

anything 'we see' in them: a double distance is established, in which our proximity to the formal labour – to the *subjectile* and to the matter – establishes the auratic respiration. That respiration does not impose anything on us, but conforms us with the simple choice of *looking* or not looking, of implicating or not the visual effectiveness of the subject. That may be how the aura 'declines' today, how it is declined and enfolded through its contact with the subject, the matter, and the *subjectile*. That may be how we can *suppose* the aura as we face a drawing, however modest, by Barnett Newman

2

THE SHORTNESS OF HISTORY, OR
PHOTOGRAPHY IN NUCE:
BENJAMIN'S ATTENUATION OF
THE NEGATIVE

DAVID S. FERRIS

Modest methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic ... The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only in so far as this element is set off against the negative. On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too – something different from what was previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.

N1a, 3

In one of the fragments belonging to the posthumous text 'On the Concept of History', a fragment entitled 'The Dialectical Image', Walter Benjamin borrows a comparison made by André Monglond in the introduction to his 1930 study *Le Prérromantisme français*. While speaking of the ability of a literary text to present a meaning inconceivable at the time of its conception, Monglond compares this effect to a photographic plate from which an image may be developed at a later date. In the first sentence of this fragment, Benjamin recalls this comparison in the following words: 'If one looks upon history as a text, then what is valuable in it [*dann gilt von ihr*] is what a recent author says of literary texts: the past has left in them images which can be compared to those held fast by a light sensitive plate' (GS 1.3: 1238/SW 4: 405). The comparison is called upon to exemplify an understanding of history in terms of the process used to produce a photographic print. In Benjamin's account, the comparison, however, is not so straightforward as the opening phrase of this sentence indicates: 'if one looks upon history as a text'. As a consequence of this conditional phrase, history is understood by reference to what photography is said to do more than any

other art: preserve the past for the present by means of the image. But, equally compelling as this conditional opening is the sequence of comparisons it sets up. Including the opening phrase, three comparisons are made in this sentence. The first, hypothetical, makes history and a text equivalent to one another. The second compares a text to a photographic plate. The third, by accepting the terms of the first hypothetical comparison would offer knowledge of the initial subject of this whole sequence: history. In effect, the logic enacted by these comparisons takes the form of a syllogism that can be expressed as follows: if history is comparable to a text and a text is comparable to a photographic plate, then, history is comparable to the same photographic plate. Yet, throughout this sequence it cannot be forgotten that, first, the premise is conditional, and second, what is at stake in these comparisons is another relation, the relation between a looking (*betrachten*) and a saying (*sagen*), between a history looked at as a text and a history that can be spoken about because of this looking – in other words, a history that can be read. As will be seen later in passages from the *Arcades Project*, it is the attainment of such a relation that is at stake in the dialectical image. But what is at stake in this relation is that history should mean, be of value, possess worth – as the verb used by Benjamin in the phrase connecting this looking and saying indicates: *gelten*. What then decides that such a history is meaningful (that is, has significance in the present – since history has no other time in which to be meaningful) is that what can be looked upon belongs to language. Yet, if history is to attain value in this way, why is it that a visual mode, photography, is the chosen means of recognizing this value? Does this mean that Benjamin's understanding of history is only conceivable after the advent of photography, a history that is then a reflection of the modernity announced by photography? Or does photography effect a change in the structure of history in the same way that Benjamin claims it does for the work of art in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility', a claim that locates the significance of art as a function of the technological?¹

Only with the advent of photography does it become possible to look at what was actually present to the past, since the moment of the photographic image is also the moment captured in the image. No painting can make this claim; as Benjamin argues, its means of production, so dependent on the hand, forbids it from doing so.² Since photography is what allows the past to be captured for the first time in an image that also belongs to the moment of the time captured, what then appears with photography is an image that no longer simply belongs to the domain of art – it now makes an historical claim.

Benjamin expresses such a claim, in the course of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' when he relates the work of the Parisian photographer, Eugène Atget, to the withdrawal of the auratic presence of the human subject in early photography:

But where the human being withdraws from the photographic image, there the superiority of exhibition value to cult value steps [*tritt*] for

the first time. To have given this development its local habitation is the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around 1900, captured Paris streets devoid of their human aspect. It has been justly said that he recorded them like the scene of a crime. A crime scene, also, is devoid of the human; its record occurs on account of its evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical process [*Prozeß*]. This brings out their hidden political significance [*Das macht ihre verborgene politische Bedeutung aus*]. (GS 1.2: 485/SW 4: 258)³

The absence of the human subject from the street scenes recorded by Atget becomes, for Benjamin, the sign of an incomparable but also superior significance. This significance, concentrated in the exhibition value of the image, is named the political by the end of these sentences. Photography not only allows the political to appear, but does so by bringing it out of concealment. The political is therefore what resides, first of all, concealed in the photograph as image. But, by what means does this concealment occur? Is it a natural attribute of the photographic image? Despite the attraction of such a claim (which presumes an essential effect for photography), the example of Atget indicates that this ability of photography to bring out the political does not reside in the technical process of photography – as if, by its nature, photography excluded the presence of a human subject. Rather, Benjamin derives the political aspect of these photographs by means of comparison: they are like the record of a crime scene, a record from which the human subject is excluded in favour of the objects that remain in such a scene. The political significance of Atget's photographs is understood strictly in accordance to this analogy. In fact, it is the analogy which brings out this significance rather than some aspect of photography as a medium. Atget's photographs thus achieve the importance Benjamin attaches to them because of a choice to capture street scenes of Paris undisguised by any human presence.⁴ As a result, Atget's photographic images become the record of a street from which the organizing actions of a human subject have been excluded rather than the record of photography's technical ability. This demonstration of exhibition value is not an attribute of the medium but a framing within the medium. This is why Benjamin will state that Atget has only given this exhibitional aspect of photography what he calls a 'local habitation', an 'abode' or a 'place' (*seine Stätte*). Yet, despite this limitation, the example reveals the crucial place the technical will hold as a means of understanding history. The question will be to account for the technical in terms of the historical since it is through the recognition of the former in the latter that the political significance of history is to be recognized (or, to recall a verb Benjamin uses in the passage just cited as well as elsewhere in the 'Reproducibility' essay, it is a question of how the technical 'steps' into the place of history).⁵

