

The Memory of Things: Walter Benjamin's Modernity

by

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Abstract

In *The Memory of Things*, I begin by posing the question, what if memory were not merely a human characteristic but also a thingly one. I approach this thought through the work of Walter Benjamin, for whom things and memories are often juxtaposed, and whose writing of modernity is concerned particularly with the intersection of material traces and memory. I access these questions by means of various theories, among which are psychoanalysis, object-oriented ontology, thing theory, and phenomenology, and, more briefly, through the history of geological science. At their cores, the questions of modernity, of things and people, of trauma and politics, of aura and its decay, of memory and forgetting, of weight are questions of ethics. I demonstrate in the dissertation to follow, objects bear the weight of human memory and ethics. Furthermore, I demonstrate that Benjamin's eclectic writings, most especially his writings on aura, provide the tools we need to re-think objects and our relations to them.

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Introduction:

Getting Lost in Walter Benjamin's Modernity

Just shy of a decade ago, i arrived at a graduate seminar that took as its subject Walter Benjamin and cultural memory. I had, at the time, little idea who Benjamin might be and no thought at all that his work would inspire a significant project. Something happened in that seminar, though, to change my mind -- a confluence, perhaps of the particular group of people, a professor who facilitated discussion generously and openly, material that was engaging in a particularly timely way, or perhaps something else entirely. Something about Benjamin made me forget how to think, how to dissect arguments and ferret out obscure meanings, how to assert myself in opposition to this or that position, how to seize a sentence and criticize it word by word. Having, then, forgotten this thing at which i had thought myself skilled, this relentless criticism, i had to relearn how to think. Reading Benjamin, above all things, demanded that i include imagination and creativity under the rubric of thought.

I'm not sure when, precisely, it became apparent that the old ways of thinking would be inadequate to my desire to encounter Benjamin. It cannot have been right away, not, surely, on my first readings, but it must have happened soon after that. Was it when i read "The Storyteller" that Benjamin first began to truly catch my imagination? I was, at the time, particularly interested in aesthetic manifestations of silence, and Benjamin's concern with the declining role of the storyteller -- and the concurrent rise of the novel -- intersects with the particular questions i had about the nature of what is speakable and of the relation of articulability to memory. Silence, then, as both a potential site of power and resistance at the same time as it submits to the power of narrative. Here, in this

essay, Benjamin seemed to tackle these questions head-on. He argues that storytelling is a distinctly social -- as opposed to literary -- practice, rooted in experience itself: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience -- his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (146).

While Benjamin identifies the rise of the novel at the advent of modernity as a sign of the decline of storytelling, what is truly at the heart of the end of storytelling is a fundamental change in the nature of experience itself: "Experience," writes Benjamin in the opening paragraphs of this essay, "has fallen in value" (143), contradicted at every turn by the catastrophic realities of war, economics, power, and modern life, and, therefore, experience can no longer provide useful council, and the storyteller's voice loses its authority: "Death is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death" (151), and this authority dissipates throughout modernity with the withdrawal of death from the public realm:

[T]he thought of death has become less omnipresent and less vivid [. . .]
Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual, and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne that people come toward through the wide-open doors of the dying person's house. In the course of modern times, dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. It used to be that there was not a single house, hardly a single room, in which someone had not once died [. . .] Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death -- dry dwellers of eternity; and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their

heirs. Yet, characteristically, it is not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life -- and this is the stuff that stories are made of -- which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. (151)

The question of silence (what it is, how it is read, where its epistemological place is), while i do not address it explicitly, features prominently among the methodological problems when the subject at hand is the nature of objects.

One of the inherent difficulties in speaking or writing about objects is that their silence, this very quality that has made them compelling to me, also leaves them open to being appropriated. Their silence makes it all too easy to forget that they exist not for our sakes but for their own. Their silence makes it too easy to project ideas onto them. Graham Harman proposes a litmus test that seeks to distinguish between a philosophy of objects and a philosophy of access, the latter of which he claims can be no more than veiled -- or unveiled -- idealism: "Of any philosophy we encounter," he writes in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, "it can be asked whether it has anything at all to tell us about the impact of inanimate objects upon one another, apart from any human awareness of this fact" (42). He goes on to clarify that such a philosophy need not "require a model of solid cinder blocks existing in a vacuum without context, but only a standpoint equally capable of treating human and inhuman entities on an equal footing" (42). As Benjamin notes in "The Task of the Translator," the work of art -- or the object -- does not exist merely to be appropriated to the observer's agenda, no matter how silent and no matter how impenetrable it may seem. The task of the translator, then -- a task which extends to include the task of all those who encounter matter that is silent and impenetrable -- is, therefore, an ethical one: to listen, to observe, and to respond.

The passage, though, that has guided my methodology throughout this project comes not from "The Storyteller" or "The Task of the Translator" but from Benjamin's unfinished autobiographical essay, "A Berlin Chronicle." While this is a passage that recurs frequently in the chapters that follow, i'd like to cite it for you, here, in the opening pages of the introduction to this dissertation for, among other reasons, its beauty. Getting lost, writes Benjamin, is a particular sort of skill:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance -- nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city -- as one loses oneself in a forest -- this calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, and bars must speak to the wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. (598)

In addition to being a compelling piece of prose, the getting lost that Benjamin describes above has largely informed my approach to the subject at hand: the confluence of objects and memory in Benjamin's account of modernity. When i began to conceive of this project, i had not encountered much writing on objects, and what i had encountered i'd found disappointing: much work that purports to be about objects is really about what objects mean to people. This anthropocentrism is, as Ian Bogost writes in *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to be a Thing*, inevitable because people are the people making the inquiries into objects:

The risk of falling into anthropocentrism is strong. Indeed, I'll take things farther: anthropocentrism is unavoidable, at least for us humans. The same

is true of any unit (for the bats, chiropteracentrism is the problem). The subjective nature of experience makes the unit of operations of one of its perceptions amount always to a caricature in which the one is drawn in the distorted impression of the other. (64-65)

As a consequence, we can never truly know the alien other's, the object's, experience as such. This is not to say that attempts to do so ought not be made, but that the tools to do so must have a more oblique relation to the Truth, namely, metaphor: "[W]e never understand the alien experience, we only ever reach for it metaphorically" (66):

The true alien recedes interminably even as it surrounds us completely. It is not hidden in the darkness of the outer cosmos or in the deep-sea shelf but in plain sight, everywhere, in everything [. . .] Speculative realism really does *require* speculation: benighted meandering in an exotic world of utterly incomprehensible objects. As philosophers, our job is to amplify the black noise of objects to make the resonant frequencies of the stuffs inside them hum in credibly satisfying ways. Our job is to write the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations. (34)

Bogost's book comes out of the new school of Speculative Realism, a relatively recent innovation in continental philosophy, which rejects the philosophy of access, nearly ubiquitous since Kant, and which speculative realists condemn as anti-realist. Speculation, Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman write in the introduction to *The Speculative Turn*, aims to rectify the anti-realist relativism of late-twentieth-century:

By contrast with the repetitive continental focus on texts, discourse, social practices, and human finitude, the new breed of thinker is turning once

more toward reality itself [. . .] [The scholars whose work is collected in *The Speculative Turn*], in one way or another, have begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally.

This activity of 'speculation' may be cause for concern amongst some readers, for it might suggest a return to pre-critical philosophy, with its dogmatic belief in the powers of pure reason. The speculative turn, however, is not an outright rejection of these critical advances; instead it comes from a recognition of their inherent limitations. Speculation in this sense aims at something 'beyond' the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of 'speculation' as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique. (3)

While I accept the critique that work too rooted in philosophies of access is easily reduced to exercises in navel-gazing (Bryant 262), to dismiss the question of how we know what we do, especially when the nature of reality is at issue, seems unsatisfying. Indeed, I would say that the question of ontology is nearly inseparable from that of epistemology, and I find it nearly impossible to abandon the question of how we know what we do, especially insofar as it concerns objects because of their silence, because we have so often been mistaken in our assessments of their potency.

I return, endlessly it will surely seem, then, to an idea about object memory based loosely on the geological practice of sedimentary stratigraphy, the founding principle of

which is the law of superposition. First articulated by Avicenna¹ in *The Book of the Cure* (1016-1027), this law posits a theory of how the earth's history has been -- and continues to be -- recorded and how it might be read: sedimentary layers are deposited following a temporal sequence, with the oldest strata on the bottom and the youngest on the top of any cross section:

It is possible that each time the land was exposed by the ebbing of the sea a layer was left, since we see that some mountains appear to have been piled up layer by layer, and it is therefore likely that the clay from which they were formed was itself at one time arranged in layers. One layer was formed first, then at a different period, a further was formed and piled, upon the first, and so on. Over each layer there spread a substance of different material, which formed a partition between it and the next layer; but when petrification took place something occurred to the partition which caused it to break up and disintegrate from between the layers (possibly referring to unconformity). ... As to the beginning of the sea, its clay is either sedimentary or primeval, the latter not being sedimentary. It is probable that the sedimentary clay was formed by the disintegration of the strata of mountains. Such is the formation of mountains. (quoted in Toulmin and Goodfield 64)

The same principle can be used to decipher glacial drill core samples, and together, rock and ice, they memorialize the earth's history in a way that is partially decipherable to

¹ Avicenna (Ibn Sina), c. 980-1037, is considered the most significant philosopher in the Islamic tradition and among the most significant pre-modern philosophers. Cf. Jon McGinnis, ed. and trans., *The Physics of the Healing* (Provo, 2009), 2 volumes; and Michael Marmura, ed. and trans. *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (Provo, 2005).

trained people, but also in a way that remains inscrutable. Reading sedimentary layers can tell us something of what the earth remembers; doing so can also tell us about the nature of earth memory accessible to us (material traces, stratification); and the principle of uniformitarianism allows us to extrapolate how that memory is formed.² These foundations, in addition to the previous work i'd done on the aesthetics of traumatic memory in abuse narratives, Sigmund Freud's theory of memory repression (and the necessary return of that which has been repressed), as well as brief forays into theories surrounding posthumanism and animal studies, as well as collective memory, turned my thinking away from memory as a faculty limited to human cognition. Memory can hardly exist only in people's heads and only for people's benefit.

This dog's breakfast of reading and vague dissatisfaction with the explanations provided about the nature of memory -- and the nature of objects themselves -- hardly seems an iron-clad philosophical reason to make the claim i return to throughout my dissertation: that what we think of as memory -- a cognitive (and narrative) relationship to the past -- hardly begins to encompass what memory really is, and indeed, that the objects with which Benjamin was preoccupied throughout his writing life illuminate an expanded definition of memory that gets at the heart of what it is to be a thing.

The text that follows is divided roughly into thirds. The first, comprising chapters one and two, takes two different paths to answer the following question: how are memory and objects connected? Chapter one follows things, in all their inscrutability, and considers the recent expansion of theories that are -- at least on their surfaces -- about

² In *Principles of Geology*, Charles Lyell claims that the present provides a key to knowing the past. Uniformitarianism is the assumption that the earth has been shaped by slow moving processes, still in operation today.

things. I begin, then, with the critical contradiction that things are important, worthy of our study, but that what's really important is how things reflect the society that produced them, or the people who have something to say about them. Perhaps a useful way to think of this projection combines the approach of Bogost, for whom, recall, anthropomorphism is inevitable -- and potentially desirable -- when people investigate the radically other, and Renu Bora, for whom projection exposes the fissure on the surface of things: "When a surface (a rock, or your face, for example) has certain properties, we often project these properties into its interior, and by this interior I mean not just a cavity, invagination, fold, or center, but the structure, consistency, or **TEXXTURE** of its interior matter that extends liminally, asymptotically, into the surface" (npg). Bora hereby posits interruption -- the caesura in speech, a crack in an object -- as a material presence. His discussion of fetish in "Outing Texture," coming as it does in the context of his analysis of Chad in Henry James' *The Ambassadors* and making use of both the Marxist and psychoanalytic roots of the concept, locates the fantasy and interruption characteristic of fetish in the realms of consumption and fulfillment -- sex and things in both cases:

The displacement of the object, ironically due in part to an attribution of magical personifying qualities, can become legible when a producer or a consumer attempts to fathom its 'inherent' sensual properties or qualities, (perhaps glimpsing with fetishistic fascination its utopic use-value/ labour capitalization in counterpoint to exchange-value, or even the supplemental relationship between concrete labour and object qualities), all of which seem inevitably naturalized by fetishistic ideology. (98)

In chapter two, i return to the ground of chapter one, asking again how objects and memory relate to one another. This time, though, i begin with what we think of as the nature of memory. In the first half of this chapter, memory is a method of object encounter, a theme i trace through Benjamin's fragment "Excavation and Memory" as well as "A Berlin Chronicle."

Both of these chapters are, without saying so, concerned with the nature of what we call "modern." Memory, writes Richard Terdiman in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, is the foundational question -- and fissure -- of modernity. In the modern world, he claims,

people experienced the insecurity of their culture's involvement with its past, the perturbation of the link to their own inheritance, as what I want to term a "memory crisis"; a sense that their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In this memory crisis the very coherence of time and subjectivity seemed disarticulated. (3-4)

Memory, he says, connects time and subjectivity, and this connection is fundamentally disturbed in modernity.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin implies that modernity is, at the time he writes, at least partly aspirational when he calls for a Copernican revolution in memory (*AP* 389). The Copernican revolution, recall, has long been thought to signify the break between pre-modern and modern ideas about how the universe really operates. This is the historical moment where observation rather than religion became the basis for astronomical models of the universe. In *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*,

Stephen Greenblatt posits *modern* signifies less a historical designation than it does a particular habit of mind, a particular sort of attention to the material world. In the opening to this controversial book, Greenblatt recalls first reading Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*:

On the Nature of Things struck me as an astonishingly convincing account of the way things actually are [. . .] But at the core of the poem lay key principles of a modern understanding of the world.

The stuff of the universe, Lucretius proposed, is an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction. (npg)

For Greenblatt, Lucretius, writing in the epicurean tradition, represents a particularly modern way of thinking: "I marveled -- I continue to marvel -- that these perceptions were fully articulated in a work written more than two thousand years ago," he writes:

The line between this work and modernity is not direct: nothing is ever so simple. There were innumerable forgettings, disappearances, recoveries, dismissals, distortions, challenges, transformations, and renewed forgettings. And yet the vital connection is there. Hidden behind the worldview I recognize as my own is an ancient poem, a poem once lost, apparently irrevocably, and then found. (npg)

Greenblatt's presentation of the Medieval period as a time of ignorance that contrasts with the enlightenment of Lucretius' Epicureanism and of modernity is, rightly, a source of contention.³

By citing this reading of Lucretius, i don't wish to deny the importance of those critiques of Greenblatt's erroneous version of European History; i do, however, want to focus fairly narrowly on this revolution in thinking about the world as atomic and amoral. While he was writing *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin would seize on a similar revolution in thought to Lucretius', one with equally far reaching implications for the way people perceive the world:

The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in "what has been," and

³ In the *LA Review of Books*, Jim Hinch writes that, while Greenblatt's "engaging literary detective story" about Poggio Braccionlini's discovery of a 500 year old manuscript of *De Rerum Natura* is "wonderful," the way he engages with Medieval Europe amounts to "an anti-religious polemic" (1). Greenblatt's version of the Middle Ages

is a powerful vision of the world entering a prolonged period of cultural darkness. If it were true, then Greenblatt's second *Swerve*, the anti-religious polemic, also would deserve every award and plaudit it won. However, Greenblatt's vision is not true, not even remotely. As even a general reader can gather from a text as basic as Cambridge University historian George Holmes' *Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval Europe* (published in 1988 and still available on Amazon): "Western civilization was created in medieval Europe. The forms of thought and action which we take for granted in modern Europe and America, which we have exported to other substantial portions of the globe, and from which indeed we cannot escape, were implanted in the mentalities of our ancestors in the struggles of the medieval centuries." Greenblatt's caricatured Middle Ages might have passed muster with Enlightenment-era historians. Present-day scholarship, especially the findings of archeologists and specialists in church and social history, tells a vastly more complicated, interesting and indeterminate story. (2)

Cf. Morgan Meis, "Swerving," *n+1* (20 July 2012); and Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria*, 22.2 (2010) for more detailed critical reading of *The Swerve*.

one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal -- the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; *to establish them is the affair of memory*. (288)

In Chapter Three, I turn, as I did in Chapter Two, to Benjamin's called-for Copernican Revolution in memory. Whereas in the previous chapter, I was mostly concerned with the collective aspects of the past, I take as a starting point for Chapter Three the revolution in Benjamin's thought marked by "One Way Street." In "One Way Street," the boundaries between subjects and objects, between past and present, between wakefulness and dreaming are blurred by what Margaret Cohen calls *Proto-Chock*. *Protoc-Chock* stages a violent and disorienting contact between the subject and the cosmos. While Benjamin does not use such psychoanalytically inflected language, this contact, as Benjamin stages it in "One Way Street," is a marker of trauma.

In his essay on Goethe, Benjamin confirms and confounds our judgments about the nature of romanticism and the supposed rupture between it and modernity. "Critique," he writes, "seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content" ("Goethe's Elective Affinities" 297). Here are echoes of the closing lines of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" -- "Beauty is truth, truth beauty -- that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (ll. 49-50) -- a phrase

which seems to encompass the entirety of the Romantic project. Benjamin's observation above, about the ideally intimate relation of truth content to material content confirms our expectation of his work, given the focus of his early writings on Romanticism, and given that in his later writings, he conscientiously binds what he says with how he says it.

Eduardo Cadava notes, in the introduction to *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, that in Benjamin's writings on history, he reproduces "the caesura of the historical event" that he considers integral to historical thinking (xx). Cadava argues that Benjamin's thetic method of writing in "On the Concept of History," replicates the photographic moment, and that it is important that it does so:⁴ "This caesura -- whose force of immobilization not only gives way to the appearance of an image but also intervenes in the linearity of history and politics -- can also be understood in relation to what we might call the photograph's Medusa effect" (xx).

This caesura, though, which according to Cadava unifies the truth content and the material content of Benjamin's essays on historiography, is also what causes the opening to "Goethe's Elective Affinities" to be so counter-intuitive. In the second half of this essay, he digresses onto the subject of Hölderlin's "Remarks on Oedipus" and onto the caesura that marks the counter-rhythm of the tragedy:

In the expressionless, the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality -- the absolute totality.

⁴ "[B]ecause historical thinking" for Benjamin, writes Cadava, "involves 'not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well' [. . .] photography can become a model for the understanding of history, a model for its performance" (xx).

Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol [. . . .]

The "occidental Junoian sobriety" -- which Hölderlin, several years before he wrote this, conceived as the almost unattainable goal of all German artistic practice -- is another name for that caesura, in which, along with harmony, every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media.

Andrew Benjamin, in *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance* reads this passage at length, concerned with the way the caesura plays out in Benjamin's early writings. The caesura, he writes, is "precisely not an emblem of rhetoric" (8). Rather, like W.H. Auden's description of poetry,⁵ the caesura is the space and manner in which Benjamin's thought revolution happens.

In chapters four and five, i take up different dimensions of the alien nature of both objects and memory. Chapter four connects allegory, ruination, and mourning in Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, William Gibson's novel, *Pattern Recognition*, and Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. This conglomeration of concepts and texts, of bodies becoming things, of blindness and clear-sightedness, of fun-house mirrors, all of these, i argue, point toward a thingly epistemology. Objects are, indeed, made more unfamiliar, more alien, when they

⁵ From "In Memory of W.B. Yeats,"

For poetry makes nothing happen, it survives
 In the valley of its saying where executives
 Would never want to tamper; it flows south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
 A way of happening, a mouth. (II.5-10)

come face to face with the absolute failure of memorialization, and this is further highlighted by the very intimacy of the physical artifacts -- tears, skulls -- at issue.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that true -- pure, rarified -- modernity is factually impossible. To be modern is a fiction that depends on the subject willingly subscribing to a critical project that advocates the work of purification and the work of translation (10-11). Modernity depends on the metaphysical separation of nature and culture, of matter and memory:

So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern -- that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. At the same time we stop being modern, because we become retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending. (11)

Modernity is, in this reading, illusory, and more to the point, if we read its dependence on the "proliferation of hybrids down below" as alluding to class,⁶ modernity is aspirational. Latour writes, "'Modern' is thus doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular

⁶ This is, I think, a reasonable assumption given, first, that capitalist society depends on an underclass of labourers (immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East in Southwestern Europe, undocumented migrants from Mexico in the United States, Aboriginal peoples in Western Canada and Australia, to name but a few) in order to function; and, second, given the monstrosity -- the uncanny and the abject -- so commonly associated with hybridity.

passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished" (10).

The interruptions and separations of modernity are fictional and aspirational. Until they're not. In Benjamin's *oeuvre*, modernity is, at least in part, traumatic and painful. This aspect of modernity is particularly clear in "The Storyteller." In that essay, Benjamin posits an all too real modernity that hurts:

Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent -- not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (143-44)

The image at the end of this passage of the "tiny, fragile human body" being buffeted this way and that in a "forcefield of destructive torrents and explosions" is remarkably similar to the image of the angel of history from "On the Concept of History," propelled forward by unseen forces, unable to stop time to awaken the dead.

This is the image that preoccupies chapter five. While i am, in chapter four, primarily concerned with the uncanny nature of the allegorical object, in chapter five i am concerned with the untimely nature of memory. Untimeliness, writes Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, is at the very heart of allegory. Allegories are always dated, writes Benjamin, "because it is part of their nature to shock" (183), and shock is a matter of untimely arrival. Untimeliness, particularly as it relates to the angel of history, eternally wishing to turn back the clock and eternally unable to do so -- seeking "to escape from history and restore the timelessness of paradise" (*OG* 116), as Benjamin writes of the Baroque dramatists -- characterizes the very nature of materialist history.

At its heart, the question of materialist history, of objects and people, of trauma and politics, of aura and its decay, of memory and forgetting is a question of ethics. And this question of how we are in the world, of how we use the objects in the world around us, and of what that means is a question i've been unable to leave. Therefore, the Conclusion considers aura in light of the ethics of object memory. It is, and has always been about weight: "Weight is not the same as the force of a mass pressing upon another mass that science measures and conceptualizes as gravity," writes Alphonso Lingis in his recent essay "The Weight of Reality" (39). He argues that weight is what brings human bodies and things together:

It is the whole body that feels the weight of things; a gallon of cider is felt to have the same weight when lifted with one hand or with both, with a foot, and when laid on one's back. A rock is felt to have the same weight when lifted under water in a pond and when held in the air. The weight is

felt to be not in the body that feels it, but in the crystal bowl, the armchair.

(39-40)

The experience of weight is an experience of the other, writes Lingis: "The sense of weight is a sense of the whole thing" (40). We experience the weight of the other as "importance" (41), as ethical obligation. However, as the above quotation indicates, weight is also an experience of oneself, and, furthermore, the experience of weight -- one's own or another's -- is not limited by species. Indeed, as i demonstrate in the dissertation to follow, objects bear the weight of human memory and ethics.

Chapter 1:

On Track of Things

What fascinates me about things is that we don't know much about them. We are constantly in contact with them, but, as Sarah Ahmed observes in *Queer Phenomenology*, we are oriented away from them. The object in phenomenology "appears not as a thing to which we should, as readers, direct our attention; it is not so much a *thing* as a way of saying something" (25-26, original emphasis). We encounter, peripherally, their various forms. We know what they look like; we know their textures and their smells. We are told that they are old or not so old, that they are human-made or naturally occurring. We have named their species and identified their compositions. In spite of this, we know comparatively little about the nature of things, and we know still less what is required of us should we want to learn more. It's so much easier, so much more pragmatic and sensible and realistic, to study their externalities than it is to encounter their beings.

Things get lost in data and swirling thoughts.

Nonetheless, things haunt us: "But what decade of the [twentieth] century didn't have its own thing about things?" Bill Brown asks in his essay "Thing Theory" (13). For Brown, this thing about things is an intellectual movement that both attempts to make things the center of ideas and to empty things of their significance: "[T]he postwar era looks like an era both overwhelmed by the proliferation of things and singularly attentive to them" (14), he summarizes. The examples he draws on, primarily Martin Heidegger's 1950 lecture "The Thing" and Jacques Lacan's 1959 seminar of the same title, simultaneously bring things to the fore and make their object-natures insignificant: "[T]he thingly character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it

be defined in any way in terms of the objectness, the over-againstness of the object" (Heidegger 165). In the introduction to *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Brown reckons with the intellectual ambivalence of being overwhelmed by the thing by attempting to domesticate it. We have, throughout modernity, he claims, attributed to the thing characteristics like those of humans in order to convince ourselves that we understand them. This effort is bound to fail because at the heart of the thing lies a fundamental lack: "It is a lesson in the insufficiency of the desired object. For of course there is no soul within the toy, not even the mechanical toy. Not even the worker's image of the thing really lurks in it" (6). Objects, claims Brown, are insufficient in themselves, and, therefore, we attempt to make up for that insufficiency by forcing them into a fetish relation.

Freud, when he writes of psychological fetishes, argues that the fetish employs the logic of replacement. This stands in for that. A shoe is sometimes not a shoe, nor is a cigar always a cigar:

In his psyche, yes, the woman still has a penis, but the penis is no longer the same thing as before. Something has taken its place, has been appointed its successor, so to speak, and this now inherits all the interest previously devoted to its predecessor. But because the horror of castration has been immortalized in the creation of a substitute, this interest also becomes intensified to an extraordinary degree. The repression that has taken place leaves behind a further stigma indelible in the form of an aversion toward real female genitals, common to all fetishes. (91-92)

What Freud discusses in "Fetishism" is less the creation of a substitute woman's phallus than it is about the subject's attachment to a substitute for female genitalia that protects him from the horror of having to revise his idea that a penis confers potency. While for Freud a fetish is an object adopted to replace only the mother's always absent phallus, it is the structural and theoretical -- not the psycho-sexual and neurotic -- sense of the fetish that characterizes this appraisal of things to which i object. I would like to note, in passing, since it comes up in *A Sense of Things*, that Marx's commodity fetish follows the same structure: the subject confers significance onto an object to compensate for that object's supposedly real emptiness. In Brown's study, among others, a thing is adopted by the psyche to substitute for an idea or for a memory, as, for example, the wooden spool in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* reenacts and transforms the child's memory of the mother's absence.

