

The Mausoleum of Youth: Between Experience and Nihilism in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*¹

MICHAEL W. JENNINGS

Abstract:

Key sections of Walter Benjamin's montage-text *Berlin Childhood around 1900* figure the relationship between human experience and modern media, with the sections that frame the text, 'Loggias' and 'The Moon', structured around metaphors of photography. Drawing on the work of Siegfried Kracauer, and especially his seminal essay 'Photography', Benjamin develops, in the course of his book, a theory of photography's relationship to experience that runs counter to the better-known theories developed in such essays as 'Little History of Photography' and 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', theories that are part of the broad currents of technological utopianism and, as such, emphasize photography's transformative potentials. In the *Berlin Childhood*, Benjamin instead emphasizes photography's role in the mortification and annihilation of meaningful human experience. Photography emerges here as the mausoleum of youth and hope.

Keywords: photography, myth, experience, media, nihilism, Kracauer

In the final, 1938 version of his montage essay *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Walter Benjamin gave pride of place to the *Denkbild*, or figure of thought, titled 'Loggias', placing it as the first section of the text. Already in 1933, soon after it was written, he had described the little text as 'the most exact portrait that I am able to make of myself'.² This is, in many ways, a puzzling statement. Of course, there are a number of explicitly autobiographical elements in 'Loggias'. Benjamin evokes the Berlin of his birth and early childhood, a Berlin on the threshold of modernity, poised between the ancient sounds of carpet beating and the technologized racket of the S-Bahn, Berlin's municipal railway. And he allows a whiff of the southern air that was so necessary to his existence after his first trip to Capri in 1924 to waft into the Berlin courtyard of his youth. Yet these references stop far short of an 'exact portrait' of this elusive figure—a figure properly without

bios.³ And neither is the artful interweaving of a number of the main themes and preoccupations of Benjamin's work—the allure of the not-yet phantasmagorical natural world; the motifs of dreaming and obsolescence; the intuition of a not-yet-present knowledge; and the reliance on image and allegory—sufficient to justify this description.

The key to the claimed portraiture lies instead in the description of a tree that emerges from the pavement of the courtyard outside the loggia itself. The large iron ring that encircles the tree marks off a conjured space: puzzlement as to what 'went on within the black pit' (GS VII, 386; SW III, 345) elicits from the narrative voice the kind of brooding more usually associated with the contemplation of the corpse in Benjamin's account of the baroque *Trauerspiel*.⁴ Although the invocation of magic and enchantment is pervasive in the *Berlin Childhood*, the 'magic curves' evoked here recur in particularly powerful form in the later sections of the text titled 'Market Hall' and 'The Otter'. In the Market Hall, or Mark-Thalle, a space of misprision and ambiguity, the child encounters market women, 'priestesses of a venal Ceres, purveyors of all fruits of the field and orchard, all edible birds, fishes, and mammals—procuresses, unassailable wool-clad colossi'. These priestesses guard a sacred space: beneath the rounded hems of their skirts the speaker senses 'a bubbling, oozing, and welling', 'the truly fertile ground' (GS VII, 402; SW III, 362). This oozing, fertile ground is a substrate hidden not just below the rounded skirt, but beneath the ground of Berlin and in particular beneath the tree in the courtyard. These are, in short, mythic spaces, spaces suffused by a dangerous magic.

By the early 1930s, when he produced the earliest versions of the *Berlin Childhood*, Walter Benjamin's theory of myth had undergone a significant transformation. In the theory of criticism Benjamin had developed between 1914 and 1924, myth had initially occupied a position as the polar opposite of truth. The theme of the great essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* of 1922 was the degeneration of everything human into the purely natural, into mere myth, as it occurs in the course of a marriage's dissolution. 'When they turn their attention away from the human and succumb to the power of nature, then natural life, which in man preserves its innocence only so long as natural life binds itself to something higher, drags the human down.' Benjamin is there at pains to define 'the meaning of the relation between truth and myth', which is fundamental to all knowledge: 'This relation is one of mutual exclusion. There is no truth, for there is no unequivocalness—and hence not even

error—in myth.’ (GS I, 138, 162; SW I, 308, 325–6). As Benjamin scholars have long known, much of the thrust of his analysis here is indebted to Hermann Cohen’s theology, and especially to his *Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism*, with its polemic against the mythic nature idolatry of paganism,⁵ a theme taken up powerfully by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its relentless attack on anthropomorphism as ‘the projection of the subjective onto nature’.⁶