In an entry to Convoluted Y of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin locates this technical aspect in relation to history in the following manner: 'The

effort to launch a systematic confrontation between art and photography was destined to founder at the outset. It could only have been a moment [*Moment*] in <the> confrontation between art and technology – a confrontation brought about by history' (Y2a, 6). The debate which followed the invention of photography – about whether it belonged amongst the arts or was, as Baudelaire put it, the 'servant' to art – is of little interest to Benjamin, since the real issue is not photography or any specific photograph or photographer but what photography represents as a technology.⁶ First and foremost, Benjamin asserts, 'in photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value all along the line' (GS 1.2: 485/SW 4: 257). This remark makes clear that photography has a role to play. Photography is the means through which the beginning of a confrontation occurs, a confrontation caused by history. That this confrontation is not seen for what it is – the beginning of a general confrontation between art and technology, rather than a confrontation between art and one mode of technology – confirms the extent to which photography is only the beginning of a development that leads to film and beyond to digital imagery. To interpret this event, this confrontation, as the result of history, as Benjamin does in the passage from the *Arcades Project* just cited (*Sie sollte ein Moment in 'der' Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kunst und Technik sein, die die Geschichte vollzog*), indicates that the appearance of photography crystallizes a force already present within history. In this case, just as Atget gives a local habitation to the stepping forward of exhibition value, so then does photography provide a local habitation for the political significance of history. Photography becomes, in this sense, not merely a means of producing images, but rather becomes itself an image, a technique for the production of history's political significance. In fact, it is a handle, as Benjamin describes it in section V of the 'Reproducibility' essay when commenting on the exhibition value of art: 'This much is certain: today, photography and film give [*geben*] to this understanding the most useful handles [*die brauchbarsten Handhaben*]' (GS 1.2: 484/SW 4: 257). As handles, neither photography nor film can be confused with an understanding that remains the domain of history, they are rather the means by which this understanding is developed. For Benjamin, this is true even when, as he states in the sentence preceding the one just cited, exhibition value achieves an absolute emphasis: 'through the absolute emphasis that rests [*liegt*] on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a form [*Gebilde*] with quite new functions' (GS 1.2: 484/SW 4: 257). Even at the absolute pole of its exhibition value, the work of art is a functional form.⁷

This functional form, as the word Benjamin uses in this context indicates, *das Gebilde*, is tied to the production of art in terms of the image, *das Bild*. Since it is on the basis of the image that a function can be given to art, the production of the image is the single most crucial aspect of Benjamin's understanding of the history within which art occurs. Without this image, there can be no such history, and therefore no art (to the extent that art

claims its significance through a historical relation to the present). The image is the handle of history, but as Benjamin's description of its appearance in exhibition value points to, its role as handle only appears at the point of an absolute emphasis. It is at this point that exhibition value is recognized not for exhibiting something – such as a building or street in a photograph – but rather for exhibiting exhibitionality in general. What is exhibited in this case is the means of exhibition: photography, exhibition as technique.

Benjamin emphatically bases his understanding of the change in the function of art on such a means. This can be read in the 'Reproducibility' essay when he asserts the difference that the camera makes: 'For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial [*bildlicher*] reproduction, tasks that now devolved solely upon the eye looking into a lens [*welcher nunmehr dem ins Objektiv blickenden Auge allein zufielen*]' (GS 1.2: 474–75/SW 4: 253). This freeing of the hand, enabled by photography, has all the character of an event ('for the first time' and a few pages later this becomes 'the first time in world history' [GS 1.2: 481/SW 4: 256]). But, what does not change is that art is functional even when it displays itself as technical. A technical art is, in this respect, no different from an auratic art: they are both claimed by function.

This shared aspect can be readily seen if the sentence in which Benjamin speaks of the new function of art is cited in full. This sentence describes this functionality as occurring both in the absolute emphasis on exhibition value and in the absolute emphasis on its cult value:

Just as the work of art in prehistoric times, through the absolute emphasis that rested on its cult value, first became an instrument of magic which was only later recognized as a work of art, so today, through the absolute emphasis that rests on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a form [*Gebilde*] with entirely [*ganz*] new functions. (GS 1.2: 484/SW 4: 257)

Only in its existence as means is the work of art both an instrument of magic through cult value and a form with 'entirely new functions'. In each case, the work of art is a form whose significance derives from a value that can be placed on that form. Consequently, the work of art is only known through the value that steps into its place. Yet, in asserting such an understanding, this sentence also poses a question about the existence of a work of art that is not simply the embodiment of a value. The question is, if value is the handle by which the work of art may be picked up, what is in effect being picked up? What remains of the work of art when there is no such handle? According to what Benjamin says in this sentence, what is picked up is what has been subject to the forces that produce an image – *das Gebilde*. But, here, not only is the work of art recognized in terms of what produces an image, the means of recognizing it also proceeds by way of the

