VANISHING POINTS: WALTER BENJAMIN AND KAREL TEIGE ON THE LIQUIDATIONS OF AURA

The Aura of Originality

The vanishing of the aura is the most celebrated postulate not only in Walter Benjamin's most celebrated essay, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' (henceforth the 'Work of Art essay'), but indeed anywhere in his writings. Even stating this fact became long ago a mechanical gesture.[1] The Work of Art essay, clearly intended as 'a scandal and a provocation', is seen to overturn established aesthetic beliefs so radically as to achieve epochal status.[2] In a major recent history of German literature, for example, Benjamin's theses are described as 'terrifying', 'bordering on heresy', and 'shred[ding] the fabric of the most cherished beliefs about art', while even unabashedly hostile commentators feel compelled to pay 'homage [. . .] to the essay's originality'.[3] Benjamin himself encourages such a view when, at the outset of the essay, he claims to provide 'neu in die Kunsttheorie eingeführten Begriffe' ('new concepts for the theory of art') and elsewhere expresses anxiety lest his ideas be stolen before he has had the chance to publish them.[4] The consensus regarding the importance and originality of Benjamin's account of the decline of aura has helped make the Work of Art

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[1] Thirty years ago Werner Fuld claimed that 'it seems precisely this most inaccessible of Benjamin's ideas has entered the speech (although not the thinking) reproduced daily by culture adepts [*Kulturbeflissene*], as if Benjamin lived on in this single concept' (Fuld, 'Die Aura: Zur Geschichte eines Begriffes bei Benjamin', *Akzente*, 26 (1979), 352–70 (p. 353)). Translations are my own when not indicated otherwise. See also Burkhardt Lindner, 'Benjamins Aurakonzeption: Anthropologie und Technik, Bild und Text', in *Walter Benjamin 1892–1940, zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. by Uwe Steiner (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 217–48 (p. 217).

[2] Michael W. Jennings, 'The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art', in Walter Benjamin, *'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Michael Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 9–18 (p. 14).

[3] Lindsay Waters, 'The Machine Takes Command', in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. by David E. Wellbery (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 790–95 (p. 791); Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, 'How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once—and Become Famous for It', in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 91–97 (p. 91).

[4] This phrase appears in all three extant German versions of the essay: see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (henceforth *GS*), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–89), I, 435 and 473, and VII, 350. An English translation of the second version (which I will cite throughout) is in Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (henceforth *SW*), ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996–2003), III (2002), 101–22 (p. 102, translation modified). The anxiety over intellectual property is expressed in a letter to Gerschom Scholem: see *GS*, I, 983; *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940* (henceforth *CWB*), ed. by Gerschom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 514.

essay 'probably the most frequently cited and most intensely debated essay in the history of the academic humanities of the twentieth century'.[5]

None the less, the intense fascination generated by the Work of Art essay has engendered a continual reforgetting of what should be an obvious fact: Benjamin's major theses are brilliantly formulated and occupy a crucial position in the larger edifice of his thought, but they are hardly original. The term 'aura' may be Benjamin's, but the idea of its vanishing is not. Indeed, one might speculate that part of what has made the Work of Art essay a touchstone for debates on modern, postmodern, and contemporary aesthetics is the way Benjamin gave conceptual depth to claims that were becoming commonplace even when he completed the first version of the essay in late 1935. To acknowledge this is by no means to question the importance of Benjamin's text. But it should warn against uncritical identification of Benjamin's 'liqui-dationist claims' as the site of the essay's originality.[6] Claims that modern society was eroding or 'liquidating' the aesthetic categories traditionally used to define art as a discrete and privileged practice had been raised forcefully over at least the decade and a half preceding Benjamin's text, and the Work of Art essay should be read as responding to rather than culminating—let alone inventing—that discourse.[7] Few thinkers pursued the liquidationist discourse as systematically as did the Czech avant-garde theorist Karel Teige (1900–1951). While Teige is no longer a familiar name, his critical legacy has in recent years begun to attract broader notice, and closer analysis reveals striking relevance for the issues Benjamin took up in the Work of Art essay. Examination of Teige's liquidationist discourse not only reveals parallels with Benjamin's claims but also sheds light on the often fundamentally opposed positions Benjamin set forth in other texts written more or less simultaneously with the Work of Art essay. Tracing the extent of Benjamin's reliance upon established liquidationist claims in the Work of Art essay, therefore, is not an exercise in debunking. Rather, such contextualization allows more precise identification of Benjamin's relation to this avant-garde discourse, and greater understanding of his veiled critique of some of the liquidationist theses the Work of Art essay is so often understood to herald.

[5] 'Editors' Preface', in *Mapping Benjamin*, ed. by Gumbrecht and Marrinan, pp. xiii–xvi (p. xiii).

[6] In her magisterial analysis of the Work of Art essay Miriam Bratu Hansen questions 'the liquidationist tenor of the essay [. . .] and, by implication, the facile reproduction of this tenor in the essay's standard reception': see 'Actuality, Antinomies', in her *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 75–103 (p. 83).

[7] This only includes arguments connecting the decline of aura to developments in technological reproduction. If one also includes 'idealist' versions of the thesis then the tradition is far older: as Jürgen Habermas pointed out, 'Hegel already announced the loss of aura in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*' (Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', trans. by Frederick Lawrence, in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 90–128 (p. 103)).

Claims for the epochal status of the Work of Art essay generally emphasize its prognostic value: how the essay forecast developments extending well beyond Benjamin's own present. The focus on prognosis may seem natural—after all, Benjamin himself writes of the 'prognostische Anforderungen' ('prognostic requirements') of the essay (*GS*, VII, 350; *SW*, III, 101). None the less, broader contextualization provides grounds for understanding the main analytic gesture of the essay less as prognosis of the future and more as diagnosis of Benjamin's present. One can cite Benjamin in support of this approach as well: in letters to colleagues Benjamin repeatedly described the essay as forensics rather than forecast. The essay, he writes, traces the 'signature' of its present and aspires to the 'genaue Fixierung des Standorts der Gegenwart' ('precise establishment of the standpoint of the present').[8]

Reading the Work of Art essay as a diagnostic rather than prognostic document brings several advantages. First, it avoids attributing to the essay a model of continuous temporal extension that is inseparable from the concept of prognosis and that Benjamin systematically critiques elsewhere in his work. Second, it allows more nuanced formulation of how the essay combines celebratory and critical stances towards the developments it describes (often understood as revealing a fundamental contradiction or ambivalence in Benjamin's thought). Third, it avoids attributing to the essay primacy for liquidationist claims that were already well established at the time it was written. By championing claims that constituted the *Jüngstvergangene*, or recent past, of avant-garde theory, the Work of Art essay acknowledges simultaneously the efficacy and the historical boundedness of the liquidationist position. Without explicitly criticizing that position, I will argue, Benjamin acknowledges that it can take the form of a *Wunschbild* or 'wish-image' belonging to his own moment in history. Because the wish-image of the vanishing aura characterizes the present in which the Work of Art essay is embedded, Benjamin himself cannot escape its seductive power. Yet as wish-image it also marks that moment as historically determined and thus inherently partial. The liquidationist claims the essay is so often taken to originate, therefore, function less as materialist prognosis of a destination just visible on the horizon of the future, and more as diagnosis of a thought-pattern of Benjamin's present: a wish-image that no thinker (or at least none unburdened by regressive ideals) could avoid. This sense of the 'unavoidability' of the wish-image lends the Work of Art essay celebratory and critical vectors that are not contradictory but rather self-reflexive.

The interpretative perspective I propose here is neatly expressed in an image Benjamin used to describe the relation of the Work of Art essay to his other work (specifically the historical construction undertaken in the

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[8] Letters to Max Horkheimer of 16 October 1935 and to Werner Krafft of 27 December 1935, reproduced in *GS*, I, 983 and 984 respectively; *CWB*, pp. 509 and 517 (translation modified).

Passagen-Werk (*The Arcades Project*)): 'Diesmal handelt es sich darum, den genauen Ort in der Gegenwart anzugeben, auf den sich meine historische Konstruktion als auf ihren Fluchtpunkt beziehen wird' ('The issue this time is to indicate the precise point in the present to which my historical construction will orient itself, as to its vanishing point').[9] This image of the vanishing point is curious, for it presumes a counterintuitive relation between foreground and background. One does not look through the foreground of the present out into the background of the past (as a more traditional image of the historical gaze would posit), nor does one look through the foreground of the present out into the future emerging on the distant horizon (as the image of prognosis would require). Rather, historical 'background' forms Benjamin's foreground; and the present, that which is temporally closest, is located in the background, at the vanishing point. If it is true that 'Benjamin thinks in images [Bildern]',[10] it is equally true that aspects of Benjamin's thought can be grasped mimetically through images that Benjamin himself invoked only fleetingly. The present essay explores the diagnosis of the wish-image inherent in the Work of Art essay through the conceptual figure of the vanishing point: a point marking both a hypothetical state in which aura has vanished and Benjamin's critical distance from the liquidationist thought-patterns of his own present.

Much has been written on Benjamin's sources for the concept of the aura. The term contains clear reverberations of the discourse on 'human aura' in *fin de siècle* spiritual and spiritualist movements (such as theosophy and anthroposophy, which Benjamin abhorred), of early Romantic or older notions of the 'schöner Schein', or even of medieval mysticism and the Kabbalah.[11] Commentators have traced earlier appearances of the concept in Benjamin's work from the 1920s.[12] Benjamin's particular use of the concept

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[9] From the same letter to Max Horkheimer, cited in *GS*, I, 983; *CWB*, p. 509.

[10] Ansgar Hillach, 'Dialektisches Bild', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 186–229 (p. 189).