Brown describes the fetish relation between twentieth century thinkers and things as "the modernist's effort to arrest commodity-fetishism-as-usual [. . .], an effort to interrupt the habit of granting material objects a value and power of their own, divorced from, and failing to disclose the human power and social interaction that brought those objects into being" (8). Central to his claim that, "[t]aken literally, the belief that there are ideas in things amounts to granting them something like the structure of subjectivity" (7-8), is the assumption that things and people are not only essentially different, but also that that difference lies in the thing's foundational lack of interiority. A thing is a thing, in short, because it is not a person.

Brown's objection to the notion that things contain ideas -- that to believe that things contain ideas, or memories, or intention, or relationality, amounts to granting them

something like the structure of subjectivity -- misrepresents the nature of subjectivity. Calling subjectivity something that can be granted, rather than something that emerges via encounters between beings⁷ implicitly encourages a stratification that values certain classes of people and animals over others. Judith Butler argues that one becomes a subject not because one has been granted subjectivity, but because we have been subjected to another's will, gaze, or accusation: "I am not," she writes, "primarily responsible by virtue of my actions, but by virtue of the relation to the other that is established at the level of my primary and irresistible susceptibility, my passivity prior to any possibility of action or choice" (88). Not the *ability* to think or to act, but the possibility of *being acted upon* or *being acted through* conditions the emergence of subjectivity.

Furthermore, Brown's assertion that (discoverable) interiority and subjectivity are functionally equivalent is, i think, false, although the two often coincide. Subjectivity has to do with the position from which an actant encounters and interacts with other actants and the surrounding world.⁸ This position may, of course, include a consideration of one's inner experiences, but it must also comprise one's physical presence -- whether, for

⁷ Cf. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

⁸ For a more detailed account of actant-network theory, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* and Graham Harman's *Prince of Networks*. "Things themselves are actants," summarizes Harman in the opening chapter of *Prince of Networks*, "not signifieds, phenomena or tools for human praxis" (24). Furthermore,

[d]espite his rejection of language as the basis for all philosophy, Latour's focus on the concreteness of actants leads him to a surprisingly Derridean moment. Since actants are always fully deployed in the universe, with no true reality lying in reserve, Latour dismisses any distinction between literal and metaphorical meanings of words [. . .]

The agreement here between Latour and Derrida (a normally unthinkable alliance) stems from their shared impatience with Aristotle's theory of substance. (24)

example, one is male or female, currently abled or otherwise -- and one's historical context, among other factors. Graham Harman, for example, in his studies *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* and *Guerilla Metaphysics*, provides an account of objects as actors, as intentional and relational beings, whose intention and relations are not contingent on human presence or desire: "By contrast [to both the analytic and continental schools of philosophy] object-oriented philosophy holds that the relation of humans to pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills is not different in kind from the interaction of these objects with each other" (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 1). To be clear, i'm not interested in arguing that things are subjects; rather, that, in order to sustain the thought that objects have memories, it doesn't matter that they're not.

The stance of human power over things, reified throughout the Western tradition, leads to the assumption that things have no autonomous interiority. Things are *granted* an inner life -- whether we express that inner life in terms of ideas, as Brown does, or in terms of being, or, as i will argue in the pages to come, in terms of memory -- only when people falsely project it into them. Peter Schwenger, for example, opens *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and the Physical Object* by reading lines from the *Aeneid* that evoke "[t]ears in the nature of things" (1), qualifying his reading of these lines as follows:

Not that I am asserting that such objects shed tears -- for themselves, for us -- or that they feel the kind of emotion that would produce tears, or any kind of emotion. Nevertheless, there is a melancholy associated with physical objects [. . .] The melancholy I am speaking of underlies the moment when "now you see it"; it is generated by the art of perception, perception of the object by the subject. (1-2)

According to Schwenger, then, however *associated* this melancholy is with physical objects, this association only takes place because humans feel something when we are confronted with a thing that we deem meaningful. I would remind you here that melancholy suggests that this feeling humans feel relates to the impossibility of fully possessing the thing (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 312),⁹ and that this implies that there's more to things than Schwenger gives them credit for. Key in Schwenger's explanation is the subject's significant feeling, which confers onto the thing what it fundamentally lacks. This assumption -- that, when we compare them to subjects, objects are always lacking -- echoes Freud's discussion of the exigencies of mourning and the pitfalls of melancholia in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia." Therein he claims that, for mourning to properly occur, all traces of subjectivity must be effaced from that which is absent, mourned: "The testing of reality having shown that the loved object no longer exists, requires forthwith that all the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to the object" (144). To mourn is to withdraw all affect, all anticipation, all desire from the lost object. I draw your attention to the inertness of the object in Freud's essay to emphasize that, in the psychoanalytic model, there is no possibility of subjectivity outside the living

⁹ For Freud, melancholia is caused by an object loss, and this loss is unresolvable due to its unconscious nature: "The obvious thing is for us to somehow relate melancholia to the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness" (312). "In this way," Freud continues a few pages later, describing the aetiology of melancholia,

[t]he result of this was not the normal one of the withdrawal of the libido from this object and its displacement onto a new one [which would resolve the loss] [. . .] The free libido was not, however, displaced on to another object, but instead drawn back into the ego. But it did not find any application there, but served to produce an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. In this way the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, which could now be condemned by a certain agency as an object, as the abandoned object. (316)

human.¹⁰ The absent, the dead, the animal, the thing, all are abandoned to the living's gaze, a gaze that is either cannibalistic, as it is in a successful work of mourning, or that projects the subject's identification endlessly onto the other, as in the case where mourning can never be complete.

And the thing? Has it, then, disappeared?

This -- that things are disappeared -- is precisely Brown's point in "Thing Theory." A thing, in this sense, is for Brown much like a thing is for Lacan,¹¹ something both real and unreal: "[T]he Thing is and it isn't. It exists," he writes in *A Sense of Things*, "in no phenomenal form" (141). That things are not observable does not, however, negate their importance to modernity: "Indeed, Theodor Adorno[. . .] understood the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact" (145). Most simply put, Brown's point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* [things] (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture -- above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop

¹⁰ Indeed, one of the criticisms most frequently leveled at actor-network theorists contests their foundational assumption that it is not incompatible to extend the possibility of agency to the nonhuman.

¹¹ In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan describes the Thing -- das Ding -- thusly: The *Thing* is *le mot* and it is meant to convey "that which has no response" (55). Indeed, the Thing is ephemeral unless and until it "becomes word" (55). It marks an absence, *objet a*, which comes to designate the phallus. This interpretation of the Thing owes much to Freud's "Fetishism."

working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production, and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is a story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (140)

I do not hold with the way in which Brown separates objects and things. Doing so repeats the assumption that some (things) are worth our time and study and other (objects) are not. Here, by arguing that we look to objects to tell us something about ourselves and we look to things to tell us something about alterity, Brown reifies the very thinking that he critiques in the opening to *A Sense of Things*. What he describes is no thing about things, but a thing about ourselves, a profound and disappointing narcissism. If we believe that things can tell us something about ourselves, why then can we not ask what they say about themselves?

The efforts to which Brown, Schwenger, and others, go to in interpreting the thing as a projection of our desires and values results in the occlusion of the very thing they claim to be writing about. In Jean Baudrillard's "Subjective Discourse or the Non-Functional System of Objects," he examines antiques as a category that answers to ethical and metaphysical -- rather than purely capitalistic and functional -- demands. He calls these objects marginal not because they are peripheral to the model of pragmatic capitalism in which they circulate, but because they "appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as

witness, memory, nostalgia, or escapism" (41). Objects -- and the modern world -- are, in his analysis, a system of meaning that exceeds the semiotic, and the antique functions within this system as the signifier of time (41). As such, "[t]he antique object [. . .] presents itself as a myth of origins" (42):

Man never comes so close to being the master of a secret seraglio as when he is surrounded by his objects. Human relationships, home of uniqueness and conflict, never permit any such fusion of absolute singularity with infinite seriality -- which is why they are a continual source of anxiety. By contrast, the sphere of objects, consisting of successive and homologous terms, reassures. True such reassurance is founded on an illusion, a trick, a process of abstraction and regression, but no matter. In the words of Maurice Rheims: "For man, the object is a sort of insentient dog which accepts his blandishments and returns them after its own fashion, or rather which returns them like a mirror faithful not to real images but to images that are desired." (50)

If humans encounter objects as though they were insentient dogs, if we encounter them only insofar as they reflect what we think, and insofar as they reflect nothing in excess of what we think, if objects disappear when we try to interpret them, is it even possible to write a philosophy of objects that, to cite Benjamin's description of surrealism in "Dream Kitsch: A Gloss on Surrealism," is on track of things?

To be on track of things is to incline ourselves toward a certain relation with objects. Ahmed, in the concluding chapter of *Queer Phenomenology*, calls for critics to exploit their moments of disorientation in the face of objects. These moments, she

reminds us, proliferate throughout phenomenology, incline us, from the start, queerly toward objects in the world and to the world itself (160-61). Reading Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* with her attention on the disorientation of "bodies becoming objects, but also the disorientation of how objects are gathered to create a ground, or to clear a space on the ground" (160), Ahmed asserts that "objects become alive not by being endowed with qualities they do not have but through a contact with them as things that have been arranged in specific ways" (164). The specific ways in which objects touch -- when they ought not be able to do so, as the narrator of *Nausea* observes, since they are not alive -- queers them, and it also disorients and disgusts the narrator witnessing this interaction:

This way of coming into contact with objects involves disorientation: the touch of the thing that transmits some thing [. . .] What the story implies is that orientation is achieved through the loss of such physical proximity: things are kept in their place, which might be near me, but it is a nearness that does not threaten to get inside me, or spill what is inside out. (Ahmed 165)

For Benjamin, as it is in Ahmed's interpretation of Sartre, disorientation is both the defining characteristic of his relation to the world around him and a key intellectual strategy for encountering that world. In the opening vignette to his autobiographical essay "A Berlin Chronicle," he traces the origin of his "impotence before the city" to his childhood (596) -- and, in particular, to his terrible sense of direction, an ineptitude he claims to have refused to see because his mother continually thrust "it under [his] nose" (596). However much Benjamin accounts for his sense of direction as a practical ineptitude, orientation and movement through the city feature prominently in this and

other essays. His essay insists on the importance of "setting out the sphere of life -- *bios* - graphically, on a map" (596, original emphasis). I draw your attention, momentarily, to the way Benjamin generalizes life. Even though what is at issue in this essay is a series of autobiographical sketches, ostensibly about the way Benjamin relates to the city, Benjamin insists on rhetorically twinning his life to the world around him, which indicates a belief that his being is inextricable from the beings of objects and places that surround him.

By deliberately choosing a site of disorientation as the background for his biography, Benjamin insists that disorientation influences his reflections on the past and the future, on himself and on the world. Disorientation is, as Benjamin names it, the fourth -- and key -- guide to Berlin, and, indeed, to the other cities that occupy him:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance -- nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city -- as one loses oneself in a forest -- this calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, and bars must speak to the wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books [. . . .] The city as it disclosed itself to me in the footsteps of a hermetic tradition that I can trace back at least as far as Rilke and whose guardian at the time was Franz Hessel, was a maze not only of paths but also of tunnels. I cannot

think of the underworld of the Métro and the North-South line opening their hundreds of shafts all over the city, without recalling my endless *flâneries*. (598)

The disorientation Benjamin invokes in this passage exceeds the disorientation of merely not finding one's way; rather, the disorientation that Benjamin finds so productive involves losing not his way but *himself*.¹² Furthermore, he mythologizes the way in which he loses himself not only by referencing the hermetic tradition dating back to Rilke, but by alluding, here and elsewhere,¹³ to the story of Theseus and Ariadne: "Nor is it to be denied that I penetrated the Minotaur's chamber -- the only difference being that *this* mythological monster had three heads: those of the occupants of the small brothel on the rue de la Harpe, in which, summoning my last reserves of strength (and not entirely without Ariadne's thread), I set my foot" (598).

¹² I would like to note here a curious passage, also from "A Berlin Chronicle," a passage I find curious because, in it, Benjamin critiques the nature of subjective writing, even as he writes autobiographically:

If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years' observance of one little rule: never use the word "I" except in letters [. . .] Now this has had a curious consequence that is intimately connected to these notes. For when one day it was suggested that I should write, from day to day in a loosely subjective form, for a newspaper, a series of glosses on everything that seemed noteworthy in Berlin -- and when I agreed -- it became suddenly clear that this subject, accustomed for years to waiting in the wings, would not so easily be summoned to the limelight. But far from protesting, it relied on a ruse -- so successfully that I believed a retrospective glance at what Berlin had come to mean to me over the years would be an appropriate "preface" to such glosses. If the preface has now far exceeded the space originally allotted to such glosses, this is not only the mysterious work of remembrance -- which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been -- but also, at the same time, the precaution of the subject represented by the "I," which is entitled not to be sold cheap. (603)

¹³ Cf. Benjamin's description of the labyrinth in the Tiergarten (595-96).

Underlying everything i've written until now, and everything that will follow is the question of why objects are so significant. One answer is, as Schwenger claims and as Baudrillard demonstrates, that things are significant because they matter to us, the subjects who encounter them. This is, of course, true of some objects, which matter to both our material well-beings and our senses of ourselves. However, it is impossible for me to conceive of a universe where we are the limit of objects' matterings. Another set of answers, the one i think has been insufficiently explored, might be found if we ask of things not why they are important to us, but what is important to them. This is not a question that comes easily -- not least of which because of objects' enduring silences. To even ask such a question, one must believe that things have a sense of importance and of their own interests, and to believe this runs counter to the Western intellectual tradition.

My objection to the line of thought that reduces things to their usefulness for people and for what they mean to people is inspired by, and owes a tremendous debt to, among other influences, Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy. Object-oriented philosophy, sometimes called object-oriented ontology, takes objects to be autonomous beings, whose interests do not necessarily correspond to human interests. In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman claims that "[o]bject-oriented philosophy has a single basic tenet: the withdrawal of objects from all perceptual and causal relations" (20). According to Harman, this tenet confers an advantage on object-oriented philosophy over both the analytic and continental schools of philosophy:

The on-going dispute between the traditions [. . .] misses a prejudice shared by both: their primary interest lies not in objects, but in human *access* to them. The so-called linguistic turn is still the dominant model of

the philosophy of access, but there are plenty of others -- phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, philosophy of mind, pragmatism. None of these philosophical schools tells us much of anything about objects themselves; indeed, they pride themselves on avoiding all naive contact with non-human entities. By contrast, object-oriented philosophy holds that the relation of humans to pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills is no different in kind from the interaction of these objects with each other. (1)

I read these statements of Harman's as meaning two, related things. First, in an object-oriented philosophy, the meaning and existence of objects cannot be limited to the manner in which humans perceive them; and, second, objects are not significant only because humans observe them or make them. I might broaden this second point to suggest that beingness -- or significance -- is not conferred on objects, rather, it is inherent to them.

Harman is not alone in decrying the stultifying effects that philosophies of access have had on the advancement -- or lack thereof -- of the discipline. In the introduction to *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, he, along with Bryant and Nick Srnicek, argue that "the price to be paid for securing" the Copernican revolution's necessary and universal basis for all knowledge rooted in observation and experience "is the renunciation of any knowledge beyond how things appear to us" (4). As I noted in the Introduction, this critique of the limits of philosophies of access is compelling, at the same time as it leaves me wondering how, then, to formulate an answer.

Although the key points of object-oriented philosophy underlie my dissertation, I find Harman's "bluntly metaphysical" approach to be counter-intuitive (1). The very

foundations of metaphysics privileges mind over body, spirit over matter, human over animal and object. Heidegger makes this metaphysical hierarchy explicit in *The Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics*: "The main points of our [comparative examination of humans, animals, and objects] are encapsulated in three theses: [1.] The stone is worldless; [2.] The animal is poor in world; [3.] Man is world forming" (184). Heidegger claims that these theses do not entail a hierarchical assessment because he is unconvinced that "poverty is necessarily and intrinsically of lesser significance with respect to richness" (194). This argument, which focuses on the term "poor" and its purported relation to richness, deflects the substance of the critique of metaphysical hierarchies -- that, in this case, the hierarchy Heidegger establishes privileges the human over the animal and the object in what concerns their relations to world -- onto semantics. In his theses, the term rich, or richness, does not appear; rather, worldlessness, poorness in world, and world-forming are at issue. Indeed, by opposing poorness in world and worldlessness to world-forming, Heidegger places world-forming man into an entirely different (active) realm than he does the passive animal and stone. In so doing, he falsely marginalizes the animal's and the stone's relationships to the world by valuing, to the exclusion of all other possibilities, man's domination over the world. If it is the case that an object-oriented philosophy must take seriously objects' own relations to each other and to the world, this aim would seem to be in direct contradiction to the theses cited above.

In the closing pages to *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman acknowledges the difficulties with Heidegger's approach to things. "Heidegger," he writes, "makes an important mistake by locating one of his pivotal ontological features (the as-structure) in certain kinds of objects at the expense of others" (243). He proceeds to claim that,

This is not only a typical case of human arrogance in philosophy, but also has an air of voodoo or fetish about it -- like some tribal myth in which the world was a lifeless soil until sprinkled with talking magic beans. We will never overcome this voodoo ontology by joining forces with the panpsychists and demanding that the special powers of human consciousness also be divvied up among dust, cactus, water, and melons. Instead, we overcome it only by denying that the special features of human consciousness are built into the heart of ontology at all. (243)

As Harman uses the term object-oriented philosophy to designate the autonomy of objects from humans and from each other, Benjamin designates the autonomy of artworks from humans in the "highly unorthodox" use of the theory of natural history (Hanssen 3). For Benjamin, natural history is, first, "a process of transience and [. . .] a logic of decay that radically undermined Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment conceptions of human history, anchored in categories of human freedom and historical teleology" (3). Beatrice Hanssen argues that this interpretation is key to understanding Benjamin's philosophy of history, an "ethico-theological call for another kind of history, one no longer purely anthropocentric in nature or anchored only in the concerns of human subjects" (1).

Benjamin expresses the separation between the interests of artworks and the interests of the humans encountering them most concisely in "The Task of the Translator." Although the bulk of this essay comprises a theory of language and translation, its opening paragraphs consider the relation of the work of art to the humans who encounter it, assessing that relationship as follows:

For what does a literary work "say"? What does it communicate? It "tells" very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not a statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information -- hence, something inessential [to the work of literature].
(253)

Thus, it is not the primary *raison d'être* of the work of literature to transmit information to its readers. Indeed, any information gleaned by readers is incidental to the artwork's primary function. The essential characteristic of a literary work is its translatability, which, Benjamin is clear to articulate, is unrelated to whether or not the work is, in fact, translated:

It should be pointed out that certain correlative concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their foremost significance, if they are referred exclusively to man. One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment is required to be unforgotten, that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God's remembrance. Analogously, the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them. (254)

Hanssen reads this to say that "Benjamin's essay [. . .] allocate[s] a certain precedence to the history of the work, showing how the tradition of translation, or history as translation, transcends human history" (36). Benjamin, however, troubles this transcendence by

announcing it as a task, one connected to messianic possibility:¹⁴ "Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to one another" (255). This relationship between languages is fundamentally messianic, and the act of translation, itself, is apocalyptic:

[A]ll suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language [. . .] In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux -- until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning. For a long time it remains hidden in the languages. If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language[.] (257)

Transcendence, therefore, yes, but a transcendence always embroiled in the contingencies of human history, art, and, as Hanssen argues throughout *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*, other objects. This messianic transcendence for which Benjamin calls cannot fully be appropriated by human interests.

¹⁴ In Chapter 5, I consider in more detail the connection of this messianic imperative in the way language functions, so characteristic of certain aspects of Benjamin's thought, to time, memory, and the materialism of history.

While i have, heretofore, been preoccupied with the separation of objects' interests from human interests in general, what follows is the result of a more narrow and particular concern with the way in which a rhetorical connection is made between objects and (human) memory. While things and memory are paired from the earliest writings on memory, this conjunction is mostly considered self-evident.¹⁵ Take, for example, Freud's "Note Upon a Mystic Writing Pad," wherein he speculates that the brain retains traces of memories in the way that the mystic writing pad's waxy substratum retains traces of notes that have been erased. I intend to return in more detail to the mystic writing pad essay in Chapter 2; however, for now, i would draw your attention to wax, which throughout the Western tradition connects memory to writing and to other sorts of encoding. David Farrell Krell notes, in *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing*, that wax is "perhaps the original icon or image of memory in our tradition -- if it is proper to speak of an image as an original: memory is a *waxen surface* which, with greater or lesser resilience and elasticity, suffers the imprinting action of sensuous apprehending, 'perception,' and preserves traces of that action in the mind" (14).

Indeed, when it is considered, the connection between objects and memory is phrased paradoxically: objects are, in this relation, at once incidental and of utmost significance. Robert Bevan, in *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, exemplifies this way of thinking about the relation of things to memory. Things -- although Bevan is particularly concerned with buildings of cultural significance, religious institutions, and monuments, his argument is broadly representative of contemporary arguments about memory -- are thought to serve as mnemonic devices for people,

¹⁵ Cf. David Farrell Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing: On the Verge* and Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

remaining only indirectly connected to the memories they are said to inspire. Even so, the destruction of these things is said to have the direst of consequences for the memories of those whose surroundings are destroyed:¹⁶ "It is architecture's very impression of fixity," writes Bevan, "that makes its manipulation such a powerful tool: selective retention and destruction can reconfigure the historical record and the façade of fixed meanings brought to architecture can be shifted [. . . .] To lose all that is familiar -- the destruction of one's environment -- can mean a disorienting exile from the memories they have inspired" (npg). We think of architecture as something unchanging, and, therefore, as a reliable record of the past, claims Bevan, and this record of the past serves as the foundation for a sense of connectedness and collective identity.

At this point, given that i have insisted on the memorial powers of objects, i should be more sympathetic to Bevan's argument, to his insistence on the connection between cultural memory and monuments, except he sidesteps the radical possibilities of this line of thought, that our memories are not our own, and reverts to the conventional insistence that objects' memories are not their own. In spite of their influence on people's memories and the limits they purportedly place on people's remembrances, the objects in

¹⁶ While i concede that the destruction of important cultural monuments might serve to publicly delegitimize certain traditions, and, indeed, that the destruction of culturally significant artifacts is, itself, a terrible thing, this is not the same thing as causing the tradition, event, or experience represented by those artifacts to be forgotten. By conflating the two -- illegitimacy and forgottenness -- Bevan doesn't acknowledge the many cultures that have perpetuated themselves and their histories absent monuments and other public displays. Cf. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* for an alternate account of cultural propagation. Furthermore, it seems that Bevan doesn't take into account other sorts of destruction -- the near absence of ancient writings, for example, by some of the most famous writers in the Greek and Roman periods, which, for all their absence, have not been forgotten -- caused by, for example, material limitations, or, less benignly, active erasure and suppression. Cf. Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World became Modern*.

question, according to Bevan, cannot, themselves, have direct access to memories: "Memories," he writes, "clearly remain in people's heads" (npg) -- a claim that is not so clear, particularly given his previous insistence that the destruction of objects destroys memories. Furthermore, this assumption echoes the prevailing judgment about the relation of things, themselves, to people.¹⁷ The structural similarity in the way Bevan writes about memory and the way Brown writes about ideas -- that they belong exclusively to humans, that their substance is considered ephemeral -- indicates a particular limitation in Western thought, which assumes an absolute non-coincidence between the human -- endowed with subjectivity, language, and memory -- and the non-human. Of Bevan, I would ask how objects can be so significant to memory that their destruction precipitates cultural amnesia and yet still not, themselves, be endowed with memory. Conversely, if it is so clear, so obvious, that memories remain in people's heads, why are things so important?

These questions -- and, indeed, the frequent rhetorical unification of objects and memory -- assume that memory and remembrance need not be identified with one another. The object of memory is, as Aristotle notes in "De Memoria et Reminiscentia," "the past," while remembrance is predicated on presence (28): "Remembrance instigates a peculiar kind of presence," writes Krell. "It 'has' an object of perception or knowledge without activating perception or knowledge as such, and without confusing past and present. For while remembering, a man tells himself that he is now present to something that was earlier" (15). Memory is embedded in the past, and remembrance takes its place in the present. Remembrance enacts memory, performs its effects; however,

¹⁷ Cf. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 7-8; and Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 1-2.

remembrance does not preserve this past presence; rather, it reinvents it. In

Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology, F.C. Bartlett writes the following:

Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless, and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude toward a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language form. It is thus hardly ever really exact, even in the most rudimentary cases of rote recapitulation, and it is not at all important that it should be so. The attitude is literally an effect of the organism's capacity to turn round upon its own 'schemata', and is directly a function of consciousness. (213-14)

Memory and remembrance are not identical, and, while remembrance relies, at least rhetorically, on memory in order to take place, memory has no such dependence on being performed, remembered.

