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**BENJAMIN’S VOICES: IRRESOLUTION AND TEXTUAL PRACTICE IN *ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY***

“Speech conquers thought, but writing commands it.”  
Walter Benjamin, ‘The Writers Technique in Thirteen Theses’<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Benjamin’s final treatise *On the Concept of History* has generated significant criticism with its profound yet enigmatic statements on his historical materialism. Its internal references range from the philosopher Hegel to satirist Karl Kraus; these interludes of scientific and poetic language have garnered notable readings through Marxian lenses, as well as ample theological and literary interpretations. Reading against any simplified tradition of unity, I suggest instead an insoluble collection of distinct voices at play in the entanglements of the text. Constellating these ‘Benjamins’ as self-conscious reflective and speculative identities nonetheless actualizing to their human character, this article illustrates a text which is intrinsically in deep conversation with its own medial limitation and consequently transforms that textuality into a locus of power. Structurally, Benjamin’s theses perform a harmonic, musical feat, embedding a true praxis of historical critique within an image from which it unendingly springs forth.

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<sup>1</sup> Selected Writings: 1913-1926. One Way Street. Post No Bills pp. 458.

**Key words:** aesthetics, Walter Benjamin, materialism, history, image

Written immediately before finally absconding his beloved Paris under the imminent threat of Nazi incarceration, Walter Benjamin's *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* ("On the Concept of History",<sup>2</sup> first translated with a manipulable, pragmatic bend as "Theses on the Philosophy of History"),<sup>3</sup> reflects a predominant case in the author's work— it need not escape the enigmatic to attain the emblematic. In the theological dimension, his system of 'weak messianism' – each generation bearing possible salvation for all previous – is explicitly explored in OC, yet as is his clearest dialogue with Marx and the bounds of dialectical materialism. With such potential, the essay has opened itself up to ample posthumous tampering. Long-time friend and *Frankfurter Schule* comrade Theodor Adorno, parallel to his qualms with Benjamin's esotericism as insufficiently Marxist, would edit to his own accord. Hannah Arendt, the editor of *Illuminations* (1968), which would introduce him to exponential fame in the Anglosphere, recognized Benjamin as a bird of her own feather, an outsider to the body of philosophy<sup>4</sup>. Even within *Illuminations*, where OC is a fitting coda, a heterodox image of Benjamin manifests<sup>5</sup>. My aim is not to confront the philosophical and historical scholarships of Benjamin on their grounds as such, but to intercede a destabilizing conjecture *a priori* to their establishment by way of a structural and stylistic analysis of the text.

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<sup>2</sup> Heretofore denoted as OC. While the term 'theses' is indeed more pliable than the ambiguous whole of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, the adherence of *On the Concept* helps define these different vantages. Similarly, this should bring to mind both Husserl's *Über den Begriff der Zahl* and *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre*, the work of Fichte. All references to individual theses will be accompanied by referencing numerals (or letter) i.e. 'a hunchbacked dwarf' (I).

<sup>3</sup> Both prominent English translations— the first 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' appearing in *Illuminations* (1968), the second 'On the Concept of History' in the *Selected Writings* Vol. 4 (2003)— were performed by Harry Zohn.

<sup>4</sup> Entrance into its highest echelons denied with his unsuitable *habilitation*, later published as *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*.

<sup>5</sup> Contra Arendt's 'rogue scholar', the preface authored by Leon Wieseltier's characterizes the critic as an acolyte of Hegel's aesthetic project, whose dislocated pedigree is inevitably subsumed into this totalizing account of mainline philosophy; the uncommon individuality of Benjamin's thought is collapsed into a paltry account where "deviance looked to him like an epistemological advantage" (*Illuminations* viii). Wieseltier and Arendt's disagreement, however, has less to do with Benjamin's place in philosophy than a dispute on the telos of Benjamin's thought. To that respect, an agreeable reading of his final work in OC is an ally of worth unparalleled.

Regarding Benjamin's particular editorial devotion – expressed in part through an aversion to publication – as symptomatic of a structural concern, this textual model establishes a pre-gestalt understanding underpinned by loci of coherence and resistance throughout Benjamin's text. Within the latter is the first movement of my argument: the insoluble and distinct voices at play do not weaken Benjamin's argument, but rather commit to a mimesis of a central assertion in the depiction of history – that a faculty of resolution does not live within the didactic historical or dialectical system. In the wake of this unsedimented portrait of historical action, I call to forefront precisely through Benjamin's own method: the *image*. Drawing on the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, which recognizes no robust (or complete) critique “without a critique – of discourse and image – by *images themselves*” (260), we find precisely the *image*, a broadly conceived encounter with the visual, acoustic, and all sensible materiality, lying before us in the form of Benjamin's final essay, whereupon the fruitful action of the final act will feature an expansion on the poetic – specifically *musical* – attribute of the text into its reflective impetus.

