

# THEY HAVE EYES THAT THEY MIGHT NOT SEE: WALTER BENJAMIN'S AURA AND THE OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUS

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## Abstract

This essay will reflect upon the significance of Walter Benjamin's conception of the aura.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about the aura, particularly in relation to Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In this work and elsewhere, Benjamin speaks of the aura as 'the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be', and associates this auratic distance with the inapproachability of the cult image. But in other texts, Benjamin speaks of the aura in different terms, as the ability of phenomena to 'look back' (*den Blick aufzuschlagen*), to return our gaze. This definition moves beyond a merely aesthetic model to a conception of the aura as a mode of perception that rather than seeking to rationally control and reduce phenomena to objects of perception, allows them to appear of their own accord. At stake in this second definition is intersubjective relationality, the possibility of encountering alterity. This essay will attempt to explain the divergence between these two conceptions of aura by re-evaluating the role of the optical unconscious in Benjamin's work. In the same way that Benjamin used Proust's *mémoire involontaire* as a tool to formulate his understanding of the redemption of history, he can be understood as using the optical unconscious to allow the world to appear outside the hegemonic control of the alienating cult image. In this sense, rather than simply celebrating the decline of aura as his Artwork essay proclaims, Benjamin can be understood as seeking to replace the traditional aura of full presence by an unconscious aura that allows the past to meet our gaze without being appropriated by institutional power.

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In the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way—on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them. This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the Gospel, they have eyes that they might not see. That they might not see what? Precisely that things are looking at them.<sup>2</sup>

Jacques Lacan

#### I. THE WITHERING OF THE AURA

Let us begin with the definitions of aura that Benjamin gives in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, where he defines it as the ‘shattering of tradition’ brought about when mechanical reproduction separates the work of art from ‘its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’.<sup>3</sup> He writes:

That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art... One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.<sup>4</sup>

The aura here, is the uniqueness of an object, which contributes to its traditional role, to its sacred or what Benjamin calls its cult status.

Thanks to mechanical reproduction, the image is separated from its spatio-temporal context and its traditional cult status, and its copies can be distributed and controlled by the masses who displace it at will, thereby changing its meaning and democratising its function. The unique presence of the original is dissipated into the appearance of the decontextualised copy. Unlike the reactionary critic of his and our own day, Benjamin sees this transformation from original to copy, from presence to absence, as positive and liberating and celebrates photography and especially film, as the technological media that enact the ‘withering’ of the aura, by destroying the exclusivity of access that renders the image ‘distant’ from its viewers. He famously writes:

Then came the film and burst this prison word asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.<sup>5</sup>

In their desire to get close to things, to generalise the unicity of objects of art by reproducing them, Benjamin implies that it is the universalising intention of the masses that is realised in technological reproduction, and thus that a form of technological revolution is imminent. The cut of the camera, which destroys the continuity of experience, like the fragments of the past he cites to destroy the continuity of history, capture the lost details, the tell-tale clues that betray an experience that cannot be lived, an absent or unconscious collage of

images that no longer depend upon linear time and space, and thus liberated, can give to be seen a non-continuous experience that resembles Benjamin's understanding of redemption: the fragments of the past that can surge into the present as the now. This 'time of the now' he writes, 'is shot through with chips of messianic time'.<sup>6</sup>

In the age of technological reproducibility, the aura's decline is described as inevitable due to the masses continually getting closer to things spatially and replacing uniqueness with sameness by means of technological reproduction. Considering the survival of the cult image in the cinematic forms of the Hollywood star cult or the fascist mass spectacle, its decline, if decline there be, cannot but be understood in positive terms. Yet Benjamin's celebration of the marriage of art and technology seems to adhere to a somewhat naïve view in technological progress. This was the point of view of Adorno who criticised the Artwork essay for 'exaggerating the progressive aspects of mass culture while denying its reactionary ones'.<sup>7</sup> Though the camera can play the role of the optical unconscious that the *mémoire involontaire* was able to play to retrieve forgotten history, the out of sequence cuts that are collated together often create a false continuity for the spectator, who enters into a context that is anything but post-ideological, anything but free from the hegemony of institutional manipulation and power relations.