[11] See e.g. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, Ch. 4; Josef Fürnkäs, 'Aura', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Opitz and Wizisla, p. 95–146; Fuld, 'Die Aura'; Wolfgang Braungart, 'Walter Benjamin, Stefan George, und die Frühgeschichte des Begriffs der Aura', *Castrum Peregrini*, 46/230 (1997), 38–51; Gary Smith, 'A Genealogy of "Aura": Walter Benjamin's Idea of Beauty', in *Artifacts, Representations, and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wartofsky* ed. by Carol G. Gould and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 105–19; Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Hanser, 1983); Birgit Recki, *Aura und Autonomie: Zur Subjektivität der Kunst bei Walter Benjamin und Theodor W. Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1988); Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, 'Formen und Metamorphosen der Aura', in *Das Schwinden der Sinne*, ed. by Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 75–86; Hans Robert Jauß, 'Spur und Aura: Bemerkungen zu Walter Benjamins "Passagen-Werk"', in *Studien zur Epochenwandel der ästhetischen Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp), pp. 189–215.

[12] The most important are 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' (*GS*, II, 368–85; *SW*, II, 507–28) and the report on hashish (*GS*, VI, 587–91; *SW*, II, 327–30).

'aura' thus emerges from a long-standing theological tradition that gives the term an immediate ring, an intuitive clarity. This might suggest that, at least in part, the originality of Benjamin's essay lies less in the concept of aura itself than in his application of the term to aesthetics and in his claim about its vanishing under modern technological conditions.[13]

Yet even here precursors are evident. For one thing, Benjamin 'had happily stolen' on a broad level from Romantic and post-Romantic nostalgic discourses on lost aesthetic harmony; indeed it has even been suggested that Benjamin was specifically influenced by conservative critiques of mechanized culture during the First World War.[14] Benjamin's essay, however, is far less pessimistic about cultural change under modernity than such sources. Thus it is rather the inter-war avant-garde movements such as Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism, with their exploration and celebration of the non-auratic tendencies of the modern work of art, that appear more plausible an influence on Benjamin.[15] These movements represented various forms of 'attack on [. . .] the very notion of art as an institution' in an attempt to 'shed the aesthetic construction of art'.[16] Benjamin himself described Dada in the essay as a major precursor for the idea of the withering of aesthetic aura owing to its attempt to create effects that would be fully achieved only later through the new medium of film. But if Dada intuitively anticipated the 'rücksichtslose Vernichtung der Aura' ('ruthless annihilation of the aura': *GS*, VII, 379; *SW*, III, 119), other avant-garde innovators not discussed in the Work of Art essay enacted quite consciously much of what that text analyses. In particular, many figures associated with International Constructivism adhered to the ideal of, and produced radical strategies for carrying out,

[13] Hansen, however, argues that the 'narrowly aesthetic understanding of aura' has impoverished the concept, and that only attention to the wider resonance of the term allows understanding of its role in Benjamin's theory of modern experience (*Cinema and Experience*, p. 104).

[14] Robert Kaufman, 'Aura, Still', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 121–47 (p. 122). Arnd Bohm has argued that an early essay in *Kulturkritik* by Adolf Behne influenced Benjamin: see Bohm, 'Artful Reproduction: Benjamin's Appropriation of Adolf Behne's "Das reproduktive Zeitalter" in the *Kunstwerk*-Essay', *Germanic Review*, 68 (1993), 146–55.

[15] In Petr Málek's words, the 'epoch-making importance [of the Work of Art essay] should not [. . .] obscure the fact that the problem of the mechanical/mass (re)production of a work of art, while grasped here in all its complexities and contradictions, had occupied the minds of avant-garde artists and theorists ever since the 1910s' (Petr Málek, 'Mass (Re)production', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík, and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Opera Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis, 2011), pp. 263–82 (p. 264)). See also Krzysztof Ziarek, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Electronic Mutability', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Benjamin, pp. 209–25; John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 160–61; Michael Müller, *Architektur und Avantgarde: Ein vergessenes Projekt der Moderne?* (Frankfurt a.M.: Syndikat, 1984), pp. 98–147; as well as the references in n. 21 below.

[16] Ziarek, 'The Work of Art', p. 212.

non-auratic cultural production.[17] A telling example is the pair of 'telephone pictures' László Moholy-Nagy produced in 1922, entitled 'EM 1' and 'EM 2'. To make these works Moholy-Nagy simply gave instructions to a sign painter over the telephone, specifying co-ordinates and tones of colour fields, which were then printed in enamel on a steel sheet as if on a piece of graph paper. The elimination of authorial intervention, the anti-auratic nature, and the immanence of technological reproducibility to this procedure are clear.[18]

Benjamin's theory of the decline of auratic art thus took fundamental inspiration from the waves of revolt against aesthetic autonomy produced by the historical avant-garde movements before, during, and immediately following the First World War. While the importance of these precedents is conspicuous, commentators rarely seem concerned by the time-lag between the precedent and Benjamin's essay itself.[19] Yet given that Benjamin's account of the decline of aura as a result of technological reproducibility has been traced back to sources from the early 1920s or mid-1910s (if not earlier), it is clear that the originality of Benjamin's claims in 1935 cannot lie in the liquidationist moments of the essay, as is so often maintained. Attempts to deepen our understanding of Benjamin's interest during the mid-1920s in the European avant-garde, and its effect on the shape of his work, offer some clarification here, since they reveal that Benjamin was himself active (albeit peripherally) in some of the movements that inspired his later essay.[20] Recent

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[17] Frederic J. Schwartz writes that 'ideas of the kind central to the Artwork essay's distracted, productive expert were clearly quite current already in the 1920s among a certain group of artists' (Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant-Garde', *Art History*, 24 (2001), 401–44 (p. 412)). And in Eckhardt Köhn's words, 'the theme Benjamin takes up of the technical reproduction of works of art is an old theme of Constructivism' (Köhn, '"Nichts gegen die Illustrierte!": Benjamin, der Berliner Konstruktivismus, und das avantgardistische Objekt', in *Schrift Bilder Denken: Walter Benjamin und die Künste*, ed. by Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 48–69 (p. 64)).

[18] Krisztina Passuth claims that these telephone pictures 'obviously provided inspiration for Walter Benjamin's [Work of Art] essay dating from a slightly later period' (Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 33). See also Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert', p. 428. Manfredo Tafuri, without discussing the telephone pictures, associates Moholy-Nagy's 'technological utopia' with Benjamin's Work of Art essay: see Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. by Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 142–43. Moholy-Nagy's 1922 essay on 'Production–Reproduction' also foreshadows elements of both the Work of Art essay and Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer' (1935) (Krisztina Passuth's translation is contained in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. by Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 454–55).

[19] Peter Bürger's classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), set an example for discussing Benjamin in the context of avant-garde movements such as Dada without reflecting on the time-lag between them. Ziarek (pp. 211–14) represents a recent example. Passuth also glosses over the thirteen-year gap between Moholy-Nagy's telephone pictures and the Work of Art essay (see previous note).

[20] This interest may originate even earlier since, according to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin was a neighbour of and met Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings in Berne in 1917–19: see Scholem,

scholarship has focused attention, for example, on Benjamin's contacts with the *G*-Group in Berlin, on his publications in the avant-garde revue *i10*, and on his incorporation of avant-garde techniques into works such as *Einbahnstrasse* (*One-Way Street*).[21] Yet the question remains regarding the 'belatedness' of Benjamin's theory of the decline of aura.[22]

Benjamin himself proposes a resolution. He implies that his reflections in the Work of Art essay represent a qualitatively different phase from the earlier avant-garde movements. While Dada may have anticipated the developments described in his essay, it did so largely in ignorance of the forces to which it was responding. Dada enacted one of the first overt manifestations of the decline of aura, but—like all true action—this occurred spontaneously and, as it were, blindly in the heat of the moment. By contrast, Benjamin implies, his Work of Art essay represents the intellectual mastery of that originary

Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 101. As Detlev Schöttker points out, this early contact with Zurich Dadaists would probably have made Benjamin receptive to the Dada movement emerging in Berlin on his return, and consequently to the Berlin Dadaists' propagation of Russian and International Constructivism: see Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus: Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 152–53 and 159. This early (and short-lived) alliance between Dada and Constructivism culminated in the International Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists in September 1922 in Weimar.

[21] See in particular the editors' introduction in *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design and Film, 1923–1926*, ed. by Detlef Mertins and Michael W. Jennings (London: Tate, in association with the Getty Research Institute, 2010), pp. 3–20 (esp. pp. 8 and 16); Frederic J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), Ch. 2, esp. pp. 39–51; Michael Jennings, 'Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-Garde', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 18–34; Köhn, '"Nichts gegen die Illustrierte!"'; Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert'; Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus*, esp. pp. 156–72; Detlev Schöttker, 'Reduktion und Montage: Benjamin, Brecht, und die konstruktivistische Avantgarde', in *global benjamin 2*, ed. by Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm (Munich: Fink, 1999), pp. 745–73 (esp. pp. 750–51).

[22] Hansen argues that Benjamin's 'tactical belatedness' reached back to a moment of unrealized potential before the mastery of false auratic culture by Fascism and the 'surrendering [of] important Marxist positions' by the Popular Front: 'It is *because* Benjamin was so acutely aware of the politically and aesthetically retrograde and dangerous uses of the technological media [. . .] that he resumed the perspective of the 1920s avantgarde' (*Cinema and Experience*, pp. 87, 77, and 88). This may be true, but underplays the critical re-evaluation implicit in Benjamin's return to this earlier moment. Maria Gough also discusses 'Benjamin's belatedness' in 'Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde', *October*, 101 (2002), 53–83 (esp. pp. 76–83), and in turn cites Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 275, n. 4. Gough's discussion, however, pertains to 'The Author as Producer' and addresses the belatedness question through historical contextualization specific to that essay. The Work of Art essay's belatedness as film theory is often noted: Eva Geulen writes that 'Benjamin's text arrives relatively late in the history of the theory of film' ('Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"', in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Gerhard Richter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 121–41 (p. 122)); and Lutz Koepnick points out that Benjamin's formulations are 'curiously out of synch with the developments of film technology' (specifically the rise of the sound picture) (*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 143).

moment: a phase of reflection that became possible 'erst heute' ('only now': *GS*, VII, 350; *SW*, III, 101), once the incipient historical vector to which Dada responded revealed its true direction through the development of film as a medium. Benjamin states that Dada's prescient aspirations 'ihm [Dada] selbstverständlich in der hier beschriebenen Gestalt nicht bewußt sind' ('in the form described here are not, of course, conscious ones': *GS*, VII, 379; *SW*, III, 118, translation modified). The Work of Art essay, therefore, represents the coming to consciousness of what, in Dada and other historical avant-garde movements, constituted an unconscious, instinctively felt response to changes in relations of production. Such a scheme of originary action versus conscious reflection relativizes Benjamin's debts to the historical avant-garde by attributing primacy to him at least in theoretical elaboration. This scheme may well represent an unspoken academic consensus on the avant-garde precedents for the Work of Art essay.[23] Yet if one pauses to examine just how far the theoretical or reflective phase of the avant-garde attack on aesthetic autonomy had in fact reached by the early 1920s, then even this scheme appears shaky.