image to the extent that photography becomes both the means of producing the exhibitional image (that is, the work of art) and the image through which the production of such a value is recognized.⁸ The camera doubles as a technological instrument whose formation (also *Gebilde*) permits the recognition of the technological. Since, as Benjamin claims, the appearance of absolute exhibition value in an art whose mode of production is technological is not simply an event in a series of events but the moment in which a confrontation between history and art takes place, then such recognition is understood as also being brought on by history – that is, history has a role in the appearance of the technological. How history fulfils this role is directly related to its structuring which, as Benjamin makes clear in the course of the ‘Reproducibility’ essay, is a movement between two poles: cult and exhibition. Despite the fact that Benjamin grants absolute emphasis to these poles at different times, the latter pole is not excluded from the former when under the sway of auratic, cult value.⁹ This is why Benjamin can speak of exhibition value as if it had always been there, hidden within the art of aura and cult value, waiting for the mode of existence most adequate to its meaning. In recognizing photography as that mode, Benjamin does not just recognize an example of exhibition value, but also recognizes a history in which technology and reproducibility are inevitable for art. Photography thus becomes the means to develop, in the technical, photographic sense of the word, the history in which its confrontation with the past of art is already set by history.

In the second sentence of the fragment, ‘The Dialectical Image’ (discussed at the beginning of this chapter), Benjamin grants photography just such a role. And again he refers to André Monglond’s comparison between photography and a text to do so. This time, however, Monglond is not paraphrased as in the first sentence but cited in Benjamin’s own translation: ‘Only the future has at its disposal developers strong enough to allow the image to come to light in all its details’ (*GS* 1.3: 1238/*SW* 4: 405). Much of Benjamin’s understanding of history, as it is expressed in the posthumous text, ‘On the Concept of History’, is condensed here. Above all the sense that what is properly historical only reveals itself to a future generation capable of recognizing it, that is, a generation possessing developers strong enough to fix an image never seen before – and never to be seen again, as Benjamin will later insist.¹⁰ Within the ‘Reproducibility’ essay, photography, as the future of art, fulfils this role. Photography does this not merely because it brings out exhibition value, but also because at the same time it brings out the auratic. Only from the perspective of the exhibitional is it possible to recognize the auratic – otherwise art is essentially and unchangeably auratic even to the point of being incapable of any other determination. In this case, the auratic could not be a value attached to the work of art. By the same logic, if it were not something attached, exhibitionality would have no mode of existence. More importantly, nor would the technological be an essential

pole of art. What is therefore at stake for art in Benjamin is not just a history that allows the confrontation of these two poles to be recognized as history, but the recognition of this history through technology. Technology is both part of this history and the means by which this history and its part in this history is recognized.

The sentence Benjamin cites from Monglond reflects the crucial role of the image in securing this recognition. However, this emphasis on the image in Benjamin’s translation is not exactly what Monglond says. As Benjamin knew, since he cites the passage in French in *Convolute N* of the *Arcades Project*, Monglond writes: ‘Seul l’avenir possède des révélateurs assez actifs pour fouiller parfaitement de tels clichés’ (*N15a*, 1) [Only the future possesses developers active enough to search out perfectly such negatives]. Benjamin translates this sentence as follows: ‘Nur die Zukunft hat Entwickler zur Verfügung, die stark genug sind, um das Bild mit allen Details zum Vorschein kommen zu lassen’ (*GS* 1.3: 1238) [Only the future has developers at its disposal that are strong enough to allow the image to come to appearance in all its details]. Where Monglond uses the French word for a negative, *cliché*, Benjamin substitutes image, *Bild*. From one perspective, there would be no difference here. After all, a negative is an image even if it is a reversal of how the world is seen. Yet, Benjamin’s substitution does pose the question of why it occurs at all and of what effect this change has on the relation between photography and his understanding of history, a relation so resolutely focused on the image.

Before discussing this substitution of *Bild* for *cliché*, two other changes of emphasis in Benjamin’s translation should be noted: where Monglond says perfectly (*parfaitement*), Benjamin writes in all its details (*mit allen Details*); where Monglond describes the activities of these developers as searching out (*fouiller*), Benjamin says that such developers allow the unperceived image to come to light, that is, to come to appearance or sight (*das Bild mit allen Details zum Vorschein kommen lassen*). Within the example of photography, what these changes clarify is an emphasis on the image produced, even to the point of subsuming the negative into that image. For Benjamin, the negative is already an image waiting for all its details to be brought to light. As a result, the negative is understood from the perspective of what it produces – to use a Marxist-inflected phrase from the introduction to the ‘Reproducibility’ essay, it becomes its own ‘prognostic requirement’ (*GS* 1.2: 473/*SW* 4: 252). The difference between negative and print then becomes a merely technical aspect of an image that has subsumed the process of its production into itself as technology is recognized less as a means of producing an image (Baudelaire’s servant) than a determination of the image. In this respect, photography is a mode of appearance of the image, a mode that, quite literally, places the image in its appearance before us: *der Vorschein*. As a result, in photography, the image is seen as coming into its own as image. This result, perhaps only distantly hinted at when Monglond

writes *fouiller parfaitement*, is made explicit by Benjamin's translation. What emerges as at stake in this use of photography as a means of understanding history is not just history itself but a history whose promise is fulfilled by technology.¹¹ Here, the historical task of technology can be determined as the task of reproducing itself in all its details. But, for this task to be known as history, that is, for technology to be recognized in all its value, it can make no absolute claim for itself. Otherwise it must fail its inmost tendency, the reproduction of every detail. This is why in Benjamin the negative is understood as in the image. Only the image can promise what it is to become as an image, just as technology can only promise what it is to be technological rather than what is already technological. Through this technology, history is developed in Benjamin.