This is equally the case with photography.<sup>8</sup> Though the camera can of course capture and freeze what was hidden, with important political and social impact, the revolutionary potential of technological media is in no way guaranteed by the camera itself, which can and is often manipulated precisely by those traditional institutions Benjamin thought it could disengage itself from (one might think of publicity or imbedded journalism in Iraq for examples of this).<sup>9</sup> There are many ways, then, in which modern photography continues to incarnate the originary auratic function of the cult image, rather than contradicting it as Benjamin's *Weltbild* essay intends.

But more problematic is Benjamin's attribution, in the same Artwork essay, of aura to the world of nature as well, drawing a parallel between nature and artifact. He writes:

We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.<sup>10</sup>

This necessary distance that sets the object of vision apart is explicitly linked to the object's cult value, endowing it with a quality of inapproachability. Benjamin clarifies this point in a footnote:

The definition of the aura as the 'unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be', represents nothing more than a formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of nearness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Inapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image.<sup>11</sup>

If Benjamin critiques the distance of the cult image because it reinforces the version of history imposed by the victors as sacrosanct, it is difficult to understand in what way the mountain range or the branch illustrate his point in this essay. He adds an element of clarification in his 'Little History of Photography' essay, where he repeats this image almost literally. He writes:

What is the aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time (*ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit*): the unique appearance of distance, no matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.<sup>12</sup>

The distance preserved in the face of proximity here comes to indicate the aesthetic experience, a 'profane illumination' or transcendent immanence that occurs when time becomes space. Like Proust's madeleine, which held his childhood intact in its flavour, Benjamin similarly seems to understand the auratic object as having the ability to capture time in the materiality of an aesthetic experience. If this experience can be controlled and manipulated with regard to the cult status of the work of art, what are we to make of this strange weave inhering in our experience of nature? In other words, Benjamin's artwork essay outlines a theory of intentionality regarding the image that seems to be at odds with his examples from nature.

## II. THE GAZE OF THE AURA

An interpretation of this mimetic parallel between nature and artefact can be found in Benjamin's essay, 'On some Motifs in Baudelaire', where the reciprocal human gaze is attributed to the non-human phenomenal world, be it an artifact or a mountain range. He writes:

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object

and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.<sup>13</sup>

And again:

Inherent in the gaze . . . is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met . . . there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness.<sup>14</sup>

Nature, like the cult object, has an aura to the extent that it has been invested or endowed with the capacity to return our gaze. On this reading, it is this investment of the imagination that empowers the cult object and can explain the sacralisation and anthropomorphisation or personification of nature in many ancient cultures. Aura would thus illustrate a theory of projection, the projection of consciousness, of familiarity, and hence of intentionality, to the non-human world of nature. Aura would come to signify the projection of the known onto the unknown, and find a place alongside projection theories of religion.<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation would imply that the technological mastery of nature would effectively ‘disenchant’ it, to use the term of sociologist Max Weber, transforming an intersubjective relationality into one of utilitarian mastery. In the same way, reproducing works of art such that they can be found on each street corner would create the crowd effect described by Baudelaire, where we find ourselves surrounded by eyes of unseeing, ‘mirror-like blankness’, the eyes of the city dweller which have ‘lost their ability to look’<sup>16</sup> due to the excess of stimulation of life in the city.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, if Benjamin implies, in his text on Baudelaire, that the reciprocal gaze is enabled by means of an investment on the part of the subject, in this very same text he also draws a connection with Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, stating that the aura cannot be controlled and willingly retained. To experience the aura of something:

means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. This ability corresponds to the data of *mémoire involontaire*. (These data, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus, they lend support to a concept of the aura that involves the ‘unique apparition of a distance’.<sup>18</sup>

In this quote, Benjamin actually refers simultaneously to both investing the object with a gaze of reciprocity while at the same time describing the aura as involuntary and lost to conscious memory. He explicitly describes the *mémoire*

*involontaire* as standing outside of conscious experience altogether. He writes, in the same article on Baudelaire:

Only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*.<sup>19</sup>

This necessity of surrendering the will is something Benjamin will reiterate in other texts, notably the *Arcades Project*, where aura is described as requiring a passivity on the part of the subject. Thus we read:

The fleeting moment of auratic perception actualizes a past not ordinarily accessible to the waking self; it entails a passivity in which something ‘takes possession of us’ rather than vice versa.<sup>20</sup>

And again, when he differentiates the aura from the trace:

The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing, in the aura it takes possession of us.<sup>21</sup>

Miriam Bratu Hansen has emphasised this passive reception of the aura in her interpretation of Benjamin. She writes for instance:

The auratic quality that manifests itself in the object—‘the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be’—cannot be produced at will; it appears to the subject, not for it.<sup>22</sup>

This passive reception that allows the world or the other to appear of its own accord, is often evoked to describe poetic, artistic and phenomenological inspiration and continues to be invoked through and in the technological media of photography and film. Whether conceptualised in terms of loss or an uncanny *déjà vu*, this gaze confronts the subject with a fundamental strangeness that recalls a deeper recollection of the self. The dynamic of this gaze can be encountered in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the *chiasme*, which describes the crossing and interpenetration of what gazes and what is gazed at. Or one thinks of Cézanne, weeping when he felt himself to be observed by the Sainte-Victoire mountain range. One might also think of the experience of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, when he describes his overwhelming experience as a child of meeting the gaze of a tin can floating in the sea. As Hansen has pointed out, Benjamin identifies this auratic gaze with poetry, Goethe’s ‘Mothers’, Bachofen’s *Vorwelt*, Baudelaire’s ‘*vie antérieure*’, Novalis’

perceptibility,<sup>23</sup> all of which describe a gaze that haunts the subject from a far-distant past. The gaze of this past unexpectedly interrupts the habits of linear time used to fulfil the teleological goals of the status quo, replacing them with the shocks of a familiar unknown, when the ‘photographic plate of remembrance’ freezes time in an image that captures what was repressed or censored. This is what Benjamin means when he uses Proust’s idea of the *mémoire involontaire* to speak of the camera’s ability to retrieve what has been lost to our conscious mind. In *The Arcades Project*, he cites the following words from *Du côté de chez Swann*:

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach, of intellect, in some material object . . . which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.<sup>24</sup>

Hidden in the contingent fragment and brought to light by the flash of a photographic cut, Benjamin reveals that the past does not live within us, but rather, like Proust’s famous madeleine, in the world of things. In Benjamin’s historical materialism, memory thus becomes an imminently political entity, because the control of artefacts and their mediation is the key not only to our past, but also to the future of that past which brings us, for a brief instant, the image of our present.

Hidden in Benjamin’s conception of the aura we therefore find a somewhat confused, or at least confusing, theory of intentionality. Does seeing the image, object or landscape require our passive reception, or rather is it the subject who actively decides to endow the image with reciprocity? In other words, does the aura inhere in the object or is it a projection (like fetishism) on the part of the observer? Do we grant phenomena the capacity to look back at us, or is it rather the passivity of the gaze that allows for alterity to present itself? What is at stake in this difference is the capacity for the world to appear to us without being a mirror of our (or someone else’s) will to power, what Heidegger calls the enframing (*gestell*) of our techno-scientific world-view.<sup>25</sup>

### III. THE OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUS

Benjamin thus critiques a certain conception of the aura linked to the unicity of cult art, which is consciously invested with the capacity to return our gaze, and thus to interpellate us according to the script given to art by institutions of power that, at least in the context of Western art, controlled both the access to and the interpretation of, the cult object. But at the same time, he retains and develops another conception of the aura—understood through the key of the

optical unconscious that is enabled by the very forms of technology that cause the decline of the cult status of the image. Technological media allows for an image of the past, lost to our conscious mind and lost to the history constructed by the victors, to surge into view. It is the unconscious eye of the camera that elicits a response and reveals the configuration of the present hidden in a snapshot of the past.