The work on the Goethe essay also took place, though, against a very different background: Benjamin was at the time a regular contributor to the sociological discussion circle at the home of Marianne Weber, an important feminist theorist and politician who was also the widow of the sociologist Max Weber. It was during these months of contact with Marianne Weber and Max Weber’s brother Alfred that Benjamin wrote down one of the most spectacular of the many short texts that remained works-in-progress, never to be published in his lifetime. ‘Capitalism as Religion’ gestures toward Max Weber’s fundamental insight into the religious nature of the capitalist work ethic, but it is significant that, as early as 1921, Benjamin grounds his argument not in Weber, or indeed in scientific Marxism, but instead in the analysis of the fetish character of the capitalist commodity that Marx offers in the chapter of *Capital* called ‘On the Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof’—and thus in the analysis of myth. Benjamin argues that capitalism is perhaps the most extreme of all religious cults, founded as it is upon a purely psychological relationship to fetishized objects. Devoid of doctrine or theology, the cult maintains itself solely through the *permanent* celebration of its rites—shopping and consumption. And, for Benjamin, this reinvention of time as feast day without end in turn enables the most crippling effect of capitalism: ‘the cult makes *verschulden*—indebtedness *and* guilt—pervasive’ (GS VI, 100; SW I, 288; translation modified).⁷ This inculcation of a guilt-ridden indebtedness leads not to the ‘reform of existence’ but to its ‘complete destruction. It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world’ (GS VI, 101; SW I, 289). Benjamin’s little fragment, written in Weber’s orbit, participates in the large, post-Weberian project, the exploration of the paradoxes and ambiguities arising from Weber’s attestation of the disenchantment of the world. In a reading that could hardly vary more from Weber’s understanding of religion, though, Benjamin offers his first remarks on the manner in which capitalism as religion effects the re-enchantment of the world.

Already in the Goethe essay, then, Benjamin was moving toward a highly differentiated understanding of myth. However inimical to human life myth might remain, however much in need of *Entzauberung* or disenchantment, Benjamin argues that recognition of myth is the precondition to genuine knowledge:

Since, however, there can just as little be truth about it (for there is truth only in objective things [*Sachen*], just as objectivity [*Sachlichkeit*] lies in the truth), there is, as far as the spirit of myth is concerned, only a knowledge of it. And where the presence of truth should be possible, it can be possible solely under the condition of the recognition of myth—that is, the recognition of its crushing indifference to truth. (GSI, 162; SWI, 326)

The *Berlin Childhood* builds directly on this position. The lure of that chthonic space beneath the tree in ‘Loggias’ is fundamentally unlike those obsolescent capitalist objects Benjamin had begun to analyse in the essay on Surrealism, objects such as early train stations and the arcades themselves that derive their appeal from their mixed, ambiguous nature—and that might help ignite revolutionary energies. The courtyard and the depths beneath the tree hold the promise, for the child, not just of a mythic ambiguity, but of an authentic knowledge.⁸

Yet, in examining the role of myth, an important aspect of ‘Loggias’ has been neglected: its insistence on the perspectival nature of all knowledge. The courtyard, with its ringed tree and chthonic depths, takes on its mythic aspect only as it is *viewed* from a particular position. And it is viewed, first and foremost, from the loggia in the most literal of its figurations: the courtyard is mythic when viewed as a theatrical stage from a loge or box.⁹ The child’s spectatorial gaze, framed by the loggia, is an indispensable component of the scene’s theatricality, the process through which it is transformed and seems to take on an enigmatic life of its own. The magic promised beneath the tree is realized, then, only from within a specific situation of spectatorship.

But there is another, more important level of figuration at work here. The loggia itself is a box-like structure whose heavy ‘roll-up shutters’ seal it off from the windows of the apartment while the shutter-like ‘roller blinds’ control the perceptibility of the courtyard. The loggia figures, in other words, not just a theatrical loge, but a view camera. The ‘photographic’ nature of the *Denkbild*, the figure of thought that is the primary textual unit of the *Berlin Childhood*, has of course long been acknowledged. What has remained unclear, however,

is the extent to which the text as a whole is suffused and structured by photographic *metaphor*. The loggia as camera is only the first, if the most important, of these figures. In the pages that follow, Benjamin deploys a number of related figures: the murky light that predominates in section after section is the light of the salt print, the light of the platinum print, the light of Atget. And the water that lies deep or flows gurgling from its subterranean source often figures the developing and fixing bath from which the latent image inscribed on the negative emerges.¹⁰ The *Denkbild* as image, then, is not merely conceived as a textual analogue of the photographic image; its very textuality is produced through recourse to the language of photography. It is in this sense that section after section of the text produces a scene in which that which we cannot understand is made visible.