If the negative is already understood as an image by Benjamin then this is an understanding, as Benjamin clearly states in 'On the Concept of History', that cannot be found at any temporal point in the past.¹² Such a negative is understood according to what it brings to light: the image.¹³ Since the print developed at a later date from a negative reveals what could not be brought to light at the time of its exposure, the negative does not negate or prevent what the future can develop. Because the image brings to light what was already there but could not be seen either in the time of its capture or in the time that has elapsed since that moment (the time of the past), then these images – both the negative and what is produced from it – necessarily vary in the amount of detail they exhibit. Thus, a deviation is an unavoidable effect of an image. Since this variation depends on a future in which there are developers active or strong enough to produce the image in all its details, then this variation depends on the internal development of technology, on a history that belongs to technology. If this deviation did not occur, the image in which Benjamin understands history would already have been brought to appearance in all its details in the negative and would be known at the time of its exposure – thereby rendering history useless since it would then have no sense. To account for this difference within technology is to account for history. The possibility of such an accounting, as Benjamin's emphasis on photography indicates, is itself an effect of technology, since it is only through the rise of exhibition value that the technological and its image appears in confrontation to auratic art, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the concept of history represented by that art. But, the mere appearance of technology will not be enough. Here, the question of recognizability, that is, the question of how looking relates to saying, returns crucially (for it is not enough to look at the negative to see all its details, they must also be recognized as those details – to do so is to register this recognition, to bring it to language, to *sagen*). In short, it is a question of how the looking of technology is not only a mere looking, not merely the image of *das blickende Auge*.

In the second entry to Convolute N of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin underlines the crucial importance of this deviation to the historical undertaking

of that project while attributing its cause to time.¹⁴ Benjamin writes: 'What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course. – On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the "main lines" of inquiry), I base my reckoning' (N1, 2). In the language Benjamin uses here, the difference time makes would disturb the hope of returning through the image to the moment captured in the negative. Yet, as the sentence preceding the one just cited indicates, the difference registered by this disturbance does not arise independently of the attempt to achieve such a return. Benjamin writes: 'Comparison of other people's attempts to the undertaking of a sea voyage in which the ships are drawn off course by the magnetic North Pole. Discover *this* North Pole' (N1, 2). To discover *this* North Pole – Benjamin's emphasis – is, according to his example, to discover the source of deviation; the source of what makes any intention of arriving at the North Pole go astray. But, it is only in such an intention that this deviation is exhibited for Benjamin – in the same way that what is developed from the photographic image utilizes the same process and produces the same image as any other time, yet what appears in this image is no longer understood as the image present to the lens in the time of its capture. Although, in the fragment on the dialectical image, Benjamin attributes this difference to the future existence of a developer strong enough to bring out the image in all its details and although it is the privilege of the future (and therefore the passage of time) to possess such a developer, time is not such a developer. Time does not produce the image that becomes available to the future. However, time as a differential is what makes production of this image possible for this future, since such a time is marked by the occurrence of two events – a condition that is equally true for photography since every negative and every print is conceived, technically speaking, on the basis of time, the defined time of its exposure, the opening and closing of the shutter.

In an entry to Convolute Y of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin recounts a transformation of visual forms that explicitly points to time as a technical condition to which photography owes its significance:

The entrance of the temporal factor into the panoramas is brought about through the succession of times of day (with the well-known lighting tricks). In this way, the panorama transcends painting and anticipates photography. Owing to its technical condition [*technischen Beschaffenheit*], the photograph, in contrast to the painting, can and must be coordinated [*zugeordnet*] with a well-defined and continuous segment of time (exposure time). In this chronological defineability [*chronologischen Präzisierungbarkeit*], the political significance of the photograph is already contained in nuce. (Y10, 2)

The political significance referred to here is also claimed by Benjamin on behalf of Atget's photographs of Paris streets but for a different reason. In

the case of Atget, it was their status as evidence – their exclusion of human presence – that allowed their ‘hidden political significance’ and therefore their relation to ‘the historical process’ to be brought out. Here, it is not a question of what is or is not in the photograph. Rather, the emphasis falls upon the chronological definability that arises from the technological condition of any photograph: the fact that a photograph can only exist because of a defined time. By claiming that the significance of this defined time is political, Benjamin is also claiming that the technological already contains the possibility of this significance – *in nuce*. Consequently, history in Benjamin becomes the exhibition of this hidden significance in technology – in effect, developing technology as the example of what it already is. For history to develop the political significance of technology is then for history to develop the means by which it also attains significance. If history does not attain this, time, as Benjamin describes it in Thesis XVII of ‘On the Concept of History’ will remain ‘a precious but tasteless seed in its interior’ (GS 1.2: 703/SW 4: 396). Precious because, without it, no history as such is conceivable; tasteless because time, in its chronological definability, that is, in its technological definition, is not the same as history – a history whose seed offers only its shell, that remains, literally, in a nutshell rather than yielding its fruit, the nut. How, then, does the technological exhibit what Benjamin refers to as ‘the nourishing fruit of what is historically understood’ (GS 1.2: 703/SW 4: 396)?

As already seen in the second entry to Convolute N of the *Arcades Project*, to exhibit historical significance is, for Benjamin, to exhibit a relation to the past that is also a deviation from that past – in the sense that the past occurs in the form of an image not yet developed in all its details. For this significance to appear, an account of such images in terms of their exhibitionability is necessary. While photography offers an account of such exhibitionability for the first time, this account runs the risk of remaining, as Benjamin notes with respect to Atget’s photographs of Paris streets, a local habitation. As such, it does not reside within the means of photography, it is not, as already pointed out above, a property of its technology. By what means, then, does technology produce historical understanding, by what means does it step into the place of this understanding?