If the distance of the aura can be understood as temporal rather than spatial, when, as Benjamin writes in his 'Little History of Photography' essay, time fuses with appearance, then it becomes clear that the aura so described does not disappear with the arrival of mechanical reproduction. Not only does it not disappear, but it also comes to overlap in important ways with Benjamin's conception of the redemption of history. For Benjamin, photography, and especially film, are means of accessing a past lost from view, erased from normative history and the conscious mind, a past captured in an image that brings the present into focus. He is attempting, in his own words, 'to carry over the principle of montage into history'.<sup>26</sup> Just as he attempts to disrupt the unified and continuous historical paradigm of the victors by citing the unclaimed fragments of the past that escape control, so he here attempts to find in technology a means of shattering the homogeneous and controllable image by means of the fragmentary medium of the camera, which manages to capture the unintended real and thereby reveal the relevance of a hidden past to the configuration of the present. Like the unique work of art, the unique historic event is wrenched from its context in order to be reproduced, re-enacted in and as present. This desacralisation undermines the temporal continuity that mummifies and makes the past somehow inviolable, like the cult image. By pointing to the impossibility of the conscious mind to appropriate the optical unconscious, Benjamin describes the image as surfacing like a dream, giving us the code to decipher the present. In his article 'A Little History of Photography', he writes of the uncanny way in which the cut of the camera captures the 'spark of contingency', the long-forgotten real, which reveals to us the future of the past. In this sense, his appropriation of Proust's *mémoire involontaire* to formulate the optical unconscious of the camera takes on a fuller meaning. I quote at length:

... the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is



another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: 'other' in the sense that a space interwoven with human consciousness gives way to a space interwoven with the unconscious. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.<sup>27</sup>

Captured by the unconscious eye of the camera, the photograph (and the cinematic image even more so), reveal to us the 'inconspicuous spot' where the future of the past comes into focus, a spot that cannot be consciously conjured but that must appear involuntarily. As the site of the optical unconscious, the technologically mediated image can be seen only when this dialectic of making near and making distant is frozen by the flash of the camera, which rips the 'tiny spark of contingency' out of the long-forgotten past. Benjamin calls this standstill a 'dialectical image',<sup>28</sup> an image that seems to encompass the 'magical value' of the aura once it has been freed from the restrictions of the cult image. This reality, he writes, 'sears' the subject with the 'here and now', for him the true site of history. Like a dream or a *déjà vu*, the past emerges 'as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability',<sup>29</sup> the *Jetztzeit* or *nunc stans* that condenses time as duration into a single instant. As he puts it in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 'history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)'.<sup>30</sup> This 'now' is filled with an infinite distance, that of possibility, in particular the possibility of justice that Benjamin calls the messianic. 'The authentic concept of universal history', he writes in *The Arcades Project*, 'is a messianic concept',<sup>31</sup> when the historian 'establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot thought with chips of messianic time'.<sup>32</sup> Because the past is not an idea, but lives on in the material world, it is by juxtaposing ruins that he hopes to build the groundwork for a photomontage, in which each memory, like a wandering Jew, reminds the survivor that the Promised Land is not a place but the repetitive act of restitution (*tikkun*), of picking up the broken pieces.

If for philosopher Jacques Derrida the openness of the future entails that the messianic never come, that it remain pure futurity, it appears that for Benjamin this pure futurity only becomes future after the fact, that is, when it can redeem the past. The Messiah can come, that is, only belatedly, or as Kafka put it, 'the Messiah will only come when he is no longer necessary. He'll come only a day after his coming...' Benjamin owned the drawing by Paul Klee that aptly figures this messianic impossibility: it is that of the *Angelus Novus*, who is swept forward by a great wind, yet with its back turned on the future, staring fixedly into the past.