This is where the work of Teige, the leading theorist of the Czech inter-war avant-garde, acquires particular relevance. Unofficial spokesperson for Devětsil, the largest and best-known Czech avant-garde group in the 1920s, Teige wrote about avant-garde activities ranging from literature, architecture, visual media from painting to typography, and theatre. He maintained close contacts in Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and elsewhere, and it has justifiably been claimed that 'of all the networked figures in the inter-war avant-garde, Karel Teige was one of the most well-connected'.[24] Teige's texts neither attain nor aspire to the philosophical heft of Benjamin's, but he was a stringently logical thinker whose interventions even in ephemeral cultural-political debates presupposed a synthesizing theory of avant-garde production, which he also viewed as inherently linked to Marxist political engagement.[25] During the early 1920s Teige became a fierce proponent of International Constructivism, and his reputation as one of the most uncompromising critics of 'aesthetic' approaches to modernist architecture was secured during a high-profile polemic with Le Corbusier in 1929. But surprisingly, Teige simultaneously

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[23] Andreas Huyssen's influential account accepts Benjamin's own explanation that 'it took much longer for the production relations of capitalist society to make an impact on the superstructure than it took them to prevail at the basis, so much longer that they could only be analyzed in the 1930s' (Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 153).

[24] Matthew S. Witkovsky, 'Karel Teige: Construction, Poetry, and Jazz', in *Avant-Garde Art in Everyday Life: Early-Twentieth-Century European Modernism*, ed. by Matthew S. Witkovsky (Chicago and New Haven: Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 99–116 (p. 100).

[25] Teige was a far more orthodox Marxist than Benjamin, although he never joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. After 1948 Teige was subjected to a vicious official smear campaign as the embodiment of decadent Trotskyite modernism.

propagated a movement he termed Poetism, a Czech *specificum* calling for ludic spontaneity, 'the liberation of all instincts [and] the development of the productive drive'.[26] In the early 1930s, as Poetism became increasingly focused on the function of the unconscious, and as French Surrealists around André Breton became increasingly vociferous about their Marxist orientation, Teige saw the two movements as naturally merging, and from 1934 onwards he became a leading figure in the Czech Surrealist Group.[27]

Beginning in the early 1920s, Teige articulated a theoretical position that clearly anticipates many of the central claims of Benjamin's Work of Art essay.[28] The point of examining Teige in this context is certainly not to claim that Benjamin was scooped by fourteen years or so, and thus to transfer the aureole of originality from a canonical to a lesser-known figure. Teige himself made no claim to originality. He saw himself as a discursive analyst, synthesizer, and propagator of international trends that were already widespread by the early 1920s, freely adopting ideas and slogans from other figures (for example, from Soviet Constructivists active in Berlin such as El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, who themselves were transmitting and transforming currents from Moscow). That Teige felt his major claims were becoming widely established (at least among 'progressive' figures), however, is precisely the point. Accordingly, the next section of this essay will examine several of Teige's early texts in order to recover more of the conceptual field of early International Constructivism and show that many of the most famous claims in the Work of Art essay appear (albeit in less resonant form) in Teige's texts of the early and mid-1920s. My final section will then examine where Benjamin's thought departs from the liquidationist line put forward by Teige, drawing conclusions for interpreting the Work of Art essay.

The Liquidations of Aura

There is no evidence that Benjamin and Teige knew, let alone engaged with, each other's work. The closest their names seem to have come during their lifetimes was in the pages of the short-lived avant-garde journal *G*. Hans Richter, the driving force behind the journal, wrote a brief gloss on

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[26] Karel Teige, 'Poesie pro 5 smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu', in his *Svět, který voní* (Prague: Odeon, 1931), pp. 195–237 (p. 237). I have examined Teige's Constructivism/Poetism dualism, as well as the debate with Le Corbusier, in Peter Zusi, 'The Style of the Present: Karel Teige on Constructivism and Poetism', *Representations*, 88 (2004), 102–24; and 'Tendentious Modernism: Karel Teige's Path to Functionalism', *Slavic Review*, 67 (2008), 821–39.

[27] For Teige's account of this development see 'Deset let surrealismu', in Karel Teige, *Výbor z díla* (henceforth *Výbor*), ed. by Jiří Brabec and others, 3 vols (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966–94), II (1969), 139–89. The Czech Surrealist Group was founded in 1934 by the poet Vítězslav Nezval.

[28] The Teige–Benjamin comparison has attracted almost no scholarly attention. Málek's 'Mass (Re)production' (see n. 15) is a perspicacious exception.

Prague, Teige, and Devětsil's breakthrough anthology *Život II* ('I know of no illustrated book that is more abreast of its time', wrote Richter) which appeared on the page directly preceding Benjamin's translation of a short essay on photography by Tristan Tzara.[29] Although there is no evidence of direct contact, Benjamin and Teige did share a constellation of intellectual orientation points and sources of inspiration. Moholy-Nagy (active for a time in the *G*-Group and then in the journal *i10*) went on to become a central figure in the Bauhaus after 1923. Teige observed developments in the Bauhaus closely: his initial scepticism towards what he regarded as aestheticist elements of the programme under Walter Gropius's leadership turned to enthusiasm when Hannes Meyer, with whom Teige was friends, became director in 1928. Meyer's radical functionalism and uncompromising scientism (as well as his strict Marxism) were close to the intellectual line Teige had propagated since the early 1920s. Indeed, Teige was among the guest lecturers whom Meyer soon invited to the Bauhaus to help cultivate this new, sober orientation—the logical positivists Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, and Hans Reichenbach were also among the better-known guests—and as external *Dozent* Teige delivered a lecture cycle in Dessau in early 1930 on the sociology of architecture.[30] Teige's course on material and technical innovations in contemporary literature, poetry, and typography, planned for the 1930 autumn semester, did not take place owing to Meyer's forced resignation.[31] A book by Teige entitled *Tschechische Kunst* (which never materialized) was part of the original publication plan that Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius drew up for the series of 'Bauhausbücher' in the mid-1920s, which included titles by figures such as Kandinsky, van Doesburg, Malevitsch, and Mondrian, as well as Moholy-Nagy's important book *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (1925).[32]

[29] See *G*, pp. 140–41.

[30] Teige set forth his views on the Bauhaus in 'Ten Years of the Bauhaus', in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 317–29; Czech original: 'Deset let Bauhausu', in *Výbor*, I, 477–86. Teige's Dessau lectures were published under the title 'K sociologii architektury' in the journal *ReD*, 3.6–7 (1930), 161–223, and then in book form (Prague: Odeon, 1930). On the philosophers' visits to Dessau see Peter Galison, 'Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism', *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 709–52 (pp. 718–20).

[31] See Vratislav Effenberger, 'Nové umění', in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 575–619 (p. 615); and Jean-Louis Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture*, pp. 1–55 (pp. 17–18). In August 1930 Teige ended his collaboration with the Bauhaus in protest against the treatment of Meyer and wrote a series of articles on the Meyer case and 'the poison gas of reaction' (see the bibliographic references in *Výbor*, I, 571).

[32] On Teige's planned contribution to the 'Bauhausbücher' see Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 43. Benjamin quoted Moholy-Nagy's pronouncements on photography at some length in his 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie': see *GS*, II, 382 and (unattributed) p. 385; *SW*, II, 523 and 527. See also Brigid Doherty, 'Photography, Typography, and the Modernization of Reading', in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. by Wellbery, pp. 733–38 (esp. pp. 733–34); Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert', p. 403; and Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 3.

Benjamin was fascinated not only by the Bauhaus but also by the modernist architectural theories of Sigfried Giedion and Adolf Behne, as well as by the ideal of glass architecture as described by the fantasy author Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915).[33] Teige's own work on architectural theory was anchored in a particularly austere version of the avant-garde discourse that interested Benjamin, but there is a more specific connection here as well: as Jean-Louis Cohen has described, Teige maintained a significant correspondence with both Giedion and, in particular, Behne.[34] Finally, both had to work through a period of initial scepticism before becoming favourably disposed towards Surrealism. Thus Benjamin and Teige shared on the one hand an interest in architectural functionalism and its broader impact through the various cultural inflections of Constructivism, and on the other hand an interest in Surrealism that is initially hesitant yet increasingly powerful as the 1920s drew to a close.