As the ground from which to begin to consider this thought, that the rhetorical intersection between objects and memory is more than coincidentally significant, I turn to Benjamin's *oeuvre*. Benjamin, throughout his writing life, could never quite let go of things. Benjamin was perpetually goaded by memory and its possibilities, which remained tantalizingly elusive. In the chapter "Allegory and Trauerspiel" in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin suggests that things and memory are directly connected:

It is not only the loss of limbs, not only in the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and purification that everything corpse-like falls away from the body piece by piece. It is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on a corpse. There is a physis, in the memory itself, a *memento mori*. (218)

Nails and hair, treated by the live body as though they were dead, bear witness, in their continued growth, to the fact that the corpse in question once lived.¹⁸ The grammatical parallelism Benjamin imposes between physis -- which is usually translated as nature, but which also signifies, as it does in Aristotle's *Physics*, an opposition to the metaphysical -- and memory implies that there is at least one dimension to memory that is manifest physically. Furthermore, the tradition of *memento mori* invoked by Benjamin serves not only as a reminder of one's mortality, but it also embodies and contains the very mortality it immortalizes.

The notion of memory that crops up throughout Benjamin's *oeuvre*, but that slides continually into forgetting or into the faint hope of messianism or that seems otherwise hard to pin down, is contingent on the objects and spaces that similarly populate his writing. Benjamin's account of his perambulations throughout Berlin enact a simultaneous discovery of the city, its memories, and Benjamin's own past. For example, Benjamin's meditation on the Meeting House and on Fritz Heinle implies that these "most important memories of [his] life" belong both to himself and to the city (604). In this

¹⁸ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, a book interesting in this context particularly because of the discussion therein of the possibilities of memory and the role of the witness on the edge of life and death, that is, of the possibility for that which does not speak to bear witness.

section, Benjamin must approach the memory of Heinle topographically: "I should never have thought that I would seek him through this topographic route," he writes (604):

But if I call to mind the first trial run I made in this direction, more than ten years ago now, the earlier and more modest essay comes off better in comparison. It was in Heidelberg, during work that I had undoubtedly undertaken so as not to forget myself, that I tried to summon up, in a mediation on the nature of the lyric, the figure of my friend, Fritz Heinle, around whom all the happenings in the Meeting House arrange themselves and with whom they vanish. Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not "in real life" but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way. (604)

Leaving aside that, while Benjamin could no longer encounter Heinle "in real life," the two did, in fact know one another when Heinle was still alive; in fact, Benjamin was one of the first to come upon the scene of Heinle's suicide. Perhaps, like his father who, when he informs the young Walter of his cousin's death, *forgets* to name the disease from which he suffers,¹⁹ Benjamin has forgotten that the story of Heinle's death is the real life story of a friendship interrupted by Heinle's suicide. Indeed, the only place in "A Berlin Chronicle" where suicide is mentioned in relation to Heinle occurs in an editorial note that reads, "Friedrich (Fritz) Heinle, German poet and friend of Benjamin's, committed suicide on August 8, 1914" (635, n.11).

Thus, Benjamin approaches the memory of Heinle topographically, in part because of his suicide, which so confounds Benjamin that he cannot bring himself to

¹⁹ Cf. "A Berlin Chronicle," 634-35; and *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 85-86.

articulate it, but also because he considers "the outward space the dead man inhabited" to be the most legitimate way to remember him (604). This way of memorializing Heinle, which indelibly links him to the topography of the particular district in Berlin that he inhabited can, in part, be accounted for by the ongoing presence of this outward space as opposed to the absence of Heinle, himself. In addition, that Benjamin sees greater legitimacy in encountering his dead friend via outward space implies that, for Benjamin, physical presence and memory are essentially joined. By saying this, I do not mean that the physical space Benjamin moves through triggers his memory -- although it does, at times -- nor even that Benjamin's memory is manifest in the physical objects that surround him -- though that observation holds true at times as well. In addition to these, Benjamin implies, in "A Berlin Chronicle" and elsewhere, that the space in which he remembers is, itself, layered with its own memory.

At stake in Benjamin's repeated turns to memory, as Noah Isenberg argues in "Culture in Ruins: Walter Benjamin's Memories," is a notion of Jewishness, which permeates his writing.²⁰ For example, Isenberg cites one of Benjamin's journal entries on the subject of the Haggadah, interpreting it as follows:

In Benjamin's brief discussion of the Jewish holiday [Passover] and its rituals, we discern subtle traces of his autobiographical project (e.g., memory, hope, redemption) transmitted through the reading of the Haggadah. According to the Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Passover is "preeminently the great historical festival of the Jewish people,

²⁰ The influence of Jewishness on Benjamin's thought is largely a cultural product, and it appears independently of Benjamin's religious beliefs, which changed throughout his life. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*; and *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*.

and the Haggadah is its book of *remembrance* and *redemption*. Here the memory of the nation is annually reviewed and replenished, and the collective hope sustained." (110)

This is not to say that Benjamin did not express his discomfort with the religious nature of, in this instance, the celebration of Passover; however, rather than negating the influence of Judaism on Benjamin's *oeuvre*, Isenberg contends that this religious ambivalence underlies Benjamin's "renewed explorations of the historiographic potential of memory for the project of modernity" (111).

Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, notes that an archive anticipates the future, although it is a repository for the physical manifestations of the past. As he begins his reading of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's "Monologue with Freud," Derrida claims that "[t]he question of archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past [. . .] It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and a responsibility for tomorrow" (36). Like Benjamin's storyteller, who derives his authority from death ("The Storyteller" 94), and like the "*weak* messianic power" Benjamin invokes in the second thesis of "On the Concept of History" (390), Derrida's archive and artifact are outgrowths of the body's physicality. At stake in *Archive Fever* is a notion of Jewishness, the kind of Jewishness of which the body becomes the archive:

In the bottomless thickness of this inscription *en abyme*, in the instance of the archio-nomological event, under the new skin of a book that consigns the new skin, wounded and blessed of a newborn, there resonated already the words intended for the newborn of a God speaking to him, in him. (38)

In this way, the Jewish male body becomes the archive of the future. Circumcised, this body contains and embodies the document of God's covenant with the Jewish people.

The sign of circumcision allows its bearer a privileged access to another archive. According to Derrida, God speaks to the newborn boy, speaks in him "even before he could speak, giving him to understand, to hear, in truth to read or to decipher, 'Go read my Book I have written'" (38). Echoing this injunction is an inscription made by Freud's father inside the cover of a Bible found in the archive at "Freud's House." In this inscription, Freud's father invokes a promise that God's book contains "wellsprings of understanding" which will be opened to its reader. The future reader is, of course, Freud, with whose father the book has been stored, and whose father has bequeathed it to him: "I have presented it to you as *a memorial and as a reminder* [. . .] of love from your father, who loves you with everlasting love" (23, original emphasis).

This book, this memorial, houses the promise of a future that exceeds the possibility of both Freuds' early lives. Furthermore, Jakob Freud's invocation of a father's everlasting love calls to mind not only family lineage, this *Sigmund* genetically related to the previous generations of Freuds, but also the lineage of the Jewish race, signified by the circumcised body and signifying the promise of a future salvation:

Arch-archive, the book was 'stored' *with* the arch-patriarch of psychoanalysis. It was stored there in the Ark of the Covenant. *Arca*, this time in Latin, is the chest, the 'ark of acacia wood,' which contains the stone Tablets; but *arca* is also the cupboard, the coffin, the prison cell, or the cistern, the reservoir. (23)

Circumcision, with its dual nature of promise and constraint, emblemizes Derrida's notion of the archive. If the *arca* signifies the Ark of the Covenant, the promise to the Jewish people, it equally signifies their prison,²¹ their impossible hope for a messiah to come, which Benjamin links to materialist history in "On the Concept of History."

In that essay, Benjamin articulates a temporal paradox associated with memory: Memory looks to the past and anticipates the future. Shoshana Felman argues that Benjamin's theses advance a "theory of history as trauma -- and as a correlative theory of conversion of trauma to insight" (213). Benjamin's history, she says, appeals to that which does not exist in the historical record (213). To remember historically does not, for Benjamin, as Otto Rank suggests, "mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'" (391). Rather, to remember historically means "appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (391).²² Although it is in ruins, although it can only be articulated and apprehended in a moment of danger (391), the past also "carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption" (389). The past always refers to its future. The possibility of redemption, with which each person has been marked, extends simultaneously into the past and the future:

[T]he idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to

²¹ A circumcised body, while it is the visible sign of God's promise, of being divinely chosen, is also the sign that historically allowed those who would persecute the Jews to distinguish them, undeniable evidence of alterity.

²² In an earlier version of this essay, published under the title "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin phrases this principle more compellingly. Therein, he writes, "[T]he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and never seen again" (255).

redemption [. . .] [T]here is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this. (389-90)

This past and this future are not merely indexed abstractly in the flow of thoughts and time, but they are indexed on the body -- the living and the dead -- and on artifacts -- whole or in ruins.

Chapter 2:

The Copernican Revolution I

It is a waste of effort for us to try to summon [our past], all the exertions of our intelligence are useless. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect.

~ Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann's*

1.

Benjamin, throughout his writing life, was continually haunted by memory, a memory that was not identical with remembrance, nor even, necessarily, with the past. This memory, preoccupying as it does Benjamin's work, is integrally linked to the objects that populate his writing, to the end that memory presences atmospherically, diffused through objects and people. In this chapter, I will read this observation about Benjamin's writing through the intellectual history of memory. I will begin with what Hanssen calls Benjamin's idiosyncratic use of the term natural history, of which she claims the following: "Benjamin's positive valuation of natural history was meant to overcome the limitations of historical hermeneutics, whose category of 'meaning' (*Sinn*) remained grounded in the understanding of a human subject" (3). This relates to memory in general, and the possibilities of non-human memory in particular, in Hanssen's *Walter Benjamin's Other History* and beyond, insofar as it opens the discussion of history -- traditionally a category that originates in the human subject -- to include a "distinct ethico-theological call for another form of history, one no longer purely ruled by the concerns and categories of human agency" (26). That is, by recognizing history's origins outside the human we recognize that memory, too, may find its origin -- and its afterlife -

- outside the human. Memory, here, in addition to everything else we mean when we invoke it, names a particular relation to time, a past that persists into the present.

The history of memory, which is to say the history of the way we humans have thought about memory, centers around the following questions: What is memory? Where (and how) is memory stored? What does memory mean? And how is it acquired? To give even the briefest of histories of these discussions would fill volumes. Rather, i begin with the following observation: however long philosophers have been interested in memory, however subtle their interpretations, memory has, since Aristotle, and throughout the metaphysical tradition, been thought of as a uniquely human faculty. Whatever it is and whatever it means, however it is acquired and stored, memory is something humans have, something that distinguishes humans from all other orders of being. Jennifer Richards argues that, from antiquity to modernity, two elements are consistent in theories of memory. First, memory is "an active process which is defined by the two activities of collection and recollection, of storing and retrieval" (20); second, collection and recollection "constitute the basis of knowing and understanding" (21). Underlying these two commonalities is the presumption of humanity. That is, that the agency required for the active process of collection and recollection and the interpretive faculties required to create knowledge and understanding out of these collections are presumed to be human in nature.

In the previous chapter, "On Track of Things," I indicated that the rhetorical inclination toward objects in philosophy occludes the objects themselves and appropriates them to human purposes. Furthermore, i have heretofore claimed, following Harman, Bogost, and others, that not only is it possible -- though challenging -- to read the objects

of philosophy without reducing them to metaphors for human ideas, but that to do so enriches rather than impoverishes the philosophical discussion in question. Similarly, the occlusion of objects in discussions of memory right up until the moment of their destruction, at which point conventional wisdom states that out of sight becomes out of mind, and the absence of physical evidence leads to the destruction of memory. I argued previously -- and will continue to argue -- against this conventional wisdom, not because i think that we do not forget things or because i think that the absence of evidence does not bolster our forgetting, but because i insist on the difference between supporting forgetfulness and causing it.

In *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*, Hanssen considers the chapter "Temporality and Historicity" from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Hanssen's critique of Heidegger follows Adorno's argument in the 1932 lecture "The Idea of Natural History," which he presented to the Kant Society at Frankfurt.²³ Of the Adorno lecture, she writes that his argument established the Frankfurt School's project of "overcoming the idealistic legacy that burdened new ontology, thus wresting a genuine turn in the philosophy of history" (14). Adorno established this project, in contrast to Heidegger's, by way of Lukàcs's *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and he does so by demonstrating that in these works "nature and history constituted a concrete unity" (14):

[T]he *Trauerspiel* study, [Adorno] argued, rejected such suprahistorical, transcendent meaning in favor of an analysis that lingered on transience and a logic of decay. Instead of resurrecting the skeleton of history,

²³ This lecture later formed the basis for the chapter "World Spirit and Natural History" in *Negative Dialectics*.

Benjamin's theory of allegory unearthed the debris of human history [. . .] Under Benjamin's critical gaze, allegory was transformed into the figure of natural history, which now exposed the ur-history of signification (*Urgeschichte des Bedeutens*) -- that is, the incontrovertible historicity that defines all human acts of signification. Henceforth, Adorno emphasized, allegory was to be understood as a constellation that comprised the ideas of nature, history, signification, and transience -- a constellation that, without fusing these terms, preserved their facticity and uniqueness. (15)

Susan Buck-Morss is less circumspect in characterizing Adorno's objection to Heidegger -- and, thus, his valuation of Benjamin. For Buck-Morss, nature and history form a dialectical unity, which is best encompassed by the way in which, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin characterizes the way constellation as an intellectual concept functions in relation to what Hanssen has called Benjamin's idiosyncratic use of the term natural history: "Arguing against the philosophical synthesis of nature and history in Heidegger's premise that 'historicity' (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is the 'nature' of Being, Adorno employed nature and history as dialectically opposed concepts, each of which provided a criticism of the other, and of the reality each was supposed to identify" (Buck-Morss 59).

Hanssen, following Adorno's critique, focuses particularly on the way Heidegger uses the term "world-historical," prioritizing its links to *Dasein* in order to devalue the study of natural history. She writes,

Of the inauthentic conceptions of history that needed to be repudiated, Heidegger noted, one in particular proved pernicious -- namely, the

erroneous reduction of history to the past. This conception of the past explained why, particularly in the nineteenth century, historiography (*Historie*) had been reduced to mere historicism -- in other words, to the antiquarian collecting of rests, remainders, remnants, or so-called historical materials so commonly put on display (*vorhanden*) in museums. (19-20)

The question of time and its relation to history, as Heidegger characterizes it -- that history is irreducible to the past -- provides a point of contact to Benjamin's notion of temporality as it relates to history:²⁴ "For a genuine historiography," Dimitris Vardoulakis claims, "Benjamin insists that time cannot be conceived as an accumulation of constitutive moments" (129). And, just as the notion of linear time as identical to history must be exploded, so too must the notion of narrative structure and its relation to history. A materialist history -- if we are to understand the term as Benjamin does, as "a transformative critique, a writing in which the material itself unfolds to a future happiness"²⁵ (Vardoulakis 119) -- cannot adhere to the traditional structure of introduction, rising action, climax, dénouement, conclusion. Benjamin writes, "In a materialist investigation, the epic moment will always be blown apart in the process of construction" ("On the Concept of History" 406). This epic moment is revisited by Benjamin in relation to both history and memory as a way to bring the connection between literary form and the style of time in materialist history to the foreground.

²⁴ I take up this question in greater detail, particularly as it pertains to materialist history, in Chapter 5.

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the notion of future happiness as it pertains to Benjamin's theory of history, see Werner Hamacher's "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time;" see also, Noah Isenberg, "Culture in Ruins: Walter Benjamin's Memories."

A second point of contact between Benjamin and Heidegger that Hanssen highlights follows on Heidegger's attempt to devalue natural history: *Dasein* encompasses even the earth under the category of world-historical. Hanssen writes,

By contrast, equipment (*zuhandenes Zeug*), including cultural artifacts on display in museums, proved historical only in a secondary sense -- that is, only insofar as it participated in the world of *Dasein*. As such, he added, these objects could be called world-historical (*Welt-geschichtlich*).

Crucial to this analysis was that nature too -- in its modality of "environing nature" (*Umweltnatur*) and as "the very soil of history" -- was qualified as world-historical, illustrating that, ultimately, it could be traced back to the world of *Dasein*. (20)

This phrase, *the very soil of history*, which Hanssen quotes from *Being and Time*, interests me because of its obvious relation to a fragment Benjamin wrote in 1932. In "Excavation and Memory," Benjamin observes that "memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium" for doing so (576). He then uses archeology as a metaphor to illuminate this claim. Memory, he writes, "is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging"²⁶ (576). To say that memory is the medium of that which is experienced contradicts the phenomenology of memory, which posits that memory is a thing -- a thought or an impression of an experience -- one has in one's mind. If we were to phrase Benjamin's

²⁶ In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin employs a metaphor similar in structure and in content to the one he employs above. Speaking of allegory and ruins, he writes: "Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things" (354). Allegory is the artifact of thought, evidence of passing time.

analogy in similarly phenomenological terms, the mind would be the medium of memory -- mind, the dirt, memory, the ruined city it surrounds.

To take this thought further, for Benjamin, memory, rather than being identified with history, forms the connection between the subject and history, the aura that surrounds history, transforming it as the earth heaped on the remains of ancient cities transforms them. These cities may not become themselves in earth, but earth is not merely passive in its relation to the city in ruins. The earth bears the city. The earth infiltrates its cracks and crevices, fills the squares and streets. The earth erodes the exposed surfaces, wears some corners away, protects others from wear. So too memory, in all its various modes: nostalgia, for example, preserves the desired aspects of the past while it wears away the harsher aspects of experience.

The focus for Benjamin is not what the digging man unearths: "[F]or authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them" (576). Here, in a slip of the tongue or pen, Benjamin reverses the terms of the analogy: In this moment, rather than being the medium through which the subject encounters experience, memory has become something graspable, something that can be separated from the archeological dig, distilled from the earth. Still the content of the memory seems less important than the strata that surrounds it, which allows the subject to date and locate the experience.

In addition to saying something novel about the nature of memory, this fragment by Benjamin also makes a statement about the nature of experience: Experience, once had, becomes unattainable, accessible only through a medium. And yet, the medium -- this medium, memory -- is more important to Benjamin than that which it encrypts,

perhaps because experience yields only itself, while "[e]pic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archeological report [. . .] gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through" (576).

Given that a later variation of "Excavation and Memory" features mid-way through "A Berlin Chronicle," it seems surprising that the archeological nature of memory is primarily implicit in the later essay. Nonetheless, while archeology is merely one of many metaphors deployed in "A Berlin Chronicle," the way such a method is performed in the last quarter of the text is particularly reminiscent of Benjamin's earlier injunction that, when one is searching for a memory, one must, first, re-examine the same ground, and, second, that one must note the ground itself.

First, I'll quote the section in question²⁷ from "A Berlin Chronicle," with the intention of noting the differences which might clarify the reversal of terms, where

²⁷ The earlier fragment, "Excavation and Memory," reads as follows:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument of the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the "matter itself" is no more the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. That is to say, they yield those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights -- like torsos in a collector's gallery. It is undoubtedly useful to plan excavations methodically. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam. And the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where, in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of its richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them. Epic and rhapsodic

memory shifts from becoming a medium through which the subject encounters experience to being something that can, itself, be apprehended:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is merely a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand -- like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery -- in the sober rooms of our later insights. True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding, as well. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest

in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through. (576)

epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones to delve to ever deeper layers. (611)²⁸

The comparison between the earlier "Excavation and Memory" and the above passage yields a few considerations and clarifications that I'd like to note. First, in "A Berlin Chronicle" Benjamin's claim that memory is a "theatre" of the past clarifies the meaning of archeology as a metaphor, although it may seem far from the subject. Theatre, relating as it does to the "epic and rhapsodic" manner in which Benjamin claims genuine memory must proceed, says something about time's relation to memory. Memory is, as Aristotle claims, *of* the past, but the past of which it is a part is mythical, grandiose, epic, which also says something about the subject's relation to the world:

But far from protesting, it relied on a ruse -- so successfully that I believed a retrospective of what Berlin had become for me over the years would be an appropriate "preface" to such glosses. If the preface has now far exceeded the space originally allotted to the glosses, this is not only the mysterious work of remembrance -- which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been -- but also, at the same time, the precaution of a subject represented by the "I," which is entitled not to be sold cheap. (603)

²⁸ Images in both these passages arise, severed from their historical contexts, from all other associations. This repeated motif is characteristic of Benjamin's ongoing epistemological and methodological concerns. See in particular, "On the Concept of History," wherein he writes, "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability and is never seen again [. . .] For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image" (390-91).

The above passage is preceded by a comment Benjamin makes about "one little rule" he has followed in his writing for twenty years, which is that he "never use[s] the word 'I'" in his writing except in letters (603). This rule of writing, Benjamin observes, has caused his subjectivity to have long been effaced in his public writing, and in response, his "I" hid in these reflections on Berlin. It is this second point, that Berlin has become, rhetorically, if not in fact, a part of Benjamin's self, the very ground of his memory, that continues to stand out.

The nature of the city, itself, and its boundaries, is instrumental in constructing and limiting Benjamin's memories:

But isn't this, too, the city -- the strip of light under the bedroom door on evenings when we were "entertaining"? Didn't Berlin find its way into the expectant childhood night [. . .]? The dream ship that came to fetch us on those evenings must have rocked at our bedside on the waves of conversation, or under the spray of clattering plates; and in the early morning it set us down on the ebb of the carpet beating that came in at the window with the moist air on rainy days, and engraved itself more indelibly in the child's memory than the voice of the beloved in that of the man -- this carpet beating that was the language of the nether world, of servant girls, the real grownups, a language that sometimes took its time, languid and muted under the grey sky, breaking at other times into an inexplicable gallop, as if the servants were pursued by phantoms. The courtyard was one of the places where the city opened itself to the child; others, admitting him or letting him go, were railway stations. (623)

A further change that Benjamin makes between "Excavation and Memory" and "A Berlin Chronicle" is to add that "the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences" is determined by the process used to attain them (611). Here, as in "Excavation and Memory," Benjamin advocates conducting oneself "like a man digging" (611), which entails being unafraid "to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil" (611). Not only do these passages thereby evoke an archeological dig, but they also evoke a garden, where one digs and scatters seed and turns over soil. I point this out to suggest that these two motifs, coinciding in the same images, each implies something about memory: that memory is something to be found, and that memory is something to be nurtured and grown. These contradictory implications, contained simultaneously in the same images, are encoded implicitly throughout "A Berlin Chronicle," whether in his return to the labyrinth in the Tiergarten or to the old university district, and I cannot stress enough how both of these metaphors for the way memory works are encoded always in a physical place.

At the end of this essay, there is a lengthy instance wherein Benjamin returns twice to the same scene -- his bedroom when he was five or six years old²⁹ -- contextualizing and recontextualizing the night his father comes in to tell him of a distant cousin's death. This incident indicates that forgetting is, itself, a presence, a thing or force of its own rather than merely the absence of memory; furthermore, it exemplifies what Benjamin means when he says that "He who seeks to approach his own buried past must [. . .] not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil" (611) and that the real treasure that

²⁹ Though he describes the same incident in these two passages, he provides two different ages. In the first telling, he's six, and in the second, five.

such a method yields is "the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand [. . .] in the sober rooms of our later insights" (611). This is an injunction echoing the Delphic, *know yourself*, but more than that, it is an injunction to see more than surface truth -- which would, in this case, be the images in their original context, the matter that is deposited, the strata of the earth.

Benjamin recounts finding the images in question in their original context by narrating a rhetorical photograph:

Anyone can observe the length of time during which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory [. . .] More frequent, perhaps, are cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source, it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate [. . .] Nor is this very mysterious, since such moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we are separated from ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by shock, as is the lit heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images. (633)

Shoshana Felman has linked this -- and other aspects of Benjamin's writing about memory -- to trauma, arguing that it bears the mark of cultural trauma, not only of the war through which Benjamin lived, but also to the rapid technological and social change

in the first third of the twentieth century.³⁰ Cadava, too, provides a similar interpretation: "[W]hat characterizes experience in general -- experience understood in its strict sense as the traversal of a danger, the passage through a peril -- is that it retains no trace of itself: experience experiences itself as the vertigo of memory, an experience whereby what is experienced is not experienced" (103). This passage does bear such signs, not only in the explicit references to shock and to immolation -- of self and of magnesium powder -- that are the marks of having lived through trauma, but also in the sudden break as Benjamin begins to tell the story.

Having written that memory's most indelible images come from "the immolation of our deepest self in shock," he begins,

So the room in which I slept at the age of six would have been forgotten, had not my father come in one night -- I was already in bed -- with the news of a death. It was not really the news itself that so affected me: the deceased was a distant cousin. But in the way in which my father told me, there lay [ed. text breaks off] [...] (633)

There lay what, exactly? A lie.

I would, in addition to the above interpretation that connects the images of photography and shock to trauma and disintegration, that this passage is connected to the archeological images i've been discussing -- not explicitly, but as part of an illumination of method. I would like to say that this, Benjamin's first turn to this particular scene, corresponds to the surface truth of the matter. The image Benjamin provides is the room, the memory, the image in its original context, that Benjamin breaks off not because he

³⁰ Cf. Felman, "Benjamin's Silence."

cannot continue -- or, not only because he cannot continue -- but because there is something else to be apprehended: "One ought," he writes, "to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seem to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of a past life" (634). This injunction, although the image is auditory rather than archeological, coincides with the methodology Benjamin advocates, turning and returning to the same ground, taking the images of one's own past or of past lives as they are yielded:

I was perhaps five years old. One evening -- I was already in bed -- my father appeared, probably to say good night. It was half against his will, I thought, that he told me the news of a relative's death. The deceased was a cousin, a grown man who scarcely concerned me. But my father gave the news with details, took the opportunity to explain, in answer to my question, what a heart attack was, and was communicative. I did not take in much of the explanation. But that evening I must have memorized my room and my bed, the way you observe with great precision a place where you feel dimly that you'll have to search for something you've forgotten there. Many years afterward, I discovered what it was. Here in this room, my father had "forgotten" part of the news about the deceased: the illness was called syphilis. (635)

The content of the memory differs only slightly from the earlier version: Benjamin names the disease; he is five rather than six; he provides further details and interpretation of his father's actions. What is important, though, in the context of the archeology of memory, is both Benjamin's rhetorical return to the scene, after he has broken off or been

interrupted, and also that the images yield something different when they've been stripped of the original context: first, in terms of an auditory rather than a visual image, an echo rather than the immolation of magnesium powder, and second, by approaching the scene deliberately rather than abruptly. Namely, the images yield a sense of deliberation and detachment, a sense that they are part of the atmosphere -- the room and the air -- as well as a sense of untimeliness: "And just as they cause us to surmise that a stranger has been there, and there are words or gestures from which we infer this invisible stranger, the future, who left them in our keeping" (634-35).