In the ‘Reproducibility’ essay, technology takes such a step when it appears with an absolute emphasis on exhibition value. This emphasis, Benjamin claims, first emerges within photography. As Benjamin describes it, the moment this first emergence depends upon is a moment that occurs within the photographic process, namely, the moment when what is captured in the image and the image are defined by the same duration of time: their chronological definability. This definition takes the form of the negative. Although Benjamin, unlike Monglond, does not retain the negative when he makes the analogy between photography and history in the fragment entitled ‘The Dialectical Image’ (preferring instead to treat the negative as *ein Bild*,

granting it the same status as the printed image that can be made from it), the negative is accentuated when the defining property of exhibitionability is given in the ‘Reproducibility’ essay. Benjamin defines this ability when he states that ‘from the photographic plate, for example, a multiplicity of prints is possible [*ist eine Vielheit von Abzügen möglich*]; the question of an authentic print has no sense’ (GS 1.2: 481–2/SW 4: 256). This definition privileges what is produced from the negative, since it is the print that possesses the ability to exhibit what is present in the negative – not with respect to what is depicted in the negative (that is again merely a local habitation, not a property of technology), but with respect to its purpose: to produce reproductions that have no priority in relation to one another and therefore no claim to authenticity since each is as authentic as the other. Here, the prints allow a negative to come to light, but again it is a negative whose property may only be recognized through its development into those prints. Monglond’s text, hidden behind Benjamin’s translation, reminds us that photography, in the stage that Benjamin refers to it as a medium of reproducibility, is only such a medium because of the *cliché* or negative that permits it to possess exhibition value. In other words, multiplicity is the effect of a difference signalled by the image in its negation. The absolute emphasis on exhibition value of photography, the means by which technology takes its first historical step, overwrites this difference. By turning from this difference, Benjamin brings to light in all its details the invariability of the image produced from the negative. This emphasis on the absolute exhibition value of the photographic image is by no means an emphasis on the significance of an image, but rather an emphasis on the technological existence of such an image. Such an emphasis cannot yield a history other than the repetition of this process. But what is important to remember, and the ‘Reproducibility’ essay does this most clearly, is that the absolute emphasis on exhibition value is what establishes the two poles and therefore the possibility of recognizing deviation within the auratic (the recognition that the auratic is already in a certain respect exhibitional). However, once established, this exhibitional pole, in order to become historical truth, rather than truth, is set against itself. To be historical, it must be the place in which a deviation steps – and steps in the name of history as something hidden.

If the presentation of photography as the image of history is maintained as Benjamin describes it in the fragment, ‘The Dialectical Image’, then the image produced from the negative can bring out what could not have been seen, but remains hidden in the historical moment in which the image was captured in its negative form. In both the earlier essay on photography (‘A Short History of Photography’) and the later essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility’, Benjamin explains the possibility of such an other understanding in the past by reference to what he terms the ‘optical unconscious’. In 1931, Benjamin describes the appearance of such an effect as follows:

It is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: other above all in the sense that in the place of a space interwoven with human consciousness steps a space interwoven with the human unconscious [*an die Stelle eines vom Menschen mit Bewußtsein durchwirkten Raums ein unbewußt durchwirkter tritt*]. For example, it is readily accepted that one can give an account, if only in general terms, of the act of walking; for certain, one knows nothing more about its disposition in the fraction of a second of 'stepping out' [*von ihrer Haltung im Sekundenbruchteil des 'Auserschreitens'*]. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, opens it up. One comes to know this optical unconscious first through photography, just as one comes to know the instinctual unconsciousness through psychoanalysis. ('Photography' *GS* 2.1: 371/*SW* 4: 510–12)¹⁵

To uncover what is hidden is again a matter of stepping into the place of something else. Here, a space interwoven with the unconscious takes the place of a space interwoven with consciousness. To know this step, and, above all, to know this step for the first time, is the achievement of photography's technical ability. Thus photography, and its instrument, the camera, become the means of knowing that this technical means of reproduction has stepped into the place of non-technical or manual reproduction.

This step (by which the significance of photography is grasped – and its significance is that it has made this step) is, in effect, only knowable through photography. Since what takes place in this step can only be revealed by the camera, photography becomes the example of the means by which it is known as a technology. Only by stepping into the place of the auratic, the space of conscious, meditative understanding, does the technical become known in its technicality. But, the step by which it achieves this knowledge is only recognizable because it has already stepped into the place of the auratic.¹⁶ Already being there is a fundamental principle of Benjamin's understanding of history. But, equally important is the necessity that what is there becomes recognizable in its hiddenness – like the absence of people in Atget's photographs of Paris streets. It is the significance of this hiddenness that remains hidden until the future. Photography in the 'Reproducibility' essay is an example of such a history as Benjamin's references to the existence of exhibitionability prior to its appearance indicate. The advent of photography, then, represents the moment when technology is seen to exhibit a tendency already present but undeveloped in auratic art. This is why, within the terms of Benjamin's history of the work of art, there could never have been a debate about whether or not photography is an art unless art had already recognized this tendency. Without this tendency, photography would simply have had no relation to art and art could not have, as Benjamin claims, 'sensed the approaching crisis' (*GS* 1.2: 475/*SW* 4: 256). The sense of history expressed here is strongly Marxist to the extent

that this history of art fulfils a 'prognostic requirement' (the requirement that exhibition value attains absolute emphasis).¹⁷ At the same time, for this prognostic requirement to have value, what it predicts cannot be the cause of that prediction. If it were, then the processes of photography would have been deducible from painting before such a technology came into existence rather than afterwards. For the advent of these processes to become part of a history, a requirement of such a history is that their existence should already be distinct from the fact of their pastness. Here, what is at stake in Benjamin's understanding of history is this difference. Hence, Benjamin's emphasis in *Convolute N* of the *Arcades Project* on recognizability (*Erkennbarkeit*) and readability (*Lesbarkeit*).¹⁸ The necessity of this emphasis results directly from the question first opened in the 'Reproducibility' essay under the name of exhibitionability or *Ausstellbarkeit*, the question of a technology that steps into the place of art as if it were a pure means, exhibiting only its own exhibitionability in order to discover itself and establish itself as another pole for art. This is why the development of Benjamin's understanding of history cannot be separated from the history of the work of art, since it is in that history that the possibility of deviation is first brought out. This is also why history in Benjamin cannot be separated from the ascendancy of the technical since the technical, as the means of producing history becomes the means of history so produced.