The conditioning of experience by modern media is of course a pervasive theme in the *Childhood*. Already in 'Loggias' we encounter not just the form of the photographic apparatus predominant in the nineteenth century, the view camera, but other pre-cinematic forms as well, as the gaze from the view camera-like loggia itself gives way, already in this first section of the text, to a view of the courtyards from the passing S-Bahn, that is, to an implicitly cinematic figuration of spectatorship.¹¹ The all-over view of the photographic negative is here juxtaposed to the segmentation of the passing scene, the frozen nature of the photograph to the shock-interrupted mobility of the view through the train window, itself a shuddering cinematic frame. The tensions between photography and the experience of the railroad journey with its pre-cinematic forms of experience give rise to the next section in the text, 'Imperial Panorama', with its cinematic shifting of 'frames' as the spectator awaits the 'ringing of a little bell that sounded a few seconds before each picture moved off with a jolt, in order to make way first for an empty space and then for the next image' (GS VII, 388; SW III, 347). And in the next section, 'The Telephone', we see enacted the gradual displacement of unmediated, acoustic communication — coded broadly, in essays such as 'The Storyteller', as traditional or pre-capitalist — by modern media.

Poised as it is between the essays 'Little History of Photography', with its introduction of the concept of aura, and 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', with its attribution to the photographic apparatus of the ability to effect a salutary distance between human beings and what Georg Lukács first called second nature, we might expect the reference to the camera in 'Loggias' to stand for a particular process of de-auraticization, that is, the liberation

of the human sensorium from the deadly effects of a tradition suffused with the effects of phantasmagoria.¹² The idea complex to which I allude here, enriched by the theory of the optical unconscious, argues that the photographic apparatus is the precondition of a certain kind of liberating habituation, a reception in distraction, that alone might serve as the basis for a genuinely revolutionary politics.¹³

But this is precisely what the figurative evocation of the view camera in 'Loggias' does *not* do. In the little text's last paragraph, the scene of photography is evoked once again. In the loggia, 'space and time come into their own and find each other' (GS VII, 388; SW III, 346). As Vilém Flusser has put it, the photographic image is a 'foreshortening of the four spatiotemporal dimensions within the two of a surface', the result of a capacity to 'abstract surfaces from space-time and to project them back into space-time'.¹⁴ This space-time is, as Benjamin claims in 'The Otter', a 'prophetic' dimension in which 'all that lies in store for us has become the past' (GS VII, 407; SW III, 365). In that tree well, then, the child gazing out from the loggia/loge/camera encounters intimations of the life to come, but a life that will remain in the thrall of that particular past that is Berlin around 1900. An anticipation of this prophetic voice marks the very beginning of 'Loggias': the child, laid into the loggia as into a cradle or onto a mother's breast, is serenaded by the caryatids. Their lullaby in fact contains nothing of the future, so the prophecy must lie elsewhere. It lies in the *Spruch*, or saying, that can, for the remainder of a life, conjure through *Rausch*—that intoxication without intoxicant—the air of the courtyard. The courtyards are thus potentially sites of a privileged epistemology. Their air can make present—the German verb *vergegenwärtigen* has material *and* temporal connotations—that which is otherwise inaccessible.

Yet the effect of this photographic moment is anything but the threshold experience that Winfried Menninghaus finds so pervasive in Benjamin's engagement with the problem of myth; it is anything, that is, but a rite of passage from the thrall of mythic nature and toward liberation. At the end of the *Denkbild* the loggia as camera instead assumes one more figurative dimension, becoming the *mausoleum* of a specific form of experience. 'Loggias', for all the beauty of its evocation of the dream world of childhood, with its intimations of an immediate access to the hidden knowledge whose presence is always signalled by magic, thus ends on a sobering note. This is another of the senses in which it is autobiographical: it traces a human life from birth to death. If the loggia itself, figured at first as a cradle, plays a role in the gestation of dream, memory, and significance, by the end of the

text its cocoon-like form has taken on a final degree of encapsulation: it is the tomb of childhood. The figure of the body embalmed and sealed off recurs frequently throughout the *Childhood*: In 'Butterfly Hunt', the taxodermic impulse always present in Benjamin speaks of the frozen horror of the encapsulated body; and in 'Victory Column', it is world history itself that is killed off and interred, with the column in the Tiergarten as its stele. The *Childhood* presents, on this reading, a moving portrait of the child's consciousness as privileged receptor of a charged experience, an experience that might give rise to a not-yet conscious knowledge of the present moment. But this consciousness, for all its privilege, is a dead form, sealed off in its tomb, incapable of moving past itself. Adult consciousness — interpellated, fetishized, phantasmagoric — cannot reenter the mausoleum, has no access to the undoubtedly positive potentials of myth. And the photographic moment seems less to record that entombment than actually to bring it about. Photographic seeing, in its peculiar interlacing of 'here and now' and 'then and there', thus holds the key to the 'temporal homeopathy' Benjamin describes in the Foreword to the 1938 version of the *Berlin Childhood*: it is a form of 'inoculation' in which 'those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood' are deployed in order to limit the pervasive feeling of loss that characterizes the present. Photographic seeing enables 'insight into the irretrievability — not the contingent, biographical but the necessary, social irretrievability — of the past' (GS VII, 385; SW III, 344). It effects the interment of the past, its identification with the child who dwells in his loggia 'as in a mausoleum long intended just for him' (GS VII, 388; SW III, 346).