The short article's eighteen eponymous these, with two addenda<sup>6</sup>, do not progress chronologically, nor by any arborescent fashion, systemically. Nor, given their rejection of ‘progressive history’, would this be any point toward which to strive. To call OC aphoristic would rob the reader of an image of its contiguous internal fury—nonetheless I contend with Sontag's portrait of Benjamin's form as “freeze-frame baroque” (Sontag 129). Rather, I suggest that if this frame is frozen—the meaning congealed into an *image*—it is not the moment of action, but in the everlasting now, in a world where action lives in the infinitesimal sliver of *then*. The tone, even for Benjamin, is presented factitiously. Despite the absence of a concrete, easy trend to identify, there is an undeniable urgency at work—for Derrida, “dense, enigmatic and burning” (181).

Forth' of historical materialism rise from the continuum of historicism (Beiner 424). Although Beiner does not discriminate the agent from the ideology, his historiographic materialism is not alchemically conceptual, but like the aforementioned

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<sup>6</sup> Two great resources are available to us, that have been under-represented in the consideration for their own circumstances: a French translation, performed by Benjamin himself, and—available due to the immense cautions at risk of self, performed by the living archive of Benjamin in the forms of Arendt, Bataille, Scholem, Adorno and else, the extensive Paralipomena and Notes, collectively illuminating the enigmatic mind at work on his final urgent document.

turn toward the actor. Illustrating this shared topos is not a matter of reconciling traditions previously thought opposed, but recognizing the role of the individual executor as interactive, marionettes pulling back at players in this theatre of historiography. Through this performance, the comprehensive image of the text appears—one which responds to that most enigmatic ‘true image of the past’ which “*huscht by*” (V)<sup>7</sup>.

What Benjamin leaves the reader with at a distance – in contact with truth, yet only through an ‘image’, and moreover one which must be caught, at an inconvenience of speed – is more than a frustration to the historical materialist; this relationship between an authentic epistemological engagement with history and the facticity of the subject remains the great hurdle of OC. It may appear that I am committing the same circumambient movement previously prescribed to shallow assessments of Benjamin’s OC; what in the mode of a praxis, linguistic action, does this literary argument extricate at work through OC – more so, what in the essay itself? To understand the embedded ‘speech acts’, in Austin’s sense, of OC, it is vital to distinguish Benjamin’s privileging of writing over speech from the well-known Post-Structuralist discourse of Derrida’s “Of Grammatology”. Rather than a structural bias, whereby the signifier and the signified can be more readily made *explicit* from one another in the written word, Benjamin’s physicality of writing finds a return to the “opaque ipseity of the natural object” (McFarland 178). Such a tension, presented in the aesthetic struggle against fascism through the problematic depletion of aura, reaches the chronological end of Benjamin’s philosophy seemingly unresolved; this, I will argue, need not be interpreted as one more dimension of Benjamin hunched in the scrutiny of “every second” as the “small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter” (B) – precisely through a return to the phenomenological human being. Grounded in phenomenal vitality, this human shares immanence with two key figurations in the material text and the broadly construed image. Instead of that dislocated Messianism, this “opaque ipseity” suggests a textual embrace of that “dissonance of the image”, whereby the ensuing “tonal dissonance” is

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<sup>7</sup> Consensus academic translation has favoured ‘flits’ (Illuminations, Selected writings); this has given the term a gracefully avian, or insect quality of motion, when *huscht* in the German literary or poetic tradition can be best translated as ‘scurries’, a more shy, base, and animalistic motion that with it carries a degree of awareness, a desire to hide. ‘Whizzes’, as Dennis Redmond adapts, loses an animal vitality, producing a more projectile connotation. ‘Huscht er davon in die Dunkelheit’, or the poem ‘Der Arme huscht durchs Leben scheu’. (In einsamen Stunden. Dichtungen 66).

celebrated, a sonorous form (or sonic image) not contrasting *with* the written text but operating *for*, whereby temporal ‘explosion’ occurs from within the kernel at infinite closeness, a wildflowering whose style is in the textual moment (Selected Writings 129).

For the historical materialist, action always incorporates “how [history] actually feels, its phenomenology in the buzzing of bursts, busts, eruptions, and catastrophes that actually characterize its tragic unfolding”; that phenomenological character is synonymous to human Being (Greenberg 37). To even speak of an atom of ‘historical materialism’ is a direct contradiction toward its Messianic deliverance – the subduction of the Antichrist, and the redemption of all, an extremism which Max Horkheimer decried, levelling in response that “the slain are really slain” – is to immediately cease speaking about materialism’s human responsibility (Benjamin “Arcades” [N8,1]). Self-consciously, the historical materialist knows her place; OC’s language repeats a deontological call for distance to be kept by the historical materialist, aware not only of her mission but of the impossibility of mapping his identity as ‘historical materialist’ onto the mission of ‘historical materialism’: “he *regards it* as his task...” (VII); “[t]he historical materialist leaves it to others... he remains in control of *his* powers” (XVI). Ridding ourselves even of the *Passagenwerk* assumption – that the historical materialist as Benjamin is impelled by an exclusively human faculty<sup>8</sup> – this discriminative action remains clear, the historical materialist held – and of her own accord remaining – at a deliberate distance from the force of historical materialism.