Before taking up this sense in which the historical is an effect of its technical production, an aspect of Benjamin's understanding of photography needs to be clarified, an aspect that is central to establishing the other pole of art. As indicated in the citation with which this paper begins, photography provides a metaphor of history to the extent that history is like 'the photographic plate from which an image may be developed at a later date'. This understanding, despite relying on the photographic process through which a print is produced, suggests a variability in what can be developed from this image. As a result, in the future, the image can reflect a significance other than what is discerned in it during the time or age of its capture, despite the fact that every print made from its negative is the same as another. As already pointed out, this fact explains Benjamin's translation of *cliché* as *Bild* (even after he initially acknowledges the role of the photographic plate in the first sentence of the fragment). Here, the negative is simply the inversion of the developed image, it is not different in kind, yet its necessary presence does signal the place of an inversion within this account of photography's transformation of the work of art into 'a work of art designed for reproducibility' (*GS* 1.2: 481/*SW* 4: 256). Since the photographic process is what Benjamin's account of reproducibility rests upon – rather than the subject or object recorded by photography – and, since this process, as a technical process, can only produce multiple images by virtue of the negative, the claim that 'the question of an authentic print has no sense' rests upon a difference that photography holds to in order to sustain its existence as well

as its role as the example of an absolute emphasis on exhibition value. Does this then mean that technology, despite Benjamin's claims to the contrary when he compares photography to history, must keep the image separate from the negative it reproduces in order to support a history other than the history of auratic art?¹⁹ Another way to pose this question would be: when photography becomes an image of history, why must the negative recede? Indeed, why is it that this inversion (which separates image and negative but which also creates the possibility of the comparison of photography to history) does not carry over into the dialectical image, despite this being named a dialectical image?²⁰

What is at stake in this history is not just an interpretation of technology as exemplified by photography but rather a relation that, nominally, takes the form of an inversion as Benjamin moves from a visual technology to history. Despite no explicit reflection on this inversion by Benjamin, its presence can be traced in a phrase and a word that link, on the one hand, the 'Reproducibility' essay and its account of exhibitionability, and, on the other, both the theses presented in 'On the Concept of History' and Convolute N of the *Arcades Project*. When Benjamin first speaks of the difference made by photography in the 'Reproducibility' essay, he states that the most important artistic tasks have 'now devolved solely upon the eye looking into a lens' (GS 1.2: 475/SW 4: 253). Within Benjamin's account, this 'looking eye', this '*blickende Auge*', reduces the intervention of the human subject to a mere act of looking as the role of the hand in the formation of art is superseded.²¹ Yet, even here, the eye still looks. It has no choice. The technology requires its involvement. The camera, after all, is not a subject capable of directing itself to this or that scene. But, when Benjamin speaks of history in the posthumous theses, the looking eye becomes the eye in its look, its glance, *Augenblick*. Linguistically, *das blickende Auge* inverts into *Augenblick* but also with this inversion the looking eye takes on the defining property of the technical instrument it looks into: the camera and the chronologically definable time of the exposure that allows the image to be held fast and subsequently recognized as an image, its *Belichtungsdauer*. Here, the *Augenblick* operates as the interruption of the 'looking eye', interrupting its look with another looking, an interruption measured by the temporal brevity of the glance or look of the eye. In the *Augenblick* of Benjamin's theses on history, this looking that interrupts in the moment of its glance steps into the place of what Benjamin defines as the technical condition (*die technische Beschaffenheit* [Y10, 2]) of photography. Just as 'the political significance of photography [is] contained in nuce' in this condition, so, in this moment, the historical significance of the image is also grasped by this condition in both the theses of history and Convolute N of the *Arcades Project* – and never more so than when these works figure the occurrence of this image in the limited and interruptive duration of a flash of lightning.²² Here, the phrase *in nuce* should not be put

aside since it would also reinforce this temporal condition if the German sense of *Nu* is also heard.

The temporal factor that coordinates the photograph and the technical condition of its creation (Y10, 2) can now be discerned in the appearance of the image through which Benjamin founds his understanding of history. It is this condition that gives recognizability to such an image, that allows it to move from what is merely a looking on (the looking into the lens of the 'Reproducibility' essay) to a look whose duration, however short, is given significance by this condition (through its recognizability and readability, its coming to light – *zum Vorschein kommen*). That this coming to light takes the form (*Gebilde*) of the technical condition of exhibitionability (through which the work of art takes on 'entirely new functions') in the 'Reproducibility' essay reveals the extent to which what is at stake in Benjamin's understanding is the technical condition through which his historical materialism is reproduced: history as the reproduction of itself as image. While the condition of this history can be coordinated with the reproducibility of the work of art after aura (and Benjamin's allusion to the political significance of Atget's photographs of Paris streets already points to this relation), this coordination also takes the form of an inversion. Where the historical image, the dialectical image occurs, it announces itself in a flash of light just as the shutter of the camera announces the arrival of an image to the photographic plate or negative on which it is recorded inversely: darkness as light, light as darkness. But besides this coordination by comparison (which can only transform photography into a phenomenology of history), there is another inversion, one in which photography, or rather, its formation functions as the *cliché* of history.