What, then, is the role of photography in this mediation of mythic knowledge and death? Already in 1923, Benjamin had isolated photography as a privileged epistemological medium — and a medium with an intimate relationship to the recognition of myth. In two short texts on Baudelaire, he had written of a photographic plate that captures the 'essence of things' (GS VI, 133; SW I, 361). These plates, of course, are negatives, and, as Benjamin claims, 'no one can deduce from the negative (...) the true essence of things as they really are' (GS VI, 133; SW I, 361). In a remarkable attempt to evoke the originality of Baudelaire's vision, Benjamin attributes to him not the ability to develop such a negative, but rather a 'presentiment of its real picture' (GS VI, 133; SW I, 361). Thus, Baudelaire's vision deep into the nature of things in a poem such as 'Le soleil' ('The Sun'), his figuration of history as a multiple exposure in 'Le cygne' ('The

Swan'), and his fundamental sense for the negative — as the transient and always irreversible — in 'Une charogne' ('A Carcass'). What is most significant about the relays between the early Baudelaire texts and the *Childhood*, though, is their mutual attribution — to Baudelaire and to the child/photographer — of a capability analogous to that which he attributes to Kafka in his great essay of 1934, an intimate knowledge of humanity's 'mythical prehistory'. It is the 'true nature' of the photographic negative that opens the knowledge of myth, of primordial good and evil, to Baudelaire's 'infinite mental efforts' (GS VI, 133; SWI, 361). Yet this understanding of photography's ability to enable a kind of intuition of myth stops far short of the corrosive role attributed to it in 'Loggias'. Benjamin's own work provides few clues as to how his thinking on photography moved from an unambiguous attribution of cognitive power in 1923 to the destructive role evident in the *Berlin Childhood*.

In the decade between 1924 and 1934 — the year of the first drafts of the *Berlin Childhood* — Benjamin's writings had changed radically. Before 1924, Benjamin had written precisely one piece on contemporary literature, an unpublished essay on Paul Scheerbarth. Before 1924, his understanding of politics and his political engagement are a matter of intense debate; he is described variously as apolitical, an anarchist, a proto-Communist, or a right-wing radical. And up until 1924, Benjamin had planned, albeit with considerable ambivalence, a career in the university. Beginning in 1924, he turned his attention and his energies in precipitously new directions: to contemporary culture — with an emphasis on popular forms and on what we might call everyday modernity, to Marxist politics, and to a career as a journalist and wide-ranging cultural critic. These three central aspects of Benjamin's turn in 1924 have received varying attention: the turn to Marxism is very well documented and plays a role in nearly every reading of the life and work; the failed academic career and the decision to pursue a career as a freelance cultural critic has, surprisingly, remained undervalued; but the shift from German Romanticism and its predecessors to contemporary European culture — and especially to popular culture and the theory of media — which is in many ways the most momentous decision for Benjamin in the 1920s, remains a black hole in Benjamin scholarship.

At first haltingly, and then, beginning in 1926, with a vengeance, Walter Benjamin turned his thought and writing to Europe, to the modernist and avant-garde culture being produced in France and the Soviet Union, and especially to popular culture and the media

in which it appeared, something Benjamin and his friend Siegfried Kracauer in some ways invented as a field of serious investigation. His range in the period is astonishing: between 1926 and 1931, Benjamin produced essays on children's literature, toys, pedagogy, gambling, graphology, pornography, folk art, the art of excluded groups such as the mentally ill, food, and a wide variety of media including film, radio, photography, and the illustrated press. Writing for some of the most prominent weeklies and monthlies in Germany, he established himself in the late 1920s as a visible and influential commentator on cultural matters.