If we are not persuaded, as Adorno and Susan Buck-Morss suggest, that OC serves as a decapitated methodological introduction to the *Passagenwerk* (Buck-Morss 97), we should nonetheless see it in a similar light to that other great enigmatic coda, as a work deeply concerned with itself as a piece of literature, and in sacred dialogue with the literary modes Benjamin himself so deeply mined in essays as *The Storyteller* and *The Task of the Translator*.

An early explicit mention of the ‘image’ in OC situates its stakes of authenticity within the practice of interpretation; capturing the image is not merely a matter of

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<sup>8</sup> None but Benjamin’s love for his transplant home – his intoxication with Baudelaire, and Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (“I could never read more than two or three pages in bed at night before my heart started to beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside”. Benjamin, letter to Adorno, in Lonitz, op. cit., p. 88.) – would fuel the decades-long dream deferred of that final encyclopaedic manuscript. If we agree that Benjamin in the *Passagenwerk* is a historical materialist, his passionate drive cannot be described as an atomism of ‘historical materialism’.

timing, but looking in the right place, with the right devices. While Benjamin indeed stages historical materialism as capable of a “true image of the past” (V) which eludes the progressive dream of history, he further endorses, beyond the initializing impulse of ‘theology’, a formal aspect indebted to a deferential reading of Hegel, one critical of Marx not for excess Hegelianism<sup>9</sup>, but oppositely a muted subjectivity, topologically (not ideologically) contradictory to the claim of Marxian materialist dialectics<sup>10</sup>. Rather than an explicit conceptual break with popular anti-Hegelian Marxism, his theses scaffold a resistivity through the acoustic. Acoustic as implemented here does not suggest that these theses are spoken, nor that their phonemic quality is the seat of that coherence-from-dissonance; the shared environment puts forth an ‘acoustic image’ – a ‘poetized’ condition. That the material comments on materialism or the idea comments on idealism is, for whomever intends a serious philosophy beyond its own crude ‘poetry’, dangerously foolish. In such light, we will begin with a return to fact: these eighteen theses demand a historical materialism as well as historical materialists, acknowledging the latter as wholly incapable of a singular sustenance of the former. OC’s desired status – a document circulated among allies, or stronger still his personal friends – lies explicitly in the fearful shadow of misinterpretation. Nonetheless, it is a negative nihilism to see ourselves as already mishandling its curvature; we must then begin in its positive – that a true interpretation lies somewhere close to Benjamin himself, yet far enough away that his careful pen would not dare waver from honing its eclectic theses to the final count and addenda. By this, there is to be seen an aesthetic principle in its work, a verve of “On the Concept of History” inextricable from personality and *appreciation*; this is the very onus of the *critical* image, the discrimination of worth among appearances. Its capstone position in both Benjamin’s aesthetics, as well as his materialist philosophy, is thus unavoidable.

### **The Image of History**

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<sup>9</sup> As was Scholem’s fear regarding the influence of playwright Brecht.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, in his movement from Hegel, sought to illustrate his materialist dialectic as the direct opposite of its Hegelian inspirator, whose action “transforms into an independent subject” the Idea, “demiurgos of the real world”, that which in Marx becomes subordinate, a reflection of the comparatively essential character of the material world (Marx, Capital Vol. I, 1873 Afterword).

‘Aesthetics’, as it takes its meaning in Walter Benjamin’s thought, must be reasoned with utmost clarity; here I will be heavier handed<sup>11</sup>. Benjamin’s radical rejection of the subject—a banishing from not only the experiential sphere but the epistemological—does not preclude this distinction of agents such as historians and materialists, but rather calls for a re-examination of their purpose among the ‘wreckage’ that is human history (IX). Only in this sift can the connection of life to art be reclaimed. The space of logic here for Benjamin is narrow, beset on all sides by stark missense; against the ostensible loss of the subject as it appears within ‘aestheticization of politics’ whose modern vessel is fascism, as well as a strong subjectivism, which constitutes a Whiggish situation of the past, the emergent ethico-aesthetics must pursue its pure kernel without deviation. The avenue of this purpose is that which the subject has lost – which in turn must be reclaimed lest the subjective jettison sacrifice those alongside, “coming to terms with its ongoing destruction” (Brigstocke 61). In the approach of historical materialism, the monadic metaphor of XVII not only deploys several images of universal singularities (but singularities nonetheless) – the “tasteless seed”, a ‘crystal’ or ‘messianic arrest’ and throughout the essay *Jetztzeit* – but stresses in tandem an active component – ‘blasts’, the suggestively Hegelian ‘sublates’, ‘nourishes’, or once again ‘messianic arrest’<sup>12</sup>. The effect is one of *montage*; *universalizing* the singular is “giv[ing] that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad”. Medium, here suggestive of a scientific analogue in the supersaturated liquid which when perturbed releases its latent energy and aligns into its solid crystal structure, is integral to the historical materialists’ active task, a system where knowledge as a particular is as Gerhard Richter espouses “always a *textual* matter” (29).