While these scattered intellectual analogies may suggest no more than a general milieu of shared concerns, examination of Teige's early texts reveals more specific parallels. In 1925 Teige published a major essay called 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"'. The very title reveals Teige's interest in identifying the concerns of International Constructivism with what Benjamin in the Work of Art essay would call the 'Liquidierung des Traditionswertes am Kulturerbe' ('the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage': *GS*, VII, 354; *SW*, III, 104). Teige's description of a contemporary liquidation of art does not pretend to originality, but merely reflects theoretically on what he saw enacted by avant-garde circles in Moscow, Berlin, and elsewhere. He does, however, perceive an epochal shift in how culture is produced: 'Constructivism is not some passing aesthetic and artistic fashion[. . . . It is] an extremely broad and absolutely international movement [. . .], the entrance into a new age of culture and civilization.'[35] The primary characteristic of this emerging era,

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[33] See e.g. Heinz Brüggeman, 'Walter Benjamin und Sigfried Giedion oder die Wege der Modernität', in *global benjamin 2*, ed. by Garber and Rehm, pp. 717–44; Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 103–19; Tyrus Miller, '"Glass before its Time, Premature Iron": Architecture, Temporality and Dream in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*', in *Walter Benjamin and 'The Arcades Project'*, ed. by Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 240–58; Detlef Mertins, 'The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass', *Assemblage*, 29 (1996), 7–23; Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 1995), Ch. 6; McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, pp. 184–85 and 229–30; and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 1989), pp. 124–31.

[34] Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture*, pp. 27, 34, and 44. See also Rostislav Švácha, 'Before and after the Mundaneum: Karel Teige as Theoretician of the Architectural Avant-Garde'; Eric Dluhosch, 'Teige's Minimum Dwelling as a Critique of Modern Architecture'; and Klaus Spechtenhauser and Daniel Weiss, 'Karel Teige and the CIAM: The History of a Troubled Relationship', all in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 106–39, 140–93, and 216–55, respectively. Teige would have had little sympathy for Benjamin's interest in Scheerbart.

[35] Karel Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', in *Modern Architecture*, pp. 331–40

Teige claims, is that it transforms the category of art so radically that the very word becomes practically unusable. Teige puts the word 'art' in scare quotes in the title of his essay and emphasizes that the term must not be understood in its standard sense: 'If we still use the word "art" today and perhaps for some time yet as a terminological aid, it does not mean for us sacred and sublime Art with a capital "A" [. . .], which the modern age has unseated from its throne' ('Constructivism', p. 331, translation modified; *Výbor*, I, 130). Disparaging the quasi-religious rhetoric he felt usually accompanied aesthetic discourse, Teige describes Constructivism as the liberation of art from theological functions and its emergence from the clouds of cultic veneration. He writes: 'We do not attach any sacral or cultic sublimity to art at all, we do not surround it with the smoke of holy incense' ('Constructivism', p. 332, translation modified; *Výbor*, I, 130). The liquidation of art, therefore, returns it to solid ground: spectral images and holy haze give way to tangible, functional products. Several years earlier Teige had invoked Ehrenburg's formulation that 'the new art is not art', but in this essay he offers a redemptive redefinition of the term: 'For us *the term "art"* [umění] *comes from the verb "to be able"* [uměti] *and its product is an artefact* [umělost]. [. . .] Art is simply a manner of using particular means for a particular function, and both means and function are more or less variable quantities' (ibid., translation modified). Constructivism, in short, makes art once again useful—a tool to be grasped and applied towards the improvement of everyday life. Teige thus invokes classic Marxist rhetoric for debunking aesthetic fetishism: Constructivism extracts the rational kernel from the mystical shell. It is not difficult to see in Teige's image of what Constructivism liquidates—the cultic cloud of 'holy incense' keeping traditional Works of Art at reverential remove—also the hazy outline of Benjamin's notion of aura.

The transformation of art that drove Teige to his etymological reinvention of the term was fundamentally related to technological developments and, above all, to technological reproducibility. In 1922 he writes in one of his first major essays: 'Painting is not religion [. . .] it is primarily a craft [*řemeslem*]. And as a craft it cannot ignore the impact of mechanical reproduction. It may be assumed that some day in an egalitarian socialist society pictures will be duplicated [*rozmnožovány*] by machine; this is already occurring partially through reproductions, which, more than originals, mediate the artistic-cultural relations of today.'[36] This passage (practically simultaneous with Moholy-Nagy's telephone pictures) retains in part a traditional vocabulary of artistic production in its understanding of mechanical reproduction as a craftsman's tool. But the conception of mechanical reproduction quickly

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(p. 331), translation modified. Czech original: Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', in *Výbor*, I, 129–43 (p. 129).

[36] 'Umění dnes a zítra', in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, ed. by Karel Teige and Jaroslav Seifert (Prague: Večernice, 1922), pp. 187–202 (p. 196).

proved stronger than such remnants. Less than a year later Teige wrote an essay explaining the phenomenon of the 'picture-poem' (*obrazová báseň*), an early form of photo-montage recently taken up by several members of Devětsil (including Teige himself, who coined the term) combining verbal elements and visual images into a sort of multi-media collage.[37] As if chased away by the technical requirements and innovative possibilities of this experimental genre, all references to art as handicraft disappear:

Sooner or later this fusion [of traditional genres in the picture-poem] is likely to bring about the *liquidation* (even if gradual) of traditional methods of painting and poetry. *Picture-poems completely conform to contemporary requirements*. Mechanical reproduction allows pictures to take *book form*. [. . .] Mechanical reproduction will bring about the popularization [*zlidovění*] of art securely and on a mass scale. The *press* [*Tisk*], not museums or exhibitions, mediates between artistic production and spectators. The old type of exhibition is dying out, for it too strongly resembles a gallery-like mausoleum. The modern exhibition must be a bazaar (a trade fair, a world exhibition). [. . .] Mechanical reproduction and the press will ultimately make originals useless—after all, we throw manuscripts into the waste-paper basket after they have been printed.[38]

Here Teige not only embraces the new media (the press and typographic pictures published in book form) that technological reproduction opened up and that he felt were bringing art objects closer to the masses: he was already stating in 1923 that technological reproduction made the very notion of an original obsolete—one of Benjamin's central and most celebrated claims.[39]

Teige's comments on the transformations instigated by modern forms of exhibition (as a bazaar or trade fair) further anticipate Benjamin's distinction between cult value and exhibition value in the Work of Art essay. Both authors describe the origin of art in religious ritual and see analogous

[37] On the picture-poem see Jindřich Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print* (Prague: Kant, 2008), pp. 83–94; Matthew S. Witkovsky, *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2007), pp. 42–47; Karel Srp, 'Optical Words (Picture Poems and Poetism)', in *Czech Photographic Avant-Garde, 1918–1948*, ed. by Vladimír Birgus (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 56–72; Karel Srp, 'Karel Teige in the Twenties: The Moment of Sweet Ejaculation', in *Karel Teige*, ed. by Dluhosch and Švácha, pp. 11–45 (pp. 29–41), and Zdeněk Primus, 'Obrazová báseň: entuziastický produkt poetismu', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, ed. by Karel Srp (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1994), pp. 49–62.

[38] Karel Teige, 'Malířství a poezie', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), I, 494–96 (p. 496, emphasis original).

[39] One of the most famous picture-poems—the cover image for the 1922 avant-garde anthology *Život II*, co-designed by Teige with several other members of Devětsil—was reproduced in 1924 in the journal *G*. Richter's gloss on Teige and the Prague avant-garde (on the page facing Benjamin's translation of Tzara's article: see n. 29) relays Teige's basic understanding of the function of the picture-poem: 'the title page of *Zivot* [*sic*] illustrated on p. 23 belongs to a series of Teige's "picture poems" that he, tired of the senselessness of oil painting—has produced for reproductive techniques in the framework of the book' (in *G*, p. 140). To speculate that Benjamin might have reflected upon this a decade later may be too bold; yet it should be noted that the Work of Art essay does echo other concepts from *G*, such as Richter's term 'optical unconscious'; see Mertins and Jennings's introduction in *G*, p. 16.

cultic functions extending in secularized form into late nineteenth-century Aestheticism. In both accounts, cultic art (in all its historical forms) seeks out tight, inaccessible spaces: Teige writes of a 'mausoleum', Benjamin of prehistoric caves and the inner sancta of Greek temples or medieval cathedrals. Benjamin writes that 'der Kultwert als solcher drängt geradezu darauf hin, das Kunstwerk im Verborgenen zu halten' ('Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight': *GS*, VII, 358; *SW*, III, 106). The viewing of such art thus becomes either initiatory rite or confirmation of privilege. This is why both Teige and Benjamin describe the trend towards exhibition value in modern art as the 'emancipation' or release of art, the opening up of such spaces of religious or aesthetic control and, therefore, as the counterpart to a broader egalitarian or progressive political shift.

The political implications of this shift from cult to exhibition value explain why Teige associates technological reproduction with a process of popularization.[40] Rather than seeing technology's intrusion into the realm of the aesthetic as a form of dehumanization or alienation, Teige emphasizes that this shift in fact brings art (with all the caveats he attaches to the term) closer to the masses. There are several aspects to his argument. The first is the obvious fact that technology enables broader, faster, and more thorough distribution of cultural products to the public (via reproductions and the like). But the more interesting aspect of Teige's notion of a popularization of culture involves the transformation inaugurated in art by its increased social proximity to the masses. Teige is less interested in the cultural edification of the masses than in the massification of culture; indeed, he is among the earliest theorists of the inter-war avant-garde to embrace mass culture wholeheartedly. In 1922 he extols 'westerns, Buffalo Bill stories, Nick Carter adventures, sentimental novels, American movie serials, and Chaplin's slapstick, amateur comedy theatre, jugglers, minstrels, clowns, and acrobatic circus riders, Springtime folk celebrations, a Sunday football match' and claims that 'these literary forms [*odrůdy*]—many of you will say: deformities [*zrůdy*]—are nowadays the one and most characteristic popular [*lidovou*] literature' (*Výbor*, I, 58). Teige greatly values the capacity of mass culture to produce a positive reaction in its audience and contrasts this with some of the more obscure works of modernist production: he states that 'Alexander Blok's works do not approach the readership enjoyed by the anonymous authors of Buffalo Bill novels' and insists that the modern artist should think long and hard on why the masses respond spontaneously and positively to Chaplin, Sherlock Holmes stories, or the Good Soldier Švejk while remaining indifferent to Verlaine, Braque, and Picasso (all