This inversion, already indicated in the shift from *blickende Auge* to *Augenblick*, is given a local habitation in the lightning flash whose significance is not its blinding effect but its minimal temporal duration. Only in such a duration does history and the dialectical image occur for Benjamin but, in this case, what happens in this duration of the lightning is not the reception of light, as in photography and the camera, but its emission. Reception only occurs when, like the photographic plate, the historical subject receives this flash by recognizing and reading what is received as an image. Here again, the place of the *cliché*, the historical subject, would give way to the *Bild* as the image becomes the only point of reference. Here, it gives way in the name of a history whose recognizability arises in its deviation from those forms of history Benjamin would resist if not overcome, namely, historicism, universal history, progress, a tradition subject to conformism (the geographical poles rather than the magnetic pole of Benjamin's historical project).²³ But, the condition of this deviation is the placement of the image in its inverted form in its other pole. (In the terms of the 'Reproducibility' essay, the relation of cult value to exhibition value is the inversion of its relation in photography). The dialectical image is in

this sense strictly dialectical, it is the inverse of the history out of which it appears but at the same time is already within that history.

In the passage previously cited from Convolute Y (10, 2) – where Benjamin traces the political significance of the photograph to its chronological definability – the recognition of such an image occurs through what he names the differential of time, the difference that time makes. But, for an image to appear according to this differential, it must also be filled with time, for Benjamin the time of the now. An early fragment from the *Arcades Project* addresses how this is to be understood. According to this fragment, the dialectical image contains time in its smallest, its least form:

On the dialectical image. In it lies time ... The time differential in which alone the dialectical image is real ... Real time enters the dialectical image ... in its smallest form [*Gestalt*] ... All in all, the force of time [*Zeitmoment*] in the dialectical image lets itself be discovered [*läßt sich ... ermitteln*] only by means of the confrontation with another concept. This concept is the 'now of recognizability'. (Q°, 21)

Time in its least form enters the dialectical image. A form that can only be discovered in confrontation. A time without time for itself. A time that needs something other than itself if it is to be itself rather than a timeless history to which it cannot belong. In its least form this time is the condition of the dialectical image. But in this case, what is referred to as time cannot be time at all, at least not in the sense that confuses history with time. Yet, in order to intervene, this time is given an image. As an image it is given definition and, as Benjamin states, confrontation is the means by which this definition arises when the dialectical image comes up against the 'now of recognizability'. This 'now' is also the moment, the *Augenblick* in which the looking of the eye is figured as a look.²⁴ The inversion that relates the looking eye to the *Augenblick* is now revealed as the moment of figuration since, in this moment, seeing becomes what can only be said (in the sense that the instant is always over in order to be an instant and therefore cannot be seen but only spoken of).²⁵ Yet, when Benjamin describes this movement, it is not a particular figuration or a particular inversion that is at work but figuration itself. In Benjamin's own words, it is the image as an image that produces this arrest, the image in its figurality:

The image is that in which what-has-been [*das Gewesene*] steps together [*zusammentritt*] in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: the image is dialectics at a standstill ... the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. (N3, 1)

In the verb *zusammentreten*, this dialectical relation of what-has-been with the now is figured as a coming together that takes the form of a step.²⁶ It is this stepping that marks the image as genuinely historical for Benjamin. At the same time, or rather, in the same time (time in its least form), this stepping is also understood as a momentary halting or interruption of progression and continuity – hence the images of crystallization, constellation, of a monad.²⁷ These images are what Benjamin refers to in Thesis XVII of 'On the Concept of History' as 'the structure [*Struktur*] in which the historical materialist 'recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest [*Stillstellung*] of happening' (GS 1.2: 703/SW 4: 396). Not only is the image understood as a structure, but this structure brings the work of placing (*Stellung*) to a halt, in effect, defines the work of *stellen* so that what emerges is a place in place of a time that has no time of its own, the place of a structure. It is in this place that what is genuinely historical steps for Benjamin, but in order for this stepping to be recognized as historical, history (time that has no time) must step along with the means of its recognition. If these did not step together, then, this history in which happening is arrested would not be differentiated from the merely representational. Its *Augenblick* would therefore not exhibit its presentation as structure or form (*das Gebilde*), that is, as the means of its presentation. For this history – the genuinely historical in Benjamin – to attain a critical force with respect to historical progress and continuity it has no other choice but to confront the foundation of their means of representation. All else would be, as Benjamin puts it, in the service of the victor who has not ceased to be victorious (Thesis VI). Yet, when Benjamin defines further the concept against which the dialectical image lets itself be known in a confrontation, the concept of the 'now of recognizability', the critical force of this image is given a perilous existence: 'The image that has been read [*gelesene Bild*] – which is to say the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment, which lies at the foundation of all reading [*des kritischen, gefährlichen Moments, welcher allem Lesen zugrunde liegt*]' (N3, 1). In another entry to this same Convolute, in which what is stated in this entry is repeated almost word for word, Benjamin does insert, however, one more phrase between this passage and the passage just cited. The phrase reads: 'and the place in which one encounters them [dialectical images] is language' (N2a, 3). Only in language is there a 'now of recognizability'. Therefore, only in the encounter with language can there be a dialectical image. This encounter takes on the form of that confrontation Benjamin ascribes to the relation between art and photography (see Y2a, 6 discussed above). But why should encountering language reveal the same structure that is brought out by history as the relation of art to photography? Indeed, just what is this structure of language for Benjamin: this structure that has to be read and, whether recognized or not, must be present at every moment (*alle Augenblicke*) since it is the foundation of all reading?