To speak of the textual in this manner is an appraisal; the use of ‘aesthetics’ therefore does not err toward judgements of beauty, but is an effort to mediate between the original *αἰσθητικός*—sense, or perception—and the barest concept of

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<sup>11</sup> That Benjamin’s system of thought is involved in the first-order with his rhetorical gestures—the product of his “erecting the great constructions from the smallest, sharply and cuttily fitted building blocks”—rather than the analytic myth of a logic whose product argument is then transposed through a second artistic facture into the Benjamin we encounter, is not a unique situation of this author himself, but nonetheless has elicited enough specific opposition (both contemporary to Benjamin and persisting into modern scholarship) that his case becomes an explicit defense.

<sup>12</sup> While ‘arrest’ may bring to mind the static state, Benjamin’s ‘messianischen Stillstellung’ (the same term elsewhere translated as Zero-hour) denotes in this context the active interruption or intercession within a progressive, mechanical process; I would not hesitate to determine this as active.

'phenomenology'. This aesthetics is merely the right or demand to be read with literary intent, a wide and modest berth that its language be given *care of*<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, Benjamin's philosophical system is in totality inextricable from the aesthetic; for his celebrated literary criticism, this claim is much less surprising than for his engagements with historical materialism. Nevertheless, their union is a matter of methodological and conceptual convergence, whereby aesthetic concepts are argued through those political means – "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction" – while maintaining vigilance against the "aestheticization of politics" in the fascist case. Skirting that dangerous reversal requires an ethical immanence of humanity, where my thinking is indebted to the 'critical image' of Didi-Huberman, in which "the critical filter is not activated exclusively to discriminate between true and false: its movement is indefeasibly connected to the *human gesture* by which, from the complex turbulence of the light and the heavy grain, something will rise up, like the very index of our desire for liberty" (emphasis mine, 257). Within the action of aesthetics, this return to agency must always wrestle against a totalization of epistemology, the 'conformism' from which to wrest tradition (VI).

For Walter Benjamin, the authentic, active dimension of the aesthetic may plausibly be most acutely found not in writing, but the context of his livelihood. Anglophone scholarship has, until recently, ignored the literary endeavours of Walter Benjamin or cast them aside as the mere light-hearted byproduct<sup>14</sup>. Yet poetic dialogue instead not only served a therapeutic, autobiographical function – Mary Maxwell gives the anecdote of Scholem's doggerel on a fictional "University of Muri" with Benjamin as Rector, a jocular gesture with heartfelt implications for the habilitation-less Benjamin (209) – but signalled a deep conceptual font through which Benjamin's own literary philosophy, culminating in the notion of the 'poetized' – *das Gedichte* – springs (Maxwell 220). In Benjamin's thought, this poetized capacity of language, while miscible

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<sup>13</sup> The German *Sorgen* comprises the range of caring, worrying, and concerning; this usage borrows from the specific language of Heidegger, for whom this 'caring' serves as a basis for being-in-the-world. What is 'cared for'—in all of its forms, most generally a 'having to do with'—is thus the world, which in our concern is the world which inscribes 'joy'.

<sup>14</sup> To anyone who has glanced cursorily at the contents of his radio broadcasts for children, best known in English as the book *Radio Benjamin*, only the most cataract of preconceptions could survive such misaligned conviction.

with the liberatory capabilities of discourse critical to his Marxian and Judaic traditions, extends to the broader question of historical representation itself.

We may, rather than labouring hermeneutically within either aforementioned tradition, look to Benjamin's explicit engagements with the creative role of language wherein a fledgling relationship with both Messianic history and the role of the human artist are already present. An early essay "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" (1916) from the eponymous sequence suggests a proto-Wittgensteinian progression in his philosophy of language: "the linguistic being of all things is in their language" (SW1 63). Yet polar to this essentialism is a naïve messianic impulse, by which 'the Fall' – "the enslavement of language"<sup>15</sup> a Babelian consequence – gestures toward redemption in the form of *pure language*. Here, Benjamin the literary critic is connected by way of "The Task of the Translator". There, "from the harmony of all various models of intention" does this 'pure language' emerge from its latent 'hidden[ness]' in all languages (72-74). Beyond this harmony – supra-linguistic, textual and sonic – the factor separating 'pure language' from a "temporary and provisional solution" is that "growth of religions" which "ripens the hidden seed into a higher development of language" (84). Both this material harmony and a progression of religion – distinct from the abrupt Messianic – are necessary to this complete a transcendent system. Yet despite this model of linguistic transcendence, Benjamin follows with a perplexing contrast between translation and 'art', which manifests in the human capacity as an ensuing distinction between the translator and poet. This last point is critical to our return to this concept of the 'poetized'.