The trauma of the present thus lies in its closure for Benjamin, for this closure eradicates the possibility of glimpsing a different future. It was Benjamin's

present that was unlivable under National Socialism, and he turned to the past in order to leave open the possibility for redemption. Because there is no continuity but that of oppression, the future cannot be planned for Benjamin. Only by turning to the past and disordering it, raising the oppressed back to the surface, allowing memory to reclaim what it was not allowed to experience, can the future remain open. Paradoxically then, Benjamin redeems the future by returning to the past, as if the already and the not yet could alone heal the trauma of the present. Remembrance then, is itself redemptive, and the dialectical image is itself the image of the Messiah in that it opens up the present as *Jetztzeit*, or what he calls ‘a Messianic cessation of happening’,<sup>33</sup> which allows us to experience the now and glimpse in its incompleteness (and in our own incompleteness)<sup>34</sup> the lineaments of an open future.

#### IV. THE AURA THRIVES IN ITS DECLINE<sup>35</sup>

By reproducing or copying phenomena through the lens of the camera, the dialectical image creates a weave of space and time, of presence and absence, which undermines attempts to ‘enshrine’ phenomena in terms of an ideology of wholeness and continuity. For Benjamin, it is this split between near and distant, then and now, present and absent, that is the saving element of history, for as he writes, phenomena ‘are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them’.<sup>36</sup> Just as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan writes of the unconscious/conscious divide that ‘the subject *is* this very split’, Benjamin similarly understands this fissure as showing the subject her own lost halo.

If the dialectical image is this fissure or split, or what Benjamin calls ‘caesura’, then it shows the subject, in the end, an image of herself. The return of the gaze described as constituting aura thus becomes our own, returning to us from the past. The aura would thus elicit the experience of self as other, presenting us with the gaze of our own forgotten selves. ‘It is ourselves, however, who are always standing at the center of these rare images’, Benjamin writes in ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, where he describes an auratic encounter of ‘sudden illumination’ when what he calls a ‘deeper self’ flashes into memory like a snapshot. ‘It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock’ he writes, ‘that our memory owes its most indelible images’.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in ‘A Short Speech on Proust’, he reiterates this uncanny encounter of meeting the gaze of the self as other in the darkroom of the present. I quote at length:

Concerning the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them. This is most clearly the case in those images in which—as in some dreams—we see ourselves. We stand in front of ourselves, the way we might have stood somewhere in a prehistoric past, but never before our waking gaze. Yet these

images, developed in the darkroom of the lived moment, are the most important we shall ever see. One might say that our most profound moments have been equipped—like those cigarette packs—with a little image, a photograph of ourselves. And that ‘whole life’ which, as they say, passes through the minds of people who are dying or confronting life-threatening danger is composed of such little images. They flash by in as rapid a sequence as the booklets of our childhood, precursors of the cinematograph, in which we admired a boxer, a swimmer, or a tennis player.<sup>38</sup>

Using the blind eye of the camera to reveal our inapproachable distance from ourselves helps to undermine the alienating myth that reifies the subject as ontologically whole and self-certain, made in the image of a continuous and univocal world. The ego, like the cult image, rules over a dogmatic monarchy where other voices are silenced in the name of unity and self-presence. Instead, Benjamin’s auratic image calls up an image of the self outside the self,<sup>39</sup> Rimbaud’s *Je est un autre*. The active remembering of citations left out of the canon and the passive remembrance of the images left out of history thus function for Benjamin as a means of salvation, to save the past from the life-threatening danger of an identity that has no exit on alterity. Though Benjamin does not call it aura, his description of encountering his own impenetrable gaze in ‘the dark room of the lived moment’ where this past is exposed to view, illustrates that aura ‘thrives in its decline’, to quote from Samuel Weber. Freed from its cult status, and linked to the redemption of history, Benjamin continues to identify art and its aura with salvation. ‘In remembrance’, he writes in the *Arcades Project*, ‘we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological...’<sup>40</sup> In this reading, the distance at the heart of the aura would reveal a rapprochement between pre- and post-technological perception. If we have always had eyes that we might not see, to paraphrase the epigraph that opened this essay, technological media ensure that we nonetheless continue to be seen by the gaze of an involuntary memory that admonishes us to seek out those moments when we stood out from the crowd like Baudelaire’s *passante*, enclosed in an aura of un-lived potential.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about Benjamin’s supposed confusion, or even for Klaus Weimar, ‘slip of the tongue’, in using the word aura instead of *auréole*, a word perhaps better suited to the phenomena he describes. If aura was a medical term connoting the ‘breath of wind’ that could

traverse the body prior to an epileptic attack (Klaus Weimar, in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, p. 188), *auréole* refers to the ‘ornamental halo’ (*Umzirkung*) that ‘encloses’ an object or being, ‘as in a case’ (*Futteral*), according to Benjamin’s own