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[40] The Czech term Teige uses (*zlidovění*) is difficult to render in English. It generally implies 'proletarianization', but for Teige also connotes popularization in the consumerist sense (as in 'popular culture') and indeed a process of 'humanization'. The central morpheme, *lid*, means 'people' in both the narrow sense of a nation and the wider sense of humanity in general (*lidstvo*).

artists for whom he otherwise has enormous respect).[41] Teige, in short, takes the position towards mass culture that would later so famously spark Benjamin's exchange with Theodor Adorno, who expressed great discomfort with what he felt to be Benjamin's 'romanticization' of the Chaplin grotesque and the 'laughter of the film spectator'.[42] Just as Teige discovers new cultural forms in what others regard as deformities, so Benjamin, discussing changes in the reception of culture, cautions that 'es darf den Betrachter nicht irre machen, daß diese [Art des Anteils] zunächst in verrufener Gestalt in Erscheinung tritt' ('The fact that this new mode of perception first appeared in a disreputable form should not mislead the observer': *GS*, VII, 380; *SW*, III, 119). And just as Teige feels that popular culture exerts a positive, progressive emotional effect on the masses alienated from high culture, Benjamin emphasizes: '*Die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verändert das Verhältnis der Masse zur Kunst. Aus dem rückständigsten, z.B. einem Picasso gegenüber, schlägt es in das fortschrittlichste, z.B. angesichts eines Chaplin, um*' ('*The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film*': *GS*, VII, 374; *SW*, III, 116, emphasis original).[43]

The privileged forum for such transformative encounters is film. In the Work of Art essay Benjamin compares film to the epic as a mode of collective reception.[44] In 1922 Teige enthusiastically describes film as 'the most powerful fact of contemporary culture and civilization', 'the true lexicon of the new art', and even as 'a Bethlehem whence comes the salvation of modern art'.[45] What initially motivates Teige's identification of this new medium as a crucial phenomenon of modern culture is its mass appeal, the 'almost unconditional faith and enthusiastic applause of the audience'.[46] But after breathlessly listing the ways that film draws on and energizes various features

[41] *Výbor*, I, 58, and see also Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 189. On such 'anti-modernist' moments in Teige (and their imbrications in the notion of *lidovost*, popular character) see Zusi, 'Tendentious Modernism', pp. 831–33.

[42] The relevant passage from Adorno's letter is reproduced in *GS*, I, 1003–04; an English translation is contained in Theodor W. Adorno and others, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 123–24. Teige is thus quite close to Benjamin's understanding of laughter as 'the dialectical precondition for a genuine seriousness'; Tim Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 12.

[43] Benjamin connects this progressive reaction with the fact that 'jeder den Leistungen, die [die Technik des Films und des Sports] austellen, als halber Fachmann beiwohnt' ('everyone who witnesses these performances [in film and sport] does so as a quasi-expert': *GS*, VII, 371; *SW*, III, 114). Benjamin gives the example of newspaper boys leaning on their bikes and analysing a bicycle race. Here, too, Teige's logic is similar when he claims that Poetist art 'must be obvious, passionate, and accessible just like sports, love, wine, and all delicacies' (*Výbor*, I, 121).

[44] See *GS*, VII, 375; *SW*, III, 116.

[45] Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', pp. 190–91. In the final phrase Teige teasingly imitates a traditional Czech Christmas carol. In these passages, too, Teige conditions his claims with the caveat that the word 'art' does not quite fit these modern cultural phenomena.

[46] Ibid., p. 193.

of popular culture—American bars, novels about the tropics or prairies, dance halls, circuses, and so forth—Teige suddenly connects the power of film with its nature as a medium utterly saturated with technology:

[Film contains] the pure power of modern poetry. It has its own precise form, which functions more perfectly than classical stanzas and the sonnets of the poets [. . .]. [I]n its origin in the optical discoveries of chronophotography and mechanical and chemical production it is an exemplar and model for all new art [. . .]. It has correctly been said that the invention of the cinema has for us the same importance as the invention of the printing press for the Renaissance: here, too, mechanical production distributes art to its spectatorship. [. . .] *Yes, all modern artistic culture consists in and must consist in mechanical production* [*strojové výrobě*].[47]

Teige places film at a crucial nodal point in the technical development of art and identifies it as the archetypal modern medium.[48] In contrast to his statements about other visual media (such as the picture-poem), Teige writes here of technological *production* (*výroba*), not *reproduction* (*reprodukce*). This constitutes the privileged moment of film: it does not start with an original art object and subsequently make use of technology for its reproduction or distribution, but is rather from the outset a mass-produced product. Teige does not explicitly state that film eliminates originals altogether, but his enthusiasm is based on film's status as a 'purely' cultural object that is simultaneously a product of technological production just like the cars, aeroplanes, and telephones he invokes to show how the achievements of engineers, though not intended as aesthetic objects, have none the less trumped the self-indulgence of poets. Film thus provides Teige with the main evidence for his argument that 'even standardized mechanical production gives rise to a new beauty', and that 'beauty is not the exclusive domain of so-called art'.[49]

To take stock, then: by 1923 (1925 at the very latest) Teige's theoretical position entails the following points. Art in modern society is undergoing a transformation so radical that it barely makes sense to use the term at all; this transformation is linked to the technological reproducibility of cultural objects; the saturation of cultural objects with technology erodes,

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[47] Ibid. (emphasis original).

[48] Teige thus presupposes a narrative about the historical development of art that focuses on nodal points associated with technological breakthroughs (e.g. the printing press or film), much as does Benjamin. For both thinkers these breakthroughs can be 'anticipated' before the necessary technological means to enact them exist. In an incidental but thoroughly Benjaminian comment, Teige describes the use of stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals as a utopian anticipation of the use of projected, coloured light for artistic purposes, a wish-image that required eight centuries for technology to provide the means for its fulfilment in cinema; see Teige, 'Poesie pro 5 smyslů', p. 207. Compare Benjamin's claim that 'es ist von jeher eine der wichtigsten Aufgaben der Kunst gewesen, eine Nachfrage zu erzeugen, für deren volle Befriedigung die Stunde noch nicht gekommen ist' ('It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come': *GS*, VII, 378; *SW*, III, 118).

[49] Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 190.

and ultimately promises to destroy, the status of the original; traditional cultic functions of art, remnants from its originary association with religious ritual, are giving way to a libratory process releasing art into spaces where exhibition value and use value take on primary importance; these processes lead inescapably to the politicization of aesthetics and culture as these are brought closer to the masses and function as a source of social empowerment; the popularization of culture pushes the form of 'art' in the direction of mass culture; and film represents the most advanced stage of these developments, equal in impact to the invention of the printing press in the Renaissance.

Clearly, much of the basic argument of the Work of Art essay is contained here. To be sure, Benjamin's formulations are more subtle conceptually and more resonant philosophically. In addition, writing in 1935 allows (indeed forces) Benjamin to take several of these arguments further than Teige.[50] What stands revealed as an obdurate phantasm, however, is the 'strong thesis' regarding Benjamin's heresies: that is, that when making these arguments in 1935 Benjamin puts forward an original and shocking line of thought. By the time of the Work of Art essay, in fact, the liquidationist discourse had even begun to reverse direction: rather than aesthetic theory attempting to articulate the implications of raw cultural practice, art objects had begun to illustrate explicitly what were already familiar theoretical tenets. If Benjamin had wished to embody his central thesis about the liquidation of aura in a visual image, he could hardly have done better than did Jaromír Funke (1896–1945), one of the leading experimenters in Czech inter-war photography. Funke's quasi-Surrealist photo series *Time Persists*, created between 1930 and 1934, contains the striking image of a sculptured angel reaching upwards and holding a wreath resembling a halo. The photograph makes expert use of the vocabulary of pseudo-auratic pictorialism: hazy light, soft focus, melodramatic gesture. Yet these elements are starkly ironic, since foreshortening makes a distant factory smokestack appear to be right in front of the winged angel. This juxtaposition transforms the gesture: the upwards reach becomes an awkward stretch, an attempt to dump the halo of art into the inconveniently tall furnace of industry.

Aura and Ornament

By 1935, therefore, the liquidationist claims of the Work of Art essay were the *Jüngstvergangene*, the recent past, of avant-garde thought. That is decidedly

[50] For example, while Teige's texts are suffused with the imperative to politicize aesthetics, Fascism obviously does not present the urgent threat for him in 1925 that it does for Benjamin in 1935. By the mid-1930s Teige was also critiquing the aestheticization of politics in Nazism—and, he grudgingly admits, to an increasing degree in the Soviet Union as well. By this time, however, the technical reproducibility of culture was no longer the vital matter it had been for him in the 1920s.

not to say they were passé—indeed the political urgencies of the mid-1930s probably reinforced the authority of such liquidationist claims as a weapon against false aestheticization.[51] But the basic arguments had consolidated into a common line that would be easily recognized and enjoyed widespread acceptance within avant-garde circles. From this angle, what stands out more prominently in the Work of Art essay is not the liquidation of aura thesis but rather the sustained attention Benjamin devotes to the structure of auratic art itself (which, for a thinker such as Teige, was primarily of negative interest). Even this observation, to be sure, has a hallowed past, and underlies two prominent approaches to Benjamin's conception of the aura: the first comprises the many fruitful analyses of Benjamin's 'ambiguous attitude' towards modernity or the way he straddles the 'antinomies of tradition', while the second encompasses accounts of Benjamin's 'redemptive' critical practice, that is, the claim that, while Benjamin embraces the anti-auratic tendencies of avant-garde cultural practice, he does so in the name of 'rescuing' a form of experience closely identified with auratic art.[52] The 'ambivalence' approach admits an unresolved inconsistency at the heart of Benjamin's thought but has also grounded his appeal for many readers for whom disillusion with avant-gardism or high Modernism is paramount. The 'redemption' approach grants Benjamin greater theoretical consistency but implicitly links him with a decidedly utopian strain in avant-garde thought. Both approaches, however, leave the liquidationist claims unchallenged as the radical core of the Work of Art essay. Whether Benjamin embraced those claims with a wistful glance backwards or with all-too-great expectations, they generate shock value and place the essay at the forefront of avant-garde theoretical speculation at that time.