'Poetization', as Benjamin identifies in his creative forbearers, does not simply lie in the page, but rather circumscribes the relational possibilities springing from the text. Presented as a "loosening up of the firm functional coherence that reigns in the poem itself" (SW1 19), ontologically a "precondition of the poem, as its inner form", this 'poetized' aspect of poetry evokes Kantian aesthetics, whereby art must satisfy its form "without strain", an inevitably formed piece without the "taught form showing through" (Figal 140). On this poetic proposition Maxwell realizes an auditory poetics in Benjamin. Within an explication of Hölderlin's "Timidity" (Blödigkeit) by Benjamin:

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<sup>15</sup> "The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence" (SW1 72).

The object of this relation of identity between poet and destiny is the living. The construction “be rhymed for joy” presupposes the sensory order of sound. And here too, in rhyme, the identity between that which determines and that which is determined is given—— the way, let us say, the structure of unity appears as half a doubling (...) [t]he rhyme words themselves are not named. For of course “rhymed for joy” no more means “rhymed with joy” than “opportune for you” turns the “you” itself into something that is laid down, something spatial. As that which is opportune was recognized as a relation of the genius (not to him), so is rhyme a relation of joy (not to it). Rather, that dissonance of the image, which given the most radical emphasis suggests a tonal dissonance, has the function of making ‘the inherent intellectual ordering of joy in time perceptible, audible, in the chain of an infinitely extended event corresponding to the infinite possibilities of rhyme. (Early Writings 184)

Maxwell aptly grounds Benjamin’s retention of rhyme in the translation of Baudelaire – contradictory to the theory of “The Task of the Translator”<sup>16</sup> – in this statement. Detectable are echoes of our aforementioned cleavage between a sociological ‘religion’ paradigm in translation against the messianic “instant and final” religious action. Hölderlin, for Benjamin emblematic of a “higher level of work” (an inheritance of Hegel through Kant’s ‘true form of Beauty’) is subsequently “translateable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly” (Illuminations 81). What does this mean of the material essence of translation? Translation of “Timidity” peers out of an extreme reduction of this ‘touching upon’ of meaning, the concentration of that time into a single node of truth-time. From the linguistic – material – dimension of this monad emerges poetic truth; it is precisely this highest relationship which assumes the “of” in the earlier excerpt of Hölderlin, where “you”, the object at the apex, a singularity conduit for the poetic action, is transformed from the previous status of a disjointed concept – the classical ‘metaphor’ or ‘rhymed with’ – into an extension of the present poetic apparatus (in “Timidity”, none but joy!), at an infinite closeness. “In the chain of an infinitely extended event”, this action resonates directly with the monad of the historical materialist as it “blast[s] a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history; thus,

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<sup>16</sup> A translation must embrace its own language on the way to ‘pure language’, rather than attempt to mimic the organic contents of the pre-translated text.

he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated in the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era” (XVII). Of the syllabic gram (or more closely Saussure’s *parole*), we mine the “nourishing fruit” for “its interior as a precious but tasteless seed” (XVII).

The ‘poetic’ for Benjamin connotes the linkage between the material quality of the text and a creative consequence, one most recognizably present in literature. Certainly, OC is no metrical text, one I would hesitate to suggest fashioning itself as ‘poetry’, but rather as living in this becoming of ‘tonal dissonance’, operating throughout the structure of its theses<sup>17</sup>. Its literary derivation, preserved only in a brief note from the paralipomena, draws on Franz Kafka. “It recalls Kafka’s note: The Last Judgment is a kind of summary justice”; here Benjamin is regarding the moments of historical materialism with a particularly explicit constellation of judgment only latent to the published OC, that “every moment is a moment of judgment concerning certain moments that precede it” (SW4 407). ‘Summary’ in Kafka counterpoints the ‘*canon* of the concept’; while this is simple enough in Harry Zohn’s English, Kafka’s original is further complicated. Benjamin’s abbreviation – and Zohn’s subsequent translation – neuters this vital context: “Only by our concept of time do we call it ‘The Last Judgement’, actually it is martial law” (Kafka 54). Ostensibly, Zohn’s ‘summary justice’ captures the idea of the momentuous gestalt, yet *Standrecht* also possesses a graver meaning of which no doubt Kafka and Benjamin were aware: summary execution. Within the context of the German Empire, such deliverance transcended a mere transfer of judicial power during military conflict, but rather a creation of zones whose civilians were equally subject to martial law – Carl Schmitt’s ‘state of exception’. It is not the suspension of the legal domain that concerned Kafka, nor Benjamin during his composition of OC, barely released from internment; rather, the fearsome condition is one of ‘*Recht gesprochen*’, whereby the ultimate condition of law emerges from the same *spoken word* whose dipole action is that of historical materialism, and the text of OC. In precisely this way does Benjamin’s own theses convey the exigency of language – including its own.