2.

The great art of making things seem closer together. In reality. Or from where we are standing; in memory.
~ Benjamin, "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together"

In his 1927 essay "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism," Benjamin provocatively links surrealism with psychoanalysis. Surrealism, in this short essay, not only takes up key themes in Freudian psychoanalysis -- dreams, fantasy, and primal memory, among others -- but surrealism as an intellectual movement fills a revolutionary space in Western Culture during the late-1920's similar to the one psychoanalysis filled in previous decades. Benjamin suggests that the two movements follow on one another in that surrealists take up the methods and metaphors of psychoanalysis against the aims thereof:

Picture puzzles, as schemata of the dreamwork, were long ago discovered by psychoanalysis. The surrealists with a similar conviction, are less on the trail of the psyche than on track of things. The very last, the topmost face on the totem pole, is that of kitsch. It is the last mask of the banal, the one

with which we adorn ourselves, in dreams and in conversation, so as to take the energies of an outlived world of things. (4)

Apparently unconcerned with the ephemera of the psyche, the surrealists, according to Benjamin, place things as the ultimate goal of their analysis. Picture puzzles, used by Freud to reinforce the structural approach to dream interpretation, are, in this essay, used by Benjamin to indicate a withdrawal from the psyche, from memory: "For the sentimentality of our parents, so often distilled, is good for providing the most objective image of our feelings. The long-windedness of their speeches, bitter as gall, has the effect of reducing us to a crimped picture puzzle" (4). The picture puzzle, in both these instances, signals a certain reduction in the field of being: in the first case, reducing the dream to abstract schemata; in the second, signifying that the "us" of Benjamin's generation had been reduced to a mere avatar of the older generation's psyche.

"Surrealism," a later and more substantial essay, argues that the early readers of the French surrealists have misread the movement. Far from being "yet another clique of literati" here "mystifying the honourable public" (207), far from being irrelevant or merely strange, Benjamin valorizes the French surrealists for their "revolutionary nihilism" (210): "But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination does not lie in narcotics.³¹ It resides in *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson" (209, original emphasis). Again, Benjamin values this movement from ephemeral inspiration to "a materialistic, anthropological inspiration."

³¹ Cf. Benjamin, *On Hashish* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP [Belknap], 2006).

Michael Jennings, in his essay "Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-Garde," writes that Benjamin's engagement with the surrealists and other movements in the European avant-garde unifies the erotic and the politic (32). The point and power of the avant-garde, for Benjamin, is this jointure:

The equation of the human body and body politic is here made concrete [in *One Way Street*]; in a sense, too, this last meditation casts a retrospective shadow over Benjamin's collection as it evokes the revolts of 1918 -- the attempt to find a new bodily form -- and their failure: the body is convalescent. Yet this dreaming, procreative, Surrealist collective can emerge only on the basis of a new constructivist mastery of technology and its deployment in a non-linear, montage-like form [. . .] The body politic can be constituted anew, Benjamin argues here, only if it builds itself up from the smallest basic units, two humans uniting agapaically and erotically, with new progeny who are at once the figure and the very material of the new state. As always for Walter Benjamin, the new state is imaginable only as the product of a dangerous and critical reading, the reading of new textual forms. The textual forms of the European avant-garde. (33)

It may seem beside the point to go on thus, on the subject of surrealism and politics, when the subject at hand is memory. For Benjamin, however, surrealism -- and, indeed, the avant-garde in general -- is strongly connected to the way memory has been talked about -- not only in the rhetorical connections he draws between psychoanalysis and surrealism via the trope of picture puzzles in "Dream Kitsch," and not only in the

radical nihilism that recalls the death drive in "Surrealism." Take, for example, "Convalut K [Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung]" from *The Arcades Project*. Here, Benjamin takes up the key themes from "Dream Kitsch" and "Surrealism" -- dreams, nihilism, awakening -- as he calls for a Copernican turn of remembrance. In the first fragment of the Convalut, Benjamin alludes to the religious illumination he seeks to overcome by profane illumination in "Surrealism" as well as the "totemic tree of objects" turned toward kitsch ("Dream Kitsch" 4):

Awakening as a graduated process that goes on in the life of the individual as in the life of generations. Sleep its initial stage. A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned toward dreams, the child's side. For the previous century, this appears very clearly in the arcades. But whereas the education of earlier generations explained these dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present day education simply amounts to the distraction of children. (388)

Awakening, he writes later in the same gathering, "is namely the dialectical, Copernican, turn of remembrance" (389).

This Copernican turn of remembrance turns in multiple directions. One such direction, given that Benjamin refers, in the opening sentence of the above quotation, to awakening as a process that perpetuates in individual life as in the lives of generations, is a way of talking about collective memory. That is, one Copernican turn of remembrance is a memory that passes generationally and that has little to do with individual

experience. Freud, on the subject of inherited memory, writes the following: "We must conclude that the mental residue of those *primaeval* times has become a heritage which, with each new generation, needs only to be awakened, not to be reacquired [. . .] [T]his is explicable only by phylogenetic inheritance" (*Moses and Monotheism* 208-09).

Derrida, as i mentioned in the previous chapter, traces the phylogenetic inheritance in question through the circumcised body: "The memory without memory of a mark returns everywhere," he writes, "about which we ought to debate with Freud, concerning his many rapid statements on the subject: it is clearly a question of the singular archive named 'circumcision'" (42). To this statement, Derrida appends a note that reads as follows:

The theme of circumcision is, however, taken up from several points of view in *Moses [and Monotheism]*. From a historical point of view, it is a "conducting fossil" (*Liet-fossil*) for investigating memory and interpreting the Israelites' relations with servitude in and the exodus from Egypt (where circumcision was an indigenous practice). From a more structural point of view, circumcision is the symbolic substitute of the castration of the son by the primitive father. (42, n.6)

Memory without memory, this evocative description implies something about what we call collective memory: namely, that while collective memory relates to a common past, while it refers to a shared history, collective memory is not an experience that can be recalled so much as it names the basis of a group's affiliation, a lineage of stories. If it seems strange, given the physical manifestation of the lineage in question, to refer to collective memory as a lineage of stories, consider what Maurice Hawlbachs says

of the subject. Hawlbachs argues that all memory fits under the rubric of collective memory: "What makes recent memories hang together," he writes, "is not that they are contiguous in time: it is rather that they are part of a totality of thoughts common to a group" (52). And so, remembrance, for Hawlbachs, performs a variation on the theme of archeological collecting and recollecting that i cited earlier in this chapter. In this case, though, remembrance is the act of organizing the collection of memories:

Exactly the same process occurs when we attempt to localize older memories. We have to place them within a totality of memories common to other groups [. . .] To call to mind this totality it is again sufficient that *we adopt the attitude common to members of this group*, that we pay attention to the memories which are always in the foreground of its way of thought. (52)

Memory is an act of empathy, here -- though not only empathy is required. Rather, it is necessary to forcibly reorient one's own subjectivity to align with the dominant group narrative.

Responding to Hawlbachs, John Frow characterizes collective memory as follows: "[M]emory is thought of as partaking of spirituality independent of the materiality of the sign; [. . .] it is organically related to its community and it partakes of the continuity of tradition -- a historical time without rupture or conflict" (222). Perhaps as troubling as its disavowal of the materiality of the sign is that collective memory seems to buy into the notion of a spiritual connection between members of a group, that it becomes religious in nature (Boyarin 19). This connection subsumes the individual --

autobiographical, experiential -- memory (Hawlbachs 53). The dominant narrative is thereby reified and memories that do not support that narrative are marginalized.

It's interesting to me that Frow's criticism of Hawlbachs in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* is centered on the technologies of memory -- and it's more interesting that one of the technologies he cites, of which collective memory is ignorant, is writing. Citing Mary Caruthers' study of medieval memory systems, he writes, "The salient fact she points to in medieval thought is that it draws no distinction in kind 'between writing on the memory and writing on some other surface'. Rather than being an external support or implement in relation to memory, the activity of writing is a kind of memorization itself" (223). No difference in kind between writing one's memory and writing on some other surface, memory is then merely another surface on which one can write. Compare this to Freud's "Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad." In this essay, Freud approaches the way memory is acquired by way of an analogy to the mystic pad, an implement which he claims both mimics the structure of memory and augments the possibilities of his own memory.

Distrustful of his own memory -- of its limits and accuracy -- and searching for an auxiliary apparatus to intensify, or perhaps to externalize its function, Freud writes, "Some time ago there came upon the market, under the name of the Mystic Writing-Pad, a small contrivance that promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate" (213). Both the sheet of paper and the slate have fallen short, in Freud's estimation, of the standard by which auxiliary models of the senses must be measured:

All the forms of auxiliary apparatus which we have invented for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions are built on the

same model as the sense organs themselves or portions of them: for instance, spectacles, photographic cameras, ear trumpets. Measured by this standard, devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent -- even though not unalterable -- memory traces of them. (212)

He goes on to write that, if the mystic pad is examined, it reveals itself to be more than a simple writing tablet: "[I]ts construction," he writes, "shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it" (213).

I can think of no other way to say it than this: Freud resists objects. He actively, stubbornly overlooks them in the very moment he focuses on them most intensely. On one hand, describing them, on the other denying their specific characteristics -- or at least denying those specific characteristics that contradict his aims. Again, consider his description of the mystic writing-pad:

The Mystic Pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet, the top end of which is firmly secured to the slab while its bottom end rests upon it without being fixed to it. This transparent sheet is the more interesting part of the little device. It itself consists of two layers, which can be detached from each other

except at their two ends. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin translucent waxed paper. (213)

Having described the device so specifically, Freud proceeds to postulate that this Mystic Pad is an ideal analogy for the way the mind perceives and retains those perceptions.

However, he goes on to state that the actual object fits the analogy imperfectly, and this falling short, which is to say the specificity of this thing he's using, is of no matter: "The small imperfections of the contrivance have, of course, no importance for us, since we are only concerned with the structure of the perceptive apparatus of the mind" (214). You will say, of course, that i go too far, that i read too much into a throw-away statement. However, it strikes me as supremely important, not only that Freud's analogy for the mind falls short, which strikes me as inevitable, but that Freud's response to this falling short is to claim that the idea must supersede the thing, that the thing's specificity must not matter.

In the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud implicitly considers the intersection of objects and the process of subject-formation. The model he provides, after opening the chapter with a digression about combat neurosis, is a game played by his infant grandson:³²

However, this good little boy had the sometimes irritating habit of flinging all the small objects he could get a hold of far away from himself into a

³² Nowhere in this chapter, however, does Freud mention that the child he observes is indeed his grandson, a problem noted and expounded upon by Derrida -- in *Resistances, of Psychoanalysis* -- and Krell -- in "Pulling Strings Wins No Wisdom." My objections to this distanced rhetorical stance, that it is fundamentally misleading, is somewhat beside the point that, for Freud, objects are fundamentally interchangeable, that what is important about them is the way he projects the psyche onto them. Except, in failing to name his grandson as his own family, Freud treats him in the same way as he treats objects. His grandson is interchangeable with any other average child of his age.

remote corner of the room, under the bed, etc., so that gathering up his toys was often no easy task. While doing this he beamed with an expression of interest, and uttered a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o' sound, which in the unanimous opinion of both his mother and myself as an observer was not simply an exclamation but stood for *fort* ('gone'). I eventually realized that this was probably a game, and that the child was using all his toys for the sole purpose of playing 'gone' with them. (140)

This behavior, playing *gone* -- if it is, indeed, gone that Ernst is playing (remember, this is a child who, Freud has taken pains to note, was neither "precocious in his intellectual development" nor could he speak more than "a few intelligible words," and whose communication was mostly limited to "a small repertoire of expressive sounds comprehensible to those around him") -- becomes legible to Freud only when he observes the child playing with a wooden reel attached to some string. Here, the game of *gone* is completed by the game of "Here!" (141).

Having seen the entire game, Freud presents an interpretation thereof, connecting the repetition of *gone* and *here* to his previous observation that, in spite of his closeness to his mother, the child would not cry when she left:

The interpretation of the game readily presented itself. It was associated with the child's immense cultural achievement in successfully abnegating his drives [. . .] by allowing his mother to go away without making a great fuss. He compensated for it, so to speak, by *himself* re-enacting the same disappearance-reappearance scenario with whatever objects fell to hand. (141, final emphasis mine)

It's important that Freud displaces the child's drive onto the reel, or whatever object falls to hand, particularly in relation to a competing model of development, and a competing interpretation of child's play Benjamin provides in "Doctrine of the Similar." But before turning to Benjamin's essay, i'd like to continue with Freud's interpretation of the fort/da game: "The act of flinging away the object to make it 'gone' may be the gratification of an impulse on the child's part -- which in the ordinary way of things remains suppressed -- to take revenge on his mother for having gone away from him" (142). Here, again, Freud suggests that the object stands in for the person in the sense that the child treats the object in the way he would unconsciously like to treat his mother:

Are there limits to the way an object stands in for a person? Is Freud's observation only true or interesting when it's someone treating an object as they would like to treat a person?

Child's play, in "Doctrine of the Similar" occupies a similarly mimetic role as does playing "gone" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Where for Freud, the goal of that mimesis is to use objects to exert mastery over intense emotions and experiences -- "It is plainly the case that children repeat everything in their play that has made a powerful impression on them, and that in so doing they abreact the intensity of their experience and make themselves so to speak master of the situation" (142) -- and thereby defend the bounds of the psyche, for Benjamin, the imitation of things incorporates them into a more porous selfhood:

The very greatest capacity for the generation of Similarities, however, belongs to human beings. Indeed, there may be no single one of their higher functions that is not co-determined by the mimetic faculty. This

faculty has a history in both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic sense. As regards to the latter, play is to a great extent its school. Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train. (694)

The difference between Benjamin's characterization of the mimetic quality of children's play and Freud's is immediately obvious: Where Freud characterizes his grandson as using objects outside himself to imitate his unconscious desires, Benjamin observes that children imitate the objects themselves, and thereby incorporate them into their beings.

This leads obliquely to another Copernican turn of remembrance. This phrase, Copernican turn, stands out more each time i read it. I just finished saying that the Copernican turn of remembrance could refer to a collective, generational iteration of memory, which is true, but i'd like to turn the idea again. Copernicus, the first to publish - in a short manuscript, "Commentariolus," circulated some time before 1514, and in *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* -- a refutation of Ptolemy's geocentric universe, posited, rather, that the earth orbits the sun. Heliocentric ushered in the scientific revolution, and the Copernican revolution had far-reaching implications throughout modernity. Indeed, Benjamin suggests that the Copernican revolution upset the very way people engaged with the past:

The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in "what has been," and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of

knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal -- the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that just now happened to us, first struck us; *to establish them is the affair of memory*. Indeed, awakening is the great exemplar of memory: the occasion on which it is given us to remember what is closest, tritest, most obvious. What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of the furniture in matinal half-slumber, what Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is to be secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening. (388-89)

In *the Language of Walter Benjamin*, Carol Jacobs connects mimesis in "Doctrine of the Similar" to Benjamin's "turn to history" (92). In this essay, she writes, "Benjamin is about to tell us two stories, the first, a tale of childhood, the second a tale of ancestors" (92). Jacobs suggests that the significance of mimetic behavior in children's play extends beyond the history of the individual and "presupposes another history, a meditation on its phylogenetic significance" (93). This phylogenetic history, presupposed by the mimetic quality of children's play, is bound up in the occult -- specifically, as Benjamin notes, in the sky: "As researchers into old traditions we must take into account the possibility that sensuous shape-giving took place -- meaning that *objects had a mimetic character* -- where we are today no longer capable even of suspecting it. For example in the constellations of the stars" (695, my emphasis). For Benjamin to say that it is possible

that objects have mimetic character is to attribute to them the activity that comes with being human.

Chapter 3:

The Copernican Revolution II

"In speaking of the inner boulevards," says the *Illustrated Guide to Paris*, a complete picture of the city on the Seine and its environs from the year 1852, "we have made mention again and again of the arcades which open onto them [. . .] so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature [. . .]" This passage is the locus classicus for the presentation of the arcades.

- Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

In "One Way Street" Benjamin sets up what may as well be a fun-house mirror, a text that shifts and adjusts its own perspective, alternating its focus between language, history, dreams, and advertising, using *proto-Chock* to "disrupt ideological distortion" (Cohen 185). *Proto-Chock*, which Margaret Cohen observes, provides the core of "One Way Street," is a technique Benjamin uses to stage "the shape taken by praxis in contemporary alienated conditions" (185). Cohen distinguishes *proto-Chock* in "One Way Street" from the shock that characterizes Benjamin's later writings on the basis of his various representations of "the subject's contact with the cosmos" (183):

In *One Way Street* Benjamin does not yet invoke psychoanalytic notions to theorize the forces structuring contemporary subjective experience. Rather, he characterizes these forces in predominantly Marxist terms. Thus, in an experience that might be called *proto-Chock* Benjamin translates the speculative Hegelian opposition between subject and object into the realm of history, using it to characterize the relationship between contemporary subjects and material processes. (183)

This contact, presented as Benjamin stages it in Marxist terms, is nearly always violent, nearly always disorienting. Cohen writes, "contemporary contact with the forces

structuring experience takes such violent form because existing material conditions produce ideological effects veiling the subject's ability to encounter the material world" (183).

From the start of "One Way Street," Benjamin stages proto-*Chock* as an encounter between the concrete and the ephemeral, as he does in the following entry: "*Antique spoon*. -- One thing is reserved to the greatest epic writers: the capacity to feed their heroes" (466). Food, as in the section "Breakfast Room," is not paired with the material present. Rather, food is presented as a counterpoint to the ephemeral past -- and not the Classical past wherein there were the writers of the epics, but the past that never was: the epic heroes were never in the material world, however much they have been idealized therein.

In Chapter 2, i wrote of dreams and their relation to Benjamin's essays on surrealism, an intellectual interest that remains evident in "One Way Street" and was formative to the *Arcades Project*,³³ although, as Cohen notes, he did not always regard it in a completely positive light. In that chapter, i suggested that dreams, particularly these dreams of the future, were connected to the "Copernican turn of remembrance" (*Arcades Project* 389). I also alluded therein to a connection between dreams and the material

³³ In a letter to Theodor Adorno written May 31, 1935, Benjamin wrote of the influence of surrealism on the *Arcades Project*:

It opens with Aragon -- the *paysan de Paris*. Evenings, lying in bed, I could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down [. . .] What an indication of the years and years that had to be put between me and that kind of reading. And yet the first preliminary sketches for the *Arcades* originated at that time [. . .] At the time, the subtitle -- no longer in use today -- originated: *A Dialectical Fairy Play*. This subtitle points to the rhapsodic character of what I had in mind to present at that time and whose relics -- as I recognize today -- did not contain any adequate guarantees whatsoever, in formal or linguistic terms. (488)

world, and in this chapter i intend to illuminate that connection. This subject would, on its surface, have little to do with memory; however, the rhetorical contiguities between dreams and memory persist, not only in "One Way Street" but also in "Convolute K [Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung]": "Fashion," writes Benjamin, "like architecture, inheres in the darkness of the lived moment, belongs to the dream consciousness of the collective" (*Arcades Project* 393). Considering this quotation, recall the connection between a city's architecture and collective memory:

Even when it is not a space of open confrontation, the peripatetic possibilities of the street can harbour threatening encounters and disturbing memories [. . .] Memory has much to do with the generic nature of particular experiences; and the nomadic topography of the nineteenth-century city street provoked extended commentary from contemporaries because it clouded the former demarcations which had made it possible to assign experiences to certain insulated categories, to say that one type of experience was tragic, another comic, one idyllic, another satiric.
(Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, 22-23)

Important to this connection of memory, dreams, and objects, is the concept of awakening, which as Benjamin writes in "The Arcades of Paris," "is the exemplary case of remembering" (883). In awakening, "we succeed in remembering what is closest to us (closest to the Ego). It entails what Proust means when he writes of the experimental relocation of furniture, what Bloch means when he writes of the obscurity of the lived instant" (883).

"One Way Street" is figured, from the very beginning, as an interior boulevard, such as the one Benjamin mentions at the start of the *Arcades Project*: "This street," he writes in the dedication, "is named Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author" (444). For Cohen, this dedication is merely one of many examples of proto-*Chock* in "One Way Street": "In figuring his powerful encounter with Lacis as urban revolution, Benjamin represents this experience as one more example of proto-*Chock*. During the reconstruction of a city long-standing structures are broken through, foundations are torn up, well-trodden paths altered or destroyed" (184). However, it strikes me that, far from being only one exemplar among many, this is the quintessential example of proto-*Chock*. Benjamin foreshadows here a motif -- that of urban revolution -- he will use throughout "One Way Street," and, indeed, in the *Arcades Project*, to refigure many no longer stable elements therein. Furthermore, what Benjamin says specifically with this dedication is that, first, Lacis has changed the way he thinks -- and she has done so irreversibly. Having had this street of Marxist thought cut through him, Benjamin cannot fill it in. As Susan Buck-Morss observes in *Dialectics of Seeing*, "What becomes evident [. . .] is how much -- or, rather, how little -- Benjamin needed to change the text in order to incorporate a Marxist orientation (and thus how close he was already in 1923 to that orientation -- or, rather, how his loose interpretation of Marxism allowed it to fit in his previous thinking)" (378-79).

This leaves, as always, the question of memory, a question about which Marxist thought remains largely silent.

In the second section of "One Way Street," called "Breakfast Room," Benjamin draws a material disconnection between the dream world and the waking one, between being in thrall to one's dreams and remembering them:

A popular tradition warns against recounting dreams the next morning on an empty stomach. In this state, though awake, one remains under the spell of the dream [. . .] He who shuns contact with the day, whether for fear of his fellow men or for the sake of inward composure, is unwilling to eat and disdains his breakfast. He thus avoids a rupture between the nocturnal and the daytime worlds -- a precaution justified by the combustion of a dream in a concentrated morning's work, if not in prayer; otherwise this avoidance can be a source of confusion between vital rhythms. In this condition, the narration of dreams can bring calamity, because a person, still half in league with the dream world betrays it in his words and must incur its revenge. To express this in more modern terms: he betrays himself. (444-45)

Food, here, is for Benjamin the key: it cleanses the inner self of all remnants of the dream world, all loyalty thereto. However, dreams are, he implies at the end of the passage, a part of oneself: In betraying the dream world he betrays himself.

Food also acts as transport -- a metaphor of sorts.³⁴ Breakfast brings about -- though it would perhaps be more evocative to say that breakfast transports one to -- the "superior vantage of memory" (445). Memory and dreams are therefore opposed --

³⁴ Metaphor has its roots in transportation: *metaphora* in both Latin and Greek is a transfer, derived from *meta* - over and *pherein* - to carry or bear. Therefore, when we use a metaphor, we are seeking a vehicle to carry our meanings (over).

memory the place from which one can overcome dreams -- linked by the metaphorical substitution of eating for transport. In this matter, Cohen is correct in saying that Benjamin values memory over dreams, lucidity over obscurity. She reads the "Breakfast Room" passage in "One Way Street" as part of a larger pattern reacting against the Surrealist fetishization of dreams:

But while multiple features of *One Way Street* recall surrealism, a polemic against the movement also runs through the text. From its second fragment Benjamin defiantly criticizes those who seek to efface the boundary between dream and waking life. *For only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dreams be recalled with impunity,*" Benjamin observes in "Breakfast Room" (*OWS* 46). Consistent with this stance, Benjamin treats the dream along standard Freudian lines. He does not seek to bring the disruptive energy of the dream into waking life but rather, through dream analysis, to gain insight into the content of subjective experience under late capitalism. (174)

I have chosen to emphasize Cohen's citation of Benjamin here because the translation she cites -- Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter's 1979 edition of *One Way Street and Other Writings* -- differs from that in the Harvard edition of the *Selected Works* -- also by Jephcott -- which reads, "For only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dream be addressed from the superior vantage of memory" (445). I find this second translation more compelling for the reason that, by relating memory to dreams in this way, Benjamin -- and his translator -- locate memory outside the psyche, as a location from which the

psyche can be addressed. The psyche must be cleansed -- bodily -- in order for memory to even be possible.

Returning to the substance of Cohen's assessment, that from this very moment in "One Way Street" Benjamin both issues a polemic against Surrealism and takes a standard Freudian position in relation to dreams and dream analysis, which seems overstated. The distance between dreams and material reality that Benjamin tries to establish in "Breakfast Room" seems difficult to maintain, and Cohen's assessment begins neither to pose nor to answer the question of how dreams relate to the objects with which they are paired. As Cohen notes, the heading "Number 113" is a nod to Aragon and the Surrealists, but *pace* her claim that Benjamin recounts the dreams therein to Freudian ends, he seems, rather to uses the dreams to denote a rupture, not of the psyche, but of time itself. The way he frames that rupture suggests a reason that the Enlightenment project is unsatisfying. Here is the dream "Cellar" to which Cohen refers:

We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected. But where it is under assault and enemy bombs are already taking their toll, what enervated, perverse antiquities do they not lay bare in the foundations! [. . .] In a night of despair, I dreamed I was with my best friend from my schooldays [. . .], tempestuously renewing our friendship and brotherhood. But when I awoke, it became clear that what despair had brought to light like a detonation was the corpse of that boy, who had been immured as a warning: that whoever one day lives here may in no respect resemble him. (445)

What strikes me is the objects Benjamin retrospectively attaches to the dream -- objects that are outside its scope: houses, bombs, antiquities, foundations, cabinets of curiosities, corpses.³⁵ None of these objects are present in the dream as Benjamin tells it. In fact, the dream, while it contains people, is remarkably devoid of objects. So Benjamin has, in this presentation, created a metaphorical link between these objects and the content of his dream. But what is the connection between dreams -- or this particular dream -- and these objects? They are, in addition to being metaphors, objects. A cabinet of curiosities is a particular thing; it exists and functions in the material world, as does a bomb, or a house, or a corpse.