The final section of this article will suggest a different perspective on the Work of Art essay by applying to it Benjamin's conception of the wish-image. The application must remain to a degree heuristic, for in two fundamental respects Benjamin's understanding of the wish-image, as put forward in his 1935 'Exposé' for the *Passagen-Werk* entitled 'Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts' ('Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century', written just a few months before the first version of the Work of Art essay, resists precise

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[51] Benjamin explicitly linked his hermeneutic examination of the 'signature of the age' with the political agenda of the Work of Art essay; see *GS*, VII, 668–69; *SW*, III, 139–40.

[52] For two important instances of the 'ambivalence' thesis see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 50; and McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, passim. Other commentators follow similar logic but with different terminology: thus Diarmuid Costello writes that 'Benjamin's attitude is marked not so much by ambivalence as by a double-edged response. He welcomes *and* mourns its passing simultaneously; his remarks about aura manifest both a "liquidationist" and an "elegiac" undertow' (Costello, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Benjamin, pp. 164–84 (p. 178)). The *locus classicus* for the 'redemption' approach is Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', esp. pp. 106–08. See also e.g. Lindner, 'Benjamins Aurakonzeption', p. 232.

application to the material of the Work of Art essay. The first reason is that Benjamin uses the wish-image as a tool for historical analysis: wish-images are necessarily invisible to those in their thrall and reveal themselves only to observers at a temporal remove. To describe a wish-image holding sway over one's own present is, in a sense, equivalent to an attempt to lift oneself up by one's own bootstraps. None the less, I argue that this framework offers a more persuasive response to the internal tensions of the Work of Art essay than the 'ambivalence' approach: Benjamin is both in the thrall of liquidationist logic and critical of some of its fundamentally utopian impulses (as further comparison with Teige will reveal). In other words, Benjamin's position may be understood less as elegiac ambivalence concerning the vanishing of aura than as veiled suspicion about the liquidationist claim that aura will vanish. Second, liquidationist logic requires retooling the concept of the wish-image, which Benjamin developed primarily in consideration of the historicist wish-imagery of the nineteenth century. In the 'Exposé' Benjamin described wish-images as images 'in denen das Neue sich mit dem Alten durchdringt. [. . .] [I]n diesen Wunschbildern [tritt] das nachdrückliche Streben hervor, sich gegen das Veraltete — das heißt aber: gegen das Jüngstvergangene — abzu-setzten. Diese Tendenzen weisen die Bildphantasie, die von dem Neuen ihren Anstoß erhielt, an das Urvergangne zurück' ('in which the new is permeated with the old. [. . . W]hat emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past').[53] Striving against the outmoded— equated here with the most recent past—wish-images reach back to the primal visual vocabulary of *Urgeschichte*, allowing the new to appear infused with a utopian force. Yet this gesture against temporal flow, the mingling of the new with images drawn from the primal past, is precisely what the liquidationist position forbids. While compulsion to distance itself from the *Jüngstvergan-gene* certainly characterizes liquidationist logic, this is performed in the name of a temporal 'purity' that makes the admixture of archaic forms anathema.

For this reason the liquidationist wish-image must take spatial rather than temporal form. The vanishing point Benjamin used to describe the subject of the Work of Art essay to Horkheimer provides an apposite conceptual figure, for it connotes the hypothetical endpoint of the developmental process for which the withering of the aura is the major symptom. While liquidationist logic stringently denies itself the right to meld the new with the archaic, the wish-image of the vanishing point does posit a comparable series of fused oppositions, such as integration and autonomy, utility and purposelessness,

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[53] Benjamin, 'Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts', in *GS*, v, 45–59 (pp. 46–47); 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (henceforth *AP*), trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 3–13 (p. 4).

or 'Ernst und Spiel' ('seriousness and play': *GS*, VII, 359; *SW*, III, 107). What vanishes with the aura is the line separating the terms in these oppositions. Perhaps no theorist of the avant-garde pursued this wish-image as systematically as Teige, whose programme in the 1920s represents a series of attempts to articulate the continuity between stringent functionalism and ludic 'Poetism'. Further comparison with Teige thus helps determine the degree to which the Work of Art essay is beholden to the wish-image of the vanishing point.

Benjamin's most impassioned defence of what might be called the liquidationist 'standard line' in fact appears in a text published two years before he began work on the Work of Art essay. His 1933 article 'Erfahrung und Armut' ('Experience and Poverty'), celebrating the 'new barbarians' who have responded to the experiential poverty of modernity not with despair but rather with a drive 'von vorn zu beginnen; von Neuem anfangen' ('to start from scratch; to make a new start'), invokes a series of Constructivist truisms that Teige (and other proponents of Constructivism) had been using since the early 1920s.[54] For example, Benjamin decries the architecture of the bourgeois era as representing 'das grauenhafte Mischmasch der Stile' ('the horrific mishmash of styles') and presupposing a 'hergebrachten, feierlichen, edlen, mit aller Opfergaben der Vergangenheit geschmückten Menschenbilde' ('traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past': *GS*, II, 215–16; *SW*, II, 732–33). The new barbarians, by contrast, represented 'constructers' who, committed to the ideals of logical transparency, egalitarian social restructuring, and sober commitment to the contemporary age, would clear the tables in the manner of Descartes (*GS*, II, 215; *SW*, II, 732).[55]

In language that sounds perhaps intentionally crude in a text by Benjamin but that adheres closely to Constructivist logic, Benjamin associates the radical gesture of the barbarian constructers with the transparency and clean surface of glass architecture, invoking specifically the architecture of Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus as well as (more idiosyncratically) the novels of Scheerbart.[56] In a sentence anticipating the central term of the

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[54] Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', in *GS*, II, 213–19 (p. 215); Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, II, 731–35 (p. 732).

[55] 'Erfahrung und Armut' was originally published in the Prague newspaper *Die Welt im Wort*. Teige, as far as I know, never commented on the piece—surprising given the proximity to his own concerns. This silence might indicate that he found Benjamin's liquidationist claims conventional or even retrograde (he would certainly have raised an eyebrow at Benjamin's praise of Scheerbart). On Cartesianism and the transparency ideal within Constructivism see Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Ch. 2.

[56] Indeed at times glass architecture becomes for Benjamin (as for Teige) a competitor to film as archetypal modern technological medium: see, for example, Benjamin's note in the *Passagen-Werk* that 'es ist das Eigentümliche der *technischen* Gestaltungsformen (im Gegensatz zu den Kunstformen), daß ihr Fortschritt und ihr Gelingen der *Durchsichtigkeit* ihres gesellschaftlichen Inhalts proportional sind. (Daher Glasarchitektur)' ('It is the peculiarity of *technological* forms of production

Work of Art essay a few years later Benjamin writes: 'Die Dinge aus Glas haben keine "Aura". Das Glas ist überhaupt der Feind des Geheimnisses. Es ist auch der Feind des Besitzes' ('Objects made of glass have no "aura". Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession': *GS*, II, 217; *SW*, II, 734). Here Benjamin displays no ambivalence: aura must go. The vanishing of the aura is not merely a developmental necessity that one might welcome or decry, but a programme to be actively pursued, since sweeping away the historical detritus of 'culture' (Benjamin himself uses quotation marks) inaugurates radical social reorganization, hostile to the bourgeois values of individualism and private property. The rhetorical similarity of this text to an almost exactly contemporaneous text on architectural functionalism and urban planning by Teige stands out starkly in their critical descriptions of the 'bourgeois interior'. One year earlier Teige wrote:

A room of the eighties and nineties of the last century is a stuffy place, full of dust and cobwebs hidden in inaccessible nooks and crannies, full of germs and stale air. Furniture is not there for the purpose of living but only for representation and a show of opulence: here we find vitrines, jardinières, huge clocks, pedestals, thrones instead of chairs, ceramic turtles and plaster busts (Napoleon, Dante, Tyrš, and Fügner), embroidered coverlets and cushions, real or imitation oriental carpets and tiger hides, paper palms, glass flowers as lamps, appliqués, batiques, and so on, and so on. The textile of choice is velvet: germs and dust thrive in this material that cannot be laundered or cleaned. Ornamentation, naturally, is the correlative accompaniment to such accommodation and furnishings.[57]

In 'Erfahrung und Armut' Benjamin wrote:

Betritt einer das bürgerliche Zimmer der 80er Jahre, so ist bei aller 'Gemütlichkeit', die es vielleicht ausstrahlt, der Eindruck 'hier hast du nichts zu suchen' der stärkste. Hier hast du nichts suchen — denn hier ist kein Fleck, auf dem nicht der Bewohner seine Spur schon hinterlassen hätte: auf den Gesimsen durch Nippessachen, auf dem Polstersessel durch Deckchen, auf den Fenstern durch Transparente, vor dem Kamin durch den Ofenschirm. (*GS*, II, 217)

If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, 'You've got no business here'. And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark—the ornaments on the mantle piece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire. (*SW*, II, 734)[58]

(as opposed to art forms) that their progress and their success are proportionate to the *transparency* of their social content. (Hence glass architecture)': *GS*, V, 581; *AP*, p. 465, emphasis original).

    [57] Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, trans. by Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 164–65 (translation modified); Czech original: Karel Teige, *Nejmenší byt* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1932), p. 155.