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<sup>17</sup> OC’s paralipomena provides not only an image of the unrefined process, those theses Benjamin cut away from his project, but those vignettes as signifying impulses embedded in the eventual product.

### Textual and Harmonic Action

Rather than seeking to neuter the generative poetic force of the textual image to preclude such destructive possibilities, OC attempts to offer within the creative environ a kernel of possibility for the rescue of liberty. Countenanced against the dangerous gesture of *Recht gesprochen*, the critical imagist's human gesture pushes the text to a domain not restricted to distinct *philosophy/theory/science*, or most topical in Benjamin's thought *theology*, but an irreducible entanglement of meanings, from the 'concept' of history to "On the Concept of History". We may go beyond the statement of Adorno's that "aesthetics is not applied philosophy but philosophical in itself" to integrate Benjamin's reflexivity of relationality, where it is "philosophical in itself" precisely *in* that it is applied and beyond philosophy. Without yet making circumspect declarations on the musicality of OC, we can consider the work both in its vocal kernel and structural resonance through the harmonic. Harmony, from the Greek *ἁρμός*, or joint, has remained fairly etymologically faithful; in the artistic sense, the harmonic bridges a temporal or spatial gap, assembling a unity not unlike E.R. Clay and William James' 'specious present'. To speak of the image of this text, and thus its human character, is to speak of these matters of finitude that construct the limits (*Grenze* – both *limitation* and *structure*) of this aesthetic form – time and space.

Yet the matter of OC is precisely in its reversal to the assemblage of time. Where the historian inherits such "homogenous, empty time" (XIV), the paralipomena of XVIII continues that for the materialist, "the empty and homogenous time was transformed into an *anteroom* (...) in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity". That interminable temporality, drawn from Neo-Kantian doctrine as "infinite [unendlich] task", is specifically echoed against the "ultimately [endlich] achieved interruption" that is classless society (XVIIa); the act of removal from time, under its varied (and variously violent, 'exploding', 'blasting') names is also the construction of the moment. Springing from this space-time, the image of the excluded 'anteroom' suggests an extemporalized locus given meaning through its relationality with the temporal – a place out of time, which relationally defines that time. From the most rudimentary particle of the interruption, colloquially the 'tempo',

we could suggest a harmonic construct in the form of a simple instrument of resonance in the bell.

As the single direct acoustic reference in OC, the bell serves simultaneously as a historical reference and a metaphor for the dynamic and collectivized instrument of the theses themselves. Bells, as Benjamin himself recognized in his celebrated gloss of Baudelaire, have like “[t]he man who loses his capacity for experiencing” been “dropped from the calendar” in a characteristically enigmatic and queerly anthropomorphic note (Illuminations 184-185). Beyond the historical background of the French Revolutionary dating system, what is the importance of the calendar as beyond an empirical subjectivity, and further, where does one go from being ‘dropped’? Thesis XV provides a metaphorical ‘historical timelapse camera’ that is the iterated function of the calendar; this recursion effaces and monumentalizes historical consciousness from its active participants, the people:

To have combined recognition of a quality with the measurement of the quantity was the work of the calendars in which the places of recollection are left blank, as it were, in the form of holidays. (Illuminations 184)

Aimée Boutin keenly notes that the revolution did not merely instate a new decimal calendar system, but enduringly “altered the liturgical year by modifying how and when parishes could use church bells” (266). This incident casts the bells’ personified ‘*affreux hurlement*’ as the vocal register of Benjamin’s ‘Angel of History’ (IX): seeking in romantic spirit the recovery of a natural order in the *ancien régime*, the bell aims to punctuate that ‘chain of events’ that is the visible historical image to man. For bells to be dropped from the calendar and abscond from the “monuments of historical consciousness” (which themselves forget the active and participatory construction of historical consciousness for a ready-to-hand relationship with the stable construct) – as Boutin claims become “emptied of their *raison d’être*” and descend to “timeless cliché” – the religious dimension must not only be sloughed off as a forbidden signification, but as (an action of reversal) a forgotten one (272).

Benjamin's moment is that of forgetting, the crisis of modernity whereby the bell loses its 'holiday' signification and becomes a symbol for the freed system of denotation. The bells, however, toll for no one:

Des cloches tout à coup sautent avec furie  
 Et lancent vers le ciel un affreux hurlement,  
 Ainsi que des esprits errants et sans patrie  
 Qui se mettent à geindre opiniâtrement. (SW4 336)

Baudelaire's bells transgress the symbolic threshold of earlier poets' pastoral evocations, themselves in the act: 'sautent', 'lancent' and 'hurlement' (leap, throw, bellow). That the bells uniquely share the fate of being 'dropped from the calendar' with human beings is no coincidence; 'poor souls' these bells may be, their movement from tool to subject culminates in the expressive moves of the poem, laying claim to their subjectivity. Here it is critical to note that Benjamin's exact translation is "[t]he man who loses his capacity for experiencing *feels* as though he is dropped from the calendar" (SW4 336, emphasis mine); that 'drop[ping] from the calendar' is a matter of affect, thus a responsibility of the dropped, further raises the personified claim of these bells, themselves spleen; if the urban mass for Baudelaire is "so much a part of Baudelaire that [it] is rare to find a description of them in his works" (Illuminations 167), for Benjamin, that pervasive implicature is the subjective becoming of the aesthetic object, in this case, the bells.