- description in the unpublished protocol of his hashish experiments (Section 'P', p. 58, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6:588) cited in Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura,' *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), p. 358. Though this may very well be the case, the term 'aura' has taken on a life of its own thanks to Benjamin, freeing itself from the medical field and entering into the philosophy of art and representation.
- <sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Alan Sheridan (trans.), (W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), p. 109.
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 221; 220.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- <sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, p. 263. In *The Arcades Project*, he similarly writes: 'The essential concept of universal history, is a messianic concept', *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 'N', p. 485.
- <sup>7</sup> Adorno to Benjamin on March 18th, 1936. Cited in Charlie Bertsch, 'The Aura and its Simulacral Double', *Critical Sense* (Fall, 1996) 22.
- <sup>8</sup> Let us use as an example the photographic plate that revealed the Holy Shroud of Turin. This image became the most important relic of the Catholic Church only when the photographic negative revealed the hidden traces of sweat and blood that drew the figure of a crucified man on the winding sheet. Invisible to the naked eye, the image/relic was revealed by the camera in 1898, to the shock of the lawyer Secondo Pia who had no inkling of the revelation he had unwittingly brought to light. In this sense, the image not made by human hand was revealed only by means of another image not made by human hands, that of the camera. There is a sense then, in which modern technological photography, the writing of light, perfectly responds to the auratic function of the medieval image. To quote Marie-José Mondzain: 'Any image that seeks a gaze can manifest only negatively the spectral essence of the Veronica. Might not all works of art be false acheiropoietic images?' *Image, icône, économie* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), pp. 248 and 252. The aura, that is, does not depend upon presence, but precisely upon absence, the material traces of an absent body that once appeared in the now of a bloody winding sheet. This absence, we might add, is at the very heart of the Christian iconic tradition from its inception, as icons are never unique but rather always copies of an acheiropoietic trace, of which the Turin Shroud is but the last variation in a long series. And the acheiropoietic trace is itself made in the image of an invisible and formless archetype. But this optical unconscious that the camera effectively revealed, was appropriated by the Church in the name of continuity and institutional hegemony (this in spite of contradictory evidence by NASA and the CNRS dating the sheet from 1260–1390). So in this sense, the camera was a prosthetic for the institution rather than an arm against it, and the auratic value of this technological monument is unequalled in the Catholic Tradition.
- <sup>9</sup> Samuel Weber and Paul Virilio have written some excellent work on this subject. See Weber's *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) and Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (New York: Verso, 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 222–3.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 5 on p. 224 (found on p. 243).
- <sup>12</sup> 'Little History of Photography', SW 2: 518–19, cited in Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art* (London: Continuum Press, 2005), p. 172.
- <sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 188.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Hume for instance, in his *Natural History of Religion* describes this tendency to attribute intentionality to the world in the following words:

- ‘There is a universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious... No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortunes, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possess of sentiment and intelligence... Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought, and reason, and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves.’ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, pp. 33–34, cited in Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘Religion, Religions, Religious,’ in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 185.
- <sup>16</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Baudelaire essay, opus cité, pp. 188–9.
- <sup>17</sup> In closing her article ‘Images of the Aura’, Beryl Schlossman writes, in reference to Benjamin’s text on Baudelaire: ‘The atmosphere around Baudelaire and his poetry has been emptied of aura: the planet is without an atmosphere, the poet is deprived of air, and the eyes that cast their familiar glances on the subject who speaks in these poems are empty. The air of aura does not bow any more; adorable Spring has lost its perfume. Suddenly invisible, the uncrowned Poet slips into the crowd and wanders in search of pleasure, forgetting, and the images of artifice.’ Beryl Schlossman, ‘Images of the Aura: Some Motifs in French Modernism’, in Dag Peterson and Erik Steinskog (eds), *Actualities of Aura* (Helsinki: Nordic Summer University Press, 2005), p. 291.
- <sup>18</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 188.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160–61.
- <sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 447 (344).
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 447.
- <sup>22</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Benjamin’s Aura’, *Critical Inquiry*, pp. 351–2.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345–6.
- <sup>24</sup> *Du côté de chez Swann* (vol. 1, 67–69), cited in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, K, p. 403.
- <sup>25</sup> Samuel Weber has drawn an interesting parallel between Heidegger’s *Weltbild* essay and Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay. In both essays, he writes, the world is ‘brought forth and set before the subject, whose place thus seems secured by the object of its representation. What holds the aura of originality in place, as it were, is the subject as its point of reference, just as, conversely and reciprocally, the subject is ensconced, “embedded”, held in place and at rest, by the scene that it both observes and also “breathes in”’. *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, (Stanford: SUP, 1996) p. 86.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Arcades Project*, 461. Or, as has become far more common, to carry over the principle of history into montage. One might think for an example of this of Chris Marker’s 1962 film *La Jetée*, where scientists concoct a machine that can read the optical unconscious, pulling images out of the unconscious mind into the light of consciousness. The image of a woman’s face, which flashes forth without being summoned, serves in the film as the key to redemptive history, yet hidden in this unconscious and thus unexploitable image from the past lies the only future possible, that of the death of the dreamer. For a more recent example, we could look at Werner Herzog’s 2011 film, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, where he explicitly refers to Benjamin when he speaks of the aura of the cave paintings, which overwhelm the spectator when he or she wanders through what he calls ‘the cave of forgotten memories’ that were

- lost to view for some 35,000 years of history.
- <sup>27</sup> 'A Little History of Photography,' in *SW*, 2:510–512.
- <sup>28</sup> In his own words, 'only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic). And the place where one encounters them is language' (Arcades Project, N, 462). Gerhard Richter describes Benjamin's dialectical image in the following words: 'He looks awry, seeking his material and inspiration not in the officially sanctioned sites of a cultural text but in the refuse and debris that has been overlooked, repressed, or marginalized. Through a strategic montage, in which the neglected debris of history is put into new grammatical constellation, a true revolutionary image emerges. This image, lodged in the language of its literary performance, is, for Benjamin, that of history itself.' Gerhard Richter, 'Benjamin's Confessional and Literary Writings,' in David Ferris (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 233.
- <sup>29</sup> 'The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is carried out by these means – and only by these – can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost.' Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 473.
- <sup>30</sup> 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 261.
- <sup>31</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N, p. 485.
- <sup>32</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 263. And again on page 254: 'In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption.'
- <sup>33</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 263.
- <sup>34</sup> What Benjamin calls the 'weak messianic power' of history, depends upon incompleteness, upon the unfinished and unfinished project of remembrance. These images of the past, then, are images of redemption for Benjamin, and they heal the suffering of the present. In other words, it is the present understood as complete that is traumatic and that Benjamin calls suffering. The mindfulness of remembrance, he writes, 'can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological...' Cited in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N 471.
- <sup>35</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, p. 101.
- <sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N, 473.
- <sup>37</sup> The passage merits being cited in full: 'More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate. It is we ourselves, however, who are always standing at the center of these rare images. Nor is this very mysterious, since such moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we are separated from ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock... It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images.' Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle,' *SW* 2, 633.
- <sup>38</sup> 'A Short Speech on Proust,' (GS, 2: 1064).
- <sup>39</sup> This externalised self is compared by Hansen to the kabbalistic theory of the

*tselem*, image or *Bild*. Benjamin's friend and specialist of kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, himself makes this connection, citing certain kabbalistic texts to bring home the comparison. Hansen cites the following from Scholem (a 16th-century text of prophesy): 'The complete secret of prophesy to a prophet consists in that

he sees the form of his self standing before him, and he forgets his own self and (is removed from it; *entrückt*)... and that form (of his self) speaks with him and tells him the future' 'Benjamin's Aura', p. 371.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 'N', p. 471.