    [58] Like Teige, Benjamin focuses on velvet as the characteristic material for such interiors, emphasizing its ability to retain traces (*Spuren*) of the inhabitants' lives (see also *GS*, V, 294; *AP*, p. 222). A similar passage appears in the *Denkbilder* in *GS*, IV, 427–28; *SW*, II, 701–02. In

Thus in 'Erfahrung und Armut' Benjamin aligned the vanishing of the aura thesis with a functionalist critique of ornament: aura is ornamental, a historical trace now become superfluous, unhygienic, and thus pernicious. The architectural environments favoured by late bourgeois society clung desperately to the auratic in the form of external ornamentation and interior plush. The only proper response to the conditions of modernity is to sweep both ornament and aura away. In a sentiment Teige would have seconded without reserve, Benjamin cites Brecht's exhortation to '"Verwisch die Spuren!"' ('"Erase the traces!"': *GS*, II, 217; *SW*, II, 734).[59]

Yet elsewhere Benjamin grants precisely these same traces privileged cognitive value. In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin does not unvaryingly align, but also at times contrasts his approach to that of Sigfried Giedion:

'Abgesehen von einem gewissen Haut-goût-Reiz, sind die künstlerischen Drapierungen des vergangenen Jahrhunderts muffig geworden' sagt Giedion. [. . .] Wir aber glauben, daß der Reiz mit dem sie auf uns wirken, verrät, daß auch sie lebenswichtige Stoffe für uns enthalten — nicht zwar für unser Bauten, wie die konstruktiven Antizipationen der Eisengerüste es tun, wohl aber für unser Erkennen wenn man will für die Durchleuchtung der bürgerlichen Klassenlage im Augenblick da die ersten Verfallszeichen in ihr erscheinen. Politisch lebenswichtige Stoffe auf jeden Fall [. . .]. Mit anderen Worten: genau so, wie Giedion uns lehrt, aus den Bauten um 1850 die Grundzüge des heutigen Bauens abzulesen, wollen wir aus dem Leben [und] aus den scheinbar sekundären, verlorenen Formen jener Zeit heutiges [Leb]en, heutige Formen ablesen. (*GS*, V, 572)

'Apart from a certain *haut-goût* charm', says Giedion, 'the artistic draperies and wall-hangings of the previous century have come to seem musty.' [. . .] We, however, believe that the charm they exercise on us is proof that these things, too, contain material of vital importance for us—not indeed for our building practice, as is the case with the constructive possibilities inherent in iron frameworks, but rather for our understanding, for the radioscopy, if you will, of the situation of the bourgeois class at the moment it evinces the first signs of decline. In any event, material of vital importance politically [. . .]. In other words: just as Giedion teaches us to read off the basic features of today's architecture in the buildings erected around 1850, we, in turn, would recognize today's life, today's forms, in the life and in the apparently secondary, lost forms of that epoch. (*AP*, p. 458)

This passage points to a crucial logical pivot in the *Passagen-Werk*, one that has fundamental implications for the Work of Art essay.[60] More important

the 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' Benjamin invokes similar interior details as Teige to describe the later nineteenth-century photography ateliers 'mit ihren Draperien und Palmen, Gobelins und Staffeleien [. . .], die so zweideutig zwischen Exekution und Repräsentation, Folterkammer und Thronsaal schwankten' ('with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels [. . .], which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room': *GS*, II, 375; *SW*, II, 515). He then contrasts this with Atget's 'Befreiung des Objekts von der Aura' ('emancipation of object from aura') in a vocabulary of hygiene and 'disinfection' again reminiscent of Teige (*GS*, II, 378; *SW*, II, 518).

59 See also *GS*, IV, 427.

60 Hansen discusses Benjamin's 'position-switching' between different texts (*Cinema and*

here than the word 'Reiz' or charm—which can too easily be taken as a coded sigh—are the phrases 'radioscopy of the situation of the bourgeois class' and 'of vital importance politically'. These mark the cognitive force Benjamin identifies in outmoded ephemera.

Benjamin pivots here from the logic of a Constructivist to that of the 'rag-picker', and he uses the concept of montage to connect these two rhetorical constellations. He sounds like a good Constructivist when he states that it is crucial 'das Prinzip der Montage in die Geschichte zu übernehmen. Also die großen Konstruktionen aus kleinsten, scharf und schneidend konfektionier-ten Baugliedern zu errichten' ('to carry over the principle of montage into his-tory. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components': *GS*, v, 575; *AP*, p. 461). This passage picks up on his identification of the Eiffel Tower—an iconic artefact for Constructivists such as Teige—as 'die früheste Erscheinungsform des Prinzips der Montage' ('the earliest manifestation of the principle of montage': *GS*, v, 223; *AP*, p. 160), con-structed from millions of minute, precisely co-ordinated pieces. The construc-tive process, as well as the breathtaking new vistas revealed from atop these structures, is the proper reserve of the engineer and the high-steel worker.[61] But montage also appears as the method of the ragpicker: 'Methode dieser Ar-beit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen. Ich werde nichts Wertvolles entwenden und mir keine geistvollen Formulierungen an-eignen. Aber die Lumpen, den Abfall: die will ich nicht inventieren sondern sie auf der einzig möglichen Weise zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen: sie verwen-den' ('Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way pos-sible, to come into their own: by making use of them': *GS*, v, 574; *AP*, p. 460). Here the materials for montage are not the precisely constructed components of the constructer but rather the loose detritus gathered by the historian as ragpicker. While Benjamin never states this explicitly, the 'ragpicker model' effects a radical re-evaluation of liquidationist logic: the dusty carpets and mouldering tiger pelts, the flower-shaped lamps and ceramic turtles are no longer to be thrown out with an indignant cry of 'Verwisch die Spuren!', but are to be gathered and explored as a wilderness of cognitive raw material.[62]

This pivot should not be dismissed as ambivalence, confusion, or a curiosity

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Experience, p. 81). Yet this particular pivot exists within the *Passagen-Werk* material, suggesting that the juxtaposition is not mere strategic convenience.

[61] See *GS*, v, 218 and 572; *AP*, pp. 156 and 459. Benjamin further connects this image of the 'panoramic view' from atop modern structures with the ideal of philosophical 'Anschaulichkeit' or perceptibility (*GS*, v, 575; *AP*, p. 461).

[62] Indeed such a landscape of 'geheime Affinitäten: Palme und Staubwedel, Föhnapparat und die Venus von Milo' ('secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hairdryer and Venus de Milo') stands at the outset of Benjamin's earliest notes for the *Passagen-Werk* (*GS*, v, 993; *AP*, p. 827).

resulting from Benjamin's tendency to think in images. Rather, it harbours a twofold critique of the liquidationist logic that the Work of Art essay is understood to champion. These claims in the *Passagen-Werk* reveal Benjamin's wariness of, first, an ideology of progress and, second, a dubious holistic tendency lurking within the liquidationist discourse invoked in the Work of Art essay.

Further comparison with Teige makes clear the limits of Benjamin's liquidationism. Discussing the emergence of modernist architecture in Czechoslovakia, Teige emphasizes its origin in engineering works and in the development of iron and glass as construction materials in the nineteenth century. He points to the immature, hybrid nature of the earliest products of the engineers: the first railway on the Continent, designed by František Antonín Gerstner and constructed between Linz and Budweis (České Budějovice) in 1825–28, still used horses, and the railway-cars resembled horse-drawn carriages; cast-iron bridges and functional structures around mid-century still utilized neo-Gothic forms.[63] For Teige, such outdated forms are senseless except in so far as they offer partial glimpses of coming architectural practices. The 'horrid iron Gothic' (*Modern Architecture*, p. 67) merely documents the historical fetters holding the imagination captive; one must look through such phenomena in order to perceive the gradual emergence of 'authentic' forms of modern construction. Benjamin echoes this sort of rhetoric often enough.[64] Yet when he discusses the hybrid forms assumed by 'zu früh gekommenes Glas, zu frühes Eisen' ('glass before its time, premature iron')—such as an early design for a locomotive that would run on 'feet' like a horse, or plans to have steam-cars run on granite lanes rather than iron tracks—they subtly transform into documents not just of torpor and fear but also of creativity and longing.[65] Benjamin rejects historical narratives that cast an entire era as embodying either a 'not yet' or cultural decrepitude: 'Das Pathos dieser Arbeit: es gibt keine Verfallszeiten. Versuch, das neunzehnte Jahrhundert so durchaus positiv anzusehen wie ich in der Trauerspielarbeit das siebzehnte mich zu sehen bemühte. Kein Glaube an Verfallszeiten' ('The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline. Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to see the seventeenth, in the work on *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline': *GS*, v, 571; *AP*, p. 458). His argument is not simply that one must painstakingly analyse the 'Traumschlaf' or dream-filled sleep of the nineteenth century in order to wake from the phantasmagoria established under early capitalism. Rather, one must bracket (in an analogy to psychoanalytic method) the rigid 'Gegensatz von Schlaf und Wachen' ('antithesis of sleeping and waking') itself.[66] Benjamin writes:

[63] See Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 60–67.

[64] For example, in *GS*, v, 46 (*AP*, p. 4), or in most of section 'F' of the *Passagen-Werk*.

[65] *GS*, v, 211, 217, 218; *AP*, pp. 150, 155, 156.