What is the product of this becoming? That 'affreux hurlement' is a call, whose speech act is triply a lamentation, for an expression of will and communicative act (that of the angel of history, a plea for a shock of time) – a purposeful poetry with "a large measure of consciousness" as Benjamin concludes of Baudelaire, where like Hölderlin's 'Timidity' a "tonal dissonance" corresponds to the "infinite possibilities of rhyme". "Rhymed for joy" is understandably absent in the "restless wander[ing]" of Baudelaire's bells, yet that 'ordering' is present with an opposite principle of spleen, equally capable of such 'infinite [unendlich]' possibilities.

Yet the sedimentation of this infinity into creative moments, where again the human task returns to the discrete 'true image' rushing by, requires a more robust

understanding of the action of image. Asking the question of the implication of this “joy” is synonymous to querying the terminus of those ‘explosions’ and ‘bursts’ that are the act of historical materialism<sup>18</sup>. Here I intone *where* as deceptively literal – I could modify it slightly to include a when, but it is otherwise on the mark, a question of location. At joy’s behest (in the way that an eye flutters at that of its bearer, so much so and not at all), the resonance expands out – our question is to what?

“In light of” what I have called an affirmation of the human gesture (which Sigrid Weigel terms the *condition of cognizability*), “the «relation of the present to the past», structured traditionally by temporality, is rewritten into an image-like structure” (365)<sup>19</sup>. By the portal of this joy do we return to our unifying strand of the image— the musical, the textual, the affective, and the human. It is not altogether too late to make that concept all the more robust. *Image* foremost seems a bearable sacrifice (one Benjamin makes into French)<sup>20</sup> from *Bild*.

Benjamin’s use of the word refers to a meaning of *Bild* that precedes the distinctions among mental, visual, and material images as well as the differentiation of scripture and pictures and the separation of concept (*Begriff*) and metaphor. (Weigel 334)

Rather than Weigel’s ‘material’, our sense of ‘material’ refers to a point of unification within the text, the opposite of that dispensation with ‘mental’ and ‘visual’ images

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Joy’, while certainly breaking from the tone of Baudelaire’s *Spleen*, does not necessarily intone that the extension – for we recall that to be “rhymed for” essentially denotes ‘joy’ *caring of* (*Sorgen*) this sense, employing rhyme as a form of that ‘joy’ – is itself strictly ‘joyous’ in the sense of extending itself as joy or happiness. In the case of historical materialism, it is precisely as an extension of joy, ‘rhymed for joy’ that the logic would preclude declaring the musical and tonal harmony – the tolling, interruptive bell – as an optimistic or itself messianic mode. The positive nature of this tool of rhyme, the tolling bells of OC, is more dangerous and puzzling of a mode to qualify, even as much that we know of the mechanics of that resonance; I follow the point of invective for ‘positive’ Western philosophy at Benjamin’s moment, where Theodor Adorno lays his negative ground and Marx himself takes issue with the positive action: the dialectic, firstly as it is conceived by Hegel.

<sup>19</sup> That we are writing of the same condition is a matter of vantage – the ‘cognizable’ emerges from an esoteric phrase of Benjamin on the ‘now of recognizability’, in which a link between past and present cognitive action justifies the retention of human agency and possessiveness within what Weigel refers to as a *historical epistemology*. That cognition alongside the human action within what it cognizes is the contents of my human gesture. In an analogy, the difference is nominal, between an explicit (or is it inductive)? and recursive definition of the same mathematical or logical function.

<sup>20</sup> *Image* in French, although impeccably a cognate to the English, carries a greater dynamism than its counterpart; Deleuze’s two books on cinema, *Le temps image/ Le mouvement image* found their concept of the constantly occurring image on a verb usage more readily motivated in the French.

Weigel specifies against. Thus, the 'critical image' is not bound to Weigel's materiality, but is rather in agreement with her use of *Bild*. *Bildliche*, image-like, constitutes a descriptive term for the image epistemology of Benjamin's writing. Yet again, rather than a mere resemblance to the static image, this term unifies the activity of the different forms of 'image', the act of manifestation for the visual, acoustic, and textual forms all mutually coherent and, adverbially, image-like. With its broader umbrella, *Bild* directly contends with writing – problematic due to its necessary conveyance *through* language. Borrowing from the understanding of Didi-Huberman, 'image' is relevant here not only in the intratextual terminology, but also as a device for considering OC as a thing as such<sup>21</sup>. This is to say – while the static image is the death sentence of any meaningful epistemology, the active 'image' is the resuscitative device. For Adorno, the 'image' is dangerously dislocated and a proponent of a traditionalism which scaffolds fascism; Benjamin fatalistically concurs: “[i]n every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (VI). Conformism is tantamount to an ossification of the image, whereby it becomes merely a representative for itself, the radical question of *gesture* and *facture* of the work lost.