The manner in which Benjamin narrates the dream locates it as a site of disruption between past and present. Samuel Weber, in *Benjamin's -abilities*, figures awakening as a breaking point in time: "Whether falling asleep or waking up, the common denominator lies in the way in which consciousness lags behind its 'own' activity" (172).

"Awakening," Weber writes, "must therefore be investigated on its own terms, as a distinctive experience, and not simply as a transition from dream to being-awake, from

³⁵ Having once been alive, having been subjects, corpses are, admittedly, a somewhat idiosyncratic addition to this list. They occupy a liminal space in the world of things, bridging the chasm between not-thing and thing. For Benjamin, this liminality contributes to, rather than detracts from, their thingness:

[T]he allegorization of the physis can only be carried through in all its vigor in respect to the corpse. And the characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory [. . .] Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life. It is not only in the loss of limbs, not only in the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and purification that everything corpse-like falls away from the [living] body. It is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on the corpse. There is in the physis, in the memory itself, a *memento mori*[.] (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 217-18)

unconsciousness. Similarly [. . .] 'passages' in Benjamin's writing are never just transitions, ways of leading from one point to another" (169). Awakening is a key site in Benjamin's thought where the body -- the physical, the material -- determines consciousness -- the spiritual, the immaterial:

Awakening is essentially spatial because of its distinctive temporality.

Before we elucidate this point, we should note that the emphasis on spatiality already foregrounds what Benjamin describes as the 'physiological' (h° 4) dimension of awakening instead of approaching it as a primarily mental event. Awakening is thus considered in relationship to the body rather than to consciousness. Or rather, consciousness will be shown as determined by the body rather than the other way around.

(Weber 171)

I would bring your attention to the transitory nature of Benjamin's valuation of clarity over obscurity: "In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes," he writes in "Convolut N." "The text is the long roll of thunder that follows" (457). In these two sentences, with which he opens the epistemological section of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin says something very specific about the nature of knowledge: Knowing, he says, takes place mostly in the dark. Take the metaphor Benjamin uses for lucidity, lightning -- a natural phenomenon that by definition occurs only for the briefest of instants -- rather than the steady daylight or lamplight of the Enlightenment: "[L]ightning in Benjamin names the movement of writing and inscription," writes Cadava: "Linked to the flashes of memory, the suddenness of the perception of similarity, the irruption of events or images, and even the passage into

night, Benjamin's vocabulary of lightning helps register what comes to pass in the opening and closing of vision" (21). This speaks to a certain oneiric possibility, first brought to prominence by the surrealists, and usually discounted when we think of knowing.

This oneiric way of knowing connects with the Jungian dreaming collective -- a concept that, although he doesn't mention it specifically in "One Way Street," underlies Benjamin's repeated references to both monuments and advertising. Take, for example, the "Monument to a Warrior," in which Benjamin renders tribute to Karl Kraus, writing that, "No name [. . .] would be more fittingly honored by silence. In ancient armor, wrathfully grinning, a Chinese idol brandishing a drawn sword in each hand, he dances the war-dance before the burial vault of the German language" (469). Here Benjamin reverses Hegel, who claims in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* that the German language is as close to Spirit as it is possible to get, while the oriental languages, lacking phonetic structure as they do, are antithetical to Spirit. By invoking Hegel, Benjamin invokes lucidity -- spirit and light, after all, accompany one another -- but, just as soon as he's invoked him, Benjamin banishes Hegel to the chthonic depths of bewildering "messages from the beyond" (469): "Helpless as only spirits' voices are when summoned up, a murmur from the chthonic depths of language is the source of his soothsaying" (469).

Cohen goes on to connect her interpretation of dreams from "Breakfast Room" to the Paris arcades of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: that is, to the respective visions of Paris held by the Surrealists and by Benjamin:

But in placing his discussion of the dream in the Palais-Royal, Benjamin does not only pay homage to the dream space of surrealism. The

eighteenth-century Palais-Royal is constructed somewhat differently from the nineteenth-century arcades dear to Aragon. While in the nineteenth-century arcades the shops open onto another interior hall, in the eighteenth-century arcades buildings open onto the street. The architectural difference between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century arcades serves to figure Benjamin's distance from the surrealist treatment of the dream. The nineteenth-century arcade is both an architectural structure produced by the historical period when, as Benjamin states in the *Passagen-Werk*, a dream sleep came over Europe and a space lit by various forms of half-light, the artificial light of gas lamps and diffused natural light as it appears when filtered through opaque glass. It is thus a space ruled by a form of light which traditional epistemology uses to figure mental delusion. Benjamin's dreamer, in contrast, emerges into an arcade that is not only the product of the Enlightenment period but that belongs to the world outside. He examines his dreams by the natural light that traditional epistemology associates with critical reason and with the objective state of things as they are. (174-77)

I think that here Cohen overstates Benjamin's fealty to the Enlightenment, considering both his contentious relationship to the Marxist establishment and, indeed, to Freudian psychoanalysis, both of which are heavily rooted in Enlightenment values, as well as his later writings on history, with their attempted separation from the teleology so valued by Enlightenment thinkers.

I'd like to dwell a moment on the connection between vision and memory encompassed by aura. For Cadava, this connection is both photographic and tied to the "catastrophic and dislocating impact of auratic experience in general" (Hansen 211): "During the flash of the mind's camera -- a moment when, beside ourselves, we are no longer ourselves -- we experience the shock of an experience that tells us that memory, all remembrance of things past, registers, if it registers anything, its own incapacity, our own immolation" (106).

Benjamin opens the eleventh section of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" by constellating aura and Proustian *mémoire involontaire*: "If we designate as aura the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception, then its analogue in the case of a utilitarian object is the experience which has left traces in the practiced hand" (186). This constellation departs from Benjamin's previous association of aura with technology -- specifically with photography -- in that, in this section of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin aligns photography with a Proustian dissatisfaction with voluntary memory:

The crisis of artistic reproduction that emerges in this way can be seen as an integral part of a crisis in perception itself. -- What makes our delight in the beautiful unquenchable is the image of the primeval world, which for Baudelaire is veiled by tears of nostalgia [. . .] This does not happen in the case of technological reproduction. (The beautiful has no place in it.) Proust, complaining of the barrenness and lack of depth in the images of Venice that his *mémoire volontaire* presented him, notes that the very

word "Venice" made those images seem to him as vapid as an exhibition of photographs. (338)

This leaves aura in the dubious position of, among other things, guaranteeing the authenticity of an object or a memory. Uncoupled from the strictures of technology, "the aura attaching to the object of a perception corresponds precisely to the experience [*Erfahrung*] which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 337). The question of aura's value as a marker of authenticity is a contentious one for those critics -- Adorno among them -- for whom the primary value of Benjamin's aesthetic theory is the revolutionary disengagement of art from cult, of modernity from tradition. For these critics, that the cult value of art has been displaced by its exhibition value and that Romantic notions of genius and authenticity, both of which are associated with aura, are decaying are positive aspects of modernity. That Benjamin seems ambivalent about aura's decay, at once celebrating this change and desiring aura's re-emergence, sets him at odds with these critics.

Benjamin summarizes the implications he draws from the premise that the aura of objects and artworks is decaying:

These circumstances may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of artwork. And although this can apply not only to art but (say) to a landscape moving past the spectator in a film, in the work of art this process touches on a highly sensitive core, more vulnerable than that of any natural object. That core is authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical

testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony [of an object] is affected is the *authenticity of the object*, the weight it derives from tradition. (103, my emphasis)

The object's aura is the guarantor of its testimony to a past during which the object was present. I cannot overstate the revolutionary power of the statement that objects, themselves, have authority, particularly given the context I outlined in the introduction, where the critical consensus is that the authority of objects -- should they, indeed, have authority -- is ultimately derived from the humans who encounter them. In Benjamin's formulation, however, the authority of an object comes not from people but from the weight of that object's own historical testimony: that is, from its material presence in a time and place to which it bears witness. And, while Benjamin calls what is lost with the decay of aura authenticity, the characteristics he ascribes to authenticity, perhaps more importantly, refer to the object's meaning. The auratic object's historical testimony exceeds the limits of record keeping that extends to include historical memory. Of the past -- recall the Aristotelian formulation of memory -- the object accomplishes literally what remembrance accomplishes through metaphor: the artifact carries a piece of the past into the present.

"Warmth," writes Benjamin, "is ebbing from things" (453). The section in which this astonishing statement is found epitomizes a diminishment of authenticity and affect that occurs throughout "One Way Street."³⁶

³⁶ "Memory always sees the loved one smaller" (468).

Objects of daily use gently and insistently repel us. Day by day, in overcoming the sum of secret resistances -- not only the overt ones -- that they put our way, we have an immense labor to perform. We must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are not to freeze us to death, and handle their spiny forms with infinite dexterity if we are not to bleed to death. (454)

Here, and, throughout "One Way Street," the nature of object balances the nature of humans: cold in the face of warmth. It is when Benjamin considers the interactions between children and objects that things truly achieve their fullest warmth:

For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face of the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship.

Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. (449-50)

In children's eyes, things have not merely achieved the warmth that ebbs from them, but where "Objects of daily use gently and insistently repel us" (454) -- us being adults -- in the first passage i cited, detritus irresistibly draws children toward it.

In the Preface to *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan offer the following explanation for Benjamin's

ambivalence in the face of aura's decay. Therein, they interpret "the intellectual background of aura as Benjamin's last-ditch effort to save [. . .] the physical limits of our human bodies as the yardstick for perception itself" (7). This conclusion is as compelling as it is surprising. It is, after all, compelling to think of aura as being all about the body because the description of aura that most stands out, not because it is the most cited of all Benjamin's descriptions but because it is the most idiosyncratic of them, detaches aura from the confines of aesthetics. After defining aura as "[a] strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of distance however near it may be" (104-05) in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin continues by describing the following scene: "To follow with the eye -- while resting on a summer afternoon -- a mountain range on the horizon or the branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch" (105). Here, seemingly uncoupled from aesthetics, aura becomes visceral, essential, even, to life.

Even if we keep this description of the experience of aura, rooted in the very possibility of a body's survival, in mind, Gumbrecht and Marrinan's assessment that aura is Benjamin's attempt to safe-guard the body as the "yardstick of perception" is surprising, because the body, in the work of art essay, is generally metonymic and abstract. There are certainly plenty of eyes and hands in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"; however, they are held separate from the masses who consume reproductions and whose desire to bring the work of art -- or the object -- ever closer contributes to aura's decay. The only other way in which Benjamin encounters the human body in this essay is via the photographic image, the last retrenchment of aura and a calcified relic of the past:

It is no accident that the portrait is central in early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from the early photographs for the last time. (108)

Coincidentally, this passage, halfway through the work of art essay, is the one in which Benjamin mentions aura for the last time in the essay. What Benjamin says about the relation of the body's image to aura doesn't anchor aura to a bodily presence but to the image thereof. Indeed, as Benjamin writes in "One Way Street," this auratic image is heavily inflected both by distance and by nostalgia: "How much more easily the leave-taker is loved! For the flame burns more purely for those vanishing in the distance, fueled by the fleeting scrap of material waving from the ship or railway window. Separation penetrates the disappearing person like a pigment and steeps him in gentle radiance" (450). Aura enters this passage only implicitly; the aura-infused images is steeped in "gentle radiance." Its presence, though, is tied not to literal, physical perception, but to a memory, distant not only in space but also in time. Furthermore, Benjamin makes a clear point, before he even begins to define aura in the fourth section of the work of art essay, that the human body as such, removed from all context, has never been the yardstick for perception: "The way in which human perception is organized -- the medium in which it occurs -- is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (104). In other words, the perception doesn't occur because of the body, but because of the context in which that body is found.

The photographed body belongs to an interrupted past and speaks to a speculative future. As Cadava notes,

As in Benjamin, what characterizes experience in general -- experience understood in its strictest sense as the traversal of a danger, the passage through a peril -- is that it retains no trace of itself: experience experiences itself as the vertigo of memory, as an experience whereby what is experienced is not experienced. For both Freud and Benjamin, consciousness emerges as memory begins to withdraw.

It is here that we can begin to register the possibility of a history which is no longer founded on traditional modes of experience and reference. The notion of shock -- of a posthumous shock that coincides with the photographic event -- in fact requires that history emerge where our understanding of experience cannot. (103)

For Benjamin, history, like aura, "can only be grasped in its disappearance" (Cadava 104). Like a photograph, the flash of an event or memory freezes a moment that is already no longer, a moment that has, perhaps, forgotten itself. Aura marks the body's passing, its leaving or its death, and far from being the yardstick by which perception is measured, the human face stares back from the photograph and perceives nothing. It does, however, testify to that subject's presence in space and time.

The threat of technical reproduction announced by aura's decay is not, as Gumbrecht and Marrinan speculate, that "the fundamental parameters of perception itself might escape our physical bodies" (6). While Benjamin does note the effect of technology on perception, it would be inconsistent to say that he holds back his enthusiasm on the subject of technical reproduction because of those concerns. Rather, if Benjamin does not wholeheartedly endorse the advent of technical reproduction, he holds

back his enthusiasm because, by sundering the work from its authentic presence in space and time, Benjamin acknowledged, the object would lose its testamentary authority and society would find no suitable replacement as a focal point for collective memory.

Chapter 4:

The Epistemology of Mourning: Allegory and Speculation in Benjamin's *The Origin of*

German Tragic Drama, Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, and Gibson's *Pattern*

Recognition

of the parergon -- get mourning one's mourning done. Like the entirely-other of hetero-affection, in the pleasure without enjoyment and without concept. It provokes and delimits the labor of mourning, labor *in general as* labor of mourning.
- Jacques Derrida, "Parergon"

[I]n allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face -- or rather in a death's head.

- Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

It would seem, from the outset, before beginning, even, that i'm trying to do too much; that knowledge, mourning, allegory, speculation, not to mention memory and things -- that these elements could not possibly come together. Furthermore, it would seem that Benjamin's failed *habilitation* on the Baroque German mourning play, Derrida's text for an exhibition catalogue for an exhibit of portraits at the Louvre, and William Gibson's novel about a mirror-world in the near past could have little in common with one another. Bodies becoming things, clear seeing and fun-house mirrors, painting, plays, and nation building: this is, indeed a monstrous conglomeration, and it must begin by doing nothing and move steadily toward failure. What all these things have in common, is rooted in mourning and in the way mourning functions, in all these texts, as a way of seeing and the foundation for a kind of knowing.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, both mourning and knowing are rooted in allegory. No mere "playful, illustrative technique" (*Origin* 162), allegory, as Willem

van Reijen writes, allegory articulates, in Benjamin, "the tension between construction and destruction, hope and sorrow, dream and waking, reality and fiction" (1). Baroque allegory, van Reijen continues, reacts "to an experience of crisis" (3):

The reference point of allegory is not a teleologically or systematically comprehensible totality, in which the tensions are recovered in sublated form, but rather a programmatic claim: to detect the extremes in the concrete phenomena, without a claim thereby to the possibility of bringing about salvation [. . . .] Allegory as the totality of antagonisms has the most intimate relationship with melancholy. It is related not only to the experience of the transitoriness of earthly beauty, but also to the loss of theoretical certainty and of the confidence that knowledge has a firm foundation and can be practically applied for the best. (5)

Van Reijen, in "Labyrinth and Ruin: The Return of the Baroque in Postmodernity," argues that allegory functions, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, as an expression of *vanitas*, an emblematic tradition of which the *memento mori* features prominently.

Memento mori, though it is rooted in the tradition of the triumph,³⁷ is more commonly thought of as an emblematic reminder of mortality, and herein lies the connection between melancholy and objects: "The ruined city is one of the many allegorical representations of *vanitas*," writes Max Pensky, "the folly of pretensions and the permanence of meaning" (155):

³⁷ It is said that during a triumph, the victorious general would have someone standing close behind him, whispering reminders that, however great the conquest, the general was, like the conquered, like everyone else, mortal, and that he, too, would die.

[N]either God's saving grace nor occult knowledge gained by endless erudition will transmute the images of lakes of blood and ruined cities into their opposites. This is possibly [sic] only through the rational decision to turn one's back on the weight of the factual in history and *regard history differently*, accepting with clear eyes the specter of meaningless time and rejecting the melancholia that the contemplation of meaningless time threatens. (155)

Three thoughts emerging from Benjamin's discussion of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* center this discussion of mourning. First, allegory, as a mode of expression corresponds with mourning; second, this coincidence embodies a particularly material way of knowing; and, third, this way of knowing has a speculative relation to both the past and the future. "A genuine theory of allegory did not," writes Benjamin, arise in conjunction with the classical rise of the symbol³⁸ (161): "It is nevertheless legitimate to describe the new concept of the allegorical as speculative because it was in fact adapted so as to provide the dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out" (161). What puts into question this notion of allegory as speculation is that it neglects to account for allegory as a mode of expression, "just as speech is a mode of expression, and, indeed, writing is" (162). Benjamin proceeds to write that "in allegory, the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape" (166):

³⁸ Benjamin does, however, note that some facsimile did arise at that time: "Simultaneously with its profane concept of the symbol, classicism develops its speculative counterpart, that of the allegorical" (161).

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face -- or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity -- nevertheless this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of all allegorical ways of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. (166)

Allegory serves, in this view, to connect ages of decline. Though this will be more pertinent to the next chapter, it bears saying -- and keeping in mind. Some eras and subjects, contends Susan Buck-Morss in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, are inherently allegorical:

Certain experiences (and thus certain epochs) were allegorical, not certain poets. In the Middle Ages, the ruins of a conquered, pagan antiquity made "[. . .] knowledge of the impermanence of things [. . .] inescapable, derived from observation, just as several centuries later, at the time of the Thirty Years War, the same knowledge stared European humanity in the face." Of significance was the fact that "in the seventeenth century the word *Trauerspiel* was applied in the same way to both dramas and historical events." At the moment Benjamin was writing, European humanity again looked the ruins of war in the face, and knowledge of history as a desolate

"place of skulls" (*Schädelstätte*) was once more inescapable [. . . .] The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization becomes proof, rather, of its transiency. (168-70)

History is, itself, a mourning play in the era that produced the dramas Benjamin focused on for his dissertation. And the ruins so important to the last chapter of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* aren't merely symbols of fictional decay but of a relevant connection between the Medieval, the Baroque, and the Modern.

For Derrida, too, allegory connects mourning and knowing. Each drawing of the blind, each drawing that takes blindness as its theme, that features in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, re-invents drawing (2): The invention of drawing, he writes, "becomes prey to *allegory*, to this strange self-portrait of drawing giving over to the speech and gaze of the other" (2-3):

The subtitle of all these scenes of the blind is thus: *the origin of drawing*. Or, if you prefer, *the thought of drawing*, a certain pensive pose, a *memory of the trait* that speculates, as in a dream, about its own possibility. Its potency always develops on the brink of blindness. Blindness pierces through right at that point and thereby gains *in potential, in potency*: the angle of a sight that is threatened *or* promised, lost *or* restored, given. There is in this gift a sort of *re-drawing*, a *with-drawing*, or *retreat* [*re-trait*], at once the interposition of a mirror, an impossible reappropriation

of mourning, the intervention of a paradoxical Narcissus, something lost *en abyme*, in short, a specular *folding* or *falling back* [*repli*] -- and a supplementary *trait*. (3)

There is much that overflows here -- so much, even, that it would be possible to exhaust a chapter or more elucidating the frantic piling of reference on reference. And this is the very epitome of melancholy mourning, which always returns the idea to the object.

Schwenger makes the link as follows in the Introduction to *The Tears of Things*. One's perception of objects, he notes, always falls short of full "possession" and this "gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately for the subject" (2).

Mourning is, for the purposes of this chapter, an epistemological task, and a speculative one. We must know something in order to mourn, and we learn something by mourning. For example, Derrida, in "By Force of Mourning," announces not only that "all work is also the work of mourning" (142), echoing what he says in his essay "Parergon," but, by working at mourning Louis Marin through the act of reading a text written by Marin which has as one of its subjects mourning, Derrida suggests that mourning -- that particular time of reading and writing -- is, indeed, a way of knowing. He writes,

If the word "force" is here in quotation marks, it is for a good reason; it is because the mourning in question and the so-called work of mourning are not self-evident; they go beyond understanding in some way, they go past the usual understanding of this word "force," indeed, they just don't quite go. It is a question of truth, of the impossible itself. (144)

Though we often think of mourning as operatic emotion, though we feel it in harsh and hesitant breathing, in the impossibility of speaking it imposes, though we see it in uncontrollable tears, mourning is, psychoanalytically speaking, the process of resolving these. Although it has been noted before, it bears saying again that there is something uncanny about the relation of the way Derrida speaks of mourning to the psychoanalytical model of mourning described by Freud. Indeed, there is something that just doesn't quite work when one speaks of Derrida and Freud on the subject of mourning without contesting one or the other definition. Derrida's law of mourning, that mourning would have to fail in order to succeed ("Force" 144) seems to hold a fun-house mirror to Freud's aetiology of melancholia.

If we are to keep to the image of the mirror world taken from *Pattern Recognition*, Derrida's mourning is a mirror world to Freud's. Though I will speak of mirror worlds in more detail later in this chapter, I submit, as a working definition, that a mirror world is a familiar or established entity reflected or reiterated uncannily. As an example only implicitly related to the works in question, consider the metaphor I've only just used, that of a fun house mirror, and consider particularly the way in which it takes the familiar image of the subject and distorts it. The image remains recognizable; however, it is rendered profoundly unfamiliar in the reflection. Nonetheless, in spite of the differences in their positions, I would, for the time being, like to bring your attention to their similarity: for both Derrida and Freud, mourning is a matter of understanding, of knowing.

Freud, in "Mourning and Melancholia," envisions the possibility -- indeed, the necessity -- of a resolution to mourning. The work of mourning, in contrast to the pathology of melancholia, presents itself as follows:

Profound mourning, the reaction to a loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind [as melancholia], the same loss of interest in the outside world -- in so far as it does not recall him -- the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him [. . .] It is really only because we know so well how to explain it that this attitude does not seem to us pathological. (244)

Pathology is, then, in part an encounter with the unknown as it is observed. Implicit, too, in this aetiology of mourning, which closely mirrors that of a pathological condition (melancholia) -- with the exception that "[t]he disturbance of self-regard [characteristic of melancholia] is absent in mourning" (244) -- is the notion that mourning's resolution has to do with clear seeing, with a reaffirmation of the actuality of the loss: "Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to that object" (244).

Only a little later in the essay, Freud attributes the unresolvable nature of melancholia to the unconscious nature of the loss:

In one set of cases it is evident that melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object. Where the exciting causes are different, one can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not

perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love [. . .] in yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, *but one cannot see clearly what has been lost*, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.

(245, first emphasis mine)

One of the connections between objects, mourning, and speculation is here, in Freud's troubling rhetorical slide between referring to a lost or dead person and a lost object. He thereby implies that mourning is complete when the subject recognizes that a loved one, once dead, is merely a thing.

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida constructs a double allegory of mourning, centering, first, on the myth of Narcissus and Echo, and, second, on the mythic history of drawing.³⁹ These are both, at their hearts, stories about knowledge and about the failure

³⁹ For Derrida, the history of drawing closely relates to the history of writing:

The extraordinary brings us back to the ordinary and the everyday, back to the experience of the day itself, to what always guides writing through the night, *farther or no farther [plus loin]* than the seeable or the foreseeable. "*Plus loin*" can here mean either excess or lack. (No) more knowledge [*savoir*], (no) more power [*pouvoir*]: writing gives itself over rather to *anticipation*. To anticipate is to take the initiative, to be out in front, to take (*capere*) in advance (*ante*). Different than *precipitation*, which exposes the head (*pre-caput*), the head first and ahead of the rest,

to see clearly. Pleshette de Armitt, in "Resonances of Echo: A Derridian Allegory," writes,

Derrida locates the coming to be of any 'self' within the paradoxical logic of narcissism, which is inextricably bound up with the experience of mourning. Derrida's Narcissus, condemned as he is to blindness, must mourn the other whom he can never wholly appropriate, but also his own autonomy. Yet, like a blind man feeling his way in the dark, he will ceaselessly attempt to sketch his own portrait, to trace his own image. And even though each gesture of narcissistic reappropriation is destined to fail, such gestures must be attempted, time and again, if there is to be any relation to the other, any love, any hospitality. (89)

The blindness of Narcissus is not, it must be said, a literal blindness; rather, the blindness of Narcissus is a perpetual short-sightedness, an inability to see past his own reflection. Not only does this short-sightedness prevent him from wholly incorporating the other, as Freud would have mourning successfully completed, but he is thence prevented from even successfully encountering the other.