Some part of the scholarly neglect of Benjamin's role as a critic of popular culture in the late 1920s and early 1930s undoubtedly stems from the formidable difficulty of finding an adequate approach to this new material. Benjamin himself was the first to have this problem. His *theoretical* writing, for all its brilliance and occasional jabbing, unforgettable insight, had in the period in question lost some of the force and all of the architectonic complexity of his pre-1924 work. Each of his writings in the years 1912–1924 represents a contribution to an integrated, if highly esoteric and even refractory theory of criticism—as Gershom Scholem once put it, each of these major works describes a philosophy of its object. Only somewhat tentatively in 1929, with major essays on Surrealism and Proust, and then with full force in 1931 with a great essay on Karl Kraus and a magisterial essay on photography, would Benjamin return to the admixture of interpretation and theory that had marked his early work and would again mark his work of the later 1930s. In the major works of the period immediately after the Kraus essay—'Experience and Poverty' of 1933, 'The Author as Producer' and 'Franz Kafka' of 1934—and then, beginning in 1935 and continuing to the end of his life, the intensive absorption into the world of the Parisian arcades and Charles Baudelaire, an absorption that would produce central essays on Baudelaire, on 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', on the philosophy of history, and the great torso of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin 'returned' to his earlier practice. He developed an extensive methodological superstructure based not only on his early theory but also on his intervening reading of contemporary cultural material.

Benjamin's *political* turn between 1924 and 1926 was apparently accomplished much more easily than was the turn to contemporary culture. The political turn was effected virtually instantaneously, and left very few marks of tension or struggle in his work—as he famously

suggested, the 1924 habilitation thesis on the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was ‘already dialectical, if not yet materialist’.¹⁵ The confrontation with contemporary culture, and especially with popular culture, however, did not by any means come easily. It seems that Benjamin somehow felt that the turn to contemporary culture necessitated the development of a totally new theory appropriate only to that culture, and he thus abandoned his own, carefully worked out theoretical position. What is not clear is whether Benjamin thought that the older theory, developed in intimate reciprocity with older culture, was *inherently* inappropriate to his new cultural interests, or whether he himself simply saw no way to apply that theory in individual cases. Whatever the case, the works produced between 1924 and 1934, while hardly devoid of theoretical interest, all too seldom speak either to one another or to a grand theory in the manner that every word Benjamin wrote before 1924 clearly does. The question arises then, as to the role played by the writings produced between 1924 and 1934 in the development of what we now know as Benjaminian theory.

In 1935, Benjamin began to disseminate the results of his research and thought on the Paris of the middle years of the nineteenth century—his work on the Parisian arcades as a central metaphor through which the emergence of modern, urban commodity capitalism in France might be better understood. Now this project, unlike anything else Benjamin wrote after 1924, was organized around a highly coherent, rigorously developed theory; what is more, central aspects of that theory are derived directly from Benjamin’s pre-1924 works. The question arises then, as to how Benjamin was able to construct a bridge backwards. How did he manage to develop the brilliant, enormously suggestive readings of the cultural objects produced under high Capitalism based on the ideas he had produced in reference to a much older art?

This is clearly a complex question, but an important part of the answer lies in Benjamin’s intellectual relationship with his friend the German novelist, film theorist, and cultural analyst Siegfried Kracauer.¹⁶ In the early and mid 1920s, Benjamin and Kracauer had systematically exchanged work; Kracauer knew, as quotations in his essays from this period and later indicate, even a series of early, unpublished essays by Benjamin, essays that had been central to Benjamin’s formulation of his early theory. After 1925, while Benjamin worked toward but was frustrated in the formulation of a coherent theory of culture, and especially popular culture, Kracauer began to

take defining concepts and theories from Benjamin's early work and apply them to everyday culture in the Weimar Republic in new and sometimes astonishing ways. Although his creative misprisions of Benjamin are widespread, they are particularly important in the cluster of essays at the heart of Kracauer's great collection *The Mass Ornament*. There, in essays with titles such as 'Cult of Distraction', 'Travel and Dance', 'Those Who Wait', 'Calico World', and 'The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies', Kracauer offered a series of brilliant analyses and critiques of contemporary culture. His gaze was particularly attuned to Berlin's diverse and frenetically active leisure world: spectacles with tiller girls, movies, shopping, bestsellers. It was Kracauer, then, who showed Benjamin how a theory like his, apparently suited only to the refractory objects of a mandarin cultural elite, might open up the world around him. Kracauer's refashioning of these Benjaminian concepts is particularly important for Benjamin's nascent theory of media; and no essay was more important for Benjamin than Kracauer's great essay of 1927, 'Photography'.

In that essay, though, the true action seems to be anywhere else but in a modern medium such as photography. Truth, after all, resides elsewhere, as Kracauer is at pains to tell us—in fact, photography is not only said to be indifferent to truth, it is finally nothing more than 'a jumble that consists partly of garbage'.¹⁷ Worse, it is deeply complicit with the most degraded practices of capitalist society: 'In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding.' (K, 58). And in the essay 'The Mass Ornament', with its brilliant analysis of the entwinement of capitalist reason and myth, Kracauer shows that 'capitalism's core defect', the defect that leads to degradation, is that 'it rationalizes not too much but *too little*' (K, 81). Photography would seem, then, to be complicit with anti-rational forces and thus in part accountable for the spread of a pernicious mythological thinking. Insofar as the opening pages of 'Photography' take photographic practice at all seriously, they seem to do so only in terms of the purported temporal authenticity of photography's reference. 'Although time is not part of the photograph like the smile or the chignon, the photograph itself (. . .) is a representation of time.' (K, 49).