[66] *GS*, v, 494 and 492; *AP*, pp. 391 and 389. Similarly, Benjamin replaces the traditional Marxist

Es ist sehr leicht, für jede Epoche auf ihren verschiedenen 'Gebieten' Zweiteilungen nach bestimmten Gesichtspunkten vorzunehmen, dergestalt daß auf der einen Seite der 'fruchtbare', 'zukunftsvolle', 'lebendige', 'positive', auf der andern der vergebliche, rückständige, abgestorbene Teil dieser Epoche liegt. [. . .] Aber jede Negation hat ihren Wert andererseits nur als Fond für die Umrisse des Lebendigen, Positiven. Daher ist es von entscheidender Wichtigkeit, diesem, vorab ausgeschiednen, negativen Teile von neuem eine Teilung zu applizieren, derart, daß [. . .] auch in ihm von neuem ein Positives und ein anderes zu Tage tritt als das vorher bezeichnete. Und so weiter in infinitum, bis die ganze Vergangenheit in einer historischen Apokatastasis in die Gegenwart eingebracht ist. (*GS*, v, 573)

It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various 'fields' of any epoch, such that on one side lies the 'productive', 'forward-looking', 'lively', 'positive' part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent. [. . . But] 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 [. . .] a positive element emerges anew in it too [. . .]. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis. (*AP*, p. 459)

The markedly theological term 'apocatastasis' might suggest that here we have tripped upon the often noted antagonism in Benjamin's thought between the mystical and the materialist, the redemptive and the radical. But Benjamin's criticism of a crassly 'black-and-white' projection of history, and his mathematical image of an integral calculus that would sharpen the image, are in at least one sense perfectly compatible with his materialist project: they warn against reading the past as a narrative of progress towards the present. When Benjamin shortly afterwards describes his aim as 'einen historischen Materialismus zu demonstrieren, der die Idee des Fortschritts in sich annihiliert hat' ('to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress': *GS*, v, 574; *AP*, p. 460), he sets himself in contrast to precisely the form of historical materialism Teige pursues with his narrative of progressive 'erasure' of regressive historical traces over the course of the nineteenth century. In other words, liquidationist discourse risks positing a fixed telos and then reading the past as linear progress towards that endpoint: an endpoint at which fundamental diremptions between structure and ornament, function and aesthetics, truth and ideology, indeed matter and spirit, are presumed to vanish.

The charge of progressivism within liquidationist logic is thus inseparable from that of incipient holism. The project of 'wiping away the traces' strives for the sheer integration of opposites: what is posited at the vanishing

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trope of base/superstructure (with its tendency to reduce 'culture' to 'ideology' or 'reflection') with a concept of 'expression' (*Ausdruck*) drawn from psychological and psychoanalytic practice. See *GS*, v, 494 and 495 (*AP*, pp. 391 and 392), as well as his replacement of the 'base/superstructure' vocabulary with that of 'consciousness/unconscious' in the 'Exposé' (cf. *GS*, v, 1224–25 and 46–47; *AP*, pp. 893 and 4).

point is a smooth, pure, transparent abstraction. The revised version of Teige's second 'Poetist manifesto' expresses with particular force this utopian ideal of integration through a reconfigured understanding of *poesie* as the fundamental human creative/constructive drive:

The new *poesie*, as advanced schooling for the new human being, as a game [*hra*] of colours and lights, sounds and movements, is not a disinterested game: every game constitutes training and cultivation of particular instincts and is adapted to their functions. [. . .] The single, multi-faceted function of *poesie* as understood and prepared through Poetism is to endow, saturate, and reawaken human sensibility, to develop human capacities, whether sensory, sensual, or emotional [. . .]. Poetry for all the senses: not *l'art pour l'art*, but rather a significant social function for the construction of the socialist world. Therefore: Poetism as the overcoming of the antagonism between poem and world, a new synthesis of poem and world, a synthesis of construction and poem [*stavby a básně*]. [. . .] This is the vanishing point in the Poetist perspective.[67]

Teige's vanishing point, in contrast to Benjamin's, marks a point in the future: an ideal to be achieved, a prognosis to be fulfilled. This vanishing point constitutes the liquidationist wish-image. The foreground in Teige's image is his present moment, and the perspective he describes imagines development along a straight line into the future. At the endpoint of this progression, aura—in the negative sense Benjamin channelled in 'Erfahrung und Armut'—will have vanished.

Set against this wish-image, the conceptual tensions inhabiting the Work of Art essay—especially when juxtaposed with relevant claims in the *Passagen-Werk*—no longer appear to be ambivalence or elegiac mourning over the vanishing of the aura. The 'ornamental' historical detritus Benjamin wishes to utilize and thereby allow 'to come into their own' maintains its heterogeneous, fragmentary, and supplemental character, and thereby overtly flouts the sacrosanct Constructivist image of peeling away the ornamental husk (*Hülle*) to reveal a structural core (*Kern*) and thus to arrive at 'authentic' modern form. To be sure, this impulse in the *Passagen-Werk* returns to formulations from earlier periods in Benjamin's thought, but it would be misguided to conclude that Benjamin's retention of such impulses is simply a regressive hold-over from earlier days.[68] For their return in his later writings enacts an implicit critique of the progressivist and holistic tendencies of liquidationist logic.

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[67] 'Poesie pro 5 smyslů', pp. 236–37. The parallel here to Benjamin's discussion of film as a 'Testleistung' or 'test performance' that ultimately aims to ensure inhabitants of a technologized world 'eines ungeheueren und ungeahnten Spielraums' ('a vast and unsuspected field of action') is evident (*GS*, VII, 365 and 376; *SW*, III, 111 and 117). See the discussion in Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, Ch. 5.

[68] In the 1930 report on hashish Benjamin had written: 'Vielmehr ist das Auszeichnende der echten Aura: das Ornament, eine ornamentale Umzirkung in der das Ding oder Wesen fest wie in einem Futteral eingesenkt liegt' ('the characteristic feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case' (*GS*, VI, 588; *SW*, II, 328). In his essay 'Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften*' ('Goethe's *Elective Affinities*') from the early 1920s he had

So what does this mean for the Work of Art essay, which undeniably invokes the liquidationist logic Benjamin equally undeniably questions? A response may lie in a single word. In the section of the Work of Art essay where Benjamin defines aura and outlines the process of its decline, he writes: 'Und wenn die Veränderungen im Medium der Wahrnehmung, deren Zeitgenossen wir sind, sich als Verfall der Aura begreifen lassen, so kann man dessen gesellschaftliche Bedingungen aufzeigen' ('And if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay': *GS*, VII, 354; *SW*, III, 104). The key word is 'Wahrnehmung', perception. Benjamin's argument in the Work of Art essay for the historicity of sense perception is well known: the human sensorium is not simply a natural or biological given but is historically determined as well. The idea that different historical periods generate different modes of interaction between individuals and the reality surrounding them was neither new (the notion is prominent in Marx) nor unusual (the quotation from Teige above exemplifies the absorption of this idea in avant-gardist rhetoric). Benjamin's invocation of this thesis has generally been understood as a component of the claim that aura is a historically contingent category rather than an intrinsic property of art; the historical shift of which reproducibility is emblematic, therefore, makes aura vanish because it no longer complements the prevailing structure of human perception. In short: aura is revealed as an ideological category in the process of being 'shed'.[69] But there is another aspect to Benjamin's attention to perception here that has largely escaped notice. For Benjamin does not in fact state that the contemporary shift in the

written: 'der schöne Schein ist die Hülle vor dem notwendig Verhülltesten. Denn weder die Hülle noch der verhüllte Gegenstand ist das Schöne, sondern dies ist der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle' ('the beautiful semblance is the veil thrown over that which is necessarilly most veiled. For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil' (*GS*, I, 125–201 (p. 195); *SW*, I, 297–356 (p. 351)). Here Benjamin posits cognitive-aesthetic activity not as the extrication of a bare, 'true' structure from the disguise hiding it, but as examination of a veil that cannot be removed without destroying the truth 'behind' it. Hansen discusses how Benjamin's concepts of semblance (*Schein*) and the veil (*Schleier*, although he also uses the term *Hülle*, important for the discourse on ornament) are indebted to his surprising infatuation with the writings of Ludwig Klages (*Cinema and Experience*, pp. 115 and 124). On the echoes of Benjamin's earlier theory of beauty in the later concept of aura see Smith, 'A Genealogy of "Aura"', pp. 108–09. The later Benjamin seems keen to correct some of these early formulations: in the list of tainted art-historical concepts he claims the Work of Art essay will invalidate, 'Stil' in the first version is replaced in the second version by 'Geheimnis'—a key term in his *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay (cf. *GS*, I, 435 and VII, 350).

[69] See, for example, Joel Snyder's summary of the 'aura as ideology' argument: 'An account of perception that fails to deal with ideology—with the stimulative capacity of ideas—will necessarily fail to explain why various qualities are attributed to objects and perceived as properly belonging to them, i.e., perceived as real properties of objects. Thus, for example, the perceived aura of objects has no immediate physical counterpart outside the human brain and cannot be explained biologically' (Snyder, 'Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura: A Reading of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility"', in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. by Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 158–74 (p. 164)).

mode of perception reveals aura to be 'false' and thus results in its withering (which would be Teige's position). Rather he claims that the contemporary shift in the mode of perception can be 'comprehended' through the idea of the vanishing of the aura. The decline of the aura, in other words, is not necessarily an objectively true development, but it is a necessary perception. Indeed, to regard aura as vanishing is the hallmark of the contemporary mode of perception: 'Die Entschälung des Gegenstandes aus seiner Hülle, die Zertrümmerung der Aura, ist die Signatur einer Wahrnehmung, deren "Sinn für das Gleichartige in der Welt" so gewachsen ist, daß sie es mittels der Reproduktion auch dem Einmaligen abgewinnt' ('stripping the object of its husk [*or* veil], the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose "sense for sameness in the world" has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique': *GS*, VII, 355; *SW*, III, 105, translation modified). Not a historical fact, but 'the signature of a perception'. This formulation pointedly skirts the question whether aura is 'truly' withering, and thus whether in the future we will arrive at the point where it has vanished completely, but does confirm that such a conviction is the defining characteristic of the contemporary mode of perception.

The signature of a perception: here lies the distinction between Teige and Benjamin, between prognosis and diagnosis, between liquidationist logic and depiction of a wish-image. The decisive point is not that Benjamin perceives aura to be vanishing: it is that he *cannot help* but perceive aura to be vanishing. This unavoidable perception is a wish-image that Benjamin both shares and recognizes as historically conditioned. Saturated with utopian energy, the wish-image underlies the Work of Art essay; yet that does not prevent Benjamin from surreptitiously imagining the Modernist monuments of steel and glass as ruins even while they are being built.

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