The myth of Narcissus,⁴⁰ never recounted in its entirety in *Memoirs of the Blind*, concerns a man of mesmerizing beauty. Before his birth, the prophet Tiresias foretold that he would have a long life, so long as he neither knew himself nor saw his reflection.

anticipation would have to do with the hand. The theme of drawings of the blind is, before all else, the hand [. . .] If to draw a blind man is first of all to show hands, it is in order to draw attention to *what one draws with the help of that with which one draws*, the body proper [*corps propre*] as an instrument, the drawer of the drawing, the hand of the handiwork, of the manipulations, of the maneuvers and manners, the play or work of the hand -- drawing as *surgery*. (4-5, original emphases)

⁴⁰ Cf. Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

This is the first salient point: the myth of Narcissus concerns the refusal of knowledge that ought to be known. Consider Jacques Lacan's essay "Mirror Stage," wherein he makes the claim that apprehending one's reflection is essential to the separation of self from other. This man, who was to remain ignorant of himself and who was to not look at his reflection, met these terms until he came of age. He was, by this time, so surpassingly beautiful that he attracted suitors of both genders. In the Greek version,⁴¹ it is a male admirer, Aminius who, after having his advances rejected, committed suicide on Narcissus' doorstep and, as he died, prayed that the gods would teach him a lesson about the pain he caused. Sometime thereafter, Narcissus, out in the woods, awoke by a stream, and, upon seeing his reflection became entranced. Because he could not possess the object of his infatuation, he died of sorrow on the banks of that stream. In this version of the myth, it is said that, in the underworld, Narcissus continues to gaze at his reflection, now in the Styx. In the Roman version of the myth, which is more pertinent to Derrida's text, found in the *Metamorphosis*, Echo is the admirer Narcissus spurns. Echo, who had been cursed by Juno to be only able to repeat what was said to her. One day in the woods, she sees Narcissus and follows him, able only to echo his question, "Who's there?" After this exchange, she announces herself by trying to embrace him, and Narcissus refuses her embrace. Heartbroken, Echo retreated to the glens, where she faded away until all that remained is her voice. Hearing of Narcissus' cruelty, the goddess Nemesis punishes Narcissus by having him come upon his reflection in a pool and fall in love with it, and, as in Conon's version of the story, he kills himself when he cannot possess the object of his affection.

⁴¹ Cf. Conon, *Narrations*.

Cigoli's drawing, *Narcissus*, provides an odd sort of centerpiece for Derrida's text. Occupying two pages, this is a singular drawing for three reasons: first, because it is the only depiction of Narcissus in the book; second, because it is the only image in the book to display two sides of the same canvas; finally, because the figure of Narcissus is repeated so frequently (ten times) thereon, along with only one image of Echo, running, reaching. Although, in this way, Narcissus is a central figure in *Memoirs of the Blind*, Echo goes entirely unmentioned. However thick the silence around her, she structures the text. Her voice -- not really her voice, but its tone, its longing -- underpin Derrida's reflections. Here is Krell's account of Echo's mourning and her role in *Memoirs of the Blind*:

Narcissus gazed and loved and grieved and could not quit the grassy verge by the pool. Concealed at a distance, Echo mourned with him. When at length he plunged a dagger into himself [. . .] she too cried, "Alas, alas!" -- she too echoed his final words: "Farewell, O beloved youth in vain." (*The Purest of Bastards* 50)

Derrida's "paradoxical Narcissus," writes de Armitt, "appears as a blind man who mourns the loss of his eyes, his vision" (85). Narcissism, thus, "like all vision, like all drawing, like all self-portraiture, is 'blinded at the point of "narcissism,"' that is, at the very point where it sees itself looking" (85). Mourning is, here, a speculative vision, albeit a failed one. A work of mourning, writes Derrida,

is at once order and its ruin. And these weep for one another. Deploring and imploring veil a gaze at the very moment they unveil it. By praying on the verge of tears, the sacred allegory *does [fait]* something. It makes

something happen or come, makes something come to the eyes, makes something well up in them [. . .] By blinding oneself to vision, by veiling one's own sight [. . .] one *does* something with one's eyes, makes something of them. One does something to one's eyes. (122, original emphasis)

To mourn, by Derrida's definition, is undoubtedly to blind oneself, to neutralize the power of one's own gaze, to expose oneself as blind.

Another myth illuminating the intersection of blindness and mourning that Derrida alludes to in *Memoirs of the Blind* is the story of the inception of drawing:

The drawing of men, in any case, never goes without being articulated with articulation, without the order being given with words [. . .], without some order, without the order of narrative, and thus of memory, without the order to bury, the order of prayer, the order of names to be given or blessed. Drawing comes in the place of a name, which comes in the place of drawing: and order, like Butades, to hear oneself call the other or be called by the other. As soon as a name comes to haunt drawing, even the without-name of God that first opens up the space of naming, the blind are tied to those who see. An internal duel breaks out at the very heart of drawing. (56-57)

Again, as with the story of Narcissus, Derrida does not directly recount the story of Butades' daughter -- incidentally, the only draughtswoman in *Memoirs of the Blind* -- choosing, rather, to allude throughout the text to the inception of drawing. Here, though, is Krell doing so:

[T]he nameless daughter of Butades [. . .] instituted the entire *iconography* of drawing, an iconography that has to do with love on the verge of separation, loss, and mourning -- the love of Echo for Narcissus. When the daughter of Butades learned that her lover would have to leave the following day she took up a stylus in order to trace the outline of his silhouette on the wall, as though this shadowy outline would *draw* him, *draw him back* to her one day. (*The Purest of Bastards*, 51, original emphases)

Both of these stories -- the story of Narcissus and Echo and the story of the inception of drawing -- that structure *Memoirs of the Blind* also point to the theme of ruination. The subtitle of Derrida's text -- *The Self-Portrait and other Ruins* -- signals from its onset that *Memoirs of the Blind* will concern itself with ruins, and it's true that the text is littered with them. "Whence the love of ruins," he writes, "and the fact that the scopopic pulsion, voyeurism itself, is always on the lookout for the originary ruin. A narcissistic melancholy, a memory -- in mourning -- of love itself" (68). As it is the case with Benjamin and with Cadava, ruination begins, for Derrida, with a gaze:

In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at is the face as the memory of itself, what *remains or returns* as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed.

(68)⁴²

⁴² Cf. Cadava on the intersection of ruins and photography in *Words of Light*:
[W]hat is at stake here is the possibility of our understanding a gaze that both returns and does not return the gaze that comes from elsewhere, the

Derrida devotes only a sentence to interpreting Benjamin's thought on ruins in Baroque culture, and it is a fairly serious misreading. Derrida writes, "The ruin is not in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself; neither the abandoned yet still monumental fragment of a totality, nor, as Benjamin thought, simply a theme of baroque culture" (69). However, for Benjamin, the ruin is precisely not merely a theme, but the essential nature of, not only Baroque but also Modern culture. While he refers to the "baroque cult of the ruin" (*Origin* 178), he does so not to diminish the centrality of ruins; rather, he does so to draw attention to the way they are inseparable from Baroque thought. For Benjamin, that which explains the Baroque cult of the ruin is the following: "Allegories," he writes, "are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). It is certainly possible to argue that ruins are a mere subset of things, and a small subset, at that; however, consider that there is nothing more thing-like than a ruin: A ruin serves no purpose other than to be, to decay, to mark a memory.

Writing of *Trauerspiel's* relation to tragedy and to opera, Benjamin notes:

Just as every comparison with tragedy -- not to mention musical tragedy -- is of no value for the understanding of opera, so it is that from the point of view of literature, and especially the *Trauerspiel*, opera must seem unmistakably to be the product of decadence. The obstacle of meaning and intrigue loses its weight, and both operatic plot and operatic language follow their course without encountering any resistance, issuing finally

process whereby persons and things are both like and different from one another at the same time [. . .] To suggest, as [Benjamin does in the Baudelaire essay], that the more absent the looker is, the more compelling the gaze, is to suggest why the most compelling gazes belong to the dead, to the most remote and thinglike beings. (120)

into banality. With the disappearance of the obstacle the soul of the work, mourning, also disappears, and just as the dramatic structure is emptied, so too is the scenic structure, which looks elsewhere for its justification, now that allegory, where it is not omitted, has become a hollow façade. (212-13)

This speaks to the transformation of the very work into ruin.

All this is to say that Derrida need not have separated his own view of ruins from Benjamin's, because they are substantively the same. Ruination "is precisely not a theme, for it ruins the theme, the position, the presentation or representation of anything and everything" (69). Nonetheless, this misreading of the role of ruins in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* leads Derrida to the most specific connection between mourning, memory, and knowing in *Memoirs of the Blind*: tears:⁴³

Order and ruin are no longer dissociated at the origin of drawing -- and neither are the transcendental structure and the sacrifice -- even less so when drawing shows its origin, the condition of its possibility, and the coming of its event: a work. A work is at once order and its ruin. And those weep for one another. Deploring and imploring veil a gaze at the very moment they unveil it. By praying on the verge of tears, the sacred allegory *does [fait]* something. It makes something happen or come, makes something come to the eyes, makes something well up in them, by producing an event [. . .] By blinding oneself to vision, by veiling one's own sight -- though imploring, for example -- one *does* something with

⁴³ Ruin, he writes, is "rather, this memory open like an eye, or like the hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing you anything *at all*, anything *of the all*" (69).

one's eyes, *makes* something of them. One does something to one's own eyes. (122)

Ruins and tears, these tie allegory to melancholy. Though I have, until now, let Freud's definition of melancholia stand more or less uncontested, Benjamin infamously eschewed the psychoanalytic definition of melancholia when he used the term in relation to himself. Susan Sontag quotes him as having written that he "came into the world under the sign of Saturn -- the star of slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays" (111). This reference to being born under the sign of Saturn comes out of a history of astrology,⁴⁴ and Sontag insists that it is this traditional and astrological definition that sheds light on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *The Arcades Project*. Notably, she suggests that among the conventionally known signs of melancholy readable in one's character,⁴⁵ the melancholic is noted for spacing time and memory:

For the baroque dramatists, he writes in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, "chronological movement is grasped and analyzed as a spatial image." The book on the *Trauerspiel* is not only Benjamin's first account

⁴⁴ Robert Burton, a seventeenth century Oxford mathematician who was also interested in the influence of astrology on psychology, published the encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy* under the pseudonym Democritus Junior in 1621. Writing to stave off his own persistent melancholy, he notes that "the stars do incline, but not compel" one's nature (206), and that one born under the sign of Saturn -- the planet traditionally associated with the melancholic temperament -- was born with the "character of mortality" (145). I note this connection between melancholy and astrology not only because Sontag assumes its relevance, but because the notion that Benjamin was, himself, a chronic melancholic is a common assumption made by many critics about him. Cf. Lisa Fittko, "The Story of Old Benjamin;" Hannah Arendt's introduction to *Illuminations*; and, of course, Sontag's essay, among others. Ester Leslie's biography, *Walter Benjamin*, argues the opposite position.

⁴⁵ "Slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament," she writes. "Blundering is another, from noticing too many possibilities, from not noticing one's lack of practical sense. And stubbornness, from the longing to be superior -- on one's own terms" (114).

of what it means to convert time into space; it is where he explains most clearly what feeling underlies this move. Awash in melancholic awareness of "the disconsolate chronicle of world history," a process of incessant decay, the baroque dramatists seek to escape from history and restore the timelessness of paradise. (116)

I would argue that this melancholic tendency to render time and chronological movement in spacial images, this impulse to realize and restore the timelessness of paradise, are, indeed, uncanny. In his essay, "The Uncanny," Freud defines the uncanny as something "frightening" (124), something that, specifically, derives its frightening quality from the fact that it was "once well known and had long been familiar" (124). To return to the previous example of spacing time, the chronicle of world history against which Benjamin has located the baroque mourning play:

When, as is the case in the *Trauerspiel*, history becomes part of the setting, it does so as a script. The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. (177-78)

You would, perhaps, argue that this shift is in no way frightening, however unsettling or unfamiliar it may be. However, the images that accompany this shift, specifically the images of skulls and corpses that accompany the way Benjamin spaces time, are, indeed, calculated to frighten. Buck-Morss writes,

We can begin by recalling that central to the Baroque vision of nature as the allegorical representation of history is the emblem, a montage of visual image and linguistic sign, out of which is read, like a picture puzzle, what things "mean." Of course, in the representation of the commodity fetish as fossil, Benjamin himself created such an emblem: Under the sign of history, the image of petrified nature is the cipher of what history has become. (161)

Buck-Morss goes on to connect the image of petrified nature with the idea that history is a place of skulls. While the image, generally, is frightening because of the way it connects to mass death,⁴⁶ the specific phrasing recalls the place where Jesus was said to be crucified (Golgotha, or the place of skulls), and in a Christian culture, this connection to a site of horror imbues this conception of history with a particular sort of messianic horror.⁴⁷ In addition to these registers of fright, Buck-Morss suggests that the image of history as a place of skulls also registers because it was inescapable in reality: "At the moment Benjamin was writing, European humanity again looked the ruins of war in the face, and knowledge of history as a desolate 'place of skulls' (*Schädelstätte*) was once more inescapable" (170).

It would be farfetched in the most egregious of ways to call Gibson an allegorist in the traditional sense. However, in *Pattern Recognition*, the constellation comprised of 9/11, Fetish:Footage:Forum, the footage, and mirror world functions allegorically in the Benjaminian sense. These elements, particularly in relation to one another, are

⁴⁶ Cf. Plate 6.5 in *Dialectics of Seeing*, which is a reproduction of *Hill of Skulls* (1917) by an anonymous German artist (169).

⁴⁷ Cf. Jane O. Newman, *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011).

structurally essential to the novel. Fredric Jameson notes, for example, that even though the footage provides the narrative framework of the novel, it is peripheral to the action:

[I]t ought already to have been clear that there is a striking and dramatic contradiction between style, as we have described it, and the footage itself, whose 'absence of stylistic cues' suggests a veritable Barthesian 'white writing'. Indeed, it is this very contradiction which is the deeper subject of *Pattern Recognition*, which projects the Utopian anticipation of a new art premised on 'semiotic neutrality', and on the systemic effacement of names, dates, fashions and history itself, within a context irremediably corrupted by those things. (3)

Taken this way, the footage is, itself, a "mirror-world," an uncanny reflection of the world as the characters think they want it: "Let us take first the uncanny effects associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish fulfillment, secret harmful forces, and the return of the dead," writes Freud ("The Uncanny" 154):

The extraordinary coincidence of wish and fulfillment, the most baffling repetition of similar experiences, in the same place or on the same date, the most deceptive sights of the most suspicious noises will fail to disconcert him or arouse in him any fear that might be called a fear of the "uncanny."
(154)

I will note here the absolute strangeness of setting a novel so soon after the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center -- and associating the protagonist so closely with the event -- and having no mention of Islam. This turns explicitly to the theme of mirror worlds and of objects standing in uncanny and contorted relation to one another.

Jameson argues that *Pattern Recognition* relates to 9/11 in part by constructing a "new world system," of which some parts are infinitely familiar and some, namely the aforementioned absence of Islam, seem like wish-fulfillment. Jameson describes the composition of the globalized mirror world Gibson constructs:

[T]he immense role [. . .] of Japan as the monitory semiotic combination of First-World science-and-technology with a properly Third World population explosion. Russia also looms large, but above all in the form of its various Mafias [. . .] which remind us of the anarchy and violent crime, as well as the conspiratorial networks and jobless futures, that lurk just beneath the surface of capitalism. It also offers a more contemporary drama of the breakneck deterioration of a country that had already reached parity with the First World. Europe's image ambiguity -- a kind of elegant museum or tourist playground which is also an evolutionary and economic dead end -- is instructive; and the absence of Islam is a welcome relief, in a moment in which it is reality rather than culture or literature, that is acting on the basis of that particular stereotype. (1-2)

America goes unmentioned when Jameson describes the world of *Pattern Recognition*, which seems an odd omission, given that Cayce uses America as the reality that mirror-world distorts, and given, also, that Cayce's cultural sensitivities -- her allergy to fashion and trademarks -- originates there:⁴⁸ "And why, she wonders, gazing blankly at more Hello Kitty regalia than seems possible, do Japanese franchises like Hello Kitty not

⁴⁸ "Tommy Hilfiger does it every time, although she thought she was safe now. They'd said he'd peaked in New York. Like Benetton, the name would be around, but the real poison, for her, would have been drawn. It's something to do with context, here, with not expecting it in London" (17-18).

trigger the interior landslide, panic attack, the need to invoke the duck in the face?" (148). Jameson suggests that Cayce's semiotic sensitivities are the result of mostly unnamed past traumas, only the most recent of which -- Win Pollard's disappearance on 9/11 -- is at issue in Gibson's novel.

In the opening sequence of the novel, Cayce describes the strangeness of waking in London as being in a mirror world: "Mirror-world. The plugs on appliances are huge, triple-pronged, for a species of current that only powers electric chairs, in America. Cars are reversed, left to right, inside; telephone handsets have a different weight, a different balance; the covers of paperbacks look like Australian money" (3). Later, when the subject comes up during a conversation with Boon Chu, she distills the concept of mirror world to "the difference" (108). When Boon argues that this stuff in London is just "more of our [American] stuff" (108), Cayce corrects him, saying,

"No [. . .] different stuff. That's why you noticed the vent. They invented that here, probably, and made it here. This was an industrial nation. Buy a pair of scissors, you got British scissors. They made all their own stuff. Kept imports expensive. Same thing in Japan. All their bits and pieces were different, from the ground up." (108)

It bears saying that, although London is the quintessential mirror world for Cayce, the manner in which Boon contests her definition, offering up "Bangkok. Asia somewhere" (108) as his notion of what a mirror world is, argues that, for him, stuff is what comprises the world, and, second, that mirror world must contain *not our stuff*. In other words, rather than the distorted reflection Cayce identifies, Boon's mirror world is not a mirror at all.

The insistant presence of mirror world -- even after Cayce's initial soul lag has resolved itself -- evokes a melancholy sense of disorientation.⁴⁹ "Mirror world," Cayce thinks, waking in Damien's flat:

The plugs on appliances are huge, triple pronged, for a species of current that only powers electric chairs, in America. Cars are reversed, left to right, inside; telephone handsets have a different weight, a different balance; the covers of paperbacks look like Australian money. (3)

Not only do objects and orientations seem strange -- for example, Cayce reports not having a mental map of London away from the underground train lines -- reversed, or distorted from Cayce's American norm, patterns of consumption are also slightly skewed. The many kinds of sugar available at the espresso counter in Harvey Nichol are characteristic of what Cayce calls "mirror world ingestion of archaic substances" (8):

⁴⁹ Of objects and melancholy, Schwenger writes,

Only in fiction can we experience so fully the transmigration into an object, and even there it is an anomaly. Less of an anomaly is a longing *toward* an object, a desire to *be* an object, and thus to exist outside the demands of being, to achieve the autonomy of Sartre's *en-soi*. To be sure, the object exists within the physical world, but the metaphysical world of interlinked uses and purposes is alien to it; the object does not participate in that world, it does not strive or desire. The desire is all on our part, and it may well lean to objects wistfully [. . .]

If we can never possess objects in this sense, outside of the realm of fiction, still we often revert to the feeling that objects are possessed, though by what it is not entirely clear to us [. . .] In the romantic period, the term *daemon* often refers to the temperament that drives an individual to its destiny -- a temperament that may be infused in the objects with which that individual chooses to be surrounded. Still the sense of a demonic malignancy in physical things cannot be dismissed. We regress to it every time an inanimate object remains stubbornly inanimate rather than responding to our will. The recalcitrant computer, the shoelace that refuses to come unknotted, the furniture that lies in wait to bruise our heel -- these restore in an instant the primitive, resentful sense that objects have a will of their own. (77)

"People smoke, and drink as though it were good for you, and seem still to be in some sort of honeymoon phase with cocaine. Heroin, she's read, is cheaper here than it's ever been, the market still glutted by the initial dumping of Afghani opium supplies" (8).

Another, similarly anomalous, characteristic of Jameson's account of *Pattern Recognition* is his assertion that the absence of Islam is somehow a relief. However, rather than relieving cultural anxiety, the absence of Islam is haunting, and more than passing strange. Indeed, the symbolic omission of large swaths of the world's population reads as threatening: Gibson uncomfortably disperses the fear resulting from the violence of the 9/11 hijackings onto other images and shadowy people:

Images called up by Damien's email. Heaps of Bone. That initial seventeen stories of twisted, impacted girder. Funeral ash. That taste in the back of her throat. And she is here, in this apartment, recently invaded by some shadowy figure or figures. Dorotea as corporate spook? The woman in the mirror, lips foamed with toothpaste, shakes her head. Hydrophobia. (79-80)

Damien, recall, is shooting a documentary in Russia, the subject of which is a rite of passage undertaken by young Russian men, who "excavate the side of some of the largest, longest-running, and most bitterly contested firefights of WWII" (74). Although he calls this film his version of the footage, Damien's project, rooted as it is in unearthing artifacts from a specific location (rather than cyberspace) and responding as it does to a specifically delineated military conflict (rather than in shadowy acts of violence), stands in ironic contrast to Cayce's quest through cyberspace, across Europe and Asia, after the maker of the footage and its meaning.

And, thus, we return to mourning. More specifically, we return to the images of mourning that pile up, emblem upon emblem, horror upon horror. Bone. Twisted metal. Ash. The horror of sadness. What this accumulation of images, paired with the terror of home invasion and being spied on alongside the ordinary domesticity of Cayce brushing her teeth, says is that mourning is a melancholic horror show, uncanny at its very heart.

It would not be unreasonable to consider the narrative arc of *Pattern Recognition* as an imperfect resolution of mourning, a story of mourning structured, first, by the mystery of Win Pollard's disappearance, and, second, by the material conditions in which Cayce allows the mourning to take place. Although the mystery of the footage provides the reason for Cayce's various travels in *Pattern Recognition*, Win Pollard's disappearance provides the background for Cayce's interior travels. For much of the first two-thirds of the novel, Cayce avoids the mention of her father's death. She meets Dorotea's question about whether it is still sad in New York following the World Trade Center attacks with a silence that reads as discomfort, particularly in the awkwardness and undercurrent of violence that underpins Cayce's relationship with Dorotea throughout the novel (13-14). Here, in the beginning of the novel, Cayce "feels bad energy brush past her as Dorotea returns to her seat" (14), and this ephemeral bad energy is characteristic of the acute but vague discomfort that characterises the interactions between the characters in the first part of the novel.

In order to deal with the weighty mystery of her father's disappearance, in order to function amidst shadowy home invasions and assaults on her psyche, she coats herself in the psychological prophylaxis of the footagehead community, engaging with a virtual reality to protect herself from the present one. After she returns to Damien's flat and finds

that someone has broken into it, after she secures the perimeter, Cayce returns to her father's lessons:

Psychological prophylaxis, she thinks he called it. Get on with ordinary business. Maintain morale. How many times has she turned to that, in the past year or so? [. . .] Not the first time she's used F:F:F that way. She wonders, really, if she ever uses it any other way. It is the gift of "OT," Off Topic. Anything other than the footage is Off Topic. The world, really. News. Off Topic. (48)

Through the first parts of the novel, Cayce frequently uses the Off Topic in order to distract herself from unpleasantness, whether that unpleasantness takes the form of her absent father, or whether it takes the form of home invaders to her friend's flat.

What i mean by the material conditions under which Cayce allows herself to mourn Win plays out in the way she "unforgets her father's absence" in the hotel room in Tokyo. She can think of him, of his disappearance, now, in Tokyo "because the Japanese sunlight, with the robotic drapes fully open, seems to come from some different direction entirely" (137). Unlike when she's in London, when the mirror world reminds her of her New York world, Cayce allows herself, in this morning in her hotel room, to remember both her father's mysterious disappearance and its connection to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Cayce summarizes:

Since there was no known reason for [Win] having been in New York that particular morning, there was no reason to assume he would have been in the vicinity of the World Trade Center. But Cynthia, Cayce's mother,

guided by voices, had been certain from the start that he had been a victim.
(138)

Even as she allows herself to remember it, she encases the narrative of her father's disappearance in a fraught and overdetermined image:

Cayce herself had been in SoHo that morning, at the time of the impact of the first plane, and had witnessed a micro-event that seemed to have announced, however privately and secretly, that the world itself had at that very instant taken a duck in the face.

She had watched a single petal fall, from a dead rose, in the tiny display window of an eccentric Spring Street dealer in antiques. (138)

Describing the aftermath of the attacks, which she compares to "watching one of her own dreams on television" (140), calling the experience "Some vast and deeply personal insult to any ordinary notion of interiority" and "An experience outside of culture" (140), she recalls:

There had been a smell, in the weeks after, like hot oven cleaner, catching at the back of the throat. Had it ever gone entirely away? [. . . .]

When the psychosomatic oven cleaner starts to stage a comeback, it's time to do more things, preferably purposeful things, to unremember.
(142-43)

That Cayce is in Japan, not London and not New York, when she begins to think explicitly about her father's death connects Cayce's remembrance of Win, her mourning for him, to the overall narrative arc of the novel.

Tellingly, Japan also relates to Cayce's allergy to branding -- specifically to the possibility of its resolution. As Jameson argues, Cayce's brand allergy seems connected to unnamed traumas in her past, only one of which, Win's disappearance, is at issue in *Pattern Recognition*. From the very beginning of the novel, when Cayce encounters the Tommy Hilfiger section in Harvey Nichol -- and more obviously when she finds the Michelin Man doll on Damien's door and when Dorotea shows her his image -- this brand allergy is clearly debilitating. However, when Cayce is in Japan, after she has spent part of a morning thinking about her father, Cayce wanders through the Hello Kitty section of Kiddyland:

And why, she wonders, gazing blankly at more Hello Kitty regalia than seems possible, do Japanese franchises like Hello Kitty not trigger interior landslide, panic attack, the need to invoke the duck in the face?

