in the second Baudelaire essay, Benjamin updates the Hegelian-Marxian category of self-alienation with an account of how the bungled reception of technology has blunted human beings' capability for experience and sense of self-preservation (see SW, 3:122, 4:335). In his work on Kafka, however, self-alienation is inflected with Scholem's kabbalistic assumption of a "primal and fundamental Galut ['exile']" in which "all existence, including, 'as it were,' God, subsists," constituting "the state of creation after the breaking of the vessels."<sup>91</sup> That is, Benjamin's concept of self-alienation differs from the concept's currency in pessimistic and lapsarian critiques of modernity inasmuch as it does not entail the assumption of an originary, unalienated condition or a more identical, unified self.

Conversely, the theological underpinnings of Benjamin's concept of self-alienation are bound up, not only with "an irreparable condition of exile which is the (German-Jewish) tradition of modernity," but at least as crucially with the experience of the capitalist-industrial everyday.<sup>92</sup> It is this doubleness of theological and immanent historical-political concerns—Benjamin stresses that the former have "no right" without engaging the latter—that puts an important "key to the interpretation of Kafka" into the hands of Charlie Chaplin:

Just as there are situations in Chaplin that, in a unique manner, imbricate the condition of being expelled and disinherited, the eternal woe of

91. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), p. 45.

92. Anson Rabinbach, introduction to *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, trans. Smith and Andre Lefevere, ed. Scholem (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. xxxii.

man [*ewiges Menschenweh*], with the most specific conditions of today's existence—finance, the metropolis, the police—so every event in Kafka has a Janus face: immemorial and ahistorical, but then again charged with the latest, journalistic actuality. [GS, 2:1198]<sup>93</sup>

Chaplin achieves this significance by mimicking technology's fragmenting effects on the human body; by dissecting "human expressive movement into a series of minute innervations" (GS, 1:1040) and reconstituting his own movement as a "succession of staccato bits of movement,"<sup>94</sup> "he interprets himself allegorically" (GS, 1:1047).

Self-alienation, after all, is one of the key concepts of the artwork essay, ostensibly unrelated to the concept of aura. "*In the representation of human beings by means of an apparatus their self-alienation has been put to a highly productive use*" (SW, 3:113; GS, 7:1:369). Chaplin is not the only witness for that claim. Benjamin elaborates this hypothesis more generally regarding the screen actor's confrontation with the apparatus, his or her instantiation of the "tests" that human beings are confronting in their work and everyday lives. Benjamin knows that the dialectics of productive self-alienation can prove itself only in the arena of reception, to the extent that the cinema—as a collective, public space—allows the individual "to encounter fragments of [his or her] own existence." Significantly, he discerns such a possibility in the appeal of early Mickey Mouse films and attributes their popularity to "the fact that the audience recognizes its life in them."<sup>95</sup> This somewhat counterintuitive claim rests on the assumption, in the urtext of the artwork essay, that these films provoke a forced articulation of distorted, mass-psychotic responses to modernization and thus prematurely detonate, and neutralize, their otherwise destructive potential (see SW, 3:118). Here, in a wholly secularized, modern context, Benjamin transposes onto a collective level his earlier linkage, in the photography essay's discussion of the Dauthendey portrait, of a daemoniac, auratic self-encounter with the concept of an optical unconscious.

Again, I am not arguing that the theorization of cinema as the locus of productive self-alienation is the same as an individual auratic experience in the kabbalistic sense of a visionary encounter with an older, other self. But I hope to have shown that, if we consider Benjamin's concept of aura in its

93. See also Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 12 June 1938, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, p. 224: "What is actually and in a very precise sense *folly* [*das Tolle*; "crazy," "mad," or "great"] in Kafka is that this, the most recent of experiential worlds, was conveyed to him precisely by the mystical tradition."

94. Benjamin, "The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression," trans. Jephcott, SW, 3:94.

95. Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse" (1931), trans. Livingstone, 2:545; GS, 6:144–45.

wider, anthropological, visionary, and psychotheological dimensions rather than in the narrower sense it acquires in the artwork essay, the relationship between aura and technological reproduction, like that between aura and the masses, no longer reduces to an opposition of binary, mutually exclusive terms.

Benjamin's adaptation of the concept of aura in the last decade of his life entailed a forceful wresting away of the term from its contemporary theosophist and Steinerist currency and, at the same time, a disavowal of his more specific esoteric sources. This critical appropriation could only be accomplished through a form of conceptual *apokatastasis*, a "resurrection, as it were, through [mortification and] dismemberment."<sup>96</sup> Even as Benjamin marked the phenomenon of the aura as historically belated and irreversibly moribund, he imported fragments of the concept—secularized and modernized—into his efforts to reimagine experience under the conditions of technologically mediated culture. If Klages's theory of perception as mystical fusion with the image left its imprint on Benjamin's aura in the paradoxical entwining of distance and nearness, it also resonates in his notion of an interpenetration of body and image space as a collective mimetic innervation of technology through film. And in Scholem's (re)construction of the kabbalistic theory of *tselem* we can trace, not only the elaboration of aura in terms of the return of the gaze and the daemonic vision of the self as other, but also Benjamin's notion of an optical unconscious and his understanding of film as a medium in which human "self-alienation can be put to a highly productive use."

The heterogeneity of sources and intertexts that resonate in Benjamin's aura goes a long way toward accounting for both the elusiveness and ambivalence that surround the concept in his work. More importantly, this heterogeneity testifies to Benjamin's revisionary ability—and intellectual courage—to appropriate and transform theoretical impulses from philosophically and politically incompatible, if not antagonistic, camps. I've traced some of these impulses to show aura's complex role for his efforts to reimagine the possibility of experience in mass-mediated modernity; I hope to have also elucidated the stakes of his experimental mode of theorizing—a mode of theorizing that I consider still, and in more than one sense, "open to the future."

96. Wohlfarth, "Benjamin and the Idea of Technological Eros," p. 68.