The work of art, by contrast—and here Kracauer mainly intends painting—is a privileged locus of meaning. Painting is uniquely capable of representing what Kracauer calls 'memory images' or 'monograms', moments of time remembered that are shot through

with significance. And these images are related in an important way to truth:

Truth can be found only by a liberated consciousness which assesses the demonic nature of the drives. The traits that consciousness recollects stand in a relationship to what has been perceived as true, the latter being either manifest in these traits or excluded by them. The image in which these traits appear is distinguished from all other memory images, for unlike the latter it preserves not a multitude of opaque recollections but elements that touch upon what has been recognized as true. All memory images are bound to be reduced to this type of image, which may rightly be called the last image, since it alone preserves the unforgettable. The last image of a person is that person's actual *history*. (...) This history is like a *monogram* that condenses the name into a single graphic figure which is meaningful as an ornament. (K, 51)

These last images, these monograms, are represented in the painting as their *meaning* takes on spatial appearance — whereas in a photograph, the mere spatial appearance of an object is the only meaning to which it can possibly obtain. The object represented in a painting is 'permeated by cognition' (K, 52) in a way unobtainable to the photograph. Kracauer's ideal painter creates works of art in which reside a truth content that 'outlasts time'.

But, as Brecht was wont to remind us, *die Verhältnisse sind nicht so* — conditions today just aren't like that. Modern consciousness is anything other than the 'liberated consciousness' capable of discerning truth. Kracauer has a rather precise idea of what modern conditions are like: 'One can certainly imagine a society that has fallen prey to a mute nature which has no meaning no matter how abstract its silence. The contours of such a society emerge in the illustrated journals.' (K, 61). In this apparently witty aperçu resides the insight fundamental to Kracauer's mature work, and to Benjamin's as well: that the conditions that obtain in their historical period are nowhere directly accessible to human cognition — they emerge, if ever, only in highly mediated and abstracted form. As allegories. In photographs.

In perhaps the densest section of a very refractory essay, Kracauer engages, through direct reference to Benjamin's book on the *Trauerspiel*, in the debate on symbol and allegory that is so significant to the German cultural tradition. He begins by aligning the memory image, or monogram, with the symbol. Symbols are, in Kracauer's phrase, 'dependent upon natural conditions, a dependence that determines the visible and corporeal expression of consciousness' (K, 60). In epochs in which nature comes wholly to dominate

consciousness, however, 'symbolic presentation becomes *allegory*' (K, 60). It is interesting to note that Kracauer, like Benjamin, distances himself from the more rigid teleologies of Bloch and Lukács, adopting a view of historical expression indebted to Riegl and even to a certain extent to Worringer.¹⁸ Just as the art of the Vienna Genesis emerged as not just characteristic of its age, but as its only historically responsible expression, so too does allegory, for Benjamin and Kracauer, become the only responsible trope of modernity. And in Kracauer's essay, photography is defined as an allegorical practice, in essence, the primary expression of the *Kunstwollen*, or artistic willing, of modernity.

If, though, photography can capture only 'the residuum that history has discharged' (K, 55), of what exactly is it expressive? In Kracauer's view, photography is uniquely charged with the laying bare of a nature from which human consciousness has wholly departed. A nature that is at once inimical and highly seductive, at once 'the sum of what can be subtracted' from the human being *and* something more appealing to consciousness even than images: 'The more decisively consciousness frees itself from [its natural] contingency, in the course of the historical process, the more purely does its natural foundation present itself to consciousness. What is meant no longer appears to consciousness in images; rather, this meaning goes toward and through nature.' (K, 60). Kracauer attempts here to create a post-Weberian vocabulary for what is still the process of *Entzauberung* or disenchantment; he is careful to avoid the vocabulary of commodification, reification and second nature then under rapid development in the wake of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. Yet what Kracauer means with the notion of the 'pure presentation' of nature to consciousness is not far either from Lukács's notion of second nature or from the discourse of phantasmagoria that had begun to play a role in the discussions between Adorno and Benjamin by 1927. The assumption common to all three positions is that the human sensorium confronts an environment that appears to be coherent, meaningful, and given, but that is in fact the objective manifestation of networks of fetishized commodities which, working together, serve to disorient and denature the human sensory and cognitive abilities. Considered in its relationship to a 'foundation of nature devoid of meaning' (K, 61), photography thus performs central epistemological tasks, in that it is capable of raising to the level of consciousness the conditions that actually obtain. Or, as Kracauer puts it, 'It is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined *foundation of nature*' (K, 61–2). It does so through a particular form of consonance

between its mechanisms and the age in which it arises: ‘No different from earlier modes of representation, photography, too, is assigned to a particular developmental stage of practical and material life. It is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production. The same mere nature which appears in photography flourishes in the reality of the society produced by this capitalist mode of production.’ (K, 61). Photography is, like the *Trauerspiel* in its relationship to its age, historically responsible, in that it is, in its brokenness, thoroughly symptomatic of the conditions that produced it.