She doesn't know. It just doesn't [. . .] And none of this stuff, purest no-content marketing, triggers Cayce in the least. (148)

The non-triggering effect of the Hello Kitty marketing juggernaut, occurring as it does soon after Cayce has both unforgotten and unremembered Win's disappearance, foreshadows the ultimate resolution of Cayce's allergy, which takes place after Cayce has been provided proof of the circumstances of Win's disappearance:

She still has the iBook but never uses it for mail. She keeps it under the hotel bed, along with the Louis Vuitton attaché, which, though she'd never buy or carry one, now causes her no discomfort at all. Nor had a section full of Tommy in Galleries Lafayette the week before, and even the Michelin Man now registers as neutral. (366)

Gibson provides little context for this resolution. Indeed, it occurs a little too tidily, a little too abruptly following the novel's climax. I've associated the disappearance of Cayce's allergy with the resolution of the mystery of Win's death -- rather than, for example, the beginning of her romance with Parkaboy⁵⁰ -- because, it occurs just after she receives a detailed account of her father's last morning (354, 359). Win's unresolved disappearance has structured *Pattern Recognition*, providing the background against which the novel's plot takes place.

Throughout the novel the footage epitomizes the timelessness and semiotic neutrality to which Cayce is drawn because, we are led to believe, of her allergy to branding:

They are dressed as they have always been dressed, in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understands. The difficulty of that. Hairstyles too [. . .] There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful. (23)

The notion of (un)timeliness will be of a more central importance to the next chapter; however, for the time being, i would like to highlight the connection of this passage to the theme of history -- and its corresponding lack -- in *Pattern Recognition*. Cayce, in particular, spends most of the novel in search of the ahistorical, the amemorial. Speaking about history and [of how the future will think of her present] this phrase is unclear,

⁵⁰ It should be noted that these aren't the only possible explanations for the sudden and unexpected resolution of Cayce's allergy. Katherine McNally, Cayce's erstwhile therapist, notes, "[t]here definitely are, in the literature, instances of panic disorders being relieved through the incidence of critical event stress, although the mechanism is far from understood" (365).

Cayce says, "I only know that the one constant in history is change: The past changes. Our version of the past will interest the future to about the extent we're interested in whatever past the Victorians believed in. It simply won't seem very relevant" (59).

Allegories are not timeless, Benjamin claims. Indeed, they are always untimely; they always arrive just a little too late, or a fraction of a second too early: "Allegories become dated, because it is part of their nature to shock," writes Benjamin:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say, it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. (183-84)

Allegory, in the final chapter of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, is the trope that connects mourning, objects, and memory: "But if nature has always been subject to the power of death," writes Benjamin, "it is also true that it has always been allegorical" (166). Nature, or nature-history (natural history), is an epistemological category Benjamin uses to undermine "Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment conceptions of human history, anchored in categories of human freedom and historical teleology" (Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, 3). Melancholy is really all about the objects. Schwenger makes the link as follows in the introduction to *The Tears of Things*: One's perception of objects, he notes "always falls short of full possession" and this

"gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately for the subject"

(2).⁵¹

⁵¹ If it seems strange to have written so much on the subject of epistemology in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* without addressing in any substantial way the prologue thereto, I've done so primarily because the theory of allegory Benjamin develops runs counter to the theory about the origin of ideas Benjamin develops therein: "Part of the complexity of the prologue," writes Beatrice Hanssen, "stems from the fact that it engages with methodological concerns, but combines such 'profane' intentions with theological ones" ("Philosophy," 811):

Such a merger of intentions is apparent when Benjamin reinterprets the doctrine of ideas along cabalistic lines, to define the Idea not as *eidos* but as the divine Word, suggesting that the profane form of origin must be thought in relation to a divine origin. (811)

Thus, claims Hanssen, *Naturgeschichte* takes on a meaning in the epistemo-critical prologue entirely apart from its connection to allegory in the later chapters of the *habilitation*. In the prologue, the theory of natural history

led into an analysis of the historical modality that qualified the artwork and aesthetic forms and that Benjamin carefully demarcated from human and world history (*Weltgeschichte*) no less than from historicist ventures to map its course in art history (*Kunstgeschichte*). (*Walter Benjamin's Other History* 23)

Chapter 5:

Objects out of Time: Benjamin's Messianic Materialist History

People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually, from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff.

-Steven Moffat, "Blink"

But since history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity. In this moment, time must be brought to a standstill.

-Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'"

In Chapter Four, I took up the confluence of mourning, memory, and objects in Benjamin's theory of allegory, and I did so, in part, by way of Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition*. In this chapter, I would like to expand on the claim I made therein, that the above-named constellation constitutes a theory of knowledge opposed to the prevailing Enlightenment model thereof, by, first, considering the untimely in relation to history and memory in both Gibson's novel and Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." I will then take up the question of the role of things -- of *materials* -- in this highly abstract essay. Finally, I will consider the city as a locus for the very non-subjective memory of which I've been writing.

When I approached *Pattern Recognition* in Chapter Four, I was primarily concerned with the uncanny nature of knowledge and memory as Cayce experiences them in the present, a phenomenon that Gibson includes under the rubric of mirror-world, which I read, in part, as both contingent on and reflective of Cayce's experience of her own traumatic memories. In this context, I mentioned briefly the prevailing sense of untimeliness that attaches itself to the footage, itself an uncanny mirror to reality, particularly as it relates to Cayce's fascination with the fashions worn by the actors in the

segments. The actors are dressed, Gibson writes, "as they have always been dressed, in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understand. The difficulty of that" (24). Timelessness contributes to the aura of mystery that surrounds the footage and the footage's maker. The male character "might be a sailor, stepping onto a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful" (24). Beyond being utterly masterful, this uncertainty highlights the non-linear nature of the footage's narrative; however, the absence of cues -- particularly when the outward signs cease to be decipherable -- also gestures toward a certain historical interchangeability: "The girl wears a longer coat, equally dark, but seemingly of fabric, its shoulder padding the subject of hundreds of posts. The architecture of padding a woman's coat should yield possible periods, particular decades, but there has been no agreement, only controversy" (24).

The prevailing sense of untimeliness, of historical and mnemonic dislocation, caused by the erasure of the usual outward markings of historical period attaches itself not only to the footage but also to the material world of the novel, intensifying the uncanniness of memory and history. In relation to the erasure -- for such absence of historical signifiers can only be the result of deliberate erasure -- of outward markings of historical periods, in none of the descriptions of footage segments is any piece of technology mentioned. This contrasts particularly to the present world of the novel, where technology is so much in evidence as to be ubiquitous.

The ambiguity of fashion in the footage segments is particularly evocative given Cayce's own anti-fashion aesthetic, which, itself, is chosen to efface the specificities of historical origin:

CPUs. Cayce Pollard Units. That's what Damien calls the clothing she wears. CPUs are either black, white, or gray, and ideally seem to have come into this world without human intervention.

[. . .] She can only tolerate things that could have been worn, to a general lack of comment, during any year between 1945 and 2000. She's a design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti whose very austerity periodically threatens to spawn its own cult. (8-9)

In addition to the austere illusion of being a design-free zone -- even the most austere aesthetic has been conceived, designed, and produced by people of things that once looked other than they do now -- the start and end dates of the clothing Cayce is willing to wear are bookended by World War II, the emblematic trauma of the twentieth century, and the terrorist attacks that, for America, became an emblematic trauma that signaled the transition from twentieth to twenty-first century. This latter event, the attack on the World Trade Center, in particular haunts Cayce's fascination with the footage as well as her travels.

In relation to this and to the mirror world, i would like to note two key contiguities between the footage, its creation, and the present world of the novel. First, Cayce's violent loss of her father in the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 is uncannily doubled in Stella and Nora's loss of their parents in a bombing in Leningrad. In the first part of her initial, tentative email to the footage's maker, Cayce succinctly narrates her

personal history: "I'm sitting on the grass in a park in London," she writes. "It's sunny and warm. I'm 32 years old. My father disappeared on September 11, 2001, in New York, but we haven't been able to prove he was killed in the attack" (264). For Cayce, the uncertainty surrounding her father's disappearance drives her interest in the footage as well as the personal dimension of her search for the maker: "All through that winter, the mildest she'd known in Manhattan, though in memory the darkest, she'd gone to F:F:F -- to give herself to the dream" (265). The footage and the F:F:F community, she writes,

became very important to me, to all of us there. Parkaboy and Ivy and Maurice and Filmy, all the others too. We went there whenever we could, to be with other people who understood [. . .] Do you know we're all here, waiting for the next segment? Wandering up and down the web all night, looking for where you've left it for us? We are. Well, not me personally, lately, but that's because I seem to have followed Parkaboy's advice and started to find another way to hack in. (265-66)

This making physical of ephemeral space has, as I noted in Chapter Four, a melancholy quality, a nightly repetition of lostness and a displacement of mourning.⁵² However, what

⁵² Consider the scene in which Cayce, having returned to Damien's flat, finds that it's been broken into. She reflects on the nature of what her father would have called "[p]sychological prophylaxis" and how F:F:F has served that purpose for her in the winter following his disappearance (48):

Hard to know what that would consist of, here and now, but then she thinks of F:F:F and the frenzy of posts the new footage would have generated. She'll make a pot of tea-sub, cut up an orange, sit cross-legged on Damien's carpet, and see what's going on. Then she'll decide what to do about Asian Sluts and Dorotea Benedetti.

Not the first time she's used F:F:F that way. She wonders, really if she ever uses it any other way. It is the gift of "OT," Off Topic. Anything other than the footage is Off Topic. The world, really. News. Off Topic. (48)

is important here is the way Stella articulates the relation of the footage to hers and Nora's loss of their parents and to Nora's serious injury. During her lengthy recovery period, Nora has access to editing equipment and security footage:

When she looked at those images, she focused. When the images were taken away, she began to die again. He taped two hours of this, and ran it on the editing deck. She began to cut it. To manipulate. Soon she had isolated a single figure. A man, one of the staff. They brought him to her, but she had no reaction. She ignored him. Continued to work. One day I found her working on his face, in Photoshop. That was the beginning.
(299)

When they meet in the Moscow cafe, Stella tells Cayce a similar story of violent annihilation, of being a witness to her parents' assassinations:

our parents died. A bomb. In Leningrad. My sister and I, my mother as well, lived in Paris. Nora studied film, of course. I business. My father would not have us in Russia. The dangers. He worked for his brother, my uncle, who had become a powerful man. He told us in Paris we should be prepared never to return. But our grandmother died, his mother, and we returned for the funeral [. . .] The bomb is in a tree, as we leave the house, all of us in black, to the funeral. They detonate it with a radio. (296-97)

Rhetorically, the repetition that they were on the way to the funeral and the shift in Stella's narration from the past to the present tense not only indicate an ongoing

traumatization; these rhetorical strategies also invite Cayce to, herself, witness the trauma.

In spite of the uncertainty surrounding Win Pollard's disappearance, Cayce notes in retrospect that she ought to have known something catastrophic was occurring. She "had witnessed a micro-event, that seemed in retrospect to have announced, however privately and secretly, that the world itself had at that very instant taken a duck in the face" (138):

She had watched a single petal fall, from a dead rose, in the tiny display window of an eccentric Spring Street dealer in antiques [. . . .]

The fall of the petal, and somewhere a crash, taken perhaps as some impact of large trucks, one of those unexplained events in the sonic backdrop of lower Manhattan. Leaving her the sole witness to this minute fall. (139)

Bearing witness to violent annihilation in the immediate past links Cayce to Stella and Nora. It also links New York to Leningrad and Moscow, and large scale destruction links these to London and Tokyo. Indeed, on returning to London from Tokyo, Cayce notes that the two are remarkably similar, suggesting, in her reflections, that the two are connected, uncanny doubles, mirror worlds to one another:

After Tokyo, everything here feels so differently scaled. A different gauge of model railroad. Though, if asked, she'd have to admit that the two have something mysteriously in common. Perhaps if London had been built, until the war, primarily of wood and paper, and then had burned the way

Tokyo had burned, and then been rebuilt, the mystery she'd always sensed in the streets would remain somehow, coded in steel and concrete. (184)

All these places and stories are pulled into the footage via the image of an M18A1 Claymore anti-personnel mine, coded not in steel and concrete but embedded in a segment of the footage, and which Gibson implies is connected to the Leningrad bombing. On running the embedded image through a database, Musashi finds that, although it appears at first to be a map, the image matches part of an American-made, remote-firing anti-personnel mine developed during World War II: "Except this branch with the ragged edge," writes Parkaboy of the image, "this looks exactly like one specific part in the manual arming mechanism of the US army's M18A1 Claymore mine [. . . .] Used for ambushes, remotely detonated. Looks sort of like an overweight but very compact satellite video-dish, rectangular and slightly concave" (284). Not only are the mine's purpose -- ambush⁵³ -- and method -- remote detonation -- identical to the attack on the Volkovs, but the way in which Parkaboy describes the mine's effects -- "When the C4 goes off, the balls come out in a 60° pattern that expands to six feet; anything closer than 170 feet (with trees or foliage in the way, mileage may vary) is thereby made hamburger" (284) -- echo those of the attack in question.

Perhaps the most striking image of untimeliness in "On the Concept of History" is Benjamin's exegesis of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. This most famous of theses reads, in part, as follows:

It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth open, his wings are spread. This is

⁵³ Ironically, the field manual for the Claymore states that the mine's primary uses is defensive ("Field Manual" npg).

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

The *Angelus Novus* encounters the teleology of positivist history as if it were a disaster. His silent horror in the face of wreckage, about which he can do nothing in spite of his impossible, untimely desire to redeem the past.

Felman, among others, has drawn a direct link between fascism and positivist models of history: "History in Nazi Germany is Fascist," she writes in her essay "Benjamin's Silence." She continues,

Fascism legitimates itself in the name of national identity on the basis of a unity and of a continuity of history. The philosophical tenets of this view are inherited from nineteenth-century historicism, which has equated temporality with progress, in presupposing time as an entity of natural development, progressively enhancing maturation and advancing toward a betterment as time (and history) go by. (209)

In Felman's reading of "On the Concept of History," the thrust of history, as opposed to historicism, moves toward redemption rather than progress: "Redemption is

discontinuity, disruption. It names the constant need to catch up with the hidden reality of history that always remains a debt to the oppressed, a debt to the dead of history, a claim the past has on the present," she writes (211). This debt the past holds against the present, this imperative that the past be somehow redeemed, is fundamentally untimely in the very instant such a claim is uttered.

"On the Concept of History," and particularly Thesis IX, presents history as a disaster, an ubiquitous structural trauma. Maurice Blanchot, in his *The Writing of the Disaster*, ongoingly considers this cultural experience of structural disaster. Of particular relevance to Benjamin's passage on the *Angelus Novus* is Blanchot's reflection on the powerlessness of the witness to a disaster:

Watching is not the power to keep watch -- in the first person; it is not a power, but the touch of powerlessness infinite, exposure to the other of the night, where thought renounces the vigor of vigilance, gives up worldly clear-sightedness, perspicacious mastery, in order to deliver itself to the limitless deferral of insomnia, the wake that does not waken. (49)

In this text, Blanchot situates what he calls the disaster as a function of writing. This is not so different from Benjamin, for whom historical materialism is a matter of articulation and illumination: "Articulating the past historically," Benjamin writes, "does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast to that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger"

(391).⁵⁴ Even as writing stands in for time, untimely, always to come and always passed, there is a fissure of thingness running throughout Benjamin's essay and Blanchot's book.

Time, writes Elizabeth Grosz in *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, is neither a thing in itself, nor is it a metaphysical abstraction: "It is a kind of evanescence that appears only at those moments when our expectations are (positively or negatively) surprised. We can think [time] only when we are jarred out of our immersion in its continuity, when something untimely disrupts our expectations" (5). It is precisely this untimely disruption to which Benjamin attempts to fasten the revolutionary potential of materialist history:

The saying that the historian is a prophet facing backward can be understood in two ways. Traditionally it has meant that the historian, transplanting himself in the remote past, prophesies what was regarded as the future at that time but meanwhile has become the past [. . .] But the saying can also be understood to mean something quite different: the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer's gaze is kindled by

⁵⁴ Cf. *The Arcades Project*. In "Convolut N," Benjamin writes,

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

And, again:

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point [. . .] Only dialectical images are genuinely historical -- that is, not archaic -- images. The image that is read -- which is to say the image in the now of its recognizability -- bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (462-63)

the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further into the past [. . .] It is precisely this concept of present which underlies the concept of genuine historiography (N8a, 3; N12a, 1). Someone who pokes about in the past as if rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies still has no inkling of how much in a given moment depends on its being made present.

("Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'" 405)

Grosz draws on Charles Darwin's writings on evolution, which she characterizes as "the emergence in time of biological surprise" (19), observing that "Time inhabits all living beings in relations of simultaneity and succession with each other insofar as they are all participants in a single temporality, in a single, relentless movement forward" (5).

Consider this single temporality, consider time's relentless march forward, in relation to the *Angelus Novus* vignette in "On the Concept of History." In this image, which has come to emblemize the confluence of materialist history with the redemption of the past, the weak messianic power to which Benjamin explicitly refers comes to fruition:

The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there the echo of the now silent ones? Don't the women we covet have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on

which the past has claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this. (390, original emphasis)

There are, first, two allusions to which i'd like to draw your attention. The opening to this passage, particularly the reference to a breath of air, recalls the famous description of aura in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."⁵⁵ The second allusion to which i would like to draw your attention is the notion that the claim the past has on the present "cannot be settled cheaply."

This statement recalls the passage in "A Berlin Chronicle" wherein Benjamin claims that the "I" cannot be sold for cheap. "If I write," Benjamin writes in "A Berlin Chronicle," "better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years' observance of one little rule: never use the word 'I except in letters" (603). The result of this is that when he is asked to write "in a loosely subjective form," he finds it difficult to summon forth the subject that has so long been in the wings (603). He attributes this difficulty as follows:

[I]t relied on a ruse -- so successfully that I believed a retrospective glance at what Berlin had become for me over the years would be an appropriate "preface" to such glosses. If the preface has now far exceeded the space originally allotted to the glosses, this is not only the mysterious work of remembrance -- which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been -- but also, at the same time, the precaution of the subject represented by the "I," which will not be sold cheap. (603)

⁵⁵ I will consider this description more fully in Chapter Six; however, i draw your attention to it now in order to raise the possibility of aura's connection to materialist history.

The present's redemption of the past crops up throughout Benjamin's *oeuvre*. For example, in his early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," he writes that the mythical fall of humans is dramatized by the devolution of pure language into many languages, and that all language seeks to redeem itself by echoing this Godly language: "Things have no proper name except in God," he writes. "For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names" (73). Here, Benjamin not only makes a point about the hope for redemption that inheres in all languages, but he also -- and more importantly -- makes explicit the relation between (abstract) pure language and the world. Language has called the world into being. Benjamin makes a similar point in "The Task of the Translator": "A real translation [. . .] does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original more fully" (260). The analogy Benjamin uses to describe the nature of pure language -- that it is the messianic fulfillment of language⁵⁶ -- is particularly telling. He writes, in the opening pages of "The Task of the Translator," that "One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it" (254). Unforgettability, then, inheres in two realms, each of them unrelated to human memory. First, unforgettability speaks to the

⁵⁶ Translations, he writes, are apocalyptic. They reach toward the revelatory, the messianic:

In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux -- until it is able to emerge as the pure languages from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning [. . .] If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language [.] (257)

nature of the event or the life itself; second, the statement that an event or a life is unforgettable indexes an outside of human space-time in which that nature is fulfilled:

If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgotten, that predicate would imply not a falsehood but merely a claim unfulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it *is* fulfilled: God's remembrance. (254, original emphasis)

While neither "On Language as Such" nor "The Task of the Translator" is particularly invested in exploring materiality or objects, that they continue to resonate in Benjamin's later essays speaks to the alliance Benjamin forms between the mystical and the material in "On the Concept of History."

While he doesn't phrase it explicitly in terms of time or language, at least not at first, Benjamin forges, from the opening sentences of "On the Concept of History," a strange collaboration between the messianic -- or, the theological -- realm and the material one. He sees the analogy of an automated chess machine, the automated portion of which appears to be a puppet, which responds to every human player's moves. Appearances, however, mask reality, which is that the "automated" chess puppet is, in fact, controlled by an ugly hunchback dwarf: "One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this apparatus," writes Benjamin. "The puppet, called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and must keep out of sight" (389). This implies, first, that there is a teleological imperative behind Benjamin's theory -- that materialist history must prevail; and, second, in this opening, Benjamin implies that materialist history does the bidding of theology: "History deals with

connections and with arbitrarily elaborated causal chains," writes Benjamin in "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'": "But since history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself, in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity. In this moment, time must be brought to a standstill" (403). The object of history must become time, a moment. Teleological though its aims are, the alliance between materialist history and theology presents the queerest, most untimely of possible theologies: Indeed, time, itself, must stop in order for history to fulfill its promise.

"If history," writes Felman, "despite its spectacular triumphal time, is thus barbarically, constitutively conflict ridden, the historian is not in possession of a space in which to be removed, detached, 'objective'; the philosopher of history cannot be an outsider to the conflict" (210). Felman phrases this complicity between the historian and the philosopher of history and the narratives imposed on them by powerful historical actors in terms of bodily lacks. First, Benjamin's theory of "history as trauma" is founded on enforced silence -- the silence of those oppressed by history and the silence of official history with regard to those it silences:

History [. . .] is thus inhabited by a historical unconscious related to -- and founded on -- a double silence: the silence of the "tradition of the oppressed," who are by definition deprived of voice and whose story [. . .] is always systematically reduced to silence; and the silence of official history -- the victor's history -- with respect to the tradition of the oppressed. (213)

Voicelessness, and its corollary, deafness, inhere in the structure of historiography. The voice of authority is, as Felman claims, deafening (210). Unlike, however, the silence that the victors choose to impose on the oppressed and on themselves, the "legacy of deafness" transmitted by history is structural, unchosen (210). The voice with which history speaks, its authoritativeness,

makes us unaware of the fact that there remains in history a claim, a discourse that we *do not hear*. And in relation to this act of deafening, the rulers of the moment are the heirs of the rulers of the past. History transmits, ironically enough, a legacy of deafness in which historicists unwittingly share. What is called progress, and what Benjamin sees only as a piling of catastrophe upon catastrophe, is therefore the transmission of historical discourse from ruler to ruler, from one historical instance of power to another. (210)

Power reproduces itself, unconsciously, supported by silence and by deafness.

If the thing has seemed too often to be lost in metaphorical abstraction, even -- or, perhaps especially -- in the Marxist-influenced readings of the materialism in materialist history, i would like to return briefly to Bevan's *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, with which i began my argument against the way we think about things. While i continue to disagree with the way Bevan reduces objects to mnemonic devices, useful primarily in prompting people's memories, it seems useful at this juncture to return to real objects and the way they serve to construct history. Bevan writes,

[B]uildings gather meaning to them by their everyday function, by their presence in the townscape and by their form. They can have meaning

attached to them as structures or, sometimes, simply act as containers for meaning and history. Each role invokes memories. We are not talking a Proustian subtlety of scent, taste and texture, here, although architecture can certainly have these evocative subtleties. But it remains true that the mere sight of a building [. . .] can be an instant memory-jerker. Equally, the sheer familiarity of a street, an unconscious sense of a particular degree of enclosure, its sunny side, a familiar turn, can create a rootedness in a place and an affiliation with the locale and its community. (npg)

It is perhaps the poet or the dreamer who arrives at Heathrow Airport and, for the first time, feels entirely at home -- disoriented and jet-lagged, of course, but unclenched, at ease. I was, for the first time in my memories, not searching or reaching for something; this place felt written in my bones. I was, for the first time, not awkwardly out of place, even though I was nearly run over every time I tried to cross the street. Look Right, though it appears on the sidewalk at many intersections, loses its meaning when you don't remember what you're looking for. ("Look Right for Traffic" would be a clearer sign.) The juxtaposition of old buildings and statues, some older than i'd ever seen, and new ones only contributed weight to this familiarity. And, yet, i could not possibly have been remembering anything, because i'd never before been to London, because my ancestral culture -- French and Irish, if that matters -- stands in opposition to London's consummate Britishness, because outside of the Underground, i did not, for one minute, know where i was nor how to get where i was going.

This is the weight of a past that has occurred, that continues, daily, to occur, and that i, with the exception to two weeks in the early fall of 2009, cannot say that i

remember, a past that is, of course, familiar to me in respects but ciphered in others. I encountered this past, not in museums nor in galleries nor at Stonehenge or Traitors' Gate, but in far more ordinary places, walking. I can say of this feeling, in retrospect, only that it was comforting, this weight of others' steps. I felt accompanied, even when i was lost, to know that the streets on which i walked had been walked on by millions of others, that the stones beside the stairs had been worn away by millions more. This is, of course, too fanciful a thought. Nonetheless, i was surrounded not by the mere thought of people's memories, but by the material traces thereof: this groove eroded by countless fingers; this piece of graffiti, worn to illegibility by years and light and touch. These are not my memories. I remember nothing. And yet, here i am, surrounded by memory.

In his novel, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino meditates on the confluence of memory and history in place: "I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways," he writes, in the guise of Marco Polo addressing Kublai Khan, "and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past" (113). Calvino, here and throughout *Invisible Cities*, presents a conception of what architecture is and what it can do that opposes Bevan's. Far from being so important to memory and to affect -- and even to knowledge -- that any alteration in its fixity is catastrophic to memory, the essence of a city does not consist in buildings and streets that do not change. To speak of those things as though they are eternal is equivalent to saying nothing. Rather, Calvino posits a relationship between present space -- and that which inhabits (and will inhabit) it -- and history that comprises the essence of the city. What strikes me

as crucial to this observation is that the city itself is not merely an encryption of history; it does not merely hold memories for those who would inhabit or visit the city. Their memories are their own, just as the city's memories are its own.