Understanding the presentation of this gesture within the text requires foremost an identification of the human role *in situ* – in 'OC', abutting the divine. While this inscribes the Messianic – an absolute finality, whose beginning signals the end of all textual stakes alongside the text itself – a binary relationship with the Messiah does not fully demarcate humanity. That 'Angel of History' (IX) – the contested mascot of OC<sup>22</sup> featured across several earlier articles – presents a crucial figure whose interaction with man is only unlocked through this consideration of the textual image.

“Es gibt ein *Bild* von Klee”, XI begins, immediately evincing the ineptitude of our English within the expanded 'image' that as such already this angel manifests. From this image Benjamin conjures the story of his angel of history, with mores and desires – all the while returning to stillness. 'Eyes wide' and 'mouth open', the angel even in imagination is unable to speak, rendered and positioned seemingly *a priori* – plucked

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<sup>21</sup> *Bild* lacks the narrow discriminative tendency of image versus picture (not merely too that *Bild* builds into *Bildung*, whose academic sense is somewhat monopolized by use in the philosophical sense from Kant and Hegel).

<sup>22</sup> I use this term in the colloquial American sense, where the 'mascot' is merely the anthropomorphic emblem of an organization, commonly sporting or academic.

from the heavenly echelons and placed by God – to history itself. Yet the “storm blowing from Paradise”, which would seem to motivate *action*, be it involuntary, on the angel’s part, brings him to a fate of greater stillness. It is a stillness whose point of reference is not divine, but of man; this wind of Paradise bears him backward at such perfect pace, locked in at the speed of human history. Vitality, that ‘single catastrophe’ which we observe as linear progress, despite the winds which carry him, continually ‘hurls [wreckage] at his feet’ (XI). Like Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history is still in the plane of human perception, borne ever against his own image of wreckage.

If this angel with “mouth open” cannot speak but crucially can *see* and ergo form impulses to “stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed” (XI), we (humans, historical materialists) are opposite. That the ‘wreckage’ or ‘debris’ which the angel may never touch is described in such crude material terms is no mere coincidence; this realm of materiality, in which language— its sonic and textual aspects melded in the image of the angel’s open mouth— image, and this wreckage of history itself must meet, *during history* (before the Messianic end of history) falls to human responsibility. In appearing as such, the angel has completed that first move of the supra-historical mechanism where man is the central feature. The image both shows within *what* is the stake, and as image, materially *shows how* to proceed.

Returning to the ‘affreux hurlement’ of Paris’ bells, we find an analogous harmonic action to the image assembled around the angel of history. Where the doubled irony of those written bells – confined to words, yet through them ringing outside of time – demonstrates the acoustic potentiality of the textual image, XI’s angel displays the other dimension of the text, not a ‘historical’ document where these bells are just so – documented – but as a creative document wherein lies a painting of Klee, whose significance to history is not found in an event. Where Boutin’s reading of the bell motif identifies an “epochal crisis in meaning and memory” (266), the hint of resolution to that crisis that Benjamin offers is elided. Where the angel must be silent, his open, paralysed mouth by that extant visualization calls to be filled. Herein the open mouth becomes the analogous participle to that ‘joy’ which is ‘rhymed for’, its progeny by way of the material – any text, picture, language – all an extension of that initializing image,

made possible through the materialist<sup>23</sup>. By that image itself and to its every response, the call is answered; the image of the angel, while certainly pathetic in isolation, is not isolated, but collated in rank among eighteen kaleidoscopic images. This contiguity or extension is indeed an extension of the image, as in translation where possibility exists “even if... meaning is touched upon only fleetingly”, the material quality of image satisfies that *touching* by being contiguous to its initializing image. The unifying discretion falls to the human actor, who is already implied in the *personification* of wailing, wandering objects; Boutin identifies an epistemological (“meaning”) and mnemonic (“memory”) problem, a simultaneous problem of knowing and recovering history which finds an answer in the ‘historical materialist’ of OC. Yet rather than two separate actions, the recovery of history and excavation of meaning is a single motion, the critique of the image; for Benjamin, the *Bildung* of the image encompasses the sensory qualities that are not relegated to a secondary, contingent aspect of the historical object, but the foremost conditions of a historical critique. To “brush history against the grain” (VII) is to recognize the grain of history, those patterns formed along its surface.

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<sup>23</sup> Herein, the angel demonstrates the inexhaustibility of the image twofold—that no image proliferated by the historical materialist could truly ‘silence the image’ (closing the mouth) is the *depth* of this void; chiasmatically, that image of the interruption through silence also makes material the infinite possibility of the image, where the materialist has all forms at his disposal.

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