But, more importantly, photography serves, much as had Benjamin’s early criticism, as a form of mortification or annihilation of its object.¹⁹ ‘A shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment; what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist.’ (K, 56–7). Photography produces — and does not merely represent — a ‘disintegrated unity’, a ‘ghost-like reality’ that is unredeemed and ‘gathers fragments around a nothing’ (K, 56). Or, in a recurrent figure from the text, the ‘inert world’ is revealed, dormant in its cocoon (K, 60). And here we are, back at the problem of allegory — and in the loggia. As a nearly random set of pixels, which is only another term for a spatial representation, a photograph presents elements in space ‘whose configuration is so far from necessary that one could just as easily imagine a different organization of those elements’ (K, 56). If for Benjamin, in allegory anything can mean anything else, in Kracauer’s conceptualization of photography the image as spatial representation is susceptible to a particular recombinatory logic. But that logic is societal, and not tropological. Kracauer imagines that that same society that has fallen prey to a mute nature, if relentlessly exposed to the mortification of the photographic image, might fail to endure. This, it seems to me, is the meaning of Kracauer’s enigmatic sloganeering for photography as the ‘go for broke — va banque — game of history’ (K, 61). Giving ourselves up to photographs means, for Kracauer, our acceptance of the possibility that the world as we know it could be brought to its end — by photographs. It could be revealed as a heap of garbage and simply cease to have the kind of meaning that alone ensures its perpetuation.

With Kracauer’s ideas on photography and its figuration in the *Berlin Childhood* in mind, we might map Benjamin’s thinking on media,

and especially on photography and film, in the 1930s by constructing two parallel trajectories. One of those trajectories is shaped by a strong emphasis on technological utopianism. Benjamin's involvement with the avant-garde artists of the G-Group in the early 1920s, and especially his intensive interchanges with László Moholy-Nagy, had lasting effects on his thought.²⁰ The role of the apparatus as prosthesis, the penetration of a certain reality by the apparatus, and the resultant reception in distraction—in short, the optical unconscious and its effects—cannot be fully understood without recourse to Moholy's groundbreaking work in the 1920s in texts such as 'Production-Reproduction' and *Painting—Photography—Film*. Although some of the results of his reading of Moholy are evident in *One Way Street*, Benjamin's reception of him largely lay dormant for 15 years, only to emerge with a vengeance in the artwork essay.²¹

If we now—after a long detour—reenter the loggia of *Berlin Childhood*, we find ourselves at the starting point of a very different trajectory in Benjamin's thinking about media. This trajectory draws heavily on Benjamin's own early work, and it builds on Kracauer's refunctioning of the theory that informed that work. It is a trajectory that emphasizes the destructive, allegorical nature of the media image. And as such it is suffused with Benjamin's essential nihilism. If Kracauer allowed himself to imagine the passing away of a society, Benjamin, like D. H. Lawrence, liked to think of the world going pop. As Eduardo Cadava has shown, that dark stream of thought flows through the work on the Arcades project, as photography is often associated with the moment of arrest—if not, by then, quite of erasure.²²

Passing, then, through the loggia, and in fact through the remainder of Benjamin's remarkable text, we find ourselves, at the end, in the child's bedroom and in the section called 'The Moon'. This *Denkbild* is a carefully constructed pendant to 'Loggias'. As in the first text, domestic architecture is figured as an optical apparatus. A pale beam of moonlight steals into the chamber through the shutter-like blinds—and if we are not quite reminded of a view camera, with its orientation toward its object, the bedroom with its darkened interior nonetheless strongly suggest the pre-photographic form of the camera obscura, with its very direct light-writing, *photo graphein*, on its rear wall. 'The Moon', in fact, is a virtually symphonic reiteration and refunctioning of the major motifs of the *Berlin Childhood* as a whole: the notion of mimetic exchange between child and butterfly so prominent in 'Butterfly Hunt' and elsewhere emerges immediately as the earth and the moon become interchangeable; the circular forms—of the