Conclusion:

Of Weight: The Ethics of Object-Memory

I ended the previous chapter with an account of a city's weightiness, of how the uncanny intersection of untimeliness and memory contributes thereto. While that may be the first time weight enters explicitly into my argument, each of the previous chapters have, in a manner of speaking, been weighted down. Objects bear weights that are not their own: for example, the weight of our expectations, the weight of the meanings we impose on them, the weight of imposed emptiness and blankness, the weight of our mourning. That these are metaphorical weights in no way diminishes their potency. It will be my contention in the following chapter that aura lends this metaphorical weight to objects.

In much of the writing on aura, the concept is treated paradoxically as one of Benjamin's "most significant, or least overlookable, contributions to cultural theory" but also as a confusing and contradictory motif that, outside of Benjamin's own *oeuvre*, bears no relevance in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century iterations of cultural studies (Leslie 147). At the start of her essay, "Benjamin's Aura," Miriam Bratu Hansen writes that "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 the question of aesthetics in the broadest sense -- this notion of aura is not particularly helpful" (337). The notion of aura at issue in Bratu Hansen's critique is a narrowly aesthetic version thereof, caused, she claims, by a "reductive reading" of Benjamin's Work of Art essay, particularly of the third version which was published in *Illuminations* under the title "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Indeed, Bratu Hansen argues that the version of aura advanced in Benjamin's Work of Art essay, far from being central to Benjamin's own conception of the concept, is largely a tactical presentation thereof, geared primarily toward carving out a place for aura in contemporary Marxist discussions:

[W]hatever it may have accomplished for Benjamin's theory of modernity, [the presentation of aura in the Work of Art essay] was not in the 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 [. . .] As Benjamin knew well, to corral the meanings of aura into the privileged sphere of aesthetic tradition -- and thus to 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. (337-38)

In order for aura to be *actually* relevant to current discussions, Bratu Hansen argues, the "broader anthropological, perceptual-mnemonic, and visionary dimensions" must be reintroduced to the concept (338). Although aura, in Benjamin's first published⁵⁷ writings

⁵⁷ Benjamin's first mention of aura, which went unpublished in his lifetime, has since appeared under the title "Protocols of Drug Experiments" in *On Hashish*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2006). Therein, he writes:

Bloch wanted to touch my knee gently. I could feel the contact long before it actually reached me. I felt it as a highly repugnant violation of my aura. In order to understand this, it is important to realize that this happens because, with hashish, all movements seem to gain intentionality, and are therefore unpleasant. (27)

Here, rather than situating aura in the realm of the aesthetic, as he does in "Little History of Photography" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility," Benjamin frames it as a bodily phenomenon, a tactile experience rather than a visual one. Aura

on the subject, is a concept firmly rooted in the aesthetic, much more is at stake in his identification of the decay of aura than the mere absence of such a visual experience: "[T]he aura," writes Bratu Hansen, "pertains to the medium of perception, naming a particular structure of vision [. . .] [A]ura implies a phenomenal structure that enables the manifestation of the gaze, inevitably refracted and disjunctive, and shapes its potential meanings" (342). Indeed, what concerns Benjamin, evident in the elements by which he conceptualizes aura -- are the metaphysical properties of the object: namely, the possibility of the object to reveal the truth.

What is aura, actually?

When Benjamin asks this question in "Little History of Photography," he has already described aura's experience as an effect of light, a "breathy halo that was sometimes captured" in early photographs (517) as well as something that, after 1880, could be simulated by suppressing darkness and by taking photographs with ever-faster lenses (517). By so linking the appearance of aura to an apparatus -- the camera -- Benjamin suggests that aura is an effect that must be produced. Thus, when he answers himself, claiming that aura is "a strange weave of space and time, the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be" (518), he means to go beyond the mere appearance in a photograph, beyond even the way it is produced. He means to ask what does aura mean now -- especially now that that we only know aura as it is in the process of decaying.

What is aura, actually?

reads here as the marker of the body's and the subject's integrity. That his aura is breached, even by a presumably trusted friend, is felt by Benjamin as a violation of his aura.

Benjamin's *actually* stands out in the question he asks, not in the sense that such phrasing would be used in English to denote truth or to emphasize a question or a statement, but in the sense of *Actualität*, which implies the current significance of a concept. Ester Leslie links *Actualität* to a conceptual break from notions of eternal value that characterized the Enlightenment. All of these aspects of aura -- its aesthetic connection to nostalgia, the artifice by which it is produced, its visual connection to the body and to subjectivity, its disintegration -- take up themes central to Benjamin's *oeuvre*.

With regard to Benjamin's *oeuvre*, I cannot emphasize often enough or strongly enough that aura must always be read beyond its appearance. Cadava locates aura as crucial to Benjamin's understanding of modernity:

To the extent that in Benjamin the experience of aura is always also an experience of its disintegration -- a disintegration in which photography is implicated -- we might say that this distance is written into a kind of rhythm or oscillation between a gaze that can return the gaze of another and one that cannot, between a thing that is becoming a person and a person becoming a thing. In other words, what is at stake here is the possibility of our understanding a gaze that both returns and does not return the gaze that comes to it from elsewhere, the process whereby persons and things are both like and different from one another at the same time. (120)

This much is clear in *Words of Light*: aura is the ethical lynchpin to Benjamin's thought.

The very nature of experience, of relations is bound up in what aura signifies.

In both "Little History of Photography" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility"⁵⁸ Benjamin follows this iconic definition of aura, that it is "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be" ("Little History" 518) with the description of a scene not included in the photographs he describes in either of these essays:

While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour becomes a part of their appearance -- this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. (518-19)

Forget for a moment that the most famous definition of aura describes it as the appearance of distance, however close the auratic object might be. Forget, too, that aura has henceforth, in each of the published essays, been a visually observed phenomenon, and that it can, according to Cadava and Carolin Duttlinger, among others, be observed only in its decay: "In literary, visual, and cultural studies," writes Duttlinger in "Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography,"

aura has become synonymous with the traditional work of art, whose contemplative experience is progressively eroded with the advent of modern media technology. Even in Benjamin's time, then, aura described a state that had already become obsolete. Aura is thus a concept coined with

⁵⁸ The first typescript (and second version) of the work of art essay from 1936 is the version Benjamin considered to be the authoritative one, and i will generally cite from its translation in Volume 3 of Benjamin's *Selected Writing*. All other versions of the essay will be cited with reference to their translators. Cf. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room for Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (2004): 3-45; and "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 337, n.2.

hindsight, describing an elusive phenomenon from the perspective of its disappearance. (80)

Forget, for a moment, tradition and metaphysics and phenomenology. Forget all this and then breathe. To breathe aura, as Benjamin suggests one could, endows aura with qualities beyond perception, beyond even the control of the most sophisticated of technological apparatus. While aura as an aesthetic category used to encapsulate a particular iteration of authenticity and presence in art is undoubtedly the most widely recognized of its uses, the aura i'm more interested in is an experiential and, indeed, an ethical weight. In the passage above, by emphasizing the connection of aura to time and to objects, Benjamin claims time to be at the core of our experience of objects.

If you'll forgive my repetition: in Chapter Three, i connected aura to the body and by extension to the world of things. It bears repeating that, even if we keep the repeated description of the experience of aura, itself rooted in the very possibility of a body's survival, Gumbrecht and Marrinan's assessment that aura is Benjamin's attempt to safeguard the body as the "yardstick for perception" is surprising,⁵⁹ because the body in the work of art essay is generally metonymic and abstract. There are certainly plenty of eyes and hands in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility." However, they are held separate from the masses who consume reproductions and whose desire to bring the work of art -- or the object -- ever closer hastens aura's decay. Furthermore, Benjamin makes a clear point, before he even begins to define aura that the human body as such, removed from all context, has never been the yardstick for perception: "The way in which human

⁵⁹ Indeed, to say that aura safeguard's the body's place as the yardstick for perception is even more surprising given that Benjamin associates aura not only with the body but also with objects and with memories, among other things.

perception is organized -- the medium in which it occurs -- is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (104), he writes. In other words, the perception doesn't occur because of the body, but because of the context in which the body is found.

The other way Benjamin encounters the human body in the work of art essay is via the photographic image. A portrait, writes Benjamin, is the last retrenchment of aura and a calcified relic of the past: "It is not accident that the portrait is central in early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from the early photographs for the last time" (108). What Benjamin says about the relation of the body's image to aura doesn't anchor aura to a bodily presence -- as it would if aura were a straightforward stand-in for authenticity -- but to the image thereof, not to our loved ones' presences in our lives but to our memories thereof.

Aura, in Benjamin's *oeuvre*, is a manifestation of memory: "If the distinctive feature of the image arising from *mémoire involontaire* is seen in their aura, then photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of a 'decline of aura' " ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 338). Benjamin makes much of Proustian *mémoire involontaire* in this essay on Baudelaire, particularly in the way in which through it, aura escapes the realm of the technological:

If we think of the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, seek to cluster around an object of perception, and if we call those associations the aura of that object, then the aura attaching to the object of a perception corresponds precisely to the experience which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself in long practice. (337)

When i cited this passage in Chapter 3, i did so alongside a description of Venice wherein Proust complains that *mémoire volontaire* is vapid and empty of meaning (338). It would seem by this confluence that aura separates voluntary and involuntary memory, that -- as i argued in Chapter Three -- aura must guarantee authenticity. There is, however, another association that i'd like to draw out. In this association, aura is associated with a particular Levinasian view of ethics:

What was inevitably felt to be inhuman -- one might even say deadly -- in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze. Inherent in the gaze, however is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met [. . .], there is an experience of aura in all its fullness [. . .] Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationships between humans and inanimate or natural objects. (338)

The photographed body belongs to an interrupted past and speaks to a speculative future. As Cadava notes,

[W]hat characterizes experience in general -- experience understood in its strictest sense as the traversal of a danger, the passage through a peril -- is that it retains no trace of itself: experience experiences itself as the vertigo of memory, as an experience whereby what is experienced is not experienced. For both Freud and Benjamin, consciousness emerges as memory begins to withdraw.

It is here that we can begin to register the possibility of a history which is no longer founded on the traditional modes of experience and reference. The notion of shock -- of a posthumous shock that coincides with the photographic event -- in fact requires that history emerge where our understanding of experience cannot. (103)

For Benjamin, history, like aura, "can only be grasped in its disappearance" (Cadava 104). Like a photograph, the flash of an event or a memory freezes in the moment that is already no longer, a moment that has, perhaps, forgotten itself. Aura, in the work of art essay, marks the body's passing, its leaving or its death, and, far from being the yardstick by which perception is measured, the human face that stares back from the photograph perceives nothing. It does, however, testify to that subject's presence in space and time.

This presence coincides with the ethical weight to which Lingis attaches reality in "The Weight of Reality." For Lingis, this question of weight as it pertains to ethics settles primarily on the disjunction between one's experience of one's own body and the body's weight as an "object of physics, biochemistry, anatomy, and physiology" (43) -- one's body, in other words, "as it appears to, exists for, others" (43):

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that consciousness posits objects before itself by distancing, differentiating itself from them, by making itself not an object. The eyes do not see themselves, the ears do not hear themselves, the hand touches things by not touching itself. But consciousness is located somewhere, at the focal point from which the field of objects is spread along lines of perspective. For consciousness, its body, is this unperceived

focal point. It is magically converted into an object by the gaze of another, acting at a distance -- a distance untraversable from me, infinite. (43)

Let us think weight, then, as an unbridgeable gap. I turn to fix you in my sights, and my gaze confers something; it adds to your weight:

For Levinas, who separates the claim of responsibility from the possibility of agency, responsibility emerges as a consequence of being subject to the unwilled address of the other [. . .] [I]t returns us not to our acts and choices but to the region of existence that is radically unwilled, the primary inaugurating impingement on me by the Other, one that happens to me, paradoxically, in advance of my formation as a "me" or, rather, as the instrument of the first formation of myself in the accusative case.

(Butler 85)

Butler argues here that, simply by turning to look, by pinning my gaze on you, i initiate a fundamentally unequal relationship. You are subject to me. It is subject to me.

There is, after all, as i indicated in Chapter 1, nothing in Butler's argument that precludes objects from being subjects in this way. To think of it another way, consider Maurice Blanchot's meditation on the intersection of subjectivity and ethics in *The Writing of the Disaster*. If subjectivity will continue to be useful in ethical discussions, we must think of it, he says, as follows:

The use of the word "subjectivity" is as enigmatic as the use of the word "responsibility" -- and more debatable. For it is a designation chosen, in a way, to preserve our portion of spirituality. Why subjectivity, if not in order to descend clear to the bottom of the subject without ever losing the

prerogative which the subject embodies, that private presence which the body, my sensate body, causes me to live as mine? But if so-called subjectivity is the other *in place* of me, it is no more subjective than objective; the other is without interiority. Anonymity is the name, and outside is the thought of the other; his hold on me is that of irrelevance and his time that of sheer return, just as the neutrality and passivity of dying would be his life, if it is true that the life of the other is that which must be welcomed by the gift of the ultimate, the gift of that which [. . .] is not -- mine -- to give. (27-28)

Neither subjectivity nor interiority can be legitimately conferred onto the other, nor, then, can those things be taken away. One ought, therefore, speak of "a *subjectivity without any subject*: the wounded space, the hurt of the dying, the already dead body which no one could ever own, or ever say of it *I, my body*" (30). This exchange of gazes, for Butler and for others influenced by Levinas, is the very foundation of ethics.

For Lingis, too, weight -- its reality as well as its metaphorical use -- is the stage of an ethical encounter. He dramatizes this weighty encounter by calling on the past. Our entire histories, our bodies, these weigh on the world:

Our past initiatives attained or aborted are definitively inscribed in the past, weighing on the world, materialized. They are also retained in our past, weighing on the direction and moment of the initiative we take. As we advance in time we are weighted down by our very commencements, initiatives, freedom. We feel the increasing effort required to break and commence anew, the increasing fatigue. This sense of being encumbered

with the weight of all our initiatives is the inner experience of aging. It is visible in wrinkles and scars, materialization [. . .] But in the inner experience of aging, our mortality is experienced as advancing materialization, our body turning into the immobility and weight of a corpse. (47)

Striking in the above passage is the similarity to Benjamin's presentation of allegory and memory -- materialized in the form of a corpse -- in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Equally striking, perhaps, is that the ethical call implicit in Lingis' essay is the call that echoes throughout Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* to re-orient ourselves, to incline ourselves toward, to bear another's weight: "Unable to restore a loss, we offer the support of our body to the weight of tormented grief" writes Lingis (47). It is not only to living non-things that we owe our support, though: "The weight of sleeping children we carry, of bodies wounded, fainted, in a coma, dead" (48). While the weight we bear seems to be all about the human body and the human subject for Lingis in "The Weight of Reality," the corpse -- as i noted it does in Chapter Three -- connects the human subject to the world of things.

The threat of technical reproduction is not, as Gumbrecht and Marrinan speculate, that "the fundamental parameters of perception itself might escape our physical bodies" (6). While Benjamin does not deny the effect of technology on perception, it would be inconsistent to say that he holds back his enthusiasm on the subject of technical reproduction because of those concerns. Benjamin notes that changes in perception manifest social and cultural upheaval:

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized -- the medium in which it occurs -- is conditioned not only by nature but by history [. . .] However far reaching their [Riegl and Wickhoff] insight [into the rise of the late-Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis], it was limited by the fact that these scholars were content to highlight the formal signature which characterized perception in the late-Roman times. They did not attempt to show the social upheavals manifested in these changes in perception [. . .] Today, the conditions for an analogous insight are more favorable. And if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood in the decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay. (104)

If Benjamin does not wholeheartedly endorse the advent of technological reproduction, he holds back his enthusiasm because, by sundering the work from its authentic presence in space and time, Benjamin was aware that the object's testamentary authority would diminish and society would find no suitable replacement as a focal point for collective memory.

In Chapter 3, I wrote that aura functions, in much of Benjamin's writing on the subject, as a guarantor of authenticity, and that, in this respect, the decay of aura entails a real loss. The loss implied by the decay of aura is, however, not limited to the object's testamentary function. Indeed, aura, as Benjamin writes in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," is experienced when the object returns our gaze: "Inherent in the gaze,"

writes Benjamin, "is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed" (338): "Where this expectation is met [. . .] there is the experience [*Erfahrung*] of aura in all its fullness" (338). Aura is, therefore, inherent not in the thing but in an ethical relation of a gaze returned: "Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between human and inanimate objects" (338). This gaze, attributed by Benjamin to inanimate objects, and returned, silently, corresponds he says, phrasing it in Proustian terms, "to the data of *mémoire involontaire*" (338). The above connection between *mémoire involontaire*, objects, and the gaze returned strikes me as the ethical nexus of aura.

Therefore, the decay of aura is a loss of memory. Such forgetting implies, among other things, a fundamental disjunction between the subject and the world s/he inhabits. This disconnection is at the heart of Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands' essay, "Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting." Fundamental to memory, she writes, is "a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world" (275). That relationship is mediated by the social, technological, and physical situation of the subject (275). At issue in this essay is not forgetting in general, not the sort of absent-mindedness that causes me to lose my keys at least twice a week or to lose my way in even the most familiar of places. Rather Mortimer-Sandilands is concerned with Alzheimer's disease and how having Alzheimer's alters or constrains one's relationship to the world. Alzheimer's "eradicates the [subject's] ability to create from the immediate world a new pathway that leads, eventually, into narrative or semantic longevity" (275). When memory retreats from the narrative to the kinesthetic realm, "[t]his does not mean there is no memory" (276). Instead this retreat characteristic of Alzheimer's disease "underscores the

embodiment of all memory and the inevitable involvement of place in the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social acts of remembering and forgetting" (283). The landscape, she posits, serves as a substitute for her mother's shrinking hippocampus: "It is almost as if she is allowing her surroundings to hold the thoughts she can't manage by herself," she observes (285). One of the effects of aura's decay is a forgetting that is precisely the opposite of the one Mortimer-Sandilands chronicles: rather than become more connected to the world, to objects, to movement, we retire further and further into narrative and image. The decay of aura thus disconnects us from our kinesthetic memories, from our connections to the objects to which we have entrusted and imposed our stories.

Technical reproduction, responsible -- in part -- for the aesthetic decay of aura, in the work of art essay, stands as a separate category from other, earlier forms of reproduction:

In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and finally by third parties in pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. (Benjamin, trans. Zohn, 218)

In his abbreviated summary of the history of reproduction, Benjamin notes that, with the advent of reproductive technologies, the creation, or the reproduction, of art was, for the first time, separated from the individual's talent or training and relegated, instead, to the realm of perception: "For the first time" in the history of art's production "photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial

reproduction -- the tasks now devolved onto the eye alone," he writes (102), continuing, "And since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was enormously accelerated, so that it now could keep pace with speech" (102). Art, in the time of its (effortless) reproducibility, hereby becomes a matter of speed. Indeed, the light of photography's writing not only keeps pace with speech, it overtakes it in the end. Light travels faster than sound. Cadava, writing on the confluence of aura, lightning, and memory, says:

Mobilizing the figures of lightning, writing, and the turning of pages in the direction of an understanding of life that begins with a departure from life, Benjamin suggests that a life measured by memory is lived not in the present but in a text. That this text can be understood photographically is suggested in a passage from his brief essay "On the Mimetic Faculty." There, evoking the mimetic capacity of language in terms of both flame and lightning, Benjamin alludes to photography's capacity to "create similarities" (*R* 333/ *GS* 2:210). (26)

What is aura, actually?

Aura is like -- like breath, like a halo, like a shift in perception, like lightning, like knowing, like metaphor.

In *Mapping Benjamin*, Gumbrecht and Marrinan engage in a somewhat mystifying argument about Benjamin's terminological choice. Aura, they argue, does Benjamin's aesthetic theory a disservice. They note that,

if we rely on Benjamin's famous definition of aura as "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be," it is indeed plausible

to suggest that he would have chosen, for this purpose, the concept of aureole (a halo around the entire body, especially the body of a saint), rather than the medical concept of aura. For, in its nonmetaphorical use, aura refers to "a curious sensation of a cool or warm breeze (aura eliptica), which starting from one end of the body passes through the same, and ends in the head or the hollow of the heart. (83)

By advocating the position that Benjamin's choice of terminology was flawed, Gumbrecht and Marrinan are not only arguing that, throughout the multiple revisions of the work of art essay, Benjamin didn't know what he was talking about; they are also changing the fundamental nature of the perception and the memory about which Benjamin spoke.

Indeed, aura has another medical, nonmetaphorical meaning that Gumbrecht and Marrinan do not cite. Since the seventeenth century, aura has been used to describe neurological symptoms that precede or accompany a migraine. The visual and other sensory distortions that characterized aura fall in line with the shifts in perception about which Benjamin was concerned.⁶⁰ While I am not trying to suggest that Benjamin was literally talking about a headache when he decided on aura to describe the unique semblance of distance on which Gumbrecht and Marrinan fixate. Rather, I cite this alternate medical definition to suggest that aura is not really so farfetched a way to encapsulate Benjamin's theory.

That aura is a unique appearance of distance may be Benjamin's most famous description of the concept. It is not, however, his only definition of aura. For example, in

⁶⁰ Cf. Oliver Sachs, *Migraine* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992).

"Convalut S [Painting, Jugendstil, Novelty]" Benjamin writes that Jugendstil -- "the second attempt on the part of art to come to terms with technology" (557) -- "forces the auratic" (557): "Never," he writes, "has the sun worn a more glorious auriole; never was the eye of man more radiant than with Fidus. Maeterlinck pushes the unfolding of the auratic to the point of its absurdity. The silence of the characters in his plays is one of its manifestations" (557). In this implied definition, the aureole that Gumbrecht and Marrinan suggest is an appropriate substitute for the term aura certainly plays a key part in what Benjamin describes; however, Benjamin declines to stop at its limits. Past the ordinary limits of the auriole, aura pushed to its absurdity, lies the unknown. Beyond the presence of light's halo, dark. Beyond memory, forgetting. Aura is both of these.

In conclusion, the aura of an object imbues that object with the force and potency of human ethics: "The person we look at, or who feels he is looked at, looks at us in turn," writes Benjamin:

To experience the aura of an object means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. This ability corresponds to the data of *mémoire involontaire*. (These data, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that involves the "unique apparition of a distance." (338)

Unlike the dead images, the calcified and formalized voluntary memories -- of Venice, say, as in Benjamin's example (338) -- marked by decaying aura, these things that can be made to look back at us cannot be captured.

Aura is like -- like a halo, like a glance, like a suspended moment, like the memory of a human face. By being like, aura connects one thing to another, one person

to another, a thing to a person, a memory to a way of being. Here, I return to the Baudelaire essay, take up again Benjamin's description of aura in the eleventh part thereof. Benjamin links, from the first sentence of this part, aura to *mémoire involontaire*:

If we think of the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, seek to cluster around an object of perception, and if we call those associations the aura of that object, then the aura of that object corresponds precisely to the experience [*Erfahrung*] which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice. (337)

Like the previous section of the essay, wherein Benjamin considers time in Baudelaire's *Le spleen de Paris*, like his emphasis on the *durée*, the ongoing nature of time and *mémoire involontaire*, indeed, like the landscape into which Benjamin inscribes aura in the Work of Art essay and in "Little History of Photography," aura seems at odds with photographic technique: "The advent of shock experience as an elemental force in everyday life in the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin suggests, transforms the entire structure of human existence," writes Cadava (102). While, he continues, the prevalence of shock in everyday life increased with the advent of many technologies, "he singles out photography and film as media that -- in their techniques of rapid cutting, multiple camera angles, instantaneous shifts in time and place -- raise the experience of shock to a formal principle" (102).

Benjamin returns again and again to *mémoire involontaire* and *durée* throughout "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." These are the aspects of experience, integral to the structure of memory that are "decisive for the philosophical structure of experience"

(314). Thus he prefaces his reading of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, of which he writes:⁶¹

[T]he historical determination of memory is not at all Bergson's intention. on the contrary, he rejects any historical determination of memory. He thus manages to stay clear of that experience from which his own philosophy evolved, or, rather, in reaction to which it arose. It was the alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism. In shutting out this experience, the eye perceives a complementary experience -- in the form of its spontaneous afterimage, as it were. Bergson's philosophy represents an attempt to specify this afterimage and fix it as a permanent record. (314)

This notion of afterimage must call up the possibilities and limitations of photography. While the instantaneity of the camera's flash, the way a photograph isolates a person or an object or a memory from its context, from the associations which seek to cluster around them, seems at odds with the demands of aura. Voluntary memory, which Benjamin strongly associates with photography,⁶² contains no trace of the past, and it can thus have nothing to do with aura. The signal characteristic of *mémoire volontaire*, he writes, is "that the information it gives about the past retains no trace of that past" (315). These traces of the past, these ruins are crucial to Benjamin, who, quoting Proust, delineates the past as follows: "Proust says that the past is situated 'somewhere beyond

⁶¹ Cf. Cadava, *Words of Light*: "Photography and perception are analogous to one another in Bergson not so much because perception works like a camera to seize reality but rather because, working like a camera, it fails to seize reality" (92).

⁶² "The techniques inspired by the camera and subsequent analogous types of apparatus," he writes, "extend the range of the *mémoire volontaire*; these techniques make it possible at any time to retain an event -- as image and sound -- through the apparatus" (337).

the reach of intellect and its field of operations, in some material object [. . .] And whether we come upon this object before we die, or whether we never encounter it depends entirely on chance" (315).

The emphasis i've placed on aura being like and of aura creating likeness and connection relates not only to the ethical dimension of Benjamin's work but it also mimics what we expect of objects themselves. James Elkins notes that we expect objects be other than themselves: "Objects molt and alter in accord with what we need them to be, and we change ourselves by the mere act of seeing" (237). Our need to make objects something else inheres, as i've argued, in the structure of looking -- and more than in the way we look, in the way we are with and in the world.

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