Benjamin states that in the dialectical image it is the relation between what-has-been and the now that is dialectical. This relation is then redefined as 'not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]'. If the nature of this relation is not temporal but *bildlich*, then, the dialectical image can also be redefined according to its own exhibitional structure as *das bildliche Bild*, as the image revealed in its image-likeness, its *bildlichkeit*. In this case, the dialectical would be exhibited as what it already is and the means of this exhibition is language since, as Benjamin asserts, it is only there that one encounters dialectical images. As such, language becomes the handle by which the dialectical image is recognized as an image that arrests its own dialectical movement. Thus, the two concepts that encounter one another in this genuinely historical image are the linguistic and the dialectical. The true historian, as described by Benjamin in the same fragment with which this essay begins (the fragment in which history, text and photography are set in comparison to one another), is the one able to read this image, but such a historian, Benjamin adds (by way of citing Hofmannstal), must 'read what was never written' (*GS* 1.3: 1238/*SW* 4: 405).²⁸

To read what was never written. Is not this reading the work of a developer available only to the future? To develop time in the image of its recognizability? Here, more than anywhere else, the relation of looking to saying is at stake as the condition of this reading, since what was never written is what could only be looked at and what is read belongs to writing. But what can only be looked at possesses no means of recognition, no definable chronology, no duration in which it can be present – just as time has no time in which to be present hence the bursting by which Benjamin describes its movement out of this state.²⁹ To name this duration as the 'now' of the 'now of recognizability' is to name language as the place of its reproducibility, but this place, not to mention its critical function, is, Benjamin insists, perilous since what is readable in this moment can only be read in this moment. As Thesis V states, 'what flashes up at the moment [*Augenblick*] of its recognizability ... is never seen again' (*GS* 1.2: 695/*SW* 4: 390).³⁰ Its function in this case is never to become an image for the past since the significance of such an image would always be tied to the here and now of its event in that past – an understanding that is in effect auratic (according to the terms in which the aura is defined in the 'Reproducibility' essay). Instead, by making it 'never seen again' Benjamin ensures that every image appearing in the 'now of recognizability' arrests the means by which historicism, continuous progress, universal history all lay claim to an authentic account of history – as if by this claim the image assured the eternal value of such histories, the image as timeless truth. Against this, Benjamin writes that 'the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea' (*N3*, 2).³¹ With this inversion of the relation between the eternal and the image – the image is no longer an image for the eternal but rather the eternal is now in it – and with the disappearance of the image from sight, genuine history is interrupted in order to preserve the future as

the place in which its interruptive force may again take place. This is why, for Benjamin, these images 'first come to readability only at a defined time [*sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen*]' (*N3*, 1). The 'historical index' of this coming to readability is the 'now of recognizability' – the defined time in which they can be read. But if what is read is their truth, then, what can only be read is that they will never be seen again. This is the truth that is the death of intentional history: history as progress, universal history, and so on. This, in the end, is the content of the truth exhibited in the dialectical image: never to be seen again. In this aspect, every image so produced has the same effect – history in the age of its reproducibility. There is no authentic image of time since no image, as photography so clearly illustrates, takes place in time, but only because of a time that recedes as the condition of its recognition. Within this understanding of time, every image is thus the record of this recession, that is, every image is the recession in which history takes on a form. In this, they do not vary – and this is also why the interest of Benjamin's concept of history does not, in the end, lie in his claims on behalf of historical materialism. This concept treats the temporal condition of history, a condition that assures the reproducibility of history in the image. It is not, in this case, an example of history but the example of time as the unvarying *cliché* from which the image is developed. Its force is this exemplariness, which is to say its citability – an aspect reinforced by the presentation of the *Arcades Project* as well as the theses on history, both are pre-eminently citable as well as pre-eminently readable as citations.

In this citability, Benjamin remains the most telling example of a history understood as example, a history that can and would only be shown ('method of this project ... nothing to say ... only to show?'). This understanding, unlike Kafka's Messiah, does not come later than it should.³² (But then, who is to say that the lateness of Kafka's Messiah would not allow the Messiah to arrive on time, unnoticed? An arrival that would not matter.) This understanding of history has appointed its time – now – as if it were a time appointed for it (as if time could ever be late or even on time). But, to defer this moment to the future is to ensure that history, in its least form, will show itself *on* time if not in time. As such, it will show in the moment of its appointment, the moment of its only possible recognition as history. Only then does it arrive as *das bildliche Bild*. Only then does it arrive in the shortness of a history that has no time to call its own other than the chronological definability of its event. But to make the example of time's not-coming matter, to make the time that has no time short enough to be recognized *as* history, is this not still the task of technology? Even in the time of an *Augenblick*, when the looking of the eye is splintered into the look of messianic time? And is such technology not the reproducible image of history reproduced as the end of modernity? And is this not in the guise of something different from what was previously signified, and so on, *ad infinitum*, until the entire past is brought into the present? *Im Nu-ce*?

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	vii
Introduction ANDREW BENJAMIN	1
1 The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN	3
2 The Shortness of History, or Photography <i>In Nuce</i>: Benjamin's Attenuation of the Negative DAVID FERRIS	19
3 'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time WERNER HAMACHER	38
4 Down the K. Hole: Walter Benjamin's Destructive Land-surveying of History STEPHANIE POLSKY	69
5 The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism REBECCA COMAY	88
6 Trembling Contours: Kierkegaard-Benjamin-Brecht RAINER NÄGELE	102
7 The Subject of History: The Temporality of Parataxis in Benjamin's Historiography DIMITRIS VARDOULAKIS	118
8 Tradition as Injunction: Benjamin and the Critique of Historicisms PHILIPPE SIMAY	137
9 Boredom and Distraction: The Moods of Modernity ANDREW BENJAMIN	156
10 Walter Benjamin's Interior History CHARLES RICE	171
11 What is the Matter with Architectural History? GEVORK HARTOONIAN	182
12 Messianic Epistemology: Thesis XV ROBERT GIBBS	197
13 Non-messianic Political Theology in Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History' HOWARD CAYGILL	215
<i>Notes</i>	227
<i>Contributors</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	256