tree ring and of the marketwomen's skirts — return in the hem-like ornamentation of the basins on the nightstand; and the clinking of the glass jug recalls the sounds of modern technology — the shuddering of the panorama, the shrilling of the telephone — that so undoes the subject. Myth is very much at work, then, in this room: the child awakens in a space bathed in an eerie glow that unhouses him. Stripped of any thought of a future, the child is again, as in 'Loggias', entombed, trapped within the irremediable pastness of the photograph. 'The Moon' is, in fact, for all its character as a domestic miniature, a great apocalyptic vision. In the moonlit room, 'nothing more remained of the world than a single, stubborn question. It was: Why is there anything at all in the world? why the world? With amazement, I realized that nothing in it could compel me to think the world. Its nonbeing would have struck me as not a whit more problematic than its being, which seemed to wink at nonbeing' (GS VII, 427–8; SW III, 383).

If, more than a decade later, Horkheimer and Adorno would emphasize the dark side of enlightenment in their vision of the interplay of myth and reason, Benjamin was nonetheless there before them. The de-auraticizing potential of the photographic apparatus is indeed revealed in the *Berlin Childhood*. But, if myth is reduced to its barest elements and depotentiated, this nonetheless occurs at a price. The effect is the liberation of neither vision, nor consciousness, nor political agency. It is the entombment of childhood, of hope, of the future. This is not the elimination of myth, not the effort, as Benjamin put it in Convolute N of the *Arcades*, to cultivate fields 'where only madness has reigned', forging ahead with 'the whetted axe of reason' in order to clear the 'undergrowth of delusion and myth' (AP, 456–7). This is a vision of a different order: we are preserved for all time in the thrall of myth, unredeemed, aware of a knowledge we can intuit but never attain, entombed — in short, photographed.

NOTES

- 1 Earlier versions of this essay were delivered at Northwestern University, Stanford University, the University of California, Davis, the University of Oxford, and the University of Cambridge. I am grateful to the members of those audiences for their critical reactions, and especially to my hosts, Professors Peter Fenves, Seth Lerer, Gerhard Richter, Anthony Phelan, and Andrew Webber. I am especially grateful to my friend Howard Eiland, whose conversations on the *Berlin Childhood* lent decisive influences to this essay.

- 2 GB IV, 267.
- 3 On the problem of Benjamin and biography, see the introduction to Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *The Author as Producer: A Life of Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming in 2010).
- 4 I cite from the last version of *Berlin Childhood*, which dates from 1938.
- 5 See especially Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), 48ff., and Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 68–9, 134–5.
- 6 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.
- 7 From 'Capitalism as Religion'. For a full reading of this fragment, see Uwe Steiner, 'Kapitalismus als Religion: Anmerkungen zu einem Fragment Walter Benjamins', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 72.1 (1998), 147–71.
- 8 The most important study of the role of myth in Benjamin's work remains Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwelkenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).
- 9 The term 'Loggia' refers in German to a typical architectural feature of an apartment building: unlike a balcony, which extends beyond the building's skin, a loggia is, as it were, carved out behind the skin, with three interior walls, a roof, and a railing on the open side. The word is related etymologically to the theatrical loge.
- 10 I am grateful to Frances Jacobus-Parker for this insight, which emerged in the course of a discussion of the *Berlin Childhood* in the Princeton seminar 'Reading Photographic Writing' which I taught with Eduardo Cadava in 2008.
- 11 On the relays between the railway and the cinema, see especially Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
- 12 On the concept of aura, see especially Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry* 34.2 (Winter 2008), 336–75.
- 13 On the role played by distraction and innervation in the formation of a collective consciousness susceptible to revolutionary action, see especially Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', *Boundary 2* 30.1 (2003), 51–66.
- 14 Vilém Flusser, *Für eine philosophie der fotografie* (Göttingen: Edition Flusser, 2006), 8.
- 15 GB IV, 18.
- 16 The best short introduction to Kracauer's work remains Thomas Y. Levin, 'Introduction' to *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

- 17 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 51. All further references to this volume occur within the text, designated as K plus page number.
- 18 On Benjamin's relationship to Riegl and Worringer, see Michael Jennings, 'Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History' in *Walter Benjamin 1892–1940: Zum 100. Geburtstag*, edited by Uwe Steiner (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992), 77–102.
- 19 On criticism as annihilation or mortification, see Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 164–211.
- 20 On Benjamin's relationship to the historical avant-garde movements, see Michael Jennings, 'Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-garde', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18–34.
- 21 The most important work on distraction (and especially its relationship to the important concept of innervation) has been carried out by Miriam Hansen. See especially 'Benjamin on Cinema: Not a One-Way Street', *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999), 306–43, and the chapter 'Innervation, Mimetic Faculty, Optical Unconscious' in her forthcoming book, *The Other Frankfurt School*.
- 22 See